

NINE PRINCIPLES

FOR RECLAIMING THOSE WHO ARE MISSING FROM FELLOWSHIP
BASED ON LUKE 15

Count. The good shepherd knew that one sheep was missing because he kept careful count on those who were with him. Direct your leaders to work with you in spiritually nurturing every member.

Risk. The shepherd left the 99 sheep exposed to danger in the wild places as he went searching for the one who was missing. He risked the group's security and convenience for the one most in need! Prioritize.

Labor. When the homemaker discovered her coin was missing, she worked long and diligently. Nothing of value comes easily! This parable also expresses God's intention for all members to be represented in ministry.

Wait. Never give up! The prodigal's father had to patiently wait until his son made the choice to start back toward home. Then he ran out to greet his prodigal. God will meet any returning soul more than half way.

Pray. You need not wait in idleness. Prayer is the key in the hand of faith that unlocks heaven's storehouse of blessings! When I pray for missing members, I do not pray to change God's attitude toward the lost; God changes my attitude toward the lost.

Love Unconditionally. Never impose criteria on someone else in order for them to become recipients of your love. Express your love unreservedly! Accept them even as they stink from the pigpen; then love them into life changing sanctified living.

Welcome. Joyously express your pleasure when a missing friend returns to fellowship. Make them feel wanted and welcomed! Encourage even their very first steps toward heaven. The prodigal received shoes, a ring, and a robe from his father at the moment of return.

Restore. Those who return have nothing to prove. The prodigal expected to be a servant; he was restored as an heir! The lost have nothing to prove to the church. We must prove our love and concern to those who have been wounded.

Celebrate. Make every restoration a joyous occasion. All heaven rejoices when one individual returns. We could at least host a fellowship luncheon! What better occasion to party?

GOD LOVES THE MISSING!

WE CAN AND MUST, ACTIVELY
SEARCH FOR THEM, LISTEN TO
THEM, AND HOPEFULLY RECLAIM
THEM INTO A VITAL
RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST
AND HIS CHURCH.



Growth. Development and Evangelism

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OPERATION RECLAIM

As we launch this year of evangelism, we must confront the reality that many who once worshiped with us, now, for a variety of reasons, no longer fellowship with our church, or any other denomination. While we emphasize reaching the lost, we ought to remember the needs of former, missing, or inactive members

Declining numbers, tragic as they are, reveal only part of the story. Thousands of individuals are still on the membership rolls who never worship with other believers—only a small percentage of all members actually attend weekly worship services. Granted, many are ill, elderly, or traveling. This still leaves a vast potential audience of individuals whom God loves and for whom His church ought to feel passion to love back into fellowship. We must emphasize the reachability of former members as some of our "best potentials" for bringing them to a new relationship with Jesus. If we want to add 100,000 active members to our churches during this year, we might well start by reaching our former members with renewed hope in the soon return of Jesus.

While we recognize that some who have left our denomination would choose not to return, many have left because of interpersonal difficulties—loneliness, alienation, boredom, lack of spiritual food, criticism, rejection, etc. Thousands are waiting on the verge of the kingdom to be invited back. Among these, we can make a difference as we allow the Spirit to work in our lives. We can, and must, actively search for them, listen to them, and hopefully reclaim them into a vital relationship with Christ and His church.

One of the first steps in reclaiming those who were once part of the AME Church, is to identify their names and mailing addresses so we can contact them. Your help is needed! Your congregants know the very ones we need. While we have the names and addresses of some of those who should be contacted, many names and addresses are unknown to the church office, even though they are individuals whom your members know personally. Never assume that the church has accurate or up-to-date information. If you know someone who should receive a gracious contact along with a no-pressure invitation to resume fellowship. Please share with church leadership.

PRIORITIZING RECLAMATION

Local congregations should make themselves more user-friendly.



Evangelistic emphasis should include printing small, economical pamphlets and emails as well as social media messages that intentionally invite inactive and former members to visit.



Pastors and Leaders should lead in planning an annual Homecoming Day for those who have become inactive and missing.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Now that we've seen the potential to reconnect/reclaim/ reflate inactive and former members, we must "put shoes on the process" and make a concentrated effort to reconnect relationships, reclaim fellowship, and reflate discipleship. I recommend the following process:

- 1. Publish the following announcement in every church bulletin and newsletter for six consecutive weeks:** Searching for former and inactive AME's. Do you have a friend or relative who used to be a member or active in church activities? We need their name, mailing address, email contact, and telephone. Each person will receive an attractively designed, sensitively written packet of materials inviting them to re-establish contact with the nearest AME Church.
- 2. Pray for the Holy Spirit to warm the heart** of every individual who will receive a gracious invitation to attend worship services and to reconnect with the church of their heritage.
- 3. Follow Jesus' model** - the only way to reach the heart and mind of seekers. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with people as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence.

4. Conduct a "Love Them Back" Seminar for every church in which pastors will instruct members on how best to encourage and engage with those who will return to attendance. This seminar could include the following practical methods:

- Make eye contact with each visitor to your church.
- Add a welcome smile to your eye contact.
- Touch your visitors with warmth and welcome.
- Ask questions designed to open conversation. "Do you live around here?" (Never ask if they are "visiting," which might easily offend someone who attends regularly and believes you should already know them.)
- Listen to your visitors. Open ended questions are better. "How did you come to be in this city?" or "How do you feel about our worship services?" Once you've asked, listen. With your mouth shut and you will learn much from what they share.
- Talk to your visitors. Easy conversations such as, "Good morning, my name is John" will get the job done. At first, strive for a friendly relationship and nothing more.
- Defer investigating their motive for attending or their challenges of the past. Over a period of time, they may share how they have felt wounded or became disenfranchised from the church.
- Feed your visitors. Food and fellowship is a powerful social component and AME's, at their best, do this very well.
- Simplify your own life to take time to greet at least one or two individuals you don't know every Worship experience. These connections make high impact.
- 5. Restrain those** who reject such training from imposing their antisocial attitudes, speculative ideas, or fanciful heresies on those who visit your church.
- 6. Ask the Holy Spirit** to enable you to be a loving and loveable Christian who will appropriately interact with all whom God will help us reclaim.