



A Quick Guide to Membership at Grace Episcopal Church

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As things have shifted culturally and religiously in the past several decades, the nature and purpose of church membership has easily become confused within churches. The purpose of this paper is to summarize some basic concepts so you can best decide on your relationship with Grace.

I. Does it really matter if I am a member or not?

It does matter, but it depends on you. This is probably best discussed with your clergy, to discern what is best in your situation. It is certainly possible that you can have a meaningful and fruitful relationship with God and the church without membership. Grace deeply values its many friends who are not members but who desire to have a relationship with us in various ways.

Yet there is also a centuries old logic to membership that is sometimes forgotten in our time. Membership isn't a bureaucratic thing but it can be reduced to such. The intent of membership is not to decide who is "in" and who is "out", good and bad, saved or unsaved. The intent of membership is to be members of the body of Christ, part of an intentional community created by a communal, Trinitarian God. If God wasn't communal then Christianity could be merely private. Instead, we are called to publicly and maturely claim our faith and our relationship to each other, so we can be a worshipping and serving community together, sustaining a life together by our love and gifts. Being members of the body of Christ then we can conceivably know who we can count on for prayers, worship, mutual support and friendship, forgiveness, learning, and work for the kingdom of God.

It also needs to be said that membership would also not be an issue if there were not special sacramental actions that are essential to Christianity and which subsequently create a logic for membership. These sacramental actions are Holy Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist. To talk about membership, then, is inevitably to have some intentional conversation about your personal relationship with Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion.

2. Membership

There are two ways to become a member of Grace:

1. By being baptized at Grace and never having moved your membership somewhere else.
2. By being baptized somewhere else and requesting of the Rector of Grace to have your membership transferred.

3. Adult Members

Those who were baptized and thereby received as a member are considered “adult members” at ages 16 and above.

4. Directories

Parish directories and pictorial directories are not membership directories but directories of people who are variously associated with Grace. Membership is supposed to be recorded in the Parish Register and in our church software.

5. Confirmation

If you are coming from a church other than the Episcopal Church then you will be given an opportunity to do some reading and study about the Episcopal tradition. Then when we have a visit from one of our Bishops you may receive the sacrament of Confirmation. If you are coming from the Roman Catholic Church or one of the eastern Orthodox churches and you were already confirmed by a Bishop there then, instead of being confirmed again, you may be received by our Bishop. Even if you are coming from another Episcopal Church, you may still wish to do some reading.

Baptized youth are eligible in this diocese to receive the sacrament of Confirmation after a period of preparation once you are 12-16 years of age or when otherwise ready to seek a better understanding of your Christian identity. In both cases, as youth or adults, Confirmation is receiving the blessing of your Bishop in your public affirmation of faith. Confirmation no longer means church membership. Baptism—infant or adult--means church membership. And so, membership is fundamentally a matter of having your baptism registered in the church in which you worship.

6. Holy Eucharist

The Holy Eucharist is the liturgy for sustaining all baptized persons in living into the spiritual path begun in their Baptism. Baptism is therefore the gateway to receiving Communion in the Holy Eucharist. You do not have to be a member of Grace to receive Communion but you need to be a baptized member of some church. Confirmation is no longer required to receive Communion. The Eucharist may also be practiced by non-baptized persons until such a time as they may be ready to be baptized. This may be done by joining in the prayers and coming to the altar, and crossing their arms across their chest, in order to receive a blessing by the priest instead of receiving Communion.

7. Communicants

A “communicant” of Grace is a baptized person of any age, whether a member of Grace or not, who communes--receives Holy Communion—at Grace at least three times a year.

8. Communicants in Good Standing

A “communicant in good standing” is a communicant (#7) who also has been faithful in attending worship at Grace, unless for good cause prevented, and has been active in “working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God” through their relationship with Grace.

9. Annual Meetings and Vestry

1. To be eligible to vote at Annual Meeting you have to be an adult member of Grace (#2, #3) for at least 3 months prior to the Annual Meeting and a communicant in good standing.
2. To be eligible to be elected at Annual Meeting to serve on the Vestry you have to be an adult member (#2, #3), communicant in good standing (#7, #8), and have received the sacrament of Confirmation (#5).

10. Other Leadership Roles Relevant to Membership

To be eligible to be elected as a delegate to Diocesan Convention or the Charlottesville Region, to serve as a Eucharistic Minister (Chalicerist), Eucharistic Visitor, Worship Leader, or Lay Preacher, or to be eligible for consideration for ordination to the diaconate or the priesthood, then you must be an adult member (#2, #3), communicant in good standing (#7, #8), and have received the sacrament of Confirmation (#5).

11. Ministry

Baptism, as the beginning of the Christian life and church membership, is thereby the most fundamental ordination to ministry. Baptism signifies that we are loved by God and variously gifted by God to be able to contribute something meaningful and helpful to the Body of Christ in the church and to the life of the world. It can take a while to figure out, each of us, what that is. Your ministry may mean helping with the Farm Tour, Food Closet, Salvation Army, Habitat for Humanity, the children’s ministry, worship, music, coffee hour, leadership, welcoming others, grounds work—it can take so many different forms, depending on where your gifts meet the church’s life.

In many cases, the greatest gifts that God calls forth from you will not be actualized in church but in the world in which you already work and live. So it may very well be that the church that helps you realize how much you belong in the community of the church will also help you realize how important your life beyond the church is too. Thus there is a great and ironic truth to the saying that “the church is the only organization that exists for the wellbeing and fraternity of its non-members” (Archbishop William Temple).

12. Money

While there has been abuse of money in churches when they have lost their way, there has probably also been even more neglect of money in churches. Money is an important “given” in any personal or family life. It is also a given in any form of communal life. Therefore it is assumed that members will support their parish with their financial giving, because it is through our giving that we acknowledge our faith in God and support the common life and mission of this Body of Christ at Grace Church, in the Diocese of Virginia, and in The Episcopal Church. Pledging is recommended. If you do not pledge then participating in the church offering by your gifts is recommended. Pledging and other giving should be an

intentional decision based, not on the church budget, but on a tithe (10%) of your income or some incremental approach toward the tithe. Pledging and other giving is therefore inherently a personal and spiritual decision. It is also just what you do to sustain a community of relationships that you love, just like you do at home.

According to the policies of Grace, members of Grace may rent the parish hall, receive a wedding, and purchase cemetery plots at a reduced cost.

13. The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage

At least one of a couple seeking a wedding at Grace or All Saints must be a member of Grace or another church.

14. All Saints Chapel

All Saints is an adjunct worshipping community to Grace and not a separate parish. So, if you were to be baptized at All Saints or wish to transfer your membership as a communicant at All Saints, your membership would actually reside with Grace.

15. Friends of Grace

For a variety of reasons, people may have valued associations with Grace and yet not be a member. They may wish to keep their membership at a previous church for personal or historical reasons. They may be undecided about matters of faith. Or they may not be clear about the difference between being a member or not. It can be helpful for friends of Grace to talk with the Rector if they have any unanswered questions. In any case, Grace values both its members and friends.