



Restoring and Retaining: The Mission of Every Church (Sermon)

June 18, 2016

Paul Richard and Nancy Canwell

Which do you think is more important to our local church: Restoring inactively attending members or retaining the members we already have? Or are they equally important? The purpose of this sermon is to show, through stories, not only the vital importance of both but how to go about restoring and retaining our members.

Restoring Through Actively Waiting

How long would you be willing to wait for an inactive member to return to church? Would waiting a year be enough? That seems a long time to wait and pray. How about two years? Surely after that amount of time, you might be tempted to think that your waiting is useless. But Carrie* prayed and waited for her friend, Heather,* for five years! And it was worth the wait.

When Carrie noticed that Heather had missed church two Sabbaths in a row, she called to check on her. Heather openly told Carrie that she'd decided to quit attending church because she was angry with God. Why? Her husband had found someone else and had left her. Also, she was leaving the church because she didn't want to face the many questions that would come—and the empty seat that would be next to her.

She told Carrie, "I don't want anything to do with God or the church, and I don't want to talk about it—ever!"

Carrie might have argued with Heather that blaming God was wrong. She might have been intimidated by Heather's strong emotions and never contacted her again. She could have laid a guilt trip on her for leaving God and the church. Instead, Carrie honored Heather's request and didn't talk about it. But what she *did* do was stay in touch with Heather on a regular basis. She remained her friend. She proved that: "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NLT). She wasn't going to allow Heather to fall alone.

"I called her often," Carrie says. "Sometimes we'd meet for lunch or at the mall. I made sure to keep our friendship alive."

During that time, Carrie and her husband, Dean, prayed for Heather's heart to be softened. They prayed—without giving up hope—for *five long years!* Then Dean was asked to

preach the sermon one Sabbath, and he called and invited Heather to church. She emphatically told him that she did not want to come. But Carrie prayed, and hoped, and waited in the foyer that Sabbath morning. And to her delight, Heather walked in!

Carrie sat with Heather during the service so there wouldn't be an empty seat next to her. When Dean had an altar call for those who wanted to recommit their lives to Jesus, Carrie took a chance.

“Do you want to go forward?” she asked Heather. “I'll go with you.”

Tears began to run down Heather's face. Hand-in-hand she and Carrie walked up to the altar. There Heather let go of five years of grief, anger, and separation from God and the church. It was a sweet relief!

Carrie says, “Heather came back to God and to the church that day and remained a faithful member for the next 15 years. Then one evening, she died suddenly from a massive heart attack. I will always be glad that I never gave up on her. It was worth the wait.”

How long are we willing to wait for our inactive members to return to our church? But even more important than being willing to wait, is what we do *while* we wait. We must wait *actively*. Carrie was an “active waiter” by keeping their friendship alive and praying.

Restoring Through Welcoming

When an inactive member is ready to return, we must be ready to welcome them. The entire church needs to be a part of the welcoming party—like the story of the return of the prodigal son in Luke 15:21-24 (NLT):

“His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.”

Dalton* received just such a welcoming “party.” When he made the decision to go back to church, his home church was fully ready to receive him. They had ministries in place that he could immediately get involved in. And that's because the members already knew, and were using, their own spiritual gifts.

It all started with a caring youth pastor. She knew that Dalton, 20, was an inactive member. So whenever she saw him around town, she made it a point to be friendly and take time to talk. Then one day, when Dalton stopped by the church office to drop off something for his grandpa, the youth pastor invited him to sit down and chat. Their chat led to Dalton telling why he quit coming to church. He quit soon after his academy graduation because someone in the church had hurt his family. The youth pastor listened, apologized for the hurt, and then invited him to church that week. To her joy, she watched from up front as Dalton walked in and sat

down in the last pew.

But the most beautiful thing about this story is that the church was ready to receive him. The greeters at the front door gave Dalton a warm welcome—not a surprised or critical look. The church had a young adult Sabbath School class that welcomed him, offered muffins and a hot drink, and friendship. During the greeting time in the church service, several members warmly welcomed him back. After church someone invited him to stay for the weekly potluck, which he did. Then the youth pastor invited him to help with a project for the younger youth, which he gladly accepted. Within his first week back, Dalton already felt that he belonged. It's no surprise that he returned the next week. His church was ready to receive him well.

Restoring Through Accepting

It had been a couple of years since Michael* and his kids had come to church. When his wife left him because he failed to overcome an addiction, he was too ashamed to return. Then one day, Michael took a hard look at his life. Being a single father on the weekends, he knew that he wanted his kids to be part of a church family. So he made a first attempt to come back. But what brought him back again and again? *The members of the congregation weren't holding stones to throw at him.*

On that first Sabbath back, he walked with his kids down the long aisle to the front of the church to hear the children's story. Many eyes followed him, surprised to see him there. *And then the grace began.* As he walked back to his pew, a family invited him to sit with them so they could help with his three kids. A few weeks later, a couple who often sat near Michael took a special interest in his children, showing them how to quietly make crafts during church. Then they invited Michael and his kids home for Sabbath lunch several times. Those were very welcome invitations for a single dad! And still another family in the children's Sabbath school wing befriended him with an invitation home for lunch. Other members visited with him after church and during the week, showing care and concern.

Michael says, "Sometimes, when I'm sitting in church and singing praise songs with the congregation, I cry because I feel a part of the church family again."

Imagine how Michael's life—and the lives of his children—would be different if the church hadn't accepted him back. What if people had looked at him and thought, "Why is *he* here?" or "The nerve of someone like him coming back to church!" or "He needs to stay home and get his act together before he comes to church!" And then, what if they started "throwing stones?"

Throwing stones by a disapproving glance.

Throwing stones by not making eye contact.

Throwing stones by making some kind of self-righteous, condemning remark.

Instead, it was as if they had just finished reading what Jesus said to the crowd surrounding the woman caught in adultery: " '... Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' ... At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the

older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin’ ” (John 8:7, 9-11, NIV).

The members of Michael’s church had no stones to throw. *They chose to help heal rather than harm.* Michael says, “When I first started coming back to church, I wondered how many people knew about my sin. But then I realized that everyone struggles. My sin may have been made public, but we have all sinned. We all need Jesus.”

Restoring Through Attentiveness

When Diego* left home as a teenager in search of a more exciting life, he also left the church. It wasn’t until years later, after he was married and had a family, that he decided to give church another try.

He chose to visit the smaller of two Adventist churches in his town. Wanting to meet the pastor, he called him during the week to let him know that he was a former Adventist and that he and his family would be visiting the coming Sabbath.

“It was almost a disaster,” Diego told me. “My family and I walked in and sat down near the back of the sanctuary. No one spoke to us—but they spent a lot of time looking us over. I looked at the bulletin, and in horror discovered that it was Communion Sabbath. I remembered communion as a kid, but my wife and children had absolutely no religious background. What were they going to think of this odd service? I felt awkward and uncomfortable.

“When the congregation got up to leave for the traditional foot washing, we stayed in the sanctuary. No one invited us to take part. The pastor saw us sitting there and gave a wave from across the sanctuary, but that was the only contact he made with us that day.

“After church, my family and I got up and walked through the foyer and out the door. Once again, no one spoke to us. *I was devastated!* This was not what I had imagined. I’d remembered reading the book of Acts as a teen about the early church that was a vibrant, loving fellowship of believers. It was very discouraging. As I walked away, I wondered whether I really wanted anything to do with church again.

“That’s when the almost-disaster turned into what I call a miracle. Two elderly ladies came running down the sidewalk toward us, frantically waving their hands in the air. Even though we were leaving, they welcomed us to church and invited us to come back the following week. I call what they did a miracle because had it not been for those two and their attentiveness, that might have been my last attempt at church. Instead, even though we didn’t return to that particular church, we tried the other Adventist church in town and liked it so much that we became members.”

The attentiveness of those two elderly women made all the difference. They weren’t evangelists, pastors, theologians, or even local elders. But they simply cared enough to reach out. I thank God that they cared.

Retaining Through Caring

These success stories are beautiful, but they happened *after* people quit coming to church. Are there things we can do to retain our members? Yes! Rather than waiting to approach someone after they have left, we can connect with him or her the moment we see signs of distress. As members we should be so aware and engaged with each other that we'll take action when it appears that one of us is in the process of leaving.

This will take diligence, but it will certainly pay off. Sabbath school class members and small group members need to look out for each other. If a member misses more than two weeks, she needs multiple contacts to let her know she is missed. If a member goes through a crisis—an illness, death, loss of a job, etc.—he needs someone to walk beside him and be a constant friend. We need to be a church that doesn't forget the hurting but gives steady aid and assistance like food, house cleaning, yard work, and even money, if needed. If we did this type of retaining ministry, we'd see fewer people leave the church. Why would anyone want to leave a loving and supportive spiritual home?

Retaining Through Involvement

When Jesus was here on earth, His disciples were very active participants in His ministry. They weren't mere spectators but ministered alongside Jesus. He taught them by His example and then gave them the same work to do.

When Jesus called the 12 to join Him, He said, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19, NLT). He let them know that they would be active in service. Perhaps we need to say something similar to those in the process of leaving the church: "Come help us. We need your talents," or "Come help us. We could use someone with your education," or "Come help us. We need someone with your unique experience."

When Pastor Allen* noticed that Brian* and Emily* had missed church for a few weeks, he stopped by their house for a visit.

"We've missed you," he told the couple, as they sat visiting in their living room. "Is everything going okay with you?"

"Well," Brian answered, "we just don't feel like we're needed there...."

"But you *are* needed!" Pastor Allen replied. "I know for a fact that you play keyboard, Brian. And Emily, you have a beautiful singing voice. We would love to include you on our praise team."

The couple seemed touched by the fact that they were needed. They didn't simply hear, "We want you there," but "We *need* you there." They returned the next week and were faithful from then on. They made new friends within the praise team and became involved in other areas of the church as well. There was no way they would leave now. The church was their second

home. Their second family. *They belonged!*

Pastor Allen said, “Their story illustrates that people need to be needed. The church needs to be committed to finding a place for each member to use his or her gifts and talents. If we don’t involve members, they will drift away.

We Are One Body

The Apostle Paul describes the church as a body: “The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ ... Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, “I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand,” that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, “I am not part of the body because I am not an eye,” would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body” (1 Corinthians 12:12, 14-20, NLT).

Whether we are restoring or retaining, we have a responsibility to engage each member. Each one is a part of the body that is our church. And if we don’t include each one in a meaningful way, we soon will have missing body parts. We won’t be whole.

Consider this: the Shepherd in Luke 15:4-7 had 100 sheep. When one went missing, he could have said, “Well, at least I still have 99.” But he saw his flock as incomplete. Ninety-nine weren’t enough, and one—just *one* missing—was worth searching for. And when he found that lost sheep, he rejoiced and called his neighbors to celebrate with him. ““In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!’ ” (vs. 7, NLT). If a church only has half of its membership attending, that church isn’t whole. Family members are missing, and shepherds need to go searching—willing to lovingly carry them home.

To be proactive in restoring and retaining members takes time. It takes patience. *It takes being like Jesus*: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12, NIV). These are at the heart of restoring and retaining ministries.

Only as we are willing to take care of those God has already entrusted to our care are we then completely ready to boldly following Jesus’ great commission: “ ‘Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ ” (Matthew 28:19, NLT). Amen.

*All names have been changed