Our approach to inactive members cannot be based on a sense of duty or because we feel bad that our church membership and attendance have dropped. John S. Paschal said:

If ministry is initiated simply because this is what seems best or because the church is losing members, financial support, etc., then there is a question as to whether or not this ministry should be initiated at all.\footnote{John S. Paschal, "Equipping the Laity for a Caring Ministry to Estranged Church Members" (D.Min. project report, Drew University, 1981), p. 86.}

Inactive or former members will be amazingly perceptive to the motives that prompt our interest in them. Again we return to Paschal for this observation.

Not only will my pretending to be something other than what I am hinder my ministry and my relationship with others, but pretending to care when I don’t will eventually be evident to those to whom I seek to minister. It is almost impossible to fake an attitude of caring and concern.\footnote{Ibid., p. 69.}

In the early days of the Adventist church, Ellen White recorded an incident where some of the brethren were cold and uncaring toward those who struggled with spiritual problems. She, on the other hand, felt a great concern for those who left the church.

In laboring with the erring, some of our brethren had been too rigid, too cutting in remarks. And when some were disposed to reject their counsel, and separate from them, they would say, "Well, if they want to go off, let them go." While such a lack of the compassion and long-suffering and tenderness of Jesus was manifested by His professed followers, these poor, erring inexperienced souls, buffeted by Satan, were certain to make shipwreck of faith. However great may be the wrongs and sins of the erring, our brethren must learn to manifest not only the tenderness of the Great Shepherd, but also His undying care and love for the poor, straying sheep. Our ministers toil and lecture week after week, and rejoice that a few souls embrace
the truth; and yet brethren of a prompt, decided turn of mind
may, in five minutes, destroy their work by indulging the
feelings which prompt words like these: "Well, if they want to
leave us, let them go."  

Fortunately, not every Adventist church is as uncaring as
this. Stone Tower Church most certainly is not. On the contrary,
many of Stone Tower's members were deeply concerned over the losses
of the past few years. They grieved for their friends and
relatives whose names had been dropped from membership or who had
become inactive. Our goal during this stage of the project was to
build upon this sense of concern and to develop an understanding of
and genuine caring for the inactive members.

The method I chose to use in enhancing a caring attitude in
Stone Tower Church was to preach three sermons on various aspects
of ministry to inactive members. The goal for these sermons was
(1) to help the members understand the feelings and experience of
those who drop out, (2) to create a desire in their hearts to do
something positive for the inactive members, and (3) to prepare the
way for acceptance of and fellowship with returning members.

The first sermon was entitled "Strangers." This sermon was
intended to help members understand what it is like to feel alone
and how a lack of fellowship and sense of belonging makes it easy

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1Ellen G. White, Life Sketches (Washington, D.C.: Review
White of a church which made no efforts to reclaim a backslidden
member called Brother A, see Testimonies, 2:218, 219.
for people to drift away from the church.\(^1\) With this in mind, and realizing that many long-time members cannot remember that feeling, I did something very uncharacteristic of my usual pastoral style. At the beginning of the sermon I asked the congregation to gather Bibles, purses, etc., to stand up, and then to find another place to sit in the church at least three rows from their previous location, and not with any family or friends. Pandemonium broke out as everyone headed for the aisles at the same time. When at last they were seated again, they looked like a whole different congregation, for no one was sitting in his usual place surrounded by family or close friends.

The sermon told about the experience of Israel as strangers in Egypt and about the feelings of new believers in the early Christian church. The main body of the sermon stressed the need for fellowship, caring, and brotherly love. Some specific applications were given, such as an awareness of the feelings of guests, a willingness to initiate conversations with people we do not know, and a concern for those who miss the Sabbath services. We closed by singing "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love."

\(^1\)Stone Tower Church has a unique situation that calls for continual awareness of the need for fellowship. The sanctuary was built as an evangelistic center and seats 1,000. We do not use the balcony (which seats 400) for the Sabbath services. Since the main floor seats 600 and attendance averages 270 to 300, there is a lot of vacant space. People tend to be separated from each other and to be a long distance from the pulpit. Only through a conscious effort to build a sense of fellowship and involvement can we overcome these obstacles and create the warmth and closeness our church family needs.
Apparently this sermon will go in the record books as my most-remembered sermon. Months later people are still commenting on how sitting alone in the church gave them an entirely new understanding of the loneliness of others and the need for fellowship.

The second sermon, entitled "The Lost Silver Coin," was based on the parable in Luke 15. It focused attention on the possibility of a church member's being lost through neglect, either theirs or the church's, the value of the lost member, and the joy that would come when the member was restored. The congregation was told about the Caring Ministry program and about the homecoming month. The sermon closed with my appeal that they pray for the inactive members and be willing to let God use them as instruments of His love and caring.

The final sermon was intended to help the members understand how people feel when they drop out of the church and to build in the members a belief that dropouts can and will be restored. Using the title "The Ministry of Reconciliation," I preached the story of John Mark.¹ When Paul and Barnabas began their missionary journey, John Mark eagerly went with them; but discouragement soon set in, and Mark left them and returned home. Apparently Paul was disgusted with Mark and would not allow him on the next journey. Using this example, along with the story of Pliable from Pilgrim's Progress and the parable of the stony ground, I talked about the feelings of failure which dropouts may experience. The sermon and the series concluded with the willingness of Barnabas to give John

Mark a second chance and how in the end Paul accepted Mark as "profitable to me for the ministry."¹ The appeal was based on Gal 6:1, 2: "Ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness."

The effect of these sermons was evident in several ways. The members were more willing to greet those they did not know. People lingered longer in the foyer and hallways. The topic of fellowship came up in casual conversations and in board and committee meetings. Almost everyone invited to attend the Caring Ministry seminar accepted and became involved in the program.

Without such a caring attitude, a church tends to ignore inactive members. At times members may be critical of them or of the pastors who baptized them. Once members come to understand the struggles, anxieties, doubts, and feelings of failure that dropouts experience, they have a softer, more loving attitude and are more willing to put forth the effort to reclaim them. Without this caring attitude, returning dropouts would find a cold and unfeeling church that would keep them at a distance and refuse them the acceptance and involvement they need. It would only be a matter of time until they dropped out again.

The love of Jesus makes the difference. "We love him, because he first loved us."² Realizing how much He loves us and loves the backslider too, we are freed from indifference, apathy, or

¹² Tim 4:11.
²¹ John 4:19.
self-righteousness and filled with a loving concern for our brothers and sisters who have separated themselves from the fellowship of God’s family.

... let the love of Christ constrain us to be very compassionate and tender, that we can weep over the erring and those who have backslidden from God.¹

If you are in communion with Christ, you will place His estimate upon every human being. You will feel for others the same deep love that Christ has felt for you. Then you will be able to win, not drive, to attract, not repulse, those for whom He died. None would ever have been brought back to God if Christ had not made a personal effort for them; and it is by this personal work that we can rescue souls.²

Identifying Inactive Members

Several months before the Caring Ministry seminar took place, we began identifying inactive members. Attendance patterns, involvement in church activity, attitudes revealed in conversation, etc., formed the basis for this system of member identification.

Before proceeding to spell out how this identification was done, it may be important to clarify that inactive members were not placed on a second membership list. The Church Manual forbids such a practice.

Each church should have but one membership list. Under no circumstances should the practice of keeping a retired list be followed. The church roll should contain the names of all members.³

¹White, Testimonies, 3:188.
²White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 197.
³Church Manual, p. 72.
Furthermore, the list of inactive members was not made public information. Some persons might misunderstand, thinking that inactives were being singled out as "bad" members. Inactive members should never be made to feel subordinate or inferior. The only reason for setting up a system of membership categories is to facilitate visitation and to monitor response. The Scriptures tell us, "Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds."\(^1\)

There are a number of systems that might be used to identify inactive members. Peter Wagner uses a nine-point system that starts with those closest to the church and ends with those furthest away:

1. Active members who are strong.
2. Active members who are weak.
3. Active members who are not born again.
4. Inactive resident members.
5. Non-resident members.
7. Non-members with church background who are indifferent.
8. Non-members with church background who are hostile.
9. Non-members with no church background (the "pagan pool").\(^2\)

Oosterwal's system is more simplified.

1. Attend Always.
2. Seldom Absent (attend more than 90 percent).
3. Attend Not Regularly (50-90 percent).
4. Attend Occasionally (10-50 percent).
5. Attend Seldom (less than 10 percent).
6. Attend Never.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Prov 27:23 (NIV).


\(^3\)Oosterwal, Patterns of SDA Church Growth in America, p. 29.
Savage divides his members into three categories--active, less active, and inactive.

A. Active Member
1. Attends church worship at least 75 percent of the time.
2. Participates in one or more institutional groups of the church.
3. Makes a pledge and pays at least 80 percent.
4. Holds a positive attitude toward the life of the church.
5. Can articulate the faith.

B. Less Active Member
1. 25 percent decrease in attendance at church worship.
2. Decreased participation in church groups.
3. Reduced pledging.
4. Hostile attitude toward the church.
5. Little or no prayer or pious behavior.

C. The Dropout
1. No attendance at worship.
2. No participation in groups.
3. No pledging.
4. Hostile or indifferent attitude toward church.
5. Can articulate faith and pious behavior returns.1

Our purpose for inactive member identification in the Caring Ministry was not to set up an elaborate system that required a lot of time or precise definitions of the member's activity and attitude. We elected to establish a system that was simple and easy to use, but that also gave us the information we needed. It is as follows:

A - Active Members

\[ A^1 \] Members who are active and involved (attend 75%,
involved in groups, positive attitude).
\[ A^2 \] Spiritually active, but physically unable to
attend or be involved.
\[ A^3 \] Spiritually active non-residents.

B - Less Active Members

Attend services 10-75%; decreasing or little
involvement; indifferent/critical/hostile attitude.

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C - Inactive Members

\[ C_1 \] Inactive resident members (attend 0-10%).
\[ C_2 \] Inactive non-resident members.
\[ C_3 \] Presumed to be inactive—whereabouts unknown.

Attendance at worship and other church activities is a primary factor in determining membership category. Attendance should not be given too much emphasis, but it is an important indicator of what is happening in the spiritual life of the member. Savage says, "Worship attendance is the first behavioral indicator of dropout and is one of the most sensitive indicators of what is happening to the parishioner."¹ Nielsen adds,

It is not always possible to distinguish whether nonattendance is a symptom or the problem itself, but it is always an important warning signal that the person is on his/her way out of the church.²

The importance of attendance is not the continued attendance or non-attendance. The indicator to watch for is change in attendance. Increased or decreased attendance often signals that something important is taking place within the member's life.

At this point Knutson reminds us of what we have previously said about grace as it applies to the dropout.

It is tempting to segregate people in groups—which is in essence what the congregation does when it talks about "active" and "inactive" members. The dividing is usually based solely upon attendance at worship, the giving of money, and attendance at Holy Communion. Persons are therefore informed subtly (or not so subtly) that they "pay" for active membership, either by attending communion or by giving a donation. When they have fallen from grace into inactive membership they are made to feel that they must earn their way back by paying the price (by attending and contributing). Holy Communion and worship,

¹Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, p. 57.
²Nielsen, p. 174.
intended to be grace experiences, become instead instruments of the Law. Thus, techniques of proclaiming the gospel actually turn the gospel into "law" because they have not been tempered with the ministry of caring and understanding.¹

Let me emphasize, then, that the placing of members into categories is not determining who is "good" and who is "bad." It is not an evaluation of spirituality based on works (attendance, giving, etc.). It is only a tool to help the pastors and Caring Ministry team be more sensitive to the needs of the members. Sometimes other known information about a member affects the placement; but again, this is not a subjective judgment of a member's relation to God. It is our attempt to bring together all the known factors of the member's patterns in church life so that we may more effectively minister to his or her needs.

Attendance is determined in two ways. Every Sabbath the "Friendship Folder" is passed down the pew. Attention is called to this instrument, and both members and guests are invited to sign it and indicate any way in which the pastoral staff or church officers may be of service. There are always a few people who are not in the sanctuary when the Friendship Folders are passed or who choose not to sign them. Because of this possibility, we pastors have trained ourselves to scan the congregation both when in the sanctuary and before and after services. We simply file away in our memories who is present and who is absent. This information is used later to fill in the names of those who did not sign the record. This practice has not turned us into computers nor made us

¹Knutson, p. 9.
feel like monitors checking attendance. It has, however, helped us become keenly aware of those who may need pastoral attention, and we are able to quickly respond to this need.

Prior to the Caring Ministry seminars, we began keeping record of attendance and gathering other data which would help us place the members in appropriate categories. After a period of three months, and in consultation with others who knew the congregation well, we set up the categories. The breakdown of our membership at the beginning of this project (April 27, 1983) was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Members</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A^1</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A^2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A^3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>271</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Active</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C^1</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C^2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C^3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>196</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>497</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The visitation which took place after the Caring Ministry seminars focused on the B and C^1 members, who comprised 33 percent of our congregation.

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This does not take into consideration 45 deaf members who are pastored by Elder Rex Rolls, a retired minister. The deaf group was not a part of this study.
Selecting and Interviewing the Callers

One of the goals for this project was to select and train a
group of lay persons who would be capable of participating in a
systematic visitation ministry to inactive church members.

Previous experience in the Caring Ministry program with the
Bellflower-Lakewood Church in Southern California taught us that
the dynamics of the seminar are best when the group size is between
eighteen and thirty-six persons (and in multiples of six). For the
Stone Tower project, we decided to conduct two seminars, hoping to
train fifty or more local members in addition to others who might
join us from neighboring churches.

Experience had also taught us that it is best to hand-select
the participants rather than to offer a general invitation.
Schaller gives this same advice: "Select the callers by
invitation. Do not issue a general invitation for volunteers!
Some people have gifts which greatly reduce their effectiveness as
listeners!"¹

There are some people who would not make successful
callers. Schaller explains:

... the caller (should) be the type of personality and possess
the skills which will not further intensify and enhance these
feelings of inadequacy and guilt, will rather help the inactive
member overcome these feelings.²

Ellen White described one man who had great knowledge of the
truth, but was lacking in sensitivity and love and was not qualified
to work for backsliders.

¹Schaller, Hey, That's Our Church, p. 124.
²Schaller, Assimilating New Members, p. 119.
I was shown the case of Brother B. He feels unhappy. He is dissatisfied with his brethren. His mind has been exercised for some time that it was his duty to carry the message. He has the ability, and, as far as his knowledge of the truth is concerned, he is capable; but he lacks culture. He has not learned to control himself. It requires great wisdom to deal with minds, and he is not qualified for this work. He understands the theory, but has not educated himself in forbearance, patience, gentleness, kindness, and true courteousness. If anything arises which does not meet his mind, he does not stop to consider whether it is wisdom to take notice of it, or to let it pass until it shall be fully considered. He braces himself at once for battle. He is harsh, severe, denunciatory, and if things do not meet his mind, he raises disturbance at once.

He passes in his organization the elements of war rather than of sweet peace and harmony. He has not wisdom to give to all their portion of meat in due season. "And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." Brother B has but little knowledge of making this difference. He is rough in his manner and indiscreet in his dealing with souls. This disqualifies him for making a wise, careful shepherd. A shepherd must have noble generosity, courage, fortitude, love, and tenderness combined.1

What are the criteria used to select the seminar participants? Some other programs researched have used fellow pastors or persons with training and experience in psychology and counseling. Ault used a rather impressive list of criteria for his team members:

Understand intellectually and emotionally.
Professional experience in managing, advising, and counseling people.
Basic understanding of how persons function.
Happy and successful with their life's work, themselves and their family.
Emotional and intellectual resilience.
Responsible in the completion of tasks.
Give attention to details, efficient follow-through.
Balance between male and female.

1White, Testimonies, 2:220. Note: This statement immediately follows strong counsel regarding the need to work for backsliders. It in turn is followed by general counsel to Brother and Sister B regarding their need to learn of Jesus so that they can be used for this work.
Balance - previous experience and no experience.  
Married and single.  
Varying lengths of membership.  
Academically oriented.  
Early mid-life years.  
Emotionally stable.  
No emotional barriers.  

The criteria Elam used called for some solid, spiritual people:  

Continuing spiritual maturity.  
Sense of responsibility and commitment.  
Faithfulness of participation in church life.  
Willing involvement in other ministries.  
Concern for the needs of their church.  
Overall ability to be included in such a project.  
Willingness to serve.  
Time available for service.  

Hunter's list shows real insight into qualities needed for this special ministry.  

Strong inner faith.  
Little need for multiple "victories" to keep incentive going.  
Ability to love without immediate reward or returned love.  
Sensitivity to where people are.  
Good sense of timing.  
Patience.  
A deep conviction that people are worth spending one's life for.  

There are some basic philosophies in our program that guided us in the selection of qualities by which participants in the Caring Ministry would be chosen. We wanted our program to be such that a majority of church members could qualify, not just a select few. The Caring Ministry is a program for the church at large.  

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1Ault, pp. 43, 44.  
3Hunter, p. 111.
Furthermore, if this project proved viable and other Adventist churches were to follow a similar plan based on this model, the participants should not be professional counselors but typical church members who use the abilities the Lord has given them for service to others.

With these goals in mind, we drew up the following list of desirable qualities:

Persons who love the Lord and love other people
Persons who understand their faith and are able to talk about it
Persons who have time for the training program and for visitation
Persons who are good listeners or are willing to learn
Persons who can keep a confidence and be trusted
Persons of varying ages and backgrounds
Persons who are responsible and stable and are spiritually mature
Persons who are willing to let God use them to help others.

In keeping with these guidelines, my wife and I (Loretta and I team-lead the seminar) reviewed the entire membership and made a list that included as many members as possible. The large list was then reduced to approximately sixty persons. We then contacted these potential seminar participants and briefly explained the program and the dates selected for the seminars. Almost all the people expressed a desire to join and were able to arrange their schedules to fit the seminar dates.
The week prior to each of the seminars, I scheduled appointments to visit in the homes of the seminar participants. Later I discovered that Gerhard Knutson also recommends this practice.

... either the pastor or chairperson of the evangelism committee should spend time visiting each family or person in order to model the listening witness ministry. Listen to the needs, hurts, feelings, and gifts of the person you visit. Encourage and enable them to share their beliefs as well. Make it not only a visit to invite them to fulfill a task, but also a model experience of how caring, listening-witnessing conversation can progress to a new level of friendship and understanding.

It required considerable effort to make so many visits because the week prior to the seminar was also busy with last-minute details. The visits were worth the effort, however, and helped to build a good foundation for the seminar. Four goals were set for these visits:

1. Explain the purpose of the seminar and the visitation program that would follow and clarify the details of dates, place, meeting times, babysitting arrangements, and meal plans.

2. Become aware of the attitudes toward inactive members and the communication skills possessed by each participant. I used a survey sheet as well as general conversation for this purpose. Their attitudes and skills would have a bearing on the agenda for the seminar as well as being useful when matching callers to inactive members for the visitation program.

3. Come closer to the members and strengthen our personal relationship. This was not just a task-oriented visit but an opportunity for spiritual fellowship together.

Knutsen, p. 35.
4. Model good listening. I wanted to hear any concerns or needs of the participants. Perhaps my listening to them would free them to listen to others.

While visiting in the homes of the participants, I asked them to complete a survey form. Questions on the survey helped me understand how they viewed their listening abilities, how they reacted to criticism, how willing and able they were to visit, and how they felt about inactive members and the dropping of membership. The latter was of particular interest because of the recent experience of Stone Tower Church when 213 members were dropped in a three-year period.

One other factor of special interest in this visit was to identify seminar participants who had previously become discouraged, inactive, or had dropped out of the church. Many times such people have a special interest and ability to reach other dropouts.¹ A total of nineteen persons, or 34 percent of our seminar group, had gone through this experience.

At the end of my visit, I gave each participant a copy of J. R. Spangler's interview of John Savage from the May 1983 Ministry magazine² and suggested that he or she read it before the seminar began. This would be an introduction to the concepts and skills that he or she would be learning.


²Savage, quoted in Spangler, pp. 4-7, 27.
The Caring Ministry Seminar

Basic Data of the Seminar

The Caring Ministry Seminar is a 27-hour training event that focuses on concepts and methods of ministry to inactive church members and teaches communication skills which may be useful when the teams call on dropouts. Space does not permit a detailed explanation of every aspect of the program, but I will include certain basic information about the seminar in general and about the two seminars that were a part of this project.

Premise

The Caring Ministry Seminar is based on the premise that lay members of the church can learn concepts, skills, and attitudes which will make them effective in calling on inactive church members. Communication skills are taught and practiced in a safe environment. Participants experience through group learning and support a closeness that motivates them to draw others into fellowship in the church.

Methodology

Learning takes place through four media: (1) Cognitive information (concepts, research findings, explanation of skills, suggestions for methods) is given through mini-lectures sprinkled throughout the seminar; (2) attitudes and feelings (of inactive members and of seminar participants) are explored in depth; (3) communication skills are explained, demonstrated, and practiced; and (4) reflection, evaluation, and feedback are constantly employed to process the data for meaning and application.
Team leadership

My wife, Loretta, and I team-lead the seminar. She has also taken both Lab I and II and is equally qualified to lead the seminar. We find this provides balance, pacing, and better identification for the participants.

Leadership modeling

It is very important that as seminar leaders, we model the caring concepts and listening skills during the presentations, at feedback sessions, and during the breaks. Feelings are often stirred up inside participants; we must be sensitive to this and be willing to do a lot of listening ourselves. We must know our material so well we are freed from notes and mechanics and can concentrate on the dynamics taking place within the participants.

Self-learning

Though a lot of learning takes place as the leaders give information regarding concepts and skills, the greatest learning happens in the small groups. Participants coach each other; insight occurs as they practice and reflect together. Occasionally the seminar leaders feel isolated from these private experiences; but our learning experience is to trust the system and let the members receive what they will from the session.

Location and arrangements

Our seminars were held at the Oregon Conference campground—a convenient location with a retreat setting. Merritt and Doris Crawford, campground caretakers, prepared meals for Sabbath lunch
and supper. We chose a room that was carpeted and would accommodate twice the size of our group. The additional space was needed when we broke into small groups. Dress for all seminar sessions was casual, and participants were encouraged to bring comfortable chairs. Each session was divided by a break during which water and hot drinks were available.

Session times

Savage's original schedule for the seminar calls for meetings on two weekends, consisting of Friday night, Sabbath afternoon and evening, plus all day Sunday. We have learned that the participants assimilate the material better when it is spread over three weekends. Adventists also appreciate having Sundays free. We followed a three-weekend format with two consecutive weekends, one free weekend, and then the final weekend session. Appendix A gives session times and contents.

Group size

Experience has shown that the dynamics are best when the group size is between eighteen and thirty-six persons. We strive for multiples of six because this is most convenient for the small group sessions that have combinations of two, three, and six persons. A total of sixty-one Stone Tower members plus four members from other churches participated in the two seminars.

Finances

We did not charge for the seminar. Participants were informed that the workbook provided each person cost the church
$7.95. They were invited but not required to contribute toward that expense. Cost for meals was cared for through a special contribution made to the church. Should this not be available in the future, we would have potluck meals or might call on the deaconesses or previous seminar graduates to prepare meals, thus keeping the participants' time free for the seminar.

Contract

Seminar participants were asked to agree to two conditions: (1) They would need to attend all sessions of the three weekends because the learning experience would be like building blocks and because their learning partners and group would be depending on them; and (2) participants were asked to keep in confidence any experiences or information of a personal nature that might be shared with them during the seminar. For their part, the leaders agreed to stay within the scheduled times and to provide support for the callers when they made visits to the inactive members.

Understanding the Dropout

Although one-third of the seminar participants had at one time been inactive or had left the church and therefore had some understanding of the dropout experience, it was important that the group as a whole learn to understand the precipitants of dropping out and the anxieties and feelings that may accompany this experience.

The "Dropout Lecture" was the major presentation of the seminar. Participants learned what research has revealed about the causes of apostasy, the feelings that accompany dropping out, and
ways in which the church can intervene or reclaim those who have dropped out. Then the participants were divided into small groups of three to react to what they had learned. Later the whole group participated in a time of questions and answers.

As a part of that lecture we explained Savage's divisions of "skunks" (those who direct blame outward) and "turtles" (those who direct blame inward). This helps to prepare the callers for the criticism and placing of blame they will probably encounter. Inevitably the seminar participants identify with one of these two types and declare themselves either "skunks" or "turtles." Identification is part of the understanding process.

To experience the feelings of dropping out and to understand how groups relate to those who have dropped out, a role-play situation was employed. Prior to this, group-building had taken place through personal sharing and study of factors that help people know they belong. Groups of six had formed a bond and had learned to work together.

Without prior consultation, one person from each group was asked to get up and leave the group. Those who remained were then encouraged to explore possible reasons why this particular person left and to consider their own feelings about staying and leaving. Meanwhile the "dropout" was asked to sit alone, outside in the cold, and make workbook notations of his or her feelings about leaving the group. Eventually the group sent "callers" to invite the "dropout" to return. Learning took place when the group was reunited and reactions were shared about the experience.
Another area in which real insight took place, both for the participants' self-understanding and their empathy with others, was when we shared neurolinguistics with them. Neurolinguistics is the language of the nervous system--three primary ways of responding to life through audio, visual, or kinesthetic dominances. These dominances were explained and illustrated. Bridging this learning to our ministry to inactives, we taught the participants to become sensitive to the dominant language of the dropout and to build the level of trust by communicating in that dominance. As always, self-identification took place among the participants and many of them experienced a moment of "a-ha" as they understood a new piece of information about the way they themselves relate to life. This identification reinforced the importance of their sensitivity to the dominance of the inactive members.

Through these experiences we were trying to sensitize the seminar participants to the needs and feelings of dropouts so that both knowledge and empathy would prepare them for ministry.

Demonstrating Caring Through Listening

For some, caring is a natural way of life. For others, caring must be nurtured, and the expression of caring must be learned. General caring soon loses its impact, but specific caring grows with the passage of time. In order to encourage specific caring, we set aside a few minutes each Sabbath afternoon of the three weekends to reflect on what had taken place that day during the worship services. Observed actions that encouraged or discouraged a sense of belonging to the church family were noted.
Suggestions were made for ways to increase fellowship and to incorporate new or marginal members. Participants were asked to recall names of members who were absent from worship. These persons may have been ill or visiting other places, or perhaps chose to stay home. We may not have known the reasons, but we became conscious of their absence. Our goal was to build an awareness of the presence or absence of others so that in the future we could encourage one another and prevent dropouts from feeling unwanted.

Learning to listen is practically a new concept in the church. For so long our emphasis has been on learning how to speak: learning to give Bible studies, to share your faith, to teach a Sabbath School class, to offer public prayers, etc. Seldom, if ever, have we taught church members how to listen to God or how to listen to each other.

We have put such an emphasis on persuasion and 'winning' that we have not had the patience or willingness to learn, appreciate, and understand one another through listening.¹

There is a tremendous need in the church for people to listen to each other. Listening is a real ministry. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this ministry:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

¹Knutson, p. 17.
Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening.¹

Listening is especially effective in ministry to former or inactive members. The events that created anxiety in their lives have caused them to have feelings of frustration, criticism, or self-doubt. Perhaps they needed someone to talk with when the problems first began. But because no one was available, the tension and frustration grew. The stronger the feelings became, the less people were willing to listen. They may have reached a point where they felt unable to control their emotions any longer and anger, criticism, insecurity, or doubt may have boiled over. If no one could or would listen to these deeply personal feelings, the only alternative left was to withdraw and seal off the pain of an unresolved problem.

Detamore's experience taught him to listen to people's pain.

Listen kindly; listen interestingly. By neither voice nor expression of face disagree with him. Let him rant and rave; the poison is coming out. There is a hope of a future healing of the wound after it has been purged and cauterized.²

Some reclaiming ministry training programs teach people to "listen selectively," that is, to change the subject so as to avoid controversial topics.


²Detamore, Seeking His Lost Sheep, p. 71.
The term 'selective listening' means that a visitor chooses the statements and questions that he responds to. This means if a negative subject is mentioned he changes the discussion to a positive idea.¹

There may be questions asked that could be honestly answered, but to do so might cause a widening of the gulf between the delinquent member and the church.

In the event of this, the visitor will engage in selective listening. He will not ignore what has been said. He will hear and yet he will reply as though he had not heard. In fact, he will direct the conversation to some other matter.²

In the Caring Ministry seminar, we do not teach people to change the subject, but to openly and honestly deal with what concerns the inactive members. This means that the callers may have to face criticism, or anger, or feelings of failure. But to do otherwise is to repeat again the lack of caring that says "we will not listen to you when you say what we do not want to hear."

We do, however, teach the callers not to pry into sordid details of past experiences. Our task is not to investigate or to force people to relive an unpleasant experience but rather to be available with a listening ear and a caring heart that is receptive to whatever is important for the other person to tell.

We also need sensitivity to know when the person has told enough and is beginning to wallow in misery and self-pity or when he or she is crossing the line into very private territory. C. W. Brister stated this principle very well:

¹Edward Miller, p. 49.
²Brooks, p. 23.
... certain secrets and hurts should not be shared. There is always a risk that someone, with defenses down in a crisis, will tell secrets but later resent anyone who knows the truth. If some sufferer trusts you with the headlines of his or her hurt, don't insist on reading the fine print, too.

Listening is the most loving thing we can do for former or inactive members. "Problem solving" is impatient and wants to take the short-cut. But listening means willingness to spend time, to be sensitive to hear not only the words but also the feelings and the meanings the other person is expressing.

In the initial contact with an inactive member there is very little trust. The dropout naturally suspects that our call is to get him or her back to church, to ask for money, or to ask for help in one way or another. This often puts the dropout on the defensive. Our demonstration of caring through listening may come as a surprise, but it quickly builds trust and openness. Savage says:

Listening builds a relationship more quickly and effectively than any other single type of behavior. I'm not talking just about social listening, but effective, depth listening that builds relationships very rapidly.

Caring Ministry callers are often surprised at how rapidly people sense our willingness to listen and will open up to talk with us about what happened to take them away from the church and what now keeps them from a close relationship with Jesus Christ and with His church.

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2Savage, quoted in Spangler, p. 6.
During the seminar itself we gave a number of small listening assignments. We asked the participants to listen for something specific each Sabbath morning of the seminar.\(^1\) Sometimes it included listening to the interchange of dialogue in the Sabbath School class or just being aware of fellowship through informal conversations before or after the services. We asked them to observe behavior that included others or screened them out. Sometimes we asked them to initiate a conversation with someone they did not know. During the weeks between the first and second sessions of the seminar, we asked them to become aware of the listening patterns in their place of work or in their own homes. Between the second and third sessions, we gave each participant the name of a church member, usually a shut-in or senior citizen, and asked him or her to have a listening visit with this person. This emphasis on listening builds appreciation of its value and helps the seminar participants become aware of areas where they can improve their listening abilities.

Learning and Practicing the Listening Skills

The concepts taught during the Caring Ministry seminar prepared the participants to understand feelings and experiences dropouts go through when they move outward from the church. Integrated with these concepts was a series of nine communication skills to help the callers become better listeners.

\(^1\)Attendance at Sabbath morning worship in the home church is a vital part of the seminar. It provides three opportunities to bridge the theories of the Caring Ministry to the reality of the local church situation.
We made it clear from the beginning that communication skills were not to be used to manipulate the inactive members. They do not make us salesmen who have an answer for every objection. The Scriptures forbid us to manipulate people through clever words or human persuasion.

when I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. . . .

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.1

Skills do not take the place of prayer. Skills do not make up for a lack of love, patience, and a genuine interest in another. On the other hand, a loving and caring Christian who is sensitive to the needs of inactive members and is also trained to use communication skills is a good, active listener and provides a climate in which the inactive member feels free to express whatever is on his or her heart.

We do not normally think of Jesus Christ as using "communication skills." But Christ was such a good listener that even the common people felt at ease in His presence and knew that He listened to them with love and tact.

11 Cor 2:1-5, 12, 13 (NIV).
Christ Himself did not suppress one word of truth, but He spoke it always in love. He exercised the greatest tact, and thoughtful, kind attention in His intercourse with the people. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul. He did not censure human weakness.¹

The nine communication skills taught in the caring ministry seminar are described briefly.

**Paraphrase**

Paraphrasing is the skill of restating another person's message in your own words so as to check your accuracy in understanding the content and/or meaning. It is a basic communication skill because it conveys to the other person that you are very interested in him while verifying that you have heard him accurately.

**Perception check**

The perception check is more concerned with the feelings of the other person. The listener is sensitive to the tone of voice and body language that accompany the other person's speaking and uses these to tune in to the feelings. Making a guess at these feelings, the listener makes a tentative, non-judgmental statement of what he or she believes the other person is experiencing and follows this with a question to verify accuracy. When this skill is used appropriately and naturally, it can assist the conversation beyond data gathering to the feelings that reside within the speaker.

¹White, Desire of Ages, p. 353.
Behavior description

Behavior description is reporting specific, observable actions of others without making accusation, inferences, or name calling. It is a skill to help the other person become aware of his/her behavior.¹

This skill must be used with tact so that it is non-judgmental and does not put the other person on the defensive. It is objectively stating observable behaviors and gently exploring the meaning of those behaviors.

Creative questions

When appropriate questions are asked in the right way, they facilitate the conversation, they show that the listener is genuinely interested, and they often help the speaker go on to say more of what he/she has on his/her mind. Questions should not be used to interrogate or to probe private space. Creative questions may help the speaker explore previously unconsidered areas, relationships, or meanings in such a way that the speaker understands the situation better.

Story listening

People tell us many things about themselves in story form, but often we do not hear the deeper meanings because we are only tuned in to the words or are caught up in the drama of their story. Sometimes our own story is triggered as we recall a similar

¹Savage, Skills for Calling and Caring Ministries, p. 31.
situation and we cease listening to the other person. Story
listening is a skill that trains the Caring Ministry teams to
recognize various levels of story as indicators of trust and open-
ness, and to understand the deeper meanings of another person's
experience as he or she couches it in story form. Seminar partici-
pants are also taught not to let their own counter stories sabotage
their ability to listen, but to use their feelings triggered by the
counter story as a mirror to better understand the inactive member.

Fogging

Those who call on inactive members often encounter
criticism. A number of skills can be used to help the callers
avoid becoming defensive while hearing the real message of these
criticisms. Sometimes the callers may use paraphrase, perception
check, or the direct expression of their own feelings. A special
skill that helps callers respond to the truth in the criticism
without becoming defensive is called "fogging." Fogging is usually
followed by a perception check to better understand the meaning of
the criticism. This skill often stops the critical cycle. Because
the critic knows he has been heard, he is free to explain the
meanings and feelings associated with the criticism.

Negative inquiry

The introduction of the skill of negative inquiry often
surprises seminar participants because it asks for more criticism.
It is very difficult for callers to know how to respond to
generalized criticism, such as, "The church is not very friendly."
Negative inquiry asks for more specific information, for
clarification, or for a behavior description of the actions being criticized. Our experience is that inactive members respond well when they realize that we care enough about them to listen even to their criticisms.

**Story polarizations**

Inactive members tell many stories of their personal lives and of the times when they were active in the church. Callers need to be sensitive to both the positive and negative poles of these stories, realizing that both poles are present in every person's experience, even though only one may be expressed. Frequently the stories are negative and recall unpleasant events. Recognizing a balance in the poles of these stories helps the caller avoid misjudging the inactive member's feelings. Even though the conversation may be predominantly negative, a gentle exploration of the positive pole may help the dropout recall pleasant experiences associated with the church. Correct use of these positive poles can help build a foundation for returning to a happy and satisfied life in the church.

**Life commandments**

As the callers really get to know the inactive members, patterns, scripts, or what we call "life commandments" begin to emerge. These commandments are usually formed in the early years of childhood or in the beginning experiences in the church. Some commandments need to be broken, but in appropriate ways. Dropping out of the church is often a way of breaking life commandments, e.g., "We don't listen to that kind of music," "Adventists always
go to church on Sabbath." The sensitive caller can pick up on these commandments (which may, in fact, be outside the inactive member's awareness) and tactfully help the dropout realize what has been happening in his/her life. Listening for life commandments is the deepest of the communication skills and, when used with love and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, can be a powerful tool to help the inactive member understand what caused the drift away from the church and how to return.

During the Caring Ministry seminar, these nine communication skills are taught in a building-block sequence. Each one is explained, illustrated, and practiced. Participants may feel awkward when first practicing the skills in isolation. Their small "home" group is usually broken into smaller groups of two, three, or six people for practice. When in triads, one person is the speaker, the second the listener, and the third is an observer who coaches the speaker and listener during a debriefing period. Learning takes place from all three perspectives.

It is very important that team members have opportunity to practice the skills before they call in the homes of the inactive members. Douglas W. Johnson's book on The Care and Feeding of Volunteers points out this importance.

People ought to be able to practice their task before they are charged with full responsibility for it. This is the basis for the apprenticeship in crafts or the internship in medicine or the practice-teacher requirement in education. In each of these, the person works in the actual job situation, but does it alongside a more experienced individual for a time. It is a learning and a testing time.¹

This "safe environment" allows the callers to build confidence in their ability to listen and frees them from the mechanics of conversation so they can focus on the needs of the inactive member.

Dealing with Emotions

One aspect of the Caring Ministry seminar needs special consideration for reasons unique to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. During the seminar we teach participants to become sensitive to feelings—their own and those of the inactive members. We encourage them not to change the subject if the dropout begins recalling negative experiences. We help the callers not to be afraid of the expression of feelings, knowing that the anger, doubt, discouragement, etc., must be worked out before the inactive member will be able and ready to return to active life in the church.

However, we are very aware of certain counsel through the writings of Ellen White which warns us away from the study of our own emotions and the sharing of personal information. The following are a few statements of this counsel:

It is not wise to look to ourselves and study our emotions. If we do this, the enemy will present difficulties and temptations that weaken faith and destroy courage. Closely to study our emotions and give way to our feelings is to entertain doubt and entangle ourselves in perplexity. We are to look away from self to Jesus.¹

We should make no one our confidant but Jesus. We can safely commune with Him of all that is in our hearts.²

²White, Testimonies, 5:201.