



Baptism in the Local Church

This material is intended to assist local churches as they develop a policy for baptisms within their congregation.



Why do we need to develop a policy?

A generation or so ago most children in Ireland would be baptised within the church to which their family had traditional allegiance. That situation has changed quite radically.

- Firstly, ties between church and society have loosened and baptism is no longer an automatic rite of passage.
- Secondly, many committed Christians have a preference for allowing their children to reach a stage where they can answer for themselves rather than baptise them as infants.
- Thirdly, ministers and churches are often exercised about how they balance their desire to maintain a strong link between baptism and the life of faith with an equal desire to respond to the pastoral needs of those who enquire about the baptism of their children.

Rather than leave everything to the local minister to make decisions on baptism on a case by case basis, it is helpful for the church itself to think about how it offers baptism.

What does the Methodist Church Teach about Baptism?

The booklet *Methodist Belief* has a brief statement about the sacrament of Baptism:

Baptism with water has been practiced from the earliest days of the Church as an act of initiation, and represents the cleansing or forgiveness of sins. Both adult baptism and infant baptism are practised within Methodism. However, since scripture emphasizes that there is only one baptism, just as there is one Lord and one faith, Methodism holds that baptism is unrepeatable, whether administered to a child or an adult.

Baptism is symbolic of the undeserved grace of God reaching out to us all through Christ. This is the key element in infant baptism, where we look forward in faith and hope to the time when children will accept what is offered to them in Christ, becoming his followers, committed members of the church. Parents and congregation promise to do all they can to facilitate and encourage this. Adult baptism, of people not baptised as children, should include a clear declaration of their personal faith in Christ, and as such is a powerful symbol of personal commitment.

There is more detailed work on the doctrine of Baptism in various statements by the Conference. What is important is:

- Baptism is a sacrament, given to us by Jesus Christ himself. It is an active sign of our belonging to Christ, our sharing in his death and resurrection and our becoming part of his body, the Church. In Baptism we celebrate the love of God that reaches out to us in Christ even before we have begun to be aware of or respond to that love.
- Baptism is linked to our journey of faith as Christian disciples. Those who are baptised are called by Christ to live out their lives in a Christ-like way, allowing the Holy Spirit to challenge and transform them.
- We recognise as valid Baptism administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whether it is to an infant or a person of mature years. It is part of the discipline of a Methodist minister, and of a Methodist Church, that the Baptism of infants be offered in appropriate circumstances.
- Baptism is a once-for-all action, so we do not re-baptise those who have been baptised as infants.
- Baptism welcomes us into the universal Church of Jesus Christ, not into a particular denomination.

Are there Alternatives to Baptism?

Yes. The Methodist Worship Book contains a service for 'An Act of Thanksgiving after the Birth or Adoption of a Child'. This service can be adapted either for those committed Christian families who would prefer their children to have a later opportunity for baptism on profession of faith or for those who want to give thanks to God but do not presently feel able to affirm the Christian commitment that the Baptism service includes.

Developing a Baptism Policy

A church should do this prayerfully, and after some careful thought. Resources to use might include:

- *All This for You*. Produced by the Methodist Church in Britain, it is intended for those who are enquiring about Baptism.
- *The Methodist Worship Book*. The services of Baptism and Thanksgiving are a rich source for thinking through the meaning of Baptism.

Questions to Ask:

Who will we Baptise?

One of the distinctive teachings of the Methodist Church has been God's prevenient grace. This means that God is at work in us even before we are aware of it. For this reason, some churches would want to emphasise God's unconditional love and not place any preconditions on those wanting their children baptised. Other churches may believe that only the children of committed church members, or persons who can make a commitment of faith on their own behalf, should be baptised. Churches might also want to find variations on these positions. Most would want some indication of the seriousness of the parents' intent, and some assurance that they were making their promises in an informed way. So a church might say to couples that they should:

- Attend services for a period
- Attend a preparation course or a series of meetings.
- Read some literature (e.g. *All this for you.*)

What Kind of Preparation will we Offer?

We would expect to provide preparation for older candidates for Baptism; it is just as vital to provide preparation for those parents who bring their children for Baptism. A church with a number of Baptisms may gather parents together for a series of meetings, or for a morning. In other situations there may be meetings with just one set of parents. We want people to have some understanding both of the meaning of Baptism itself and of the Christian faith it expresses. It is worth thinking who might be involved in this preparation:

- The minister
- The cradle-roll secretary (or equivalent)
- Church members who have already had their children baptised.

The Local Church as a Community of Welcome, Hospitality and Nurture.

It is important to think not only of the church's policy, but also its practice.

A Welcoming Church

What about the service itself? How, for example, will it express the church's welcome to all, especially to children? How will it combine solemnity with dramatic joy? What symbols can be used? In many churches a lighted candle is presented to the parents. The Baptism is normally within the main service on a Sunday and members of the congregation can be involved as well as the minister.

A Hospitable Church

The baptism service is but one expression of a local church's hospitality. A church should be a community and a space in which children and their parents are safe, valued and encouraged. How does your church express this? One way is by welcoming children to receive communion.

A Nurturing Church

It is our fervent prayer that all those who are baptised grow up into an active and mature Christian life. This does not happen automatically and so it is important that the local church puts thought and energy into the nurture of children and young people.

Some examples of Baptism policies from local church websites:

An Irish Methodist Church

<http://jennymountchurch.co.uk/what-we-do/baptism>

A British Methodist Church

<http://www.northallertonmethodistchurch.org.uk/baptism.html>

An evangelical Anglican church in Lancashire

<http://www.stmatthewssalfordpriors.org.uk/baptism-or-christening/baptism-policy.php>

Conference Statements on Baptism

The Theology of Baptism 1978.

In 1994, Conference approved a discussion document. This led to a brief report in 1995, showing that while the practice of infant thanksgiving services was growing, there was still strong support for infant baptism.

Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion 1981