

Redemptive Membership Review Process

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Jesus called His church to fulfill the Great Commission to make disciples. With this goal in view, local churches should aim to create a warm and caring environment for spiritual growth and to encourage all ministries of the church to be united in making mature and faithful disciples.

A healthy church develops a nurturing plan that equips every member to be involved in disciple-making using their talents and spiritual gifts. In addition, it should create a strategy to retain and reclaim former and inactive members through (1) a regular redemptive membership review process and (2) reclaiming ministries.

Definition – Redemptive membership review intends to improve pastoral care based on the foundation of accurate membership records. Nevertheless, it must have a redemptive purpose of seeing people rather than numbers. Updating the records should be motivated by the goal of being more effective in pastoral care and reaching the lost. The goal of perfect attendance should not be motivated by the “pride of the church, but for the progress of kingdom.”¹

The *Church Manual*, states: “Redemptive Membership Review—Membership records are kept up to date by the local church. They are subject to audit by the next higher organization. This rule, which also applies to every entity or level of the organization, provides the maximum privacy of members’ personal information, and shall comply with legal requirements.”² Ellen G White says, “If the lost sheep is not brought back to the fold, it wanders until it perishes. And many souls go down to ruin for want of a hand stretched out to save.”³ Therefore, it is a most needed ministry to review the membership records and to approach this exercise in a Christ-like redemptive way.

Caring about people

As stated earlier, the main purpose of the membership review is not to clean the books but to offer more effective pastoral care. Regular non-frequent members should receive careful attention. “When a church prunes what appears to be ‘dead’ roots, they will often damage healthy roots. In other words, friends, and family members of those purged from the church rolls can be offended and leave the church. Our primary goal is not to boast about the percentage of members present, but to reach the unsaved in our community and to care for the inactive in our fellowship. We’re not caring for someone when we prune them from our rolls. We simply lose contact and opportunity for ministry.”⁴

The rescue starts with the counting of the flock. “The shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is missing does not look carelessly upon the flock.... He counts and recounts the flock. When he is sure that one sheep is lost, he slumbers not... He makes every effort to find that one lost sheep... The parable does not speak of failure but of success and joy in the recovery.”⁵

Local Church – A permanent review of membership helps to keep the records up to date and to assist in pastoral care. An electronic membership system is especially beneficial for keeping updated information.

The redemptive membership review process should include a local church membership classification, follow-up pastoral care for each category, and a permanent membership review process.

According to the *Church Manual*, “If members grow indifferent or drift away, the church must seek to reclaim them for the Lord.”⁶ Or when someone does not want to remain as a member, the proper

procedure must be taken. The *Church Manual* gives specific direction regarding disciplinary process and removal from membership in Chapter 8.

This is a brief description of the redemptive membership review at the local church:⁷

1. A special revision committee can be a great help; it is a permanent standing committee that works with the local church board to:
 - Screen all names in the membership records, classifying them in five categories. The classification can be done directly in Adventist Church Management System (ACMS), if your church is part of the system.
 - Frequently Attending Members (online attendance may be considered)
 - Non-frequently Attending Members
 - Attending Another SDA Church
 - Whereabouts Unknown*
 - Members to Rescue (try to reconnect through visitation plan, invitation for social gatherings, special events, Reencounter or Reunion Project, etc.)
 - Update the categories' list once a year.
 - Follow up on the progress of the Permanent Review Program.
 - Present to the church board a report of the work done—once every three months.
2. The church board should frequently examine the classification lists, implementing strategies to involve each member in disciple-making of each category. The board will:
 - Assess the reports presented by the special revision committee.
 - Appoint a person responsible to lead in working with each auxiliary list.
 - Follow the progress of each category by checking the increase or decrease of members in each category.
 - Provide a separate list to the pastor/elder with the names of the members who left the church to be considered for the Reencounter or Reunion Project (rescue of former members).
3. The church clerk's role is crucial in preparing the classification lists and implementing membership reviews. The church clerk oversees the execution of the review process.[†] The church clerk will:
 - Provide an updated membership list (from ACMS or another electronic system).
 - Participate in the elaboration of the classification lists as a member of the special revision committee.
 - Update each member's electronic record after the special revision committee submits its report to the church board.
 - Update membership classification during the period between the special revision committee meetings. This classification will be validated by the executive committee whenever analyzed on its agenda.
 - Include in the church board's agenda, once every three months, a report of the work done with the membership classification. After that, update the classification lists as needed.
 - Monitor the progress of the work done with the members in the classification lists.

* Whereabouts Unknown – If “members move without leaving a forwarding address and make no effort to contact or report to the church, and the church cannot locate them for at least two years, then the church may certify that it has tried without success to locate the members and the members may be removed by a vote of the church.” (*Church Manual*, pp. 71-72)

[†] Some churches may assign a “member care coordinator” to oversee these functions. It could be one of the elders or the head deacon or deaconess. In some circumstances it might be better suited to another individual, even one where this is their only role.

Local Field – A permanent process of redemptive membership review will:

1. Offer training for church clerks, leaders, pastors, and members to implement redemptive membership review and reclaiming ministries.
2. Implement an electronic membership system to help identify real people.
3. Take the administrative decision to “close the gap,” between official numbers and actual number reported by the churches, and highlighting the benefits of membership review.
4. Plan to close the gap by “adjustments” progressively. Reconciling organizational records with local church membership may take a few years.
5. Keep a permanent review process.

Division/Union

Each entity should implement a membership review process and follow each step. For example, if there is a big gap between official numbers and the local churches' reality, the local fields should be updated one at a time. Division/union will:

1. Appoint a Disciple-making Reclaiming (DMR) coordinator and a DMR committee, including departmental directors and chaired by one of the officers.
2. Improve the reviewed membership retention rate and increase church attendance by 20 percent.
3. Implement an active disciple-making plan, according to their context, to increase evangelism, assimilation, and leadership development.
4. Hold conferences accountable on disciple-making, nurture, retention, and reclaiming.
5. Improve records of local church membership by using approved membership software in at least 75 percent of the unions.
6. Provide training in disciple-making, nurture, retention, and reclaiming in ministerial and theological education programs.
7. Follow the above process to update membership records of organizational units (unions and local fields), not waiting to update all the units at once.

General Conference

1. The General Conference has an active Disciple-making and Reclaiming Committee to support worldwide initiatives on disciple-making, nurture, retention, and reclaiming ministries.
2. General Conference Departments, in collaboration with one another and in consultation with division leaders, share materials that meet expressed needs in disciple-making, nurture, retention, and reclaiming ministries.

¹ Kenneth S. Hemphill, *The Bonsai Theory of Church Growth* (Tigerville, SC: Auxano Press, 2011), p. 36.

² *Church Manual* (Silver Springs, MD: Review & Herald, 2023), p. 61.

³ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1941), p. 191.

⁴ Hemphill, p. 36.

⁵ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 187-188.

⁶ *Church Manual*, p. 62.

⁷ More detailed explanation of the redemptive membership review process is presented at “People Behind the Numbers – A Positive Perspective on Membership Auditing,” by Edward Heidinger and Charles Rampanelli, in the book *Discipling, Nurturing, and Reclaiming* (Silver Spring, MD: Review & Herald, 2020), pp. 256-269.