



## Wandering Sheep Must Be Sought

LUKE 15:3-6

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”

In any given week at a typical WELS church, approximately six out of ten members do not go to worship. There are many different reasons.

- “I don’t feel like I need to go to church every week to stay close to God.”
- “I’m really busy. I work a 60-hour week. Weekends are the only time I have for family.”
- “The church is only interested in my money.”
- “I don’t feel like I get much out of worship. It seems out of touch with my day-to-day life.”
- “I’ll be more active when I’m older. Right now I have other priorities.”
- “There are too many hypocrites in church. It doesn’t seem to make a difference in people’s lives.”

This should not be surprising, that Christians grow lax in maintaining faithful church attendance. The believer’s life of sanctification (i.e. the fruits of faith he produces) is one marked by peaks and valleys. We all have sins with which we struggle. Maybe it is your temper. Maybe it is materialism. If you have mastered these, your pet sin might be pride.

Skipping church is another very common pet sin. The Old Adam within us latches onto one of those excuses. When we skip church once, it is easier the second time, and easier yet to skip the third week. Eventually our habit has changed. Skipping church has become a pet sin.



How do we avoid these pet sins? There's only one way. We need fellow believers to apply law and gospel to our lives. If your pet sin is indeed your temper, hopefully, God gives you a spouse who has both the patience to put up with you and the bold love that calls for you to repent. If your pet sin is materialism, you need a trusted Christian friend to help you struggle against it.

That is the way God intended the Church to work. You see it in all the "one another" passages of the Bible.

- Let us consider how we may spur *one another* on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging *one another* — and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:24,25).
- Encourage *one another* and build *each other* up (1 Thessalonians 5:15).
- Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish *one another* with all wisdom (Colossians 3:16).

The law and gospel have the power to do supernatural things: to change attitudes and minds and behavior. However, God intends for that supernatural power to be unleashed by believers *proclaiming* law and gospel.

Someone will say, "God's Word is proclaimed in our church! It's called the sermon." However, if members aren't there, obviously the Word does them no good.

All of the reasons people give to skip church have counter arguments. Those counter arguments need to be made. The sinful attitudes need to be confronted and crushed by the law. Then those individuals will need to be healed with the gospel. Because they are not in worship or Bible study, they need God's Word *brought* to them. Wandering sheep must be sought.

That is the point Jesus made in the parable of the lost sheep. The lost sheep was part of the flock once, but it strayed. Therefore, this parable is not about evangelism, i.e. proclaiming the gospel to unbelievers who have not heard it before. This parable teaches about going after the wandering. The point of this parable is not that the ninety-nine sheep *don't* need care. They do. There are ninety-nine of them! They need a lot of care. Without the care of the shepherd, they will perish. So the point of Jesus' parable is not that we *can* ignore regularly attending members; the point is simply that we *can't* ignore the straying.

More than that, Jesus' parable teaches that there is a type of transcendent joy in reaching straying souls. You are talking about an individual who might be very close to losing the righteousness of Christ... losing their place in God's kingdom. (In some cases, they might have actually fallen from faith.) But then they are *found*. They are *found* because someone moved by the love of Christ went and *sought* them. Angels rejoice.

So just as it would be unthinkable for a congregation to *not* proclaim law and gospel in worship to the gathered flock, so also it is unthinkable for a congregation to not proclaim the law and gospel in the homes of the straying sheep.

That is not easy work. There are practical challenges that make going after the straying and the lost very difficult. Let us consider them.

## **CHALLENGE – It is a challenge to accurately recall who was missing from worship in any given week.**

Can your pastor accurately remember everyone who attended worship in a given week? That depends on three things.

**Firstly, it depends on your pastor’s memory.** Like all skills, memory skills vary greatly from person to person. However, studies have demonstrated that even individuals with good memories can only accurately remember every participant in a group if that group is around seventy people or smaller.

**Secondly, it depends on your worship attendance.** If you have one service with a total attendance of fifty-two people, your pastor can probably go through a membership list after worship and accurately recall everyone who was there. But if you have two or three services with two hundred and ten people in attendance, it is highly unlikely he can accurately remember who was all there.

**Thirdly, the answer to that question depends on “traffic flow” before and/or after worship.** Does the pastor greet everyone on the way into worship? Does he greet them all on the way out? If so, does everyone actually walk past the pastor on the way out, or do some people exit the sanctuary in other ways? Someone might say, “Doesn’t the pastor see everyone during his sermon?” Most pastors do not. Studies have shown that the majority of public speakers will not remember who was present simply by looking at the crowd and making eye contact. Since a pastor is intensely concentrating on his message, faces tend to blend together.

Therefore, for your pastor to accurately remember everyone who was attended worship in a given week, you need to have:

- 1) a system in place so that everyone in attendance comes in contact with the pastor at sometime before or after worship (e.g. Everyone shakes his hand on the way out after worship), and...
- 2) a small enough attendance that the pastor can remember everyone shortly after.

That simply is not feasible for many WELS congregations. So what’s the solution?

The best option seems to be for the congregation to use a worship registration system of some sort. This has the additional benefit of being a *much* better way of collecting visitor information than a guest book located somewhere in the narthex/entry foyer. The two most common and cost-effective ways of worship registration are to use pew registers or individual cards.

**Pew registers** are simply pads of paper, often in a decorative cover, that go in each row. It has lines for people to write down their name and, if a guest, their contact information. The pew register can be kept at the end of the pew, or it can be distributed at a certain

time during worship, typically prior to the offering. (Some churches have children do this, a fine way to have your youth serve.) At that designated time, individuals fill out the register and then pass it along. Again, this is a great way to collect visitor information. There is a type of positive peer pressure as the visitor sees everyone else in their row filling out the register. The chances of getting a visitor's contact information with a pew register is much higher than getting their contact information with a guest book in your narthex.



(You can find pads and decorative covers for pew registers at Northwestern Publishing House's website. Go to [online.nph.net](http://online.nph.net) and type "church attendance" in the search box near the top of the page. You can also find companies that will customize the decorative covers with your congregation's name and/or logo.)

## CONNECTION CARD

<p>Name(s): _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Address: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">City      State      Zip code</p> <p>Best contact phone: _____</p> <p>Best contact e-mail: _____</p>	<p><b>You are a:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> first-time visitor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> repeat visitor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> member</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> member of another WELS church</p>
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*Please place this card in the offering as it is received or in the connection card basket as you exit the church after worship. Thank you!*

**Individual worship registration cards,** sometimes called "connection cards," are often used when a congregation produces worship folders. The connection card can be inserted into each worship folder. At a designated time, worshipers are encouraged to fill out their card. Because there is more room, a card allows you to collect more information. For example, cards could provide an opportunity for members to request a pastoral visit or to list an item to be included in the congregation's prayer ministry.

For many of our congregations, filling out some sort of worship registration should not be a big step. It is (or has been) a fairly common practice in WELS to have people "announce" when they are taking communion, either by a pew card or by a communion registration book in the narthex. Having a worship registration is just a slight expansion on that practice.

There are other methods congregations have used to track weekly attendance. Some congregations have cameras located on their campus. It might be for security. It might be to film the worship service. There are churches that look through that video to help identify who was present. That seems much more time consuming and complicated than to utilize some sort of written registration system. It also has legal ramifications. In some states you must post signs notifying people if they are being filmed.

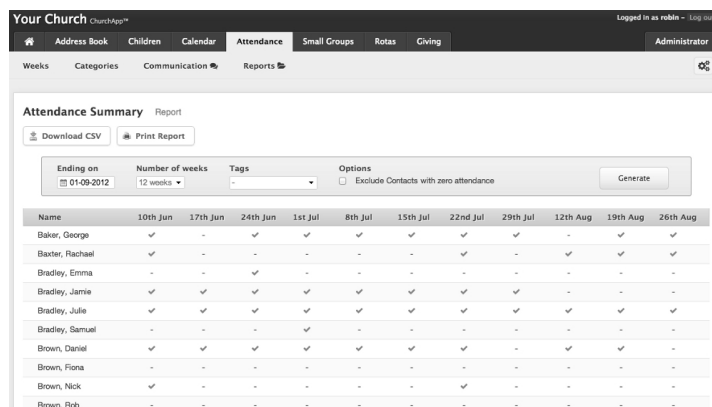
With a worship registration system in place, the congregation will have a very accurate record of who was in attendance on any given week.

## CHALLENGE – It is a challenge to know who is missing from worship for multiple consecutive weeks.

Go back to the smaller congregation with only fifty in worship attendance. We said the pastor can probably remember who was all there in any given week. However, can the pastor remember who has missed two weeks in a row? Four weeks? Two months? Not a chance.

Therefore, a congregation needs to have a system for recording church attendance. Without it, there is a big danger of inconsistency. Example: Family A is contacted after they miss four weeks, but Family B is not contacted in spite of missing four months.

The recording system could be as simple as a written register. It could be a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. However, there are computer programs out there that make tracking worship attendance simple. WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling can provide you with a list of options, some of which are free for smaller congregations. This software allows you to take your pew registers or connection cards and quickly enter who was present. It will then let you run an absentee query. For example, the program will allow you print a list of the names of everyone who has been absent for four straight weeks.



The screenshot shows a web-based interface for a church management system. The main heading is 'Attendance Summary' with a 'Report' label. Below the heading are buttons for 'Download CSV' and 'Print Report'. There are input fields for 'Ending on' (01-09-2012), 'Number of weeks' (12 weeks), and 'Tags'. An option 'Exclude Contacts with zero attendance' is checked. A table below shows the attendance status for various individuals over a period of 12 weeks.

Name	10th Jun	17th Jun	24th Jun	1st Jul	8th Jul	15th Jul	22nd Jul	29th Jul	12th Aug	19th Aug	26th Aug
Baker, George	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Baxter, Rachael	✓	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
Bradley, Emma	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bradley, Jamie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Bradley, Julie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bradley, Samuel	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Brown, Daniel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Brown, Fiona	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Brown, Nick	✓	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-
Brown, Rob	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

There will need to be someone in the congregation who has the job of recording attendance information in a timely manner. Shortly after the last worship service of the week, they will need to enter in attendance information and print off any desired lists of absenteeism.

## CHALLENGE – It is a challenge to deal with absenteeism in a consistent manner.

Scripture gives this directive to fathers: “Do not exasperate your children” (Ephesians 6:4). One sure way to exasperate children is to be inconsistent with correction or discipline. If a child is allowed to walk away from the table without touching his vegetables on Monday, he is going to be confused if dad chides him on Tuesday for not finishing his dinner. That inconsistency is exasperating.

An even worse type of inconsistency is when correction is not applied evenly. Imagine a father who scolds child A for not cleaning his room but does not correct child B, whose

room is just as bad. At the very least, that father is going to confuse both children, who do not know what the standard for a “clean room” is. The father may even lead child A to think he is loved less than child B. The father’s action is extremely exasperating.

It is no different with adults. If your adult members are not dealt with consistently when it comes to worship delinquency, it will lead to frustration and maybe accusations of favoritism. Absenteeism must be dealt with in a consistent manner.

This requires a written plan. WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling has offered a sample, *The Peter Plan*. The goal of the plan is to restore inactive members to a living relationship with the Lord Jesus and an active church membership; or, to take the appropriate action that reflects their current spiritual status.

The plan calls for contacting every communicant member who has been absent from worship for four straight weeks. This initial contact is not made with a spirit of admonition, but with a spirit of concern. E.g., “I noticed you haven’t been to church in about a month. I just want to make sure everything is OK. If you are not able to make it to worship, the church will serve you with the Means of Grace some other way.”

Four weeks seems to be an ideal time. Studies have shown that four straight weeks of non-attendance is the beginning of a habit. In other words, a member might feel guilty about missing two or three straight weeks. By week five or six, their conscience probably will not be nagging them all that strongly. Absenteeism is their new habit. You want to deal with that absenteeism before it gets to that point. Four weeks is a good time.

Contacting members who have been absent less than four weeks can create two issues. First, it greatly increases the time it takes to administrate this program. Your volume of calls will be much higher if you contact members who have been absent, for example, for only two weeks. Secondly, it might seem a bit heavy-handed to some. There are lots of legitimate reasons to miss worship at your home church for two straight weeks.

## A summary of *The Peter Plan*

### **Absent four weeks**

A trained lay member calls the absent individual simply to see if everything is ok.

### **Absent eight weeks**

The pastor contacts the absent individual by phone. The tone is still one of encouragement. He may schedule a meeting with the absent individual.

### **Absent twelve weeks**

The absent individual is sent a letter by an elder, explaining that the elder is concerned and will be following up to see how he can better assist the individual in their walk with Jesus. Follow up is done by phone or in person.

### **Absent eighteen weeks**

The same trained lay member who contacted the absent individual at four weeks now visits the absent individual in his home to encourage him to return to worship.

### **Absent twenty-four weeks**

The absent individual is sent a letter by the pastor, explaining the seriousness of the situation. The letter also says the pastor will be following up that week with a visit to the person at their home.

### **Absent thirty weeks**

The same elder that wrote the twelve week letter attempts a “pop in” visit on the absent member.

Vacation is one example of a legitimate reason to miss worship at your home church. However, it becomes a bit harder to explain when you have missed four straight weeks of worship.

Contacting members who have been absent for *more* than four weeks can also create problems. First, as mentioned earlier, you have given time for absenteeism to become an engrained habit. Second, Satan has a clever way making that long absence seem like it is the congregation's sin, rather than the absent individual's sin. Example: A member removes himself from worship for twelve weeks. When an elder shows up on that member's doorstep, the member says accusingly, "What took you so long? Don't you care about me?" Satan is twisting that person's mind to drive a wedge between that individual and the congregation. However, the member's question *is* a valid one. "Don't you care about me?" The response, "Of course we do!" might seem more sincere if that individual had been contacted at four weeks, rather than at twelve weeks.

For those reasons, *The Peter Plan* calls for an individual to be contacted when they have been absent four straight weeks. *The Peter Plan* lays out steps for subsequent intervals of absenteeism. In subsequent months, the tone of the contact shifts from concern to warning and then to admonition. The intensity of the contact grows as well. Contact by phone becomes face-to-face contact. More people are involved as well. Under *The Peter Plan*, early contact with absent members can be made by any fellow member. But eventually, when the purpose of the contact transitions from encouragement to admonition, the calls are made by an elder and/or pastor.

Again, the goal of *The Peter Plan* is to restore inactive members to a living relationship with the Lord Jesus and an active church membership; or, to take the appropriate action that reflects their current spiritual status. Under *The Peter Plan*, if an individual has no legitimate excuse for their prolonged absence from worship, that person is removed from membership. This happens after one year of absence.

This removal from membership might be considered a "release for self-exclusion." This type of release is appropriate when the individual gives what seem to be visible signs of faith, and yet for whatever reason refuses to attend worship. "Release for self-exclusion" tells the individual:

"We are not going to say that you are not a Christian. However, your intentional and prolonged withdrawal from our congregation, in

### *Peter Plan continued*

#### **Absent thirty-six weeks**

The same elder as before sends what is now the third letter, expressing concern that repeated admonition from both the elder and the pastor has not been heeded. It makes clear that if the member does not return to worship attendance, the congregation will eventually have to enact church discipline.

#### **Absent forty-four weeks**

The elder and pastor visit the absent individual together. They explain that after one year of absence, the individual will be removed from membership either by release-for-self-exclusion or by excommunication.

#### **Absent for one year**

The member is sent a final letter by the elder, informing him that he has been removed from membership.

spite of continued encouragement to return, indicates that you do not want us to serve you spiritually. Therefore, we will remove you from membership.”

Absent members might also be removed from membership through excommunication. This happens when, during the process of dealing with the delinquency, it becomes apparent the individual is living in unrepentant sin. Often the unrepentant sin will be broader than a refusal to come to church. Repeated warnings and admonitions have had no effect. In love, the congregation tells the individual:

“We do not believe you a member of the Holy Christian Church. Your refusal to repent of your sin in spite of repeated correction and encouragement would indicate that your faith is dead. Since you are not a member of the Holy Christian Church, we will also remove you from membership at our congregation. We still desire to serve you in any way we can if you should choose to let us do so. And if the Holy Spirit moves you to repent, we will rejoice with you and reinstate you as a member at that time.”

Thus *The Peter Plan* removes from membership individuals who are consistently and persistently absent. This is loving. A trick that Satan uses is leading individuals to put their faith in their church membership rather than in their Savior. Some people believe that they will be saved on the Last Day simply because their names are on some church membership roster. In such situations, the most loving thing you can do is take that false security away by removing them from membership. Hopefully, it doesn't come to that. Ultimately, if a member hasn't heard the Word or received the Sacrament in a year, what good does it do for them to remain on the membership list? None. It potentially hurts them by giving them a false sense of safety.

*The Peter Plan* is by no means the only way to deal with delinquency. But it is a way to do it. So if your congregation does not have a written plan of how to systematically deal with delinquency, then *The Peter Plan* is better than what you currently have. Adapt it in whatever way best serves the gospel in your situation, but have a written plan for going after straying sheep. Communicate that plan to your members, so they know *how* your church operates and *why* it operates that way – out of love for Christ and for the members.

## **CHALLENGE - Having enough qualified individuals to implement that written plan.**

If you implement a plan to go after the straying that is going to be zealous, it will require a good amount of work, especially when starting the program up.

As mentioned earlier, on average about sixty percent of a WELS congregation's membership is absent from worship in any given week. How many of those members have been absent at least four weeks? You can plan on it being somewhere between



thirty and fifty percent of your weekly average absent rate.

For example, say your congregation follows the WELS “norm,” having about sixty percent of your communicant

members absent on any given Sunday. That means if your congregation decides to call on members who have been absent at least four weeks, you will likely be contacting between eighteen percent (thirty percent of sixty percent) and thirty percent (fifty percent of sixty percent) of your members each week. Therefore, if you have a congregation with two hundred communicant members, it means you probably will be contacting between thirty-six and sixty individuals each week, at least initially.

If the average percentage of your communicant members who are absent in a given week is	Then the average percentage of your communicant members who, on any given week, have been absent for at least four straight weeks is between		
20.0%	6.0%	and	10.0%
25.0%	7.5%	and	12.5%
30.0%	9.0%	and	15.0%
35.0%	10.5%	and	17.5%
40.0%	12.0%	and	20.0%
45.0%	13.5%	and	22.5%
50.0%	15.0%	and	25.0%
55.0%	16.5%	and	27.5%
60.0%	18.0%	and	30.0%
65.0%	19.5%	and	32.5%
70.0%	21.0%	and	35.0%
75.0%	22.5%	and	37.5%

Say your congregation *doesn't* follow the WELS average, and you have only thirty-five percent of your members absent on average per week. That means if your congregation decides to call on members who have been absent at least four weeks, you will likely be contacting between eleven percent (thirty percent of thirty-five percent) and eighteen percent (fifty percent of thirty-five percent) of your communicant members each week. In a congregation of two hundred communicant members, you are looking at twenty-two to thirty-six calls a week initially.

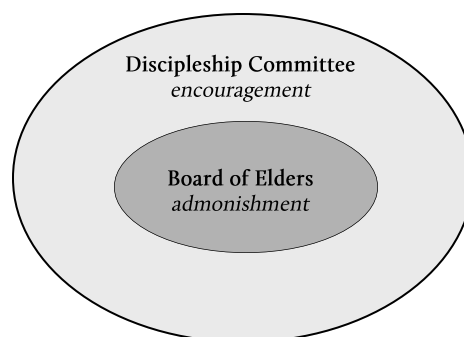
Note that this high level of calling activity goes down, often quite dramatically, over the course of a year. More on that in a moment. But when implementing something like *The Peter Plan*, the level of calling activity described above will be necessary. That means a congregation that implements this program will need to choose one of two options.

The first option is that the congregation’s Board of Elders, the group that typically deals with delinquency, commits itself to a year of heavy work.

Let us consider that example of a congregation of two hundred communicants that has between thirty-six and sixty individuals that have been absent at least four weeks straight. A congregation of that size probably has a Board of Elders of about four men. That means each of those men would be making nine to fifteen calls a week. *The Peter Plan* suggests this initial contact be done by phone. A e-mail that says, “I haven’t seen

you in church in awhile. I'm just checking up to see if everything is ok," might be perceived as impersonal and cold. If that initial call to the four-week absentee is made by phone, and if the average phone call lasts five minutes, it means each elder would be on the phone for forty-five to seventy-five minutes each week, just for the first step of *The Peter Plan*. In addition, there are many subsequent steps, including ones that require in-home visitation by the elders.

The second option is to throw open the early steps of dealing with delinquency to a group larger than the Board of Elders. We recommend this option. *The Peter Plan* calls for a group-within-a-group. You have a Discipleship Committee that is comprised of both men and women. Within the Discipleship Committee, you have the Board of Elders, men who meet the qualifications laid out in the Pastoral Epistles.



This is both appropriate and wise.

It is appropriate, since the early stages of *The Peter Plan* do not involve the exercise of authority. Those early stages call for listening and encouragement. Thus, having women participate in those early stages of *The Peter Plan* would in no way violate the Scriptural gender principles (such as 1 Timothy 2:12).

It is wise, because there are times when having a woman of the Discipleship Committee call on a female absentee member might be better received than if that absent woman was called on by someone from the Board of Elders. Say, for example, a twenty-six-year-old single mother of two children has been missing church because she finds it challenging to get her children to church all by herself. If another young woman could call on her and uncover that reason (as well as offer some help), it might be perceived as being more natural than having a married fifty-year-old man calling on that young, single woman.

In the early stages of *The Peter Plan*, both male and female members of the Discipleship Committee are calling on absent members. If members continue in their absence, then the goal of the contact shifts from encouragement to loving admonition. It eventually becomes a matter of church discipline. Therefore, the latter stages of *The Peter Plan* are when the work shifts *solely* to the "group-within-the-group," the Board of Elders.

This second option – the group-within-the-group – spreads the work of implementing *The Peter Plan* around to more individuals. It also allows the Discipleship Committee to take on other tasks. For example, they can also be trained to be informal greeters on Sunday morning, looking for unfamiliar faces, either guests or members.

As mentioned, once *The Peter Plan* is implemented, the level of calling activity will decrease, often quite dramatically, over the course of a year. This is for two reasons.

The first reason is that the Word works! The gospel-motivated encouragement of fellow Christians is often well received. Many of your members will respond to this encouragement and become more faithful in their church attendance.

The second reason is that over time some individuals will likely be removed from membership. As mentioned, *The Peter Plan* calls for the removal from membership after a year of absence – an act of love intended to take away a dangerous false security. When persistently absent members have been removed from membership, *The Peter Plan* suggests you add them to your evangelism prospect list. So they will still be invited to church (as part of your normal evangelism ministry), but they will no longer be called on if absent from church, as they are no longer members.

Therefore, over time your congregation will have fewer “hard-core” delinquents (those absent for very long periods of time) to call on. Conversely, God willing, your congregation will have more of your “soft-core” delinquents (those who miss a month or two at a time) becoming more faithful in church attendance. That will mean the amount of time it takes to work the steps of *The Peter Plan* will go down.

## FAQs - Frequently asked questions

There are a number of questions that come up almost every time a congregation considers implementing a zealous system for dealing with delinquency. Let us consider them.

### **If we have a written plan for dealing with delinquency, won't some people simply “work the system”?**

Yes, most likely. If your members know that your congregation contacts individuals who have been absent four straight weeks, you probably will have some members who simply will come one Sunday a month – just enough not to be contacted. So be it. For many of those people, that will be a substantial increase in church attendance. And while their motivation for coming is not God pleasing (i.e. They are not attending out of love for God, but because they want to avoid “getting in trouble.”), at least they are now in contact with the law and gospel. That is how the Holy Spirit works. **“It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose”** (Philippians 2:13). The prayer is that through that more frequent contact with the Means of Grace, the Holy Spirit will change the “will” of those individuals so that they *want* to come to worship, and therefore stop working the system.

### **Isn't this really the pastor's job?**

No. Scripture says that dealing with persistent sin (such as despising the Means of Grace) requires more than one individual. In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus says that sometimes, to try and break through to an unrepentant individual, “two or three” will

Speak to that individual. Jesus says that eventually the whole church will try to send that unrepentant individual a message, so that his or her soul might not be lost for eternity. Using law and gospel to help people trapped in sin (including the sin of delinquency) is *never* just the pastor's job.

What is his job? Scripture says, **“Christ himself gave... pastors... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”** (Ephesians 4:11,12). God's plan is that pastors would train people to serve Christ. We all do that in our personal lives. In addition, some congregational members do that publically, serving on behalf and at the request of their congregation. Examples would be Sunday school teachers, ushers, members of the Board of Elders, members of the Discipleship Committee, etc. The pastor will be involved in training these individuals for ministry. He will not do all the ministry himself.

## Won't some members get mad if we monitor their church attendance? Won't that come across as treating them like children?

That depends on two things.

First, it depends on how the program is presented to them.

Martin Luther's explanation of the Eighth Commandment says, “We should fear and love God, so that we do not lie about, betray or slander our neighbor, but excuse him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.” Putting the best construction on things would mean that we *don't* assume that if someone has missed church for four straight weeks, they have hardened their heart against God's Word. Instead, we assume there is a good reason for their absence.



It might be that they have been sick. It might be that their work schedule has changed. In such cases, the congregation wants to contact the individual to help in whatever ways it can: helping the family of that very sick individual, bringing the Sacrament to the home of that person whose work schedule has changed, etc.

It might be that the individual is absent because they did something wrong, committed some sin which they think makes them unworthy of being in God's house. If the congregation would want to contact that individual to comfort them with gospel's unwavering promise of forgiveness.

In other words, the first purpose of monitoring church attendance isn't to “catch people” who are absent from worship for bad reasons. The first purpose is to take note of people who are absent for legitimate reasons, so that the congregation might help them. It is inevitable that the program will also identify people who are skipping church just because of their sinful nature. Why would that be bad?

That leads us to the second factor that will determine whether or not people “get mad” at this program – their sinful nature.

If someone objects to tracking member attendance and following up on people who are persistently absent, they need to be asked why they object. Then they need to provide an answer that clearly demonstrates a concern for the gospel and souls. “*I don’t like it*” does not count. The objection probably flows from a sinful nature that bristles at the thought of being held accountable for violations of God’s Law, such as unjustifiable persistent absent from worship. We do not negotiate with or take advice from the sinful nature.

WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling has provided materials that can be used to introduce and explain *The Peter Program* to your membership in a way that, God willing, will address any potential objections.

### **Won’t this make evangelism impossible? Will anyone want to join a church that is so strict?**

The belief that people want to join a church that has no standards is not rooted in reality. Studies have shown that many prospects *want* a church to have expectations, often high-expectations, of membership. It is perceived as commitment to core values.

Now, those same studies have shown what prospects want those high expectations to be is not always in line with Biblical truth. For example, a spiritually immature individual might think that a church should expect its members to be doing all they can to advance homosexual rights. That individual’s values are not in line with Scripture. However, note that he still wants the church to have high expectations! This illustrates the point that prospects typically understand and even desire congregations to have expectations of its members.

This question is also a matter of timing. One way we rightly law and gospel is understanding that no one will assent to *any* sanctified behavior unless they first of all see the grace that they have been shown in Christ Jesus. For example, it probably would be unwise to teach about financial stewardship as the first lesson of a Bible Information Class (i.e. the classes one takes to become a member). If someone is spiritually dead or spiritually immature, they are going to see that as a grab for money. Only *after* the Holy Spirit enables them to grasp that the Son of God became infinitely poor so that we might enjoy the richness of heaven will the individually hear the doctrine of stewardship and rejoice.

It is the same with this program. If the first thing you tell a prospect is that when they become a member you are going to track their church attendance and call on them if they are absent too long, that will seem awfully heavy-handed to them. They are not spiritually mature enough to understand the loving motives behind your program. However, *after* the individual comes to see that because Christ is infinitely good everything he asks us to do is for our infinite good, the prospect will understand that it is loving and wise to encourage believers to be in worship regularly.

## **I have read that the best way to encourage faithful church attendance is through small groups. Couldn't that be a better way to do this?**

Indeed, there are some congregations that use small groups this way. The small group leaders are the ones responsible for knowing which members of the group are straying. The benefit of this approach is that members of a small group typically know one another fairly well. That is the *point* of being in a small group – connecting more closely with fellow members, growing friendships, etc. Therefore, with this approach, when someone becomes delinquent in worship, they are contacted by a church member that they would probably consider a friend.

However, if you use small groups to deal with delinquency, unless you are going to make small group participation mandatory for church membership, you will need a second system (like *The Peter Plan*) in place anyway. That can make everything more complicated. Is a member's attendance being monitored by his small group or by the congregation itself?

The Commission on Congregational Counseling (CCC) believes that in most WELS congregations it will work best if delinquency is dealt with as a separate program, apart from any small group program. The CCC believes that a small group program should have one main focus – to knit Christians together more closely in a bond of sincere friendship. Certainly, if a congregation has a small group program, it could *aid* with delinquency. The encouragement one receives through small groups can be very helpful in assimilating new members, lowering the chance that they become delinquent. (See the Commission on Congregational Counseling ministry module on *Developing a Small Group Program* for more information.)

### **In conclusion — this is good for *all***

Here is a final encouragement for your congregation as you tackle the issue of delinquency. Certainly having a system in place to deal with delinquency serves the souls of the individuals who have strayed from the means of grace, but realize it also serves your congregation. St. Paul says, **“There should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it”** (1 Corinthians 12:25,26).

Christians are woven into a body. There is no part of the body that is dispensable. In fact, if a part of the body suffers, eventually the health of the whole body is dragged down. Therefore, a zealous delinquency program does not just serve the individuals who are straying. It serves the entire congregation and its overall health. As straying sheep are reclaimed, their faith and their gifts once again become a blessing to the body of Christ. This is all to his glory!



## Discussion

- How big is the problem of delinquency in our congregation? If it is higher than the WELS average of about 40%, what might be the reasons?
- Consider the basic plan that is outlined here. What is similar to what we currently do? What is different?
- What are the biggest challenges to implementing this plan? What are the potential blessings in doing so?
- The Peter Plan calls for the “group-within-a-group” approach, where you have a Discipleship Committee that contacts absent members simply to encourage them. Eventually, the work transitions to the Board of Elders. Would that plan be feasible in our congregation?

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