

Members Who Have Moved Away

When people unite with your church, they covenant with God and with the other members of the church for a ministry of support, nurture and concern enabled by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The covenant relationship needs to be honored when those members can no longer be present at church activities because work, retirement, military service, illness or school has taken them out of town. Just as God does not forget God's people, the church should not. You have the responsibility of helping the church keep the covenant alive.

History and Background

The church's commission to bring individuals under the influence and ministry of Jesus Christ is not limited by geography or movement of people. The Bible is full of stories of people on the move. Their covenant with God went with them wherever they went. They continued to feel that God cared for them as they were called to go from their homes and friends. God's love was constant.

Common Practices

Members who are moving to find a new congregation may be shown how to use the "find a church" feature on www.ucc.org, or they may call the "Church find" line at 1-800-UCC FIND (1-800-822- 3463). A pastor may also contact churches in the new area directly. Because church membership is transferred by correspondence from church to church, you will be able to

know when new church membership is established.

In most churches contact with absent members is through the church office. Some churches have a committee that thinks of ways to support absent members and carries out those ideas.

Suggestions for Relating to Absent Members

When members move permanently you may want to do some of the following:

- Express appreciation during a worship service before they leave. Consider using the "Order for Times of Passage: Farewell" in **Book of Worship** for United Church of Christ. Order from United Church of Christ Resources. Telephone, toll-free, 800-537-3394.
- Write a letter of appreciation for their participation in your church.
- Call the 1-800-UCC-FIND program to assure that a UCC congregation will contact and welcome a member in a new community. This program is managed by the Evangelism Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115 or visit www.ucc.org.
- Have a parting conversation with them, in which they can express their feelings about the church, their hopes for its future, and suggestions for improvements in its ministry. They will also have a chance to share their personal hopes and fears as they move to a new community.

You'll want to help members who are away temporarily feel that they are still part of the church family. Some of the following could also be used for people

who have moved permanently but have not yet established a church home:

- Keep them on the church mailing list.
- By occasional reminders in the newsletter, encourage nonresident members to keep the church informed of address changes.
- Send cards, email greetings or letters on holidays.
- Send a small gift from the church at least once a year.
- Send greetings on birthdays, graduations or other special occasions.
- Encourage those members who remain in contact with your church to submit absentee votes on all matters brought before the church. Supply them with ample background information in time for study and vote.
- Encourage them to continue financial support of the church.
- Assign pen pals.
- Especially remember one nonresident each week. During the worship service, give a brief update of the person's activities or note it on the bulletin, remember them in prayer and encourage others to communicate with them.
- Encourage these members to send periodic updates for inclusion on the bulletin boards or newsletters.
- Place a large map in the church with pictures of nonresident members pinned on it. Post news about them on an adjoining bulletin board.
- Subscribe to the local newspaper for absent members.
- Make cassette tapes of special services or events and mail them to each nonresident member.
- For students away at school, plan a

special event during a holiday when they are likely to be home.

- Send a special invitation to all nonresidents for special celebrations like anniversaries or dedication services.
- If the absent member is a college student, let the campus minister or college chaplain know he or she is on campus.

Issues Facing the Church

- Some churches have established associate memberships for persons who will be in the community a limited time. This sets up a formal relationship but does not remove them from the roll of their home church. Does your church encourage associate memberships? Should it?
- Most churches wish to take care not to "cut off" members who have moved and have become uncommunicative. Does your church have a caring way to remove members from its rolls when appropriate?

Questions

- Did this information help you think about what you could do for people who haven't moved away? If so, what might you do?
- How does your church already care for its absent members?
- Which suggestions are new ideas that you might consider?