



NAC-USA  
DEVELOPMENT  
INSTITUTE

Church  
membership  
as a gift

A unifying  
church  
member

Family

# MIDWEEK SCRIPT

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**2018**

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September

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## Session 1 – Church membership as a gift

Hello, and welcome to our first small group session for September. This month, the Sunday divine service theme focuses on “building up the congregation,” and to support that, our small group discussions will explore what it means to be a church member within the congregation.

Perhaps you’ve been a church member for years or decades like I have. We could even say, “I’ve been a church member all my life. I know how to be a church member.” As church members, we must understand that we are continually in development because we are striving to transform our nature and be more like Jesus, we want to know God more intimately and align our lives with His will, and we want to make His love known to the world. These goals of our faith should inspire us to grow and change.

The church as an organization also changes. The *methods* that we use to reach our goals and the *understanding of important spiritual matters* have also evolved over time. Through the Holy Spirit, the church is the vehicle that Christ established to equip us. The church provides a community for us to work on the goals of our faith together.

It’s good to calibrate every once in a while by asking ourselves, “How am I doing? Have I lost sight of my purpose? What am I doing, and why?”

To help answer these questions, we’ll briefly reference some concepts from the book, “I Am a Church Member” by Christian author Thom Rainer, to explore what church membership is and what it isn’t.

First, let’s look at what church membership is not. Church membership is not a country club membership. It might seem like an odd analogy, but let me explain. In a country club, members pay their dues and expect to be served, perhaps even feeling a sense of entitlement or pride because their family has been a part of the club for many generations. Members often join a club to seek social and networking opportunities. Have we sometimes approached the congregation as our “country club”? Have we come to church, made offerings, and boasted that our family has been New Apostolic for many generations? I dare say that if we view church membership that way, then we have a wrong and dangerous view of the church.

Our Catechism states that the purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to make salvation and eternal fellowship with the triune God accessible to mankind, and to bring worship and praise to God (CNAC 6.2). In his letter to the Ephesians, Apostle Paul clarified, *For by **grace** you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Did you catch that? Salvation is a gift, made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. This is best described in the famous verse of John 3:16, *For God so loved the world that He **gave** His only begotten Son...* Jesus’ sacrifice is a gift. Christ established His church as a gift. Having faith is a gift. And that is how we are to see church membership: as a gift.

In order to understand how valuable these gifts are, we just need to look at Romans 3:23: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* That means that we’re all in the same boat. It doesn’t matter if you’ve sinned “a little” or “a lot”; we are all sinners and in need of salvation. The salvation that God offers as a gift through the sacrifice of His Son is accessible in the church He established. Despite our sinful nature, God accepts us, loves us, and is patient with us as He pours out His grace over and over again. These are all gifts, and, like church membership, should be treasured as such.

We don’t want these special gifts to be taken for granted or disregarded. When we receive a gift that we truly want and understand the value of, our natural response is appreciation and thanksgiving. As part of the body of Christ, we each individually have a holy responsibility to contribute to the health of the church body. While we all have giftedness and contribute in unique ways, there are those in the congregation that have accepted leading and teaching roles. This could be Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, shared leadership team members, or those that have accepted the call to be in ordained ministry. Regardless of the specific role and function, the demands on leaders are numerous. I ask that you please make an intentional effort to pray for your church leaders. Pray for their wisdom and courage, for their spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health. Pray for their families. Pray that God strengthens them on this journey that we are all on together.

1 John 4 tells us that *God is love*. God demonstrates this love for us by showering us with gifts: the gift of His Son, the gift of salvation, and the gift of church membership. When we see church membership as a gift, rather than something that we are entitled to or in some way have earned, we will be inspired to follow Jesus' humble example, and seek ways to serve and build up the congregation.

## Session 2 – A unifying church member

Hello! We began our monthly study last week by focusing on the gift it is to be a part of the family of God and a member of our church. We can demonstrate how valuable these treasures are to us when we work to ensure that our congregation is unified. Each congregation is tasked with being a witness of the glory of God to the world, and each member has an important part in keeping unity intact among the community of believers. The world will know whether or not we are followers of Jesus by the way we interact with one another. If we are to fulfill the mission of our church, unity is not just important: it's critical.

Why is unity so important? It shows that the congregation is focused on the One who unifies us all as believers – Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the cross to rescue sinners and reconcile their relationship with the Heavenly Father. We are all in need of a Savior, and we all come before Him on equal ground with the same standing. This knowledge is the gift that unifies us. When our congregations are united, we tell the world all around us that the love of God and the work of Jesus is the most valuable treasure we have. When unity and love are present, congregational life thrives. Our mission remains at the forefront, and the health of the congregation prospers. We all want to be unifiers who strive to fulfill Apostle Paul's exhortation to the believers in his letter to the Colossians: *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another, even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all things put on love, which is the bond of perfection* (Colossians 3:12-14).

By putting on these virtues and having the willingness to forgive, we become unifiers in our congregation. We can resist things that cause division, such as:

- Gossip,
- An unwillingness to forgive,
- Refusal to look past differences, and
- An inability to let go of personal preferences and desires in order to serve others.

Gossip is a divisive force. Gossip tears apart unity and renders a church powerless. It enables some to falsely elevate themselves, while causing others to seek a place of refuge outside of the church. We can overcome the temptation to gossip with the desire to love one another unconditionally. Be a unifier by demonstrating how powerful the love of God is, and let that love drive your actions.

A member once shared with me her admiration for another member in the congregation, because whenever a group conversation turned towards gossip, he always found a way to defuse it. She said, "He doesn't feed it, but in a nice way does not allow it to proceed. I would like to learn how to do that more." Therefore "turning off" gossip can be admired and respected. Isn't this a way we can "renounce Satan and all his work and ways" as we have stated in our confirmation vow? Let's try to learn how to do this more in the spirit of Christ.

Every congregation is filled with imperfect people who make mistakes. We all sin. Each one of us from time to time has the tendency to say the wrong thing or do something that causes one or the other some pain. That's why a willingness to forgive is so important to the unity of a congregation. If we are unable to move past and reconcile missteps, then we are keeping ourselves from growing into the image of Jesus, and we are building up walls that divide us. Always remember that Jesus loves us so much that He died on the cross so we could be forgiven. Why would we then withhold forgiveness from someone else? Be a unifier by always being willing to forgive.

We are all different, yet we are all made in the image of God. For this reason, we cannot allow our differences to keep us from teaming up to serve our God, our congregation, and our world, together. Our Chief Apostle said, “We are different and these differences are an obstacle to be[ing] united. But seeing it with the Holy Spirit, we see it in a very different manner. Sure enough, we are different, but these differences are no longer an obstacle for us. It’s a chance, it’s a blessing, because we want to form a team, a team of those who fight with God and for God, a team of those who are called by God to serve Him and to spread the gospel.” Our differences make us stronger. The Holy Spirit has given all believers spiritual gifts to serve others. Be a unifier by teaming up with those who are different than us to glorify God.

Each one of us have our own preferences and desires, but we cannot allow them to dictate our behavior when we’re serving our congregation. When we become stuck in our own way of doing things and demand that our preferences are considered above all others, we make ourselves out to be the “greatest” among equals. This happens when we’ve forgotten why we have been called and the example that Jesus has modeled for us. When the twelve disciples argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest, Jesus sat them down and said the following: *If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all* (Mark 9:35). You see, being a part of the church is about servanthood. It’s about giving. It’s about putting others first and lifting them up above ourselves. It’s not about me and my preferences. It’s about our obedience to God and His will, and our desire to be like Jesus, who humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). Be a unifier by being a humble, obedient servant to all.

When we are united as a congregation, we will be on mission for Jesus. That’s why unity is so vital to the health of our community. We must never lose sight of the truth that unites us, and seek always to be unifiers who are willing to love, forgive, and share the gospel.

### **Session 3 – Family**

Welcome! In our third session, we will explore how we can fulfill a unique serving role: to help lead our families to becoming healthy church members.

Let’s start at the beginning. God is LOVE. In the Pentecost message, our Chief Apostle stated: “For one thing, God loves you because you are His child. No matter what you do, even if you do everything wrong, it will not change anything for God. If you come back to God, whatever you have done He will accept you as His child.”

This is our godly reality: that God’s love for His children unifies us because nothing can change His love. Wonderful! This amazing love He has for us inspires us to grow in love for our neighbor. Loving our own family members can exhibit the highest calling of loving our neighbor. Just as God placed us in our congregation for a purpose, He created each of us individually and placed us in our family for a specific purpose. What is that purpose? To serve our family members just as much as we serve our neighbor, and to support them and love them in their relationship with Christ. Seems easy, right?

Let’s review a few of the challenges, or perhaps even myths, specifically related to serving our families:

Perhaps we think, “My family member needs to worship God and express their faith exactly as I do; if not, they will fall behind.” Myth! God loves each person in our families, and they are each on their own unique journey of faith. Can I respect this? Can I support this? Can I share my personal journey in a positive manner without being judgmental? This is what Jesus would have us do.

Another concern or burden could be that a family member has chosen not to attend church, either because they don’t believe in God, they have decided to attend a different church, or they have suffered a hurt or injustice that has separated them from church. What should be our reaction to this situation?

First, we should turn to God’s desire to save all souls. Second, we must keep the ultimate goal in mind. Our greatest wish is to share eternal fellowship with our loving God, and we should focus on this goal as a family.

Even if our individual journeys may look different, we can have faith and confidence that God has our lives in His hand and will fulfill the purposes that He has made for us all.

If we want to inspire faith in our families, they should be able to see the effects of our relationship with Christ in our actions: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, and self-control. Do we display the fruit of the Spirit in our family circles? When we build up these characteristics in our family, we can be a strong example of what a healthy church member looks like. Even when we fall short and sin, it is important to show our family what it means to repent and seek forgiveness. When we display humility in our sinfulness, we become credible witnesses of Christ.

Praying together is a beautiful unifying tool. Can I share a story with you from over 30 years ago? It was a time when it was strongly encouraged that during a family prayer, each family member was given the opportunity to pray out loud. It wasn't always so easy! But one of our members shared with me, "I am overjoyed at this direction. My family members and especially my husband can now clearly hear what I carry in my heart, my faith, my joys, and my sorrows. It is bringing us all closer together." What a nice affirmation! Praying together as a family will bring us all together.

Sometimes, the conversation among our family may turn to disappointments in the church. Wouldn't it be nice to cover this with prayer as well? What if every time something like this comes up, we join in prayer to our God to help find the way forward? We seek the will of God, not focusing on how something could have been done or said differently, but perhaps on how we can see things from His perspective.

When we look at our family members or our congregation, there are also some obstacles that could arise. Let's use the parable of the prodigal son to help us understand. The prodigal son left his father and squandered his inheritance. He then decided to repent and come back to the father even as a servant. Instead of anger, the father accepted his son with love and rejoicing. Usually we imagine ourselves to be the prodigal son in this parable, because we often stray in our relationship with God. However, we should also consider the older son that remained with the father. He was first offended by his brother's actions, but then also by his father's forgiveness and acceptance of the prodigal son. Even though he didn't leave his father's house, did he recognize his father's love? Did the older son really have that strong of a relationship with his father? I wonder because he was not so happy how the father received his lost son with joy and a big feast. What can we learn from this?

The older son viewed his brother as the "one who left." He couldn't let go of this sin or fault of his. Do we do the same with members of our families or in our congregations? Perhaps we could say, "I knew them when..." because we know their history and faults and can't move past that. The father in the parable says, *It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found* (Luke 15:32). Can we rejoice in the transformations of our brothers and sisters, or do we hold their past against them? Do we think that God favors one over the other? Even if we have remained with God, it might be that we still don't understand His love for us all! Whether we relate to the older or younger brother, we must continue to try and grasp the love of our Father, and look at each other the way that He sees us – as all part of His family.

As we have discovered today, there are many ways for us to be examples in loving and serving each other in our immediate families. When we recognize and do our best to live out God's purpose for us within our family, it will spill over into our congregations, where we can live lives that glorify God in all that we do.