



## ***Planning for Baptism*** *with Young People & Adults,* *and for Confirmation and Reaffirmation of Baptism*

### ***The Congregation***

Baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation of baptism are celebrations of the whole church. Just as the congregation gathers at worship for these special events, so the whole congregation may be involved in preparation and in what happens afterwards. With each of these times, the focus is not simply on the individuals being baptised or confirmed or reaffirming their faith, but on the community of faith witnessing to God's grace and committing themselves to live as disciples of Christ.

Growth in grace and discipleship happens in community. The candidates are being baptised or confirmed within the Christian faith, a faith which is visibly expressed through the lives of congregations. As we celebrate God's grace and make our response together, we can all experience a new openness to God's love, rediscover Christ's call to follow, and see new dreams and visions of God's purpose for our world.

The congregation has a central role in preparing people for baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation of baptism. The *Uniting Church's Constitution* says that "The *Congregation* with the Ministers and Council of Elders shall make provision for the spiritual oversight and pastoral care of its members and adherents"(9). Not only do we share in the celebration, but we also share in the nurture which surrounds these events. This involves helping prepare candidates for baptism and confirmation. Members of the congregation may be involved as mentors, leaders in group discussion sessions, role models, supporters, worship planners and leaders.

The congregation's role also includes welcoming candidates into a new phase of their journey with God. Baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation are important rites of passage; they help us to keep turning from the old way to the new way in Christ. They mark our growth in grace, and encourage us to move further along the journey of faith towards maturity in Christ. Just as families give new responsibilities to their children when they pass the milestones of growing up, so the church allows its members to make new contributions as they grow in their faith and gifts. Interviews with young people reveal that for them, one of the important dimensions of confirmation is the new level of acceptance and involvement in the congregation that they receive afterwards. As congregations, we need to allow the growing faith of our members to challenge, encourage and change us so that we too can grow as the body of Christ.

### ***The Elders***

With the ministers, the elders take active responsibility for the spiritual oversight and pastoral care of the congregation. The *Uniting Church* assumes cooperation among its ministers and elders, and the involvement of both in baptism and confirmation. This is in recognition of the variety of gifts and talents within the church: ministry is the work of the whole people of God.

In preparing people for baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation of baptism, ministers and elders can work together on significant aspects of the church's worship, education and pastoral care. Planning for these events, the minister and elders will need to discuss together the relevant sections of the *Constitution and Regulations* and decide how the responsibilities will be fulfilled.



In particular these responsibilities include,

- approval of names and candidates for baptism and confirmation;
- sharing in the conduct of worship and administration of the sacraments;
- sharing in spiritual oversight, Christian education and nurture;
- maintaining records of membership.

*Constitution, 9. Regulations 1.1.7, 1.1.9, 3.1.3, 3.1.9.*

There are many practical ways in which elders may be involved in preparation for and conduct of these celebrations. These include:

- pastoral care of candidates and others involved;
- leadership of teaching sessions;
- mentor and other support roles;
- partnership in active learning about Christian discipleship;
- encouraging participants to develop and express their gifts;
- prayer;
- sharing faith stories;
- worship preparation;
- preparing symbolic gifts for candidates;
- contributions during worship.

All of these tasks are appropriate for any member of the congregation with suitable gifts and maturity. The role of the minister and elders is to plan for congregational participation. The *Belonging Kit* gives many examples and opportunities for these kinds of involvement.

Following baptism and confirmation, elders have a critical role in providing for the ongoing spiritual nourishment. This will include exploring the availability of local opportunities for friendship and study, for expression of gifts in ministry, and for involvement in mission beyond the congregation.

*Note: Following the decisions of the 1997 Assembly, and following endorsement by the other appropriate councils, the duties of the Council of Elders will be taken up by a Church Council. The role of this Council will include the above responsibilities of Elders as set out in the UCA Constitution and Regulations.*

### **The Minister**

Ministers' involvement in baptism, confirmation and reaffirmation of baptism is a common aspect of their role and responsibility, shared with elders. In preparing for and conducting these celebrations, ministers have significant contact with candidates and their families. There are important pastoral, educational and liturgical dimensions to these contacts, which may take place over a short time or a longer time. The sharing of elders with the minister in these tasks is a distinctive aspect of ministry in the Uniting Church. Not only do candidates experience ministry from more than one key person, but there can be tremendous mutual learning and growth from the partnership of ministers and elders.



## Planning

The ministry of teaching has been and continues to be a vital role for ministers. For many young people, confirmation has been a time of close contact with the minister as pastor-teacher. The involvement of elders and others in conducting confirmation education can further enrich learning, bringing a diversity of life and faith experiences, gifts and expressions of discipleship.

In providing a range of learning experiences, the *Belonging* Kit allows candidates to connect with many people in the congregation during the course of their preparation. This aims to strengthen the candidate's sense of belonging and identification with the congregation and the wider church.

The minister has a specific responsibility in relation to the preparation and conduct of worship, with assistance from the elders. There are three key groups of people whose added participation in planning and leadership greatly enhances the meaning of the celebration - elders and others involved in the preparation phase; people who have been significant in the faith journey of the candidate; and close family members and friends.

### Preparing young people and adults for baptism

*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)*

The baptism of youth and adults is a witness to God's Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ, and will be a great cause for celebration. Baptism, like confirmation, acknowledges that God loves us before we love God.

Preparation of candidates for baptism may take place concurrently with preparation of candidates for confirmation. The *Belonging* Kit has sufficient flexibility to allow for a group to share in common learning activities while some individuals undertake additional or different elements of preparation. The structure and style of the Kit allow for the preparation to be tailored to the needs, capacities and maturity of individuals. While this may involve a bit more planning, it may also have great benefits.

However, it should not be assumed that in this situation all candidates will be ready for participation in baptism/confirmation at the same time. Also, if the candidate is relatively new to the congregation, their pastoral support during the preparation period may also need to be handled differently from other candidates.

Ministers and elders should note that *Uniting in Worship* states that immersion is the preferred method of baptism. While the amount of water used does not affect the validity of the baptism, immersion is a much richer sign of God's overwhelming grace. With the baptism of young people and adults, immersion may be a more practical possibility than with infant baptism.

The Assembly is continuing to work on further ways to prepare adults for baptism and to explore the meaning of the sacraments and Christian faith with people who have had little prior contact with the church.





## Preparing young people and adults for confirmation

*The Uniting Church will seek ways in which the baptized may have confirmed to them the promises of God, and be led to deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptized.*

(Basis of Union, Paragraph 12)

*Uniting in Worship* speaks of confirmation as a reaffirmation of baptism, a time when God's grace declared in baptism is confirmed for us and we make a response of faith and commitment. This is an important step. It is also helpful to see confirmation as one of many opportunities throughout our lives to celebrate God's love and pledge our obedience to God.

Your congregation will have certain familiar ways of preparing people for confirmation. The *Belonging Kit* encourages you to have a new look at the way you do this. The Kit contains themes which explore Christian faith; however, they are not just about beliefs or doctrines. The twelve units explore Christian *discipleship*, the ways in which Christian beliefs are expressed in Christian living. The range of learning activities helps take Christian faith out of the classroom and into the world.

As with baptism, a task of the elders and the ministers is to approve candidates for confirmation. It is important that elders understand that their role is not to examine candidates for full membership. We are made members of the church through our baptism, not our confirmation, by God's grace, not by our achievements, though confirmation is still required for a person to become a voting member of the Uniting Church.

Confirmation does not declare that we have finally memorised the church's doctrines correctly, nor that we have somehow 'made it' as Christians. Confirmation candidates are expected to express Christian faith, but like all of us, their faith can continue to grow. Confirmation marks a step on the journey. A person's desire to be confirmed is a willingness to celebrate God's love and goodness in their lives, a desire to express publicly their response of faith, and to continue to follow and serve Christ in the company of other Christians.

Confirmation should not be the only chance that a person has for this celebration and response. Other reaffirmations of faith may witness to continuing growth in faith and discipleship in response to God's constant love.

## Preparing for reaffirmation of faith

Reaffirmation of baptism is a common practice in churches around the world, and a growing practice in the Uniting Church. In reaffirming our baptism we declare the wonder of God's love, our salvation through Christ, and we pledge ourselves again to Christ's ministry in the world. Baptism occurs once-and-for-all. A reaffirmation does not repeat our baptism, instead we recall our baptism and its meaning for our lives. God calls us to live out our baptism as we continue to live in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Reaffirmation of baptism is an important option to suggest when people ask for rebaptism.

Reaffirmation of baptism may take place in any service of worship: in a sense we can reaffirm our baptism every time we worship. In the world-wide church, reaffirmation of baptism is common at Easter and Pentecost. The questions in the *Uniting in Worship* liturgy recall the questions asked at baptism, the Creed declares our faith in God, and the pledge renews the promise to follow and serve Christ. Water from the



font may be sprinkled as a further reminder of baptism, and people may be invited to make the sign of the cross on their foreheads.

**Congregational reaffirmation of faith** may be preceded by encouragement for spiritual preparation, which can be related to the church season. Some of these opportunities may be available to all members of the congregation at any time, while other choices may be for those people who wish to make special preparation. People who have been in the church for many years can find that their faith is renewed through this. An advantage of these options is that people can go further in preparation without feeling singled out during the service itself. This preparation can include:

- personal prayer and reflection
- small group Bible study and discussion
- active learning about ministry and mission
- one-to-one mentor meetings
- a weekly prayer group

Preparation for the service can also allow people who have been involved in these extra activities to share with the congregation something of their learning and growth.

**Personal reaffirmation of faith** gives witness "to the fact that the Holy Spirit given in baptism has awakened a response of faith in a person's life" (*Uniting in Worship*). This may take place when a church member comes into a renewing and transforming experience of God's love, or when a person returns to faith and the church after a time. Opportunities to celebrate and witness to this personal growth and change are not always present in regular Sunday worship.

Preparing the person for such a service need not take long, yet the experience may be deepened by prayer, reflection, Bible study, or some other activity. The *Belonging Kit* provides a range of possibilities in terms of the length, the style, and also the focus of the preparation - for example, Christian service, understanding the Holy Spirit, sharing gifts, sharing faith. Some intentional pastoral contact by a minister or elder is also important, and a person will benefit from time with a small group or mentor. These people might meet for a few weeks just for this purpose.

A service with personal reaffirmation of faith allows for an individual or group to recall that the God of their baptism has not let them go; God has loved them and brought them to a new point of growth and change. Robert Gribben reminds us (in *A Guide to Uniting in Worship*) that personal testimony of growth in faith is quite appropriate in the context of corporate worship. Our stories of grace and faith tell of the power of the gospel to change our lives and our world. At these times, it is certainly appropriate for the worship leader to invite others to commit or recommit themselves to Christ, provided that the congregation offers appropriate counsel and nurture.

These notes invite you to see the *Belonging Kit* as a resource which can be used in many ways to prepare people to celebrate God's divine grace and to commit and recommit themselves to God's service. The people who are part of the congregation, and particularly those who share in this ministry of nurture, will add the essential dimension of a visible witness to God's love and purpose.