

St. Gregory's Members' Agreement – History and Concepts – January 2013

There are many aspects of our common life that distinguish St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church. Most people would name our liturgy as the thing that sets us apart among Episcopal Churches, and that certainly is one significant difference. But what is often overlooked among our founding principles is our definition of intentional membership. Although anyone can come to St. Gregory's and receive what our community offers, only members are expected to come and participate in making the church happen. In essence, what comes with membership is not additional privilege, but additional responsibility, authority and relationship.

However, in recent years – years that have seen a transition from the first to the second generation of clergy leadership – the concept of membership has shifted. This has as much to do with the quality of the congregation as it has to do with a change in leadership. Of course these phenomena are related and dependent on each other. A change in leadership will draw new people to the community, and be a reason for some members of the community to move away. But there is another factor, one that goes all the way back to the founding idea of the parish, that influences the idea of intentional membership in our community today.

St. Gregory's began as a small group. In the first decade our average Sunday attendance never exceeded 60. In 1981, the year that the first version of the Members' Agreement was written, our average Sunday attendance was closer to 20. When the community moved into its current location – the first building we ever owned – the membership doubled in three years. From 1995 – 2003 the membership continued to grow, and then stalled. From 2005 – 2012 the membership either declined slightly or plateaued.

In our early history, when everyone knew everyone else in the community, the idea of intentional membership worked well, as might be expected for a community that was essentially a small group. When the number of members and Sunday attendees began to grow our understanding of intentional membership had to change. In 1995 the Members' Agreement was modified to reflect the changing situation of our community. Around this time St. Gregory's added an earlier Sunday morning service. The addition of this service meant that some members never had the opportunity to worship with other members. The era of St Gregory's being a small group was over. We became a community with several small groups, some overlapping and others not.

We have continued to change and evolve since 1995. We added an evening service in the early 2000's that was suspended in 2006. We increased our staff by hiring a series of

youth and family members. In the 2010's we changed our Sunday morning schedule to include a separate education hour for children and adults. This meant that children became regular members of the worshipping community. With the presence of children in the liturgy there came an increase in children's leadership in the liturgy. Most recently we have added a monthly Sunday evening service for everyone, but particularly for families with children. All of these changes in the 35 years of our community's life have made a difference in how we understand our long held and fundamental commitment to intentional membership. It seems the time has come to revisit the Members' Agreement and try to understand how to use it to help clarify what we mean by intentional membership.

To begin this analysis of the Members' Agreement we turn to the founding document for St. Gregory's, written in 1977 by Rick Fabian. The period when Rick began to imagine St. Gregory's was a time of huge change for the Episcopal Church. The revision of the denomination's Book of Common Prayer had been underway for more than a decade. New scholarship about liturgy and new experiences of congregational life had been percolating for half a century. And the cultural shifts of the mid-twentieth century called for a new way of conceiving what the church meant by congregational life. Rick's document, a unique and historically significant document in the church growth movement, described a congregation that was primarily a community uninhibited by received ideas about what an Episcopal Church should look like. At the center of our founding document is a redefinition of membership in the church.

Our founding document describes our identity as a community of Christ's Church firmly rooted in the free gift of God's grace to all people. This is a theology that considers people of all faiths - or of no faith at all - as equal recipients of God's grace. Our trust in this extravagant gift of love is experienced week by week in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. It is from the altar that we discover who we are as a community. We are none other than God's friends, as are all human beings. Like God's grace, this friendship comes to us freely. And it comes with an expectation that our lives will be transformed in God's love. A part of this transformation is expressed in the relationships that we share within the community of the church. Because our transformation is discovered in our relationships, it means that we must live together according to a rule of life. A particular expression of this rule is found in our commitment to membership.

One need not become a member of St. Gregory's to participate in the life of our community. Just as all human beings are recipients of God's grace, we freely welcome everyone to come and share the life of God with us. But because we value relationship as the greatest expression of God's love we want to deepen our relationship with those

visitors and newcomers who come to worship with us. We want everyone to know that membership is generously offered. There is a kind of tension in our position toward welcoming strangers and encouraging membership. On the one hand we are explicit that the welcome to share the gifts of God we have received comes from Jesus Christ and not from us ourselves. On the other hand we who are members of St. Gregory's find our lives enriched by a deeper commitment to the community.

The distinction between membership and non-membership has to do with a particular understanding of relationship and responsibility. To become a member of St. Gregory's means sharing in a commitment to the long-term vision of our community to live as God's friends. It means sharing with the community in service to the world, welcoming the stranger, spiritual formation, and financial support. Membership is claiming a stake in what it means to be a community. Membership is related to the ancient Benedictine value of stability in community. The work that we do in the community as well as our life in prayer give us a firm foundation for the living of our lives. To be a member of St. Gregory's means claiming the power to take up whatever work one feels called to and to do it in partnership with the clergy and people of St. Gregory's Church for the sake of the whole community.

All of the members of St. Gregory's share in the work of making church happen. Implicit in our founding document is an understanding that everything we do at St. Gregory's is "home made." We are very strongly pro-participation. This is one of the ways that our community is distinct in its approach to the church's ministry. We strive not to professionalize our pastoral work. In some Episcopal Churches the clergy take all of the authority for planning and implementing the congregations ministry. Our community is not like this. St. Gregory's is not a congregation where the clergy do everything for the members. It is the work of the community - of the membership - to help all of its members find what it is they love to do, and then to find ways to express that loving action in their whole lives. We believe that the work of ministry isn't a solitary exercise, but one that needs partnership with other members. More often than not our various ministries are lead by two members who may recruit others to help make church happen. This may not always be the most efficient way to get things done. Sometimes sharing leadership requires greater flexibility and more time. But our primary goal is not to work efficiently; it is to do work that amplifies our identity as friends of God. It is the whole community's job to support each member in their work of sharing God's love in the world.

This principle is expressed in the way that we welcome visitors. The first thing a visitor finds when they come to St. Gregory's on a Sunday morning is a member handing out

music books on the front steps of the church. But the welcome doesn't end there. All members share responsibility for hospitality and welcome to strangers and visitors. Although some people are given specific tasks of greeting people, every member takes the responsibility for extending a genuine welcome to those who come to visit. Because we value relationship as an expression of God's presence in our lives, we put a very high premium on this kind of welcome. The entire community of members shares in the struggles and joys of this work.

St. Gregory's is a community that puts a lot of energy into the liturgy. This is because it is in the context of the liturgy that we demonstrate what it looks like to live as friends of God. Likewise, it is the liturgy we are both strengthened in our commitment to membership and demonstrate what it is that we mean by membership. Many people – both adults and children – take a part in the liturgy. As members of the community, this is a primary commitment. Members light the lamps and candles. Members take turns proclaiming the scriptures. Members assist in serving communion. Members speak their own intercessions during the prayers. Members make coffee and serve it. And members clean up when it's time to go home. Because each member calls out their own prayers, proclaims the scriptures, lights the lamps, serves communion, and takes on a dozen other jobs, the community recalls where its corporate identity is rooted: in the worship and praise of God shared freely between clergy and laypeople.

St. Gregory's means take membership seriously. And there are times when we do not communicate clearly enough this primary part of our common life. Sometimes we take for granted that a long time visitor is a member. Sometimes we are too shy to ask someone if they've ever considered becoming a member. Sometimes we assume that some other member is taking the responsibility for encouraging a long time visitor to become a member. Even when we don't live up to our highest goals, our desire to welcome everyone into the membership of the community remains. Just because we are sometimes hesitant to ask someone to become a member does not mean that we take membership at St. Gregory's lightly.

We appreciate that membership in any organization fosters a sense of ownership among members. Those who decide to become members of our community do so for many reasons, but the unifying quality of our membership is their commitment to work and give to make church happen. In past years Episcopal Churches didn't place many expectations on members. In order to join an Episcopal Church all one had to do was have their letter of membership transferred from one congregation to another. Churches would ask people to give "time, talent and treasure" to the congregation, but the leadership's expectation of members was mixed. For some churches there was a custom

of a “two-tiered” membership: some people gave money and some people did the work. Each group tended to look with suspicion on the other. Our founding document makes clear that we do not want to organize our membership this way. St. Gregory’s has only one category of membership and one standard, which every member is expected to follow. This is what members do:

1. Give their money to the church’s operating fund in order to provide salaries and benefits to our rector and staff, pay our occupancy and other bills, and support the work of the Diocese of California.
2. Offer their individual gifts, abilities and time to the church to accomplish the work that the community takes on to express God’s love in the world.
3. Look for signs of God’s presence in their experiences and express the love of God through works of charity, compassion, and service to others.
4. Gather regularly with the rest of the membership in the liturgy to share their experiences, offer their prayers, and receive the gifts of God in the Eucharist.

We believe that membership implies both giving and receiving. Members receive the riches of God’s grace and take responsibility for making the community thrive. We don’t think of this as a quid pro quo; God’s grace is given freely to everyone without expectation of return. Members don’t get “gold stars” for their financial gifts or the amount of time they give to the community. God doesn’t keep score. Instead, giving is a sign of our members’ thanks for everything that God has already done and will continue to do. Because God continually showers grace on everyone equally our hierarchy is flat, and our organization is a network. Linking people to the life of God and the work of our community is our chief goal in encouraging membership.

Both financial giving and doing work are taken on by members in order to make the life of the community possible. Without a clear appreciation of this fact we wind up in the same position as many other churches find themselves where some people are overworked and some people are expected to give most of the money. This way of making church does not sustain community; in fact it is responsible for the decline of community. The surest way to constrict the life of a congregation is to empower an organizational structure that regularly burns out some of its members. Because we believe that relationship is the way that we know God, we strive to share work and financial giving among all of our members. Without practicing this double basis for membership, St. Gregory’s will simply cease to exist.

We strive to be absolutely clear about the community’s need for members’ financial giving and sharing in the work of ministry. Everything that we are able to do is based on

this double basis for membership. At our best we tie giving time and giving money into a single request to our members. When members gather for worship, setting up the church for special services, learning, or service work in the community we are explicit about the community's financial need, and expect that the membership will support the work with their financial giving. Likewise, when we talk about our finances we need to talk about opportunities to find meaningful work at the church and in the world. This is the way that we have chosen to enable the community's mission to expand and continue.

We sometimes joke that the only thing that membership at St. Gregory's brings is additional responsibility. This is half true. There are things that we expect of members that we do not expect of visitors and newcomers. We expect only members to carry out the responsibility and leadership of the community. Newcomers and visitors are expressly invited to wait to give financially, but to return and offer their money and talent as an expression of thanks to God. Members take responsibility for incorporating newcomers and visitors into our liturgy and community life. Members are expected to be intentional in their welcome. When visitors and newcomers come it is the members' work to help them to participate in the liturgy, in the pastoral and hospitality work, in the administration of the parish, and ultimately in making financial gifts to the community.

This is the way that we assist visitors and newcomers in becoming members of the community. It is on the basis of our membership's welcome and hospitality as well as their example of participation in the community that visitors and newcomers find a way into our community. By contributing to the work of the community that visitors and newcomers move closer in their commitment to become members. Because of our horizontal networked organization we have a culture where a newcomer can enter into the work easily. And we believe that it is when people take on real work in the church that they are more likely to join the membership of the community. We provide many entry points to membership: through the choir, through the food pantry, through the Christmas pageant, through the Friends of God Camp, through concerts that we host, through the New Taste Market Place, through healing prayer. All of these are avenues, first of all, in hospitality. They are also ways that newcomers and visitors may catch a glimpse of what we mean to be as a community of Christ's church.

The rector plays a significant role at St. Gregory's, but one that looks somewhat different from other Episcopal Churches. This is a factor of the value we place on shared leadership. The rector - along with the other ordained leaders in the community - take as their first job giving work away. This doesn't include the work for which the community properly orders the presbyters and deacons, but it does mean that members take much greater responsibility than is usual in other congregations. The rector is the communities chief teacher and preacher. It is his or her job to build sustainability in the spiritual lives

of the membership. As pastor of the congregation, the rector's work includes preparing newcomers to become members and claim their full place in the life of the church. The rector offers openhearted invitations to find opportunities for friendship within the membership and meaningful work. This is something that the rector shares with the membership. Each member has the authority to help others grow as responsible members of the church, including the rector and other clergy. Likewise, each member supports the rector and other clergy in their priestly work. In this way authority and responsibility mirror each other.

Members have responsibilities *and* authority to do the work of the community. Those to whom the community gives authority are responsible for the execution of that authority. We, as a community, raise up and form leaders (rectors, vestry members, committee heads, liturgical leaders), and in doing so, we make some significant statements about who we want to be and how we are responding to God's call in our community life. Leaders are members first. Having leaders is a means to execute the responsibilities of doing the work of the community, but having leaders does not shift the responsibility away from members. We are collectively responsible for making church.

The membership agreement is a way that we have to outline these responsibilities and to state the work we intend to do together. It is natural in the life of the community that as the nature and makeup of our membership changes, we re-examine the work we are doing, how we are doing it, and how we communicate that to our existing and new members. Your engagement in this dialogue is an important part of renewing the membership agreement.