

MASSACHUSETTS COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN UNITY



BAPTISMAL PRACTICE IN AN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT

PREFACE

This document supports the rite of Christian Baptism celebrated and observed in an ecumenical context. It is the fruit of dialogue among the present members of the Massachusetts Commission on Christian Unity (MCCU), a body representative of Christian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and Reformed traditions with jurisdictions in this State and Commonwealth.

Our member churches, their congregations and pastors are increasingly dealing with the reality of witnesses to a public baptism coming from diverse Christian traditions. Moreover, friends may attend who are not Christian or any other faith.

It is the intention of this document to suggest ways in which the person being baptized can be supported in one's life-long Christian pilgrimage, specifically by those already baptized and committed, and more generally, by those who come from other faith communities.

As MCCU, we have drawn from the "BAPTISM" portion of "BAPTISM, EUCHARIST, MINISTRY: (BEM) Faith and Order Paper #111—World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, 1982. We discovered this particular explication provides not only the theological base to support our endeavor, but also an easily understood common language based on that Gospel mandate that we be One for the sake of the world.

(For further definitions from BEM, note those contained in this document's APPENDIX).

INTRODUCTION

First of all, BEM states the historical basis for the Institution of Baptism: "Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people." (BEM, page 2, paragraph 1)

We assume this understanding and orientation.

"Baptism is a gift of God, and is administered in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Saint Matthew records that the risen Lord, when sending his disciples into the world, commanded them to baptize (Matthew 28:18-20." (BEM, page 2, paragraph 1)

In the pursuit of appropriate language for describing the deity within the context of recent Biblical studies and interpretation, some Christian churches and congregations are experimenting with the Trinitarian formula in non-traditional terms (I.e. other than "Father, Son & Holy Spirit.") However laudable it may be to find dynamic equivalents that express God's love and God's relationship to all creation, this formula, the traditional Trinitarian formula, has been agreed upon as ecumenically acceptable and has been used historically by the churches of the East and of the West for almost 2,000 years. With respect to recognizing each tradition's baptism, it is imperative that this traditional Trinitarian formula, along with the use of water, be maintained. According to local usage, other language may be used throughout the rite, but not at the moment of baptism. At that time, other descriptive words may be added to the Trinitarian formula, but not substituted for it.

If a person expresses a desire for "re-baptism" with the implication that an earlier ritual action was in some way flawed, it would be advisable to offer an appropriate pastoral alternative to correspond to a particular personal need (e.g., a rite of entrance into the life of a particular church and congregation and/or a statement of recognition of the person's previous baptism.) What is known as Conditional Baptism is appropriate and expected when no record of baptism exists.

We recognize there are communities that baptize at any age and others who insist upon baptizing only those able to make a profession of faith themselves. Dialogue on this issue within and among churches and congregations of various traditions concerning these practices enriches the lives of all parties toward deeper discipleship.

Some churches presently represented in the Massachusetts Commission on Christian Unity encourage their congregations to be open in finding ways to celebrate this rite of initiation together with other Christian congregations in their locality and to use the following as guidelines in such preparation.

We recognize a host church may be welcoming those who come from increasingly complex populations within our churches. We offer these Points of Baptismal Practice. They are designed to support the candidate, the sponsors and all who witness this act of commitment.

POINTS OF BAPTISMAL PRACTICE

A person to be baptized is presented to a local Christian community by parent/s and sponsor/s from an inter-church or possibly inter-faith background in which all parties intend to sustain the candidate in the Christian faith.

1. Person to be baptized:

The person who is to be baptized may be an infant, a child or an adult.

If one is an adult, or an older child, there is normally a period of instruction and preparation of a duration set by the leadership of a local congregation. Both adult and child are normally accompanied by a sponsor, a godparent who testifies not only to the intent of the candidate for baptism but also to the person's knowledge and commitment within a faith community. In the case of an infant, the consent of the sponsor or godparent testifies to this intent and instruction is relegated, by necessity, to an age of maturity or understanding.

2. Local Christian Community

Each candidate for baptism must be engrafted (incorporated) in a visible community of faith which has a structure to provide the new member with the necessary elements for one's life in Christ.

3. Christian Nurture:

It is expected that there will be a family environment which is faith nurturing and linked to a local Christian community for ongoing support.

Baptism is a corporate event in the life of an individual. Both the church community and the individual's baptismal party commit themselves to support and sustain the newly baptized. It makes no sense to baptize if such conditions are not likely to be honored. Neither baptismal party nor congregation should promise to support the candidate if such an intention is not present. The degree of preparation for sponsors or godparents by the congregation's pastoral leadership can ascertain the level of commitment.

4. Congregation's Preparation and Reception of Candidate:

Each Christian tradition and their congregations develop their own particular way for preparing an individual and the baptismal party for the rite of baptism.

Such preparation includes the following components:

- Instruction in the meaning and purpose of baptism.
- Instruction in the meaning of the Christian faith in relation to baptism.
- The explanation of responsibilities for the sponsors and parents if an infant is to be baptized.
- The explanation of responsibilities expected from within the congregation of the new member.

- A sharing of faith by parent(s), sponsors and candidate (if of age) according to the rite or in one's own words. In some traditions, this is a crucial part of Reception.
- A sharing of what this new life in Christ is meant to be for those baptized.
- An examination of the rite, even in the "free church" tradition.
- A plan and/or process for ongoing Christian education.

5. Baptismal Sponsors:

A sponsor or godparent holds a crucial role in the practice of baptism; each is obligated to sustain the newly baptized in the faith.

- The sponsor or godparent is to attest to the seriousness of the individual's commitment.
- The role of sponsor or godparent carries with it the obligation to advocate for the baptized.

Although it is a privileged moment of one's life, it bears the ongoing awesome responsibility to accompany the baptized on their faith journey.

Note: In some Christian traditions, the use of the term "witness" differs from that of sponsor or godparent. The "witness" does not assume the same obligations. As defined by a local Christian community, a "witness" may be a friend or other relative who may be from a tradition other than Christian. In any case, it is expected that such a "witness" would not object to the candidate's initiation into the Christian faith and would honor the commitment of the sponsors or godparents.

6. Baptism in the Christian Faith

The blessing over the water should remind those present of the history of the people of God from the beginning: giving thanks for the Spirit moving over the waters, Noah's flood, crossing the Jordan River and the birth of Jesus from the waters of the womb. In the life of Jesus himself, we will recall his own baptism, Jesus offering living water to the Samaritan woman, washing his disciples' feet and sending them forth to baptize by water and the Spirit.

The significance of water and the symbolism of immersion in baptism is central to our understanding of Christian servanthood and discipleship.

Unfortunately, in most churches in the west, we have reduced baptism by immersion to pouring water over the candidate. However, with liturgical reform, baptismal pools with running water are being introduced in renovated or new buildings, in place of stationary fonts.

In addition, a personal response is called for on the part of those who participate in a baptism. In part, their response is an expression of faith expressed in the form of a creed, statement of faith or covenant. Another part of the response to Baptism is an expectation of growth into Christian maturity exhibited in a life of worship, nurture and service.

7. Emergency Baptism

In instances of dire emergency, it is permitted for persons who are not ordained to administer the ordinance or sacrament of baptism.

Most churches recognize that there are occasions in which a baptism is to be performed when there is no time to receive baptism from an ordained person.

One such time is when a person is facing the possibility of death and expresses a desire to be baptized. In the case of a child, a parent may request.

It would be helpful to ask one's pastor what are the occasions and conditions under which emergency baptisms have been performed and recognized.

If the person so baptized should recover, it would be expected that a public ceremony would occur, at which time all the regular parts of the baptismal liturgy would be performed except for repeating the actual baptism by water and in the name of the Trinity.

An emergency baptism should be part of the patient's or recipient's official record.

When the person is dead or stillborn, baptism is not necessary. It is then appropriate to offer a prayer of blessing, naming the person as part of the Body of Christ forever, marking the forehead of the person with the sign of the cross, sheltered and received by God forever.

8. Certificate of Baptism

A record needs to be kept in the Christian Community in which the ordinance or sacrament took place.

This is especially important for the sake of those moving from one tradition to another, or for other sacramental participation for which the baptismal record may be required.

There is in use among some of our churches an "Ecumenical Certificate of Baptism" which records the event of a baptism in a particular congregation; it expresses the acceptance of that baptism by the wider church, includes references to the traditional Trinitarian words, the use of water and the signatures of the clergy authorized. Individual congregations may also issue and record a certificate of their particular Christian community.

"...the issuance of a common Certificate of Baptism to each person baptized in any of our churches...would witness to this unity for which we work and pray—in response to Christ's prayer 'that they may all be one...so that the world may believe...' (John 17:20-21, NRSV)" (Christian Conference of Connecticut, BEM Task Force of Faith and Order Commission, Report on Ministry Section May 3 1991, pages 4 & 5)

For safety, a copy of the record or certificate of baptism should be kept in a secure place (such as a safe-deposit box) by the individual candidate or responsible person.

In some instances, the baptismal record can attest to a person's birth.

BEM APPENDIX

In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches meeting at Lima, Peru presented Faith and Order Paper No. 111 document to the churches. Being entitled Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, the booklet became known as "BEM." This document presented in a few pages major areas of convergence on these three topics. BEM represented one way for Christians to talk about baptism, Eucharist and ministry. The MCCU in preparing this paper has found it both helpful and informative.

The section of BEM having to do with Baptism is presented in five sections.

I. The Institution of Baptism

II. The Meaning of Baptism

III. Baptism and Faith

IV. Baptismal Practice

V. The Celebration of Baptism.

I. Is quoted in our opening paragraph

II. Presents Baptism as:

Participating in Christ's Death and Resurrection Conversion, Pardoning and Cleansing, The Gift of the Spirit Incorporation into the Body of Christ, The Sign of the Kingdom

III. Describes the dynamics of growing in the Christian life.

IV. Lists three elements of the rite; believer and infant baptism, baptism, chrismation, and confirmation, the mutual recognition of baptism.

V. Notes some of the liturgical units in a baptismal service including the form and elements of water and spirit.

Six of BEM's twenty-three paragraphs are accompanied by a short commentary. However, the real commentary on BEM came from the churches whose responses world wide filled six volumes under the title Churches Respond to BEM and a report Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry 1982-1990. As a way of enjoying the fruits of the ecumenical movement you may want to see what your church said about baptism in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.