

LEADER'S GUIDE

*heart
call*

Women
reaching
women
who are
taking a break
from church

heart call

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Women's
MINISTRIES
NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION
of SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS
A ministry for every woman



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Editor: Erica Jones
Design and Layout: Ani Holdsworth

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Women are specially designed by God to meet the needs of other women. While there are other programs created to bring former or inactive members back into the church, Women's Ministries has a unique ministry to reach women who have stopped attending church and literally love them back. The beautiful part about this ministry is that when we reclaim a woman we very often reclaim a family.

OVERVIEW

Heart Call is a ministry conducted by women who have a desire to reach out to women who are no longer connecting with their churches. This guide contains material to help local churches set up a successful ministry of reaching women who are taking a break from church.

Identify

Make a list of women missing from your church.

Pray

Pray over this list daily — both individually and in small groups.

Share

Share with your pastor your vision of renewing friendships and reconnecting with these non-attending members.

Introduce

Along with your pastor, introduce the Heart Call program to your church board and to the church body.

Form a Team

Form a Heart Call ministry team. Ideally, this team should include:

- Leader—a woman with a vision for the ministry who possesses the leadership gifts to pull the team together and oversee the project.
- Bible study leader—a woman with teaching gifts who can effectively lead a small group through the Bible study materials you select.
- Events coordinator—a woman with hospitality and organizational gifts to coordinate social gatherings and/or seminars designed for the women you hope to reach.
- Personal Mentors—women with strong spiritual lives to partner with each woman on your list.

Choose Mentors

Choose a spiritual mentor for each woman on your list. The mentor's role is to establish a friendship with the woman and to simply love her, pray for her, and interact with her in a non-judgmental way. If possible, choose a mentor who knows the non-attending member or is at least acquainted with her. It can be difficult for someone who has no prior connection to genuinely relay the "we've missed you" message.

Send a Gift

Send or take a women's devotional book or other small gift to the non-attending members. If the gift is sent as a part of their first contact, the mentors can follow-up and ask if they received their gift. This is an easy, non-threatening way of making the first personal connection. If you feel it might be more appropriate, make initial contact by phone or card and, depending on the response, follow up with a small gift.

Plan Ahead

Make a tentative one-year plan for your Heart Call ministry. Schedule monthly meetings for the team and events for the non-attending members. If possible, form small Bible study or prayer groups to invite the non-church-attending women to be a part of. If you hold these small group meetings in members' homes, the women will likely feel more comfortable.

Train Your Team

Hold a 1-2 hour training session for all of the mentors.

Celebrate God's Leading

After the initial contact with non-attending women has been made, celebrate how God is leading and encourage each other to remain committed to the friendships. As more time passes, evaluate your Heart Call ministry.

HOW TO BEGIN

Making the List

First, ask yourself, “Is my church a safe place to invite inactive or former members to come back to?” A safe church is a healthy, growing church, one where the members are united with the pastor in accomplishing mutually agreed upon goals. It is friendly and welcoming to everyone, not just to those who look or act like a “good” Seventh-day Adventist Christian.

An unsafe church is one where there is conflict between members or between members and the pastor, where there are power struggles, cliques, or an attitude of spiritual elitism. Often, the membership is dwindling because the church is so unhealthy. This type of congregation is not a safe environment for new members or newly-returned members.

As God impresses the hearts of the Women's Ministries team, they should begin praying about it. Who is missing from church? Ask God to direct you to the women He wants you to reach out to. Start your list by asking, “Who have I not seen lately?” Then ask church greeters who they notice missing. Ask other church members if they know of non-attending friends or relatives. A look at the church membership directory or a talk with the church clerk may reveal names of members who have been missing for years.

Praying

Lay your list before God and sincerely ask Him to prepare each person's heart. Interceding for those who may not be praying for themselves is a very powerful thing. We know that it is God's desire for each woman on your list to be in a right relationship with Him, so you may come boldly before Him to present your requests. Look for Scripture verses that will be encouraging. Remember to also pray for the mentors—that God will prepare them, as well, for the journey that lies ahead of them—and that the Holy Spirit will lead in pairing together the right women.

Sharing Ideas and Gathering Information

A. Talk with the pastor

Your pastor is no doubt a busy person, but hopefully he or she will take

time to talk with you about Heart Call and will offer support and access to church records you may need. In addition to names, information that will be helpful includes: addresses, birth dates, anniversaries, number and ages of children, place of employment, current family situation, date of baptism or transfer of membership.

Learn as much as possible from church records, relatives, etc., before you contact the person. It will help you get a feel for each woman.

B. Gather information

Start by talking with the church clerk to find the names of non-attending members who still live close enough to the church to come back. (This program is not designed for members who have moved away.) Other places to find former Adventists and non-attending members who live in your area include:

- Church membership directory
- Sabbath school records

Introducing the Program

If you currently have a Women's Ministries program in place in your local church, work with your leader and pastor to introduce Heart Call to your church board. Give a brief summary of your goals and how you plan to implement the program (example: organize and train the mentors, meet monthly with them, invite non-attending women to Bible studies, social events and/or seminars). The board will probably ask to see your proposed budget, so come prepared with an estimate of the cost of gifts, prepared Bible studies, cards and postage for whatever you plan to mail, and the cost of refreshments, décor, etc., for social events.

After you have the board's support you can present your plans to the entire church body. Give them the opportunity to add names to your list and to support the program with their prayers and finances.

Most churches will readily acknowledge the need for a Heart Call ministry. However, in some churches the support in terms of finances and people-power may be lacking. If you are the only one in your church with a commitment for reconnecting with women who formerly attended, don't give up. It is possible to start a modified version of Heart Call and work alone or with a partner until others catch the vision.

Forming a Team

Heart Call is usually a branch of Women's Ministries, but occasionally the church board or another body nominates leaders. Regardless of the method used for selecting leadership, the Heart Call team will be successful only if the women involved have a passion for the ministry and are deeply committed to it.

The leader needs to be a woman with vision, wisdom, and leadership skills. She must be able to communicate her vision and act with tact and compassion. She needs to be organized in keeping notes, schedules and records, or she needs to delegate this part of the job to a responsible woman on the team. Large churches may need an assistant leader.

The Bible study leader should be someone with the spiritual gift of teaching who can make the words of Scripture come alive with relevancy to people's daily life and struggles. She needs to be passionate about the Bible, open-minded to the leading of God's Spirit, and able to draw practical lessons for women. A small group meeting in a member's home is the ideal setting for the Bible study. Many women who are not attending church will come to someone's home if they are personally invited and know at least a few of the women who will be there.

The events coordinator should be a woman with hospitality gifts and organizational skills for managing the social gatherings, teas, or seminars to which you invite non-attending members. This woman needs to be fun! If your times together are upbeat and special in some way, people are more likely to attend. Your first few events should be planned away from the church. As the women begin to get reacquainted and feel comfortable, later events can be held at the church.

Women need to connect with other women in meaningful ways, but that will happen differently in different churches. Some women love tea parties and may use them as effective tools for reconnecting with members. Some churches have conducted Heart Call successfully without planning any specific social activities. The path of wisdom is to know the women, their interests and needs, and what they have time and energy for. Just remember to be open to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Hand-picked, personal mentors for each woman on your list are the real backbone of Heart Call ministry. These women need to be actively involved with the church and have a desire to reach out to others. They must be loving, non-judgmental people who can see past lifestyle choices non-attending members may be making.

Choosing Mentors

In addition to the things previously mentioned, the mentors should be women who can systematically reach out and build friendships with women who have left the church. They need a clear understanding of God's grace and His power to work in people's hearts. They need to be encouragers. Some of these skills can be learned in the training session.

They should also be committed to continuing the friendship as long as the non-attending member is willing, even if she shows no interest in returning to church. This unconditional friendship is key to demonstrating the unconditional love of Jesus in human flesh.

The true success of a Heart Call program lies in the conduct of the leaders and mentors, not in the number of women who return to church. That's why choosing the team carefully is so important.

Note: Many churches have found that assigning mentors by geographic location works best, simply because it is easier to visit someone nearby than far away.

Planning Ahead

Making a one-year plan is vital to the success of Heart Call. The plan may need to be adjusted throughout the year, but people want to have an idea of what they're getting involved with. Work with the Women's Ministries leader on a schedule of events for non-attending members. If you plan these well in advance, the mentors can be prepared to bring their new friends. Confirm the time and place of small group meetings, such as Bible study or prayer groups.

Choose a time and location for team meetings. You can meet at the church, at a restaurant, in someone's home—whatever works for your group. Some teams find that meeting monthly during church potluck time is a good way to keep things simple.

The team meetings are designed to provide support and accountability for the mentors, so it's a good idea to have an encouraging devotional thought and a time for prayer. Later, as the women's friendships progress, they can share experiences and discuss any needs while maintaining confidentiality.

TRAINING MENTORS

Conducting a training session for the mentors is essential in preparing them for what they may encounter while approaching women who are not attending church.

Simple Suggestions to Jump-Start or Restart Friendship

Pray, pray, and pray some more! Ask the Holy Spirit to show you any areas of your life still needing to be surrendered to Jesus so you will be enabled to truly be a friend who can *love with no inner criticism, condemnation, or air of superiority.*

Let friendship be enough. Remember the Holy Spirit is working even now to draw her to Jesus. *Be a friend without an agenda* while you pray daily that the Holy Spirit shows you *His* agenda and timing on her behalf.

To start with, plan a short visit in a neutral place, so she has a sense of the length of time commitment. (“Hey, want to meet for frozen yogurt for 20 minutes or so?”) If you know she is an active person, maybe consider a short walk. *Wait awhile* before inviting her to a church function.

Ask safe, open ended questions. Remember the *70-30 rule*—*listen 70%, talk 30%.* Be intentional about finding out things that will help you be considerate and thoughtful of her in the future. Questions about family, occupation, hobbies and interests are usually safe questions.

Remember the 5 W’s—who, what, when, where, why, and how. These words will help you think of questions to bolster conversation.

Express genuine interest in the things she shares. The things you learn can help you in future conversation. Listen for opportunities to connect her with other church members who have similar interests to broaden the circle of people who will have an interest in her.

Let your initial visit give ideas for another time/place/activity where you can meet.

Wait before bringing up religious topics, unless she initiates it. Remember, listen, listen, listen. Using phrases like, “That’s an interesting viewpoint—tell me more!” or “Help me understand your thoughts...” are ways to open the door for dialogue. Even if you are 100% certain she may have some incorrect views, *pray*, listen, and ask questions rather than “setting her straight.” (At the same time, don’t be afraid to mention how Jesus is working in your life. Just remember—go gently, led by the Holy Spirit.)

If she brings up negative things regarding the church, genuinely apologize on behalf of the church. Be brief, sincere, and don’t be afraid to tell her you don’t have all the answers. Seek to redirect the conversation to end on a positive note. Remember, the Holy Spirit is working!

Try to think/plan ahead so you can suggest another time to meet as you end your conversation and visit. Text her later to tell her thank you and let her know you had fun.

Friendship works both ways. When she invites you to do something together, make every possible effort to go!

Pray for her with another friend and try to include her in a group outing with another couple of girlfriends from church.

When the time comes that the Holy Spirit prompts you to invite her to attend a church function, discreetly lay the groundwork ahead of time with key people who will speak to her and welcome her.

Don't give up if she doesn't respond the way you hoped. Take a step back, keep praying, and keep gently reaching out.

Building Trust and Faith

1. Discuss the reasons women stop attending church. Below are several common reasons, in addition to the ones already mentioned, based on research among Seventh-day Adventists:

- Conflict with spouse and/or a divorce
- Conflict with other members of the church
- Moving to another town with no follow-up between churches
- Making the transition into a new stage of life
- Losing their connection with God
- Loneliness/feeling that they don't belong

2. Discuss qualities of a trustworthy friend with team members:

- Won't lie to you
- Respects your boundaries
- Respects your decisions
- Upholds your dignity and worth
- Wants the best for you
- Honors your confidences

Keep in mind that the former or inactive member:

- May still believe Adventist teachings, although she may have forgotten some things.
- May feel she has not lost her connection with God.
- Does not need lectures about standards.
- May have been hurt by the church or by another Adventist.
- May have done something that she feels God cannot forgive her for.
- Will not share her true feelings until she trusts you.

3. Discuss practical ways to share your faith.

- Avoid arguing.
- Be careful not to get sidetracked by doctrinal issues when the deeper issue is her friendship with God.
- Talk in terms of her spiritual “needs.”
- Tell your own story of conversion or falling in love with the Lord and how important He is in your life now.
- Do not push her.
- Be kind and compassionate.
- Drop the discussion about her spiritual life if she doesn’t want to discuss it.

4. The mentor may have an opportunity to invite her friend to accept Jesus by praying with her and then inviting her to do something to help her keep growing in faith. Here are some points to keep in mind:

- It still may not be time to invite her back to church. She may feel that it is not a safe place but would be willing to meet in someone’s home for a Bible study group.
- Share some of your devotional practices with her.
- Be open about your own need of other Christian friends to encourage you and hold you accountable.
- Invite her to attend a small study or prayer group, or for just the two of you to study together.
- Do not end the friendship if she is not ready to join a study group. Be patient.

As a Heart Call mentor you may be the person who receives the anger or hears the bitterness from past experiences at church. Your response should always be, “We are sorry that we failed you” and “Please give us another chance,” even if you do not agree with her reasons. Be prepared for possible replies from non-attending women, such as:

Resistance—You don’t really care about me.

Suspicion—I’m just part of some “church project.”

Anger—I don’t want to talk to you!

Surprise—You’re the first person who has come to see me since I left the church 20 years ago!

Hesitation—What do you want from me?

It is very important that a Heart Call mentor not become defensive.

Points to address during the training session:

- Take things slowly—don’t pry. Be tactful and genuine. Building a trusting relationship takes time.
- If she is deeply hurt, let her cry and express her pain. It’s part of the healing process. Show sincere empathy for her pain.
- If she is angry, let her vent. Don’t be defensive or take it personally. You can just say, “I can see how angry you are” without approving or condemning. An honest, accepting attitude will promote healing better than a good defense of “the church.”
- Keep a brief journal of your contacts, your friend’s responses and any prayer requests. This will help refresh your memory as you prepare for your visits and for monthly team meetings.
- Trust is a vital element of friendship. Keep confidences, unless professional help is needed in cases of abuse or threatened harm.
- When the time seems right, share your own spiritual journey. Hearing how you have developed your friendship with God may be encouraging to her.

As women are drawn into friendships with other women of your church they may express an interest in attending church again. Prepare your greeters and other members to welcome them warmly. Avoid asking, “Where have you been?”

Offer to pick up your friend on your way to church. Invite her to your Sabbath School class. If there is no lunch being served at the church that day, invite her to your home for a meal and a relaxing time together.

At some point, women who have chosen to come back to church may want to be re-baptized, make a Profession of Faith statement, or give a personal testimony. Celebrate these times by giving flowers or gift certificates, enjoying a special meal, etc.

Many women who are not attending church don't feel that they have left God. Whatever your friend's situation, give her to God. Spiritual conviction comes only through the Holy Spirit. Your responsibility is to have the loving attitude of Jesus, be faithful in praying for and contacting your friend, and wait on the Lord to work.

No matter how prepared you are, some women may flatly refuse any contact. Respect their wishes, but don't cross them off your prayer list. There may be some women in your church who are unable to serve as mentors but who could pray on a daily basis for those women who refuse contact. There is great power in persistent, intercessory prayer!

Celebrate!

Celebrating is sometimes a forgotten element. Just as the shepherd was genuinely delighted to find his sheep, and the woman was thrilled to find her coins (Luke 15), the church should exhibit delight when a member who has not been attending has returned. Have a church potluck to honor each member who returns or honor a group of returnees. Women's Ministries could have a tea or luncheon to honor them. Let them know they're special, and you're glad they're fellowshiping with you once again. (Make sure the person returning is comfortable with the idea before you begin planning the event.)

Questions to ask as you evaluate your Heart Call ministry:

- What have we learned about rebuilding friendships?
- How does that impact our ministry plan?
- What type of follow-up do we need to implement to prevent women from leaving the church again?
- How can we involve women who return to church in Heart Call or other ministries?



RESOURCES

BIBLE STUDIES

Journey of Joy DVD Bible studies
featuring speaker Carla Gober

Surprised by Love DVD Bible studies
featuring speaker Elizabeth Talbot

Women in the Bible...and Me

BOOKS

for reintroducing women to Christ

From the *Jesus 101* series by Elizabeth Talbot:

Matthew: Prophecy Fulfilled

Mark: Good News!

Luke: Salvation for All

John: God Became Flesh

Revelation: The Fifth Gospel

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