



Beginning...
Beginning...

Beginning Belonging, Becoming

"Baptism is a sacrament of beginnings. It is a dramatic re-enactment of our salvation found in the life of Jesus Christ the baptised one... Confirmation is one of the actions within the sacrament of baptism. It is not a separate sacrament... It stands as part of one unified action of initiation."¹

Baptism: A New Beginning

Lea wandered into an inner city church one Sunday morning, interested in seeing what a group of Christians would be doing. Finding words of inspiration and a warm acceptance, Lea soon became a regular worshipper. After a year attending the church she asked the minister about becoming a Christian. Following several weeks of conversation and reflection, Lea was baptised one Sunday morning.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way Christ enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

(Basis of Union, Paragraph 7)

Baptism is a celebration of a new beginning, putting the old ways behind, changing direction to make a new start. For the Jews, it was a reminder of the dramatic Red Sea escape from Egypt. For John the Baptist, being washed was like being bleached of corruption. For the apostle Paul, the waters of baptism were a powerful symbol of death to the old life and rising to a new identity in Christ.²

To baptise means to dip or plunge into water. After a summer of tragic drownings on Australian beaches, the water symbolism of dying and rising to life takes on a gripping meaning. The waters of baptism are dangerous: we really die to our old selves. But Baptism also shows the hand of God grabbing us up from the depths and dragging us to safety. The God who made us comes to save us.

Baptism is not about us choosing God, but about God claiming us and holding us tight. We can only love because God first loves us. As Davis McCaughey says, "What matters about baptism is not what I feel about it, what I knew or did not know at the time; what matters is what God in Christ did for me and to me."³

Walking with Christ

Jesus referred to his death as a baptism (Luke 12:50). The cross is the climax of a life of self-giving. It is this death that Christian baptism proclaims... Christian baptism... is a sign of the once-for-all redemption won for us by Christ.⁴

Baptism joins us to Jesus Christ: that is what matters. It makes real for us what God planned in Creation. Jesus shows us the fullness of a life lived with God and for God. He is our example of the way to love and serve God and the world. But more than this, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God makes it possible for us to love and serve in the same way that Jesus did.

In Baptism we share in his death and resurrection; that means we are freed to live in Christ each day. We can walk with him: his struggle for truth becomes our struggle, his work for justice and peace becomes our work, his compassion for people becomes our care, his hope for the world becomes our vision.



Called into Community

Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit. The Uniting Church will baptize those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility.

(Basis of Union, Paragraph 7)

One of the most breath-taking moments of worship is the baptism of a person who has discovered God's unconditional love and chosen to follow Christ. Baptism welcomes and connects us to the family of God, like a new branch being grafted onto a fruit tree. We're not just joining a club, we're being adopted by God into a worldwide community of disciples of all ages and races.

To be a church that lives and breathes God's mission is to welcome and celebrate God's call to new life. Baptism is a celebration of the whole church, as together we work and pray for all Creation to know the reconciling love of God.

Along with many churches around the world, the Uniting Church is recognising the essential importance of baptising people who profess a personal faith as a vital expression of being a church engaged in mission. This does not deny the validity of infant baptism, rather it affirms that God's grace invites and allows for a conscious response of faith. Infant baptism is itself a sign that God chooses us before we choose God.

Preparing a person for baptism, initiating them into the way of Christ, and celebrating with them the grace of God, should be activities of the whole church. The early church recognised that to move from life in a pagan culture to life within the way of Christ involved a transformation of loyalty and lifestyle. New ways of thinking and acting were called for. That is only possible within a community of people who already walk the walk and talk the talk of Jesus.

Confirmation:

God's Grace, Our Response

Chris had been baptised as a child. It was the 'done thing'. His parents sent him to Sunday school, but as a teenager he dropped out. When he and his wife discovered that their newborn son had a critical illness, Chris didn't know where to turn. Circumstances led him back to church, where a local minister offered caring support and prayer. Today Chris stands in front of the congregation, acknowledging that God's love has sought him out and brought him home. He witnesses to his faith in Christ, and God's promises are confirmed in the prayers and songs of the gathered people of God.

Confirmation affirms that what was begun and anticipated in Baptism is happening in the life of the individual. Instruction in the faith, confession of faith and participation in the body of Christ are recognised and continued: there is a fresh challenge, commitment and empowering by the Holy Spirit.⁵

Assembly Commission on Doctrine, Understanding the Church's Teaching on Baptism, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988.



Confirmation... shall make provision for the candidate to declare:

- acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord,
- determination to follow him in daily life,
- intention to participate actively in the fellowship of the Church and to support its work, and
- resolution to seek the extension of the reign of God in human society.

UCA Constitution 1.1.9

In confirmation, we celebrate God's grace in our lives and offer to God our love and service. With laying of hands, the church prays for us to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to walk in the way of Christ. In all churches, the experience of confirming people as disciples who have received grace and responded to grace is a powerful witness to God's unconditional love.

These declarations of faith and obedience are a vital dimension of the calling to live out our baptism as disciples of Jesus Christ. However, they are not confined to confirmation; they express commitments which are part of our *life-long* response to God's grace expressed in baptism. Every time we gather to worship God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the One who made us, saves us, strengthens us, we are called to love and serve God in return.

Reviewing Confirmation

In recent years, there has been significant world-wide examination of the nature of confirmation in relation to baptism and church membership. While confirmation was an important practice of the denominations entering church union, it has long been recognised as having theological and liturgical difficulties. Our church's *Basis of Union* acknowledges this when it says "[The] Uniting Church commits itself to undertake, with other Christians, to explore and develop the relation of baptism to confirmation and to participation in Holy Communion" (paragraph 12). The Uniting Church Assembly is presently undertaking such a review.

Confirmation within Baptism

In the early church, the act of confirmation was part of baptism itself. The sacrament of baptism concluded with laying on of hands by the presiding bishop with a prayer for strengthening by the Holy Spirit. Preparation of candidates for baptism was taken very seriously. This process was called the *catechumenate* and in some places took up to three years.

During the fifth to ninth centuries, this laying on of hands became a separate rite of confirmation performed by a bishop who would visit a local parish, sometimes several years after a child had been baptised by the local priest. The medieval church gave various explanations for the importance of confirmation, elevating its status to being a sacrament alongside Baptism and Eucharist.

Reforming Confirmation

A number of leaders of the Reformation, including Luther and Calvin, rejected confirmation as an unscriptural invention of the Catholic Church. However they saw great value in a period of intentional instruction in church doctrine, followed by examination and the opportunity to make a personal declaration of faith in Christ.



This emphasis gave rise to a modern understanding of confirmation as the time when an individual confirms that they have claimed personally the faith which was offered on their behalf at baptism. The UCA Constitution reflects part of this view. However, as Graeme Ferguson says, "In ancient practice Confirmation is... to ratify and confirm what has been performed in Baptism as truly the work of God and his Spirit". As part of baptism, the act of confirming was a confirmation by the church that the grace of God was the initiating, dynamic power which was active in baptism.

Reclaiming Baptism

In welcoming baptised children to Holy Communion, the Uniting Church has recognised that we join the church at our baptism, not at confirmation. Churches around the world have restated the sufficiency of baptism as a sacrament of Christian initiation. This is reflected in the *Uniting in Worship Service of Baptism* where confirmation is included with the sacrament.

Baptism is a celebration of God's gift of new life in Christ and an initiation into the body of Christ. Baptism declares that we become members of the church not by personal choice but by God's grace: we are chosen and called. For this reason, confirmation is not required in order to complete our baptism, nor is confirmation necessary to make us members of the church. Currently, an Assembly task group is reviewing the church's understandings of membership. As a church, we are exploring ways of involving children and young people in the life and work of our councils.

A Life of Turning to Christ

Christian conversion is often seen as a *one-off* event of accepting Christ. Confirmation is seen as a time for giving testimony to what has taken place. However, Baptism celebrates that God is for us before we turn to God. Accepting Christ as a young person or adult comes after we have heard and received God's love through the words and actions of people, perhaps over a short time, perhaps over many years.

We can see our conversion as an *ongoing process*, a life-long journey, which begins as a seed of faith, grows into mature discipleship, and continues as we learn to follow Christ and become like him. Our growth in faith has both gradual and dramatic times of growth and transformation.

Rather than seeing confirmation as the only opportunity to celebrate God's love and make our response, we can look for repeated opportunities to reaffirm our baptism throughout our lives. At these times, God's love is confirmed for us and we restate our allegiance to Christ. At this current time of review, confirmation may be best seen as a particular opportunity for reaffirmation of baptism. This has been stated by the Assembly Commission on Liturgy in *Uniting in Worship*.⁶



Renewal:

Reaffirming our Baptism

On Easter Saturday at Duke St. Church, the congregation gathers for a late night service. The minister invites God's people to reaffirm their baptism and to celebrate the holy meal which is a sign of their Lord's suffering and death. Some people have chosen to be part of a group making special preparation for this time. Through several weeks of study, prayer and meetings with a sponsor, they have come to a deeper understanding of Jesus' call to be disciples. Together they have prepared prayers, songs and banners for the service. Along with the congregation, they recommit themselves to follow Christ. As a body they say the Creed and recall their baptism, making the sign of the cross on their foreheads.

The event of our baptism was not simply the administration of water in the name of the Trinity. It committed us to the gospel, and it was undertaken in the light of the gospel... Baptism occurs once-for-all, but it may be recalled many times... The witness of one person's recommitment is a demonstration of the power of the gospel 'to enable us to turn from the darkness of evil and to walk in the light of Christ'.⁷

Christian worship provides many opportunities for the people of God to recall God's saving grace and to recommit themselves to God's service. This should be the character of our worship each time we gather to acknowledge the overwhelming love of God and to hear God's call to be channels of that same love. Baptismal reaffirmation is a celebration of our belonging in Christ and our calling to live out our baptism as followers of Christ, engaged in God's mission in the world. This reaffirmation is also a focus at key times in the Christian year, especially Easter and Pentecost.

Renewing our faith

When individuals in the congregation experience Christ's transforming love and a renewal of faith, or return to faith after a time of separation, they may express a desire to reaffirm their baptism to "witnesses to the fact that the Holy Spirit given in baptism has awakened a response of faith in a person's life."⁸

God's initiative of divine grace invites human response: this is always God's intention. It is both appropriate and necessary to give ritual expression to people's responses to God's saving love. Christian faith and discipleship are a lifelong journey lived in community. Within this shared experience of faith, individual growth and change take place. The journey of faith needs to be celebrated, stimulated, nourished and encouraged. Baptismal reaffirmation will take place at key times in the church year, as well as at significant times of personal growth and transformation in people's lives.

What the church needs at such times is not necessarily confirmation but suitable opportunities for people to recall, reaffirm and have affirmed for them the faith of their baptism. At such times the church says to them, "We are on a journey together. You have not arrived at the destination, and neither have we. You have grown along the journey, and so have we. You have many questions about the journey. We welcome your questioning. We have lots of questions too! We commit ourselves to travelling, questioning and learning with you. We know we can do this because God travels with us. Together let's remind ourselves that we belong to God, who started our journey and calls us to keep travelling together. We will tell you our story as your share with us your story."

Faith is familiar and foreign

In the *Belonging Kit*, baptismal education is seen as both 'tribal' and 'immigrant'. Those who are relatively new to the church are being introduced as 'immigrants' to a new environment of faith. Christian education cannot assume knowledge of the basics of Christian faith, even among church members. We cannot assume that



those who have spent time in church have already 'made it': they need to experience the ongoing transformation of 'becoming Christian'.

At the same time, we practise our faith as people who already walk in the way of Jesus. Faith can only be appropriated from within: trust in God is the basis for our understanding of God. Christian initiation involves more than learning doctrines, it is an apprenticeship in Christian living alongside people who have already begun the journey.

Today, we know that it is a mistake to call our society "Christian"; to become Christian is to turn from false gods to love and serve the One, Living God who claims our total allegiance. Baptism celebrates the fact that God takes us on a journey with a group of people who are travelling in the same direction. We haven't arrived yet. Some of us have a glimpse of where we are going; others are just happy to enjoy the company.

At the same time, we also recognise that God is in the world and speaks to the church from beyond its bounds, bringing new words and guiding our way: newcomers do not come empty-handed to the table of religious experience. Baptismal preparation may begin from the spiritual and life experience of those who are candidates and connect with the faith and tradition of the Christian church.

Preparing to Celebrate

While the Uniting Church is in the process of reviewing its theology and practice of confirmation, congregations still require ways to prepare people for baptism, confirm them in faith, educate them about Christian beliefs and discipleship, and invite them to reaffirm their baptism.

In this climate, there will be a diversity of local educational approaches to confirmation and baptismal reaffirmation within the scope of the UCA Constitution and Regulations. The *Belonging Kit* aims to provide ministers, elders and congregations with a framework for preparing people for these vital celebrations of beginning, belonging and becoming.

¹ Graeme Ferguson, "Confirmation in Context", in *Strengthen, Lord, Your Servant*, Leigh Pope (ed), Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986, p. 6.

² John Watt, *Joining the Church*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986.

³ Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980, p. 37.

⁴ D'Arcy Wood, *Building on a Solid Basis*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986. p. 23.

⁵ Assembly Commission on Doctrine, *Understanding the Church's Teaching on Baptism*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988, p. 29.

⁶ Assembly Commission on Liturgy, *Uniting in Worship*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988, p. 14

⁷ Robert Gribben, *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1990, pp. 36ff.

⁸ Assembly Commission on Liturgy, *Uniting in Worship Leader's Book*, Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1988, p. 58.