

RECLAIMING THE STRAYING

A bible study on Jesus' care for those who wander from his love.

Introduction: Share some titles we apply to those who are no longer active in gathering with their fellow believers. How well do these descriptions work?

1. List some reasons why sheep stray.
2. Who is held accountable when they stray?
3. Compare your previous answer to the following sections of Scripture



Ps 119:176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.



Je 50:6-7 "My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place. Whoever found them devoured them; their enemies said, 'We are not guilty, for they sinned against the Lord, their true pasture, the Lord, the hope of their fathers.'


4. What does the following say about reclaiming the straying member?



"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with



me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:4-7)

 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)



Reclaiming the Straying: Maintaining an "I must leave the 99" Mindset

5. Describe the proper attitude regarding the members of the flock who stray. List some pitfalls to avoid:



6. What are some ways to avoid these pitfalls when it comes to working on reclaiming the straying sheep?





Reclaiming the Straying:

Sheep Prone to Listen to the Voice of Any Shepherd

7. List some pitfalls to avoid when dealing with these sheep:



8. Discuss & Share: What can we do to avoid these pitfalls and help these sheep?




9. Some questions to consider:


- a. Do the members of Rock of Ages Lutheran Church have a good awareness of fellowship blessings and dangers?
- b. Do we work together with nearby WELS/ELS congregations to avoid territorial wars or congregational ignorance of each other's existence?
- c. Does your congregation have any group or activity which promotes fellowship between your congregation and other WELS congregations? Is it well attended? Why?
- d. List suggestions for more fellowship opportunities:
- e. How would you describe the "synod loyalty" of your congregation? What avenues are available for creating awareness of the blessing we share in our fellowship together?



10. How did Paul deal with sheep prone to follow other voices? (If time read Galatians 1:6-9)

 (Galatians 1:6-9) *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

11. Remember the following:

 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. (John 17)



Reclaiming the Straying: **Sheep Falling Into or Living In Sin**

12. List some pitfalls to avoid when dealing with these sheep:



13. Discuss & Share: What can we do to avoid these pitfalls and help these sheep?



14. Pick one of the following passages and apply it to dealing with sheep living in sin.



2 Ti 4:2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction



Philippians 2:4-5. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.



Leviticus 19:17. Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.



Galatians 6:1-2. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.



Colossians 3:16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.



Heb 4:12-13 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.




Revelation 2 You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ Remember the height from which you have fallen!




15. What are some of the challenges that might arise as the straying sheep returns to the flock?

16. Apply the following to the flock that 'never' strayed as it receives the one who did.


 (Luke 15:28-32)²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

17. How does Paul address these challenges? (if time, read 2 Co 2:5-11)

 2 Co 2:5-11 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as *he has grieved all of you*, to some extent—not to put it too severely. 6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7 Now instead, you ought to *forgive and comfort him*, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to *reaffirm your love for him*. 9 The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10 If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven *in the sight of Christ* for your sake, 11 in order that *Satan might not outwit us*. For we are not unaware of his schemes.



18. Case discussion:


 A member of the congregation's school board goes to prison for sexual misconduct with his own daughter. He hasn't been to church since his recent release from prison. He expresses the desire to return to worship but says he isn't sure he would be welcome and is frustrated that he is isolated from his old church home and wishes to return. How might leaders in the congregation help or hinder the congregation's handling and understanding of the return of a member who has committed a this or some other well-known and very offensive sin?



Reclaiming the Straying: Sheep Who Quit Regularly Gathering with the Flock.

19. If you have a larger congregation or plan on growing, do you have a system of recording attendance at worship?

20. Evaluate the following statement from a recently written WELS essay file.

 *When someone is neglecting Word and Sacrament, it is the time to speak. Don't let ten or twenty weeks go by before you finally let someone know that you noticed they haven't been at worship for a while. Act quickly. Four to six weeks is not too soon.*

21. Discuss: When is it time to take action?
When is it time to stop all efforts?





Reclaiming the Straying: Sheep who reject the Shepherd's voice.

22. List some pitfalls to avoid when dealing with these sheep.



Reclaiming the Straying: Further Discussion.

23. Evaluate these statements from WELS essay files. Any thoughts?




It may seem easier and more efficient to write letters to people who are straying, especially if there are dozens of them in your congregation. But letters are a poor way to communicate when members are straying.





...The best and brightest lay members are used for 'survival goals'—raising money, keeping physical plant in good repair, keeping existing groups going, etc. That is a reality that I would doubt many of have seen contradicted. We employ all too often in our congregations those who are gifted and willing to serve in roles that simply maintain what we have. (Please do not




misunderstand. I am not saying that such service is neither desirable nor unimportant.)...

 *We erect a barrier when we or our lay members assume that new members will make their way into the groups of the congregation without invitation. ... A simple announcement in the bulletin or newsletter is at times assumed to be all that is necessary for a new member or a formerly inactive member to become involved.*

 *Does the Law have a role in member reactivation? The answer is a resounding: Yes! The Law's role is essentially to make the comfortable sinner uncomfortable, to break the fallow soil to allow planting of the Gospel seed, to crush the proud and arrogant spirit that turns a stony heart toward God's love in Christ Jesus, to cause the self-satisfied to hunger and thirst after a righteousness not their own. Thus the Law must be carefully and properly applied as we approach the wandering brother or sister in Christ.*

 *In our visitations with the straying we should not wear out our welcome. That is a valuable thought. We must go to the delinquent member with a specific purpose in mind, and it is not to win them back into the congregation. It is to gain a brother. That means that our overriding purpose is the evangelical desire that they once again trust in Jesus and walk in life as his disciple, that they will from that point on make progress...*

 *You finally made it into Joe and Jane Straying's living room. The conversation turns to church things, and you sense the time is right to point them back in the right direction-regular worship. So you back up your dump truck filled with pertinent Bible verses and catchy analogies, and you pull the lever. BAM! A half-hour later you're on your way again, confident that you spoke masterfully and that your conversation with Joe and Jane will bear much fruit. If your visit doesn't seem to achieve any results in the long run, perhaps it is because you forgot one of the most important purposes for visiting Joe and Jane. You didn't listen. listening builds trust. Listening allows you to probe behind the excuses to the real issues.*





...There are probably a hundred errors you could make when speaking to a straying member, but one of the worst is not talking about Jesus...

24. Sharing Ideas & Brainstorming: List some practical ideas that you have found helpful or that you might like to use which will help your congregation in reclaiming the straying member.



25. Self-Evaluation questions to consider.

- a. How many WELS members typically remain inactive for extended periods of time before they or the congregation finally gets around to severing the tie?
- b. Do you have an organized system of checking your member database and keeping track of straying sheep?
- c. Does your congregation have a team of visitors for inactive members?
- d. Are these visitors eager to lovingly go after the straying sheep? (gospel motivated & empowered?)
- e. Do you have an adequate training (and growth) program for those who go after the straying?
- f. Do those who formally help in reclaiming the straying members have access to your attendance database/list?
- g. What would your congregation consider to be an adequate number of formal programs and workers for reclaiming straying members?



- h. What can your congregation do to address the issue that many college students will be leaving their church-home for the first time?
- i. Are the most gifted and spiritually mature individuals in the congregation helping reclaim the straying sheep or are these individuals reserved for evangelism outreach and serving the flock which stays at home?
- j. What impression is given if a congregation fails to contact an inactive member after 8 weeks?
- k. Have you recently instructed/ provided a review for your congregation and especially church leaders on the proper steps of church discipline and excommunication?

26. Group Activity: Evaluate the following chart. What attitudes does it suggest become barriers to reclaiming the straying member?

“Actives”		“Inactives”	
How they see “Inactives”	How they feel	How they see “Actives”	How they feel
Dropouts	Frustrated	Hypocrites	Condemned
Delinquents	Fearful	Do-gooders	Forgotten, left out
Do-nothings	Anxious, worried	Nosy	Lonely & Rejected
Inactive	Hostile	Fussy	Abandoned
Lazy	Suspicious	Nitpickers	Angry
Backsliders	Pity	Bossy	Suspicious
Sinners	Sympathetic	“In group”	Failures
Complainers	Puzzled	Judges	Apathetic
Excuse makers	Embarrassed	High & Mighty	Uncaring

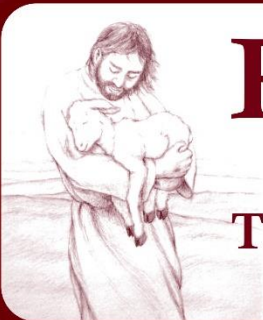




Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:19-25

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