

How do we understand Baptism?

Prepared in 2005

The content on this page has been drafted bearing in mind the many discussion papers and resolutions adopted by the Uniting Church over the years. We have also taken note of the statements of our partner churches, as we are baptised not just into the Uniting Church, but into the one universal (catholic) church existing through time and in many different contexts. The statement has been carefully considered by the National Working Groups on Worship and Doctrine appointed by the Assembly, as well as some other eminent Uniting Church scholars. (The detailed wording has not, however, been approved by the Assembly so, in that sense, does not state official Uniting Church doctrine.)

How do we understand baptism?

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1. What is the essential meaning of baptism?

Baptism offers us the life of Christ through the sign of water. Baptism tells the story of God's love and embraces us in that love. In baptism we rediscover that God is active in the world and loves the world. We see ourselves as rebellious and sinful people whom God loves, in spite of ourselves. Baptism tells the story of God's righteous judgment and grace. It tells us the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and unites us to Christ. Baptism is the sign of the new covenant between God and God's people. We receive the Holy Spirit and wait expectantly for the coming kingdom.

Baptism signifies God's life-giving renewal given freely and abundantly. The two great signs of God's work, baptism and the Lord's supper (the Lord's supper is also known as holy communion, or eucharist), are called "sacraments". They are God's gifts to the church. The sacraments intimately involve us in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Christ acts through baptism to form the church. It thus establishes our identity as Christian people.

The baptised person responds to God's freely-given love by turning from rebelliousness to trust in God and dependence on God's goodness. Baptism entails a life-long commitment to serving God. It thus redirects our lives to the life of God's reign (kingdom). As forgiven sinners, we freely and joyfully serve God out of heartfelt gratitude.

It is important to keep together the initiative and grace of God on the one hand and the human response on the other. Emphasising one, at the expense of the other, leads to extreme positions which distort the meaning of baptism.

2. What is the relationship of baptism to conversion?

While some of us can identify a key event as a turning point when our life was changed by God, it is also an ongoing process. As the Spirit of God continually shapes and moulds our lives around the events of Jesus' life and the significance of his death and resurrection, and as we are empowered to live by his teaching, we find new life for ourselves and for the world. We receive deep healing, forgiveness and wholeness.

The Christian community is shaped and reformed to embody what Jesus stood for and inaugurated – the reign of God in our midst (Mark 1:15, Luke 4:16-19). Week by week, year by year, as we meditate and reflect on the story of Jesus, we are challenged and empowered to conform our lives to his.

This ongoing renewal and conversion of our lives is a gift of God's grace and an outpouring of God's love. As we experience God's renewal, we ourselves are called to participate in God's mission of the renewal of the whole creation, as we give ourselves freely to the ministry of reconciliation as an expression of our following Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

This gift is nothing less than a new identity, symbolised so graphically in our baptism. The biblical images of baptism speak of new life in Christ. Being immersed in water is a going into the grave and rising to new life; in this we die and rise with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12). We have "put on Christ" like discarding our old clothes and being reclothed in bright new clothes (Gal. 3:27), we are reborn (John 3:5), we are washed clean (1 Cor. 6:11), we are enlightened by Christ (Eph. 5:14), we are renewed in the Spirit (Titus 3:5), we are initiated into a new community where all divisions are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 12:13).

In this way, Christians discover the purpose, direction and meaning of their lives in the person of Jesus. In his life, teaching, death and resurrection we see the character and will of God. In God is the means of our salvation.

The Psalmist speaks of the necessity of "a new (or clean) heart" (Psalm 51:10). Jesus recognised that the innermost being of a person needs to be made pure (Matt. 5:8; 12:33-37). We speak of the heart as

the seat of the emotions, but for Jesus, the heart was clearly much more than that. It was the deepest centre, or “core” of the person. It was the basis for the body, the mind, the emotions and the will. By speaking of the “heart”, biblical writers mean the personality, the inner character, the soul of the person. It is this that needs to be transformed or converted.

This transformation means turning away from sin – all our rebelliousness against God. This may well mean turning from the conventional preoccupations of society, with its focus on security, wealth, status, family or even religion, to being centred on God. In more shorthand language, it is repentance from sin. This conversion of the heart is much more than following religious practices and traditions, or mouthing certain words, or having certain feelings. Above all it means turning away from the self. The love of God is the greatest commandment. In turning to God, we centre our lives on God, we come to trusting God, to loving God with our whole being (Mark 12:28-31, which could be read as, “love God with all your heart i.e. with all your soul and mind and strength”).

Jesus spoke of such re-centering of our lives on God as a dying, as “taking up the cross” (Luke 9:23-24). It is only in dying, by turning from self and our other preoccupations to God, that we can find the new life God offers. As Paul puts it, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me” (Gal. 2:20). He therefore calls on his readers to offer themselves as a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1).

God’s deep desire is for our total well-being. As we enter into this most precious of gifts, we are remade not just to be *like* Jesus, but to be *in* Christ.

The cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith, both because Jesus died on a cross and because it sums up his teaching and his way. But while the cross was an instrument of death at the hands of the Romans, in Jesus it becomes the symbol of new life – which is the gift of God to us. The cross is empty; Jesus was crucified once and for all, and is now risen.

3. Does being baptised mean we are saved?

Baptism is a sign of salvation, and we celebrate that salvation in the rite of baptism. In baptism, we are related to God and the Christian community in a new way (see Q. 5). The sacrament of baptism is a sign of all that God has done for us, and also the sign of our response of worship, love and service.

The waters of baptism sum up the whole story of God’s dealing with God’s creation. It recalls the Spirit moving over the waters at creation. It recalls the crossing of the Red/Reed Sea to escape slavery and the crossing of the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. Our baptism joins us to the baptism of Christ, his life, death and resurrection. Baptism makes Pentecost present as the congregation prays for the coming of the Spirit. Baptism incorporates us into the Reign of God and the life of the age to come.

Baptism also plunges us into discipleship. As reborn people our lives are centred on God’s will and the life of praise, obedience and service. Baptism calls us to witness and to ministries of justice as our participation in God’s renewal of the whole creation.

Salvation is about being reconciled to God and living the life of faith in Christ, in the Spirit, in fellowship with other believers. Salvation is both a present experience and a future confident hope.

This salvation is found within the covenant which God established in Jesus. It is a covenant between God and God's people. Our baptism signifies our participation in that covenant.

It is not, however, something mechanical, magic or automatic. Baptism speaks of the grace of God and God's grace continues and is trustworthy. But we can neglect and abandon God's grace. The person is free to step out of the relationship of grace and reject it. It is possible that someone may reject and deny their baptism. God's gift of grace and the human response can not be artificially separated. Both are part of the significance of baptism.

4. What happens in a service of baptism?

In the service of baptism (see *Uniting in Worship 2*), we read some of the key Bible passages about baptism. The minister then announces:

Baptism is Christ's gift.

It is the sign by which the Spirit of God joins people to Jesus Christ and incorporates them into his body, the Church.

In his own baptism in the Jordan by John, Jesus identified himself with humanity in its brokenness and sin;

that baptism was completed in his death and resurrection. By God's grace, baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ, so that whatever is his may be called ours.

By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own and set free from the power of sin and death.

Thus, claimed by God

we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit

that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,

share his ministry in the world and grow to maturity, awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.

The candidates for baptism repent of their sins, declare that they turn to Jesus, pledge themselves to God, declare that they trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord and trust the Holy Spirit as their Counsellor and God.

Where young children are brought for baptism, the congregation and the parents promise to nurture the children in the faith, so that they will be brought to the point of personal commitment.

The congregation then prays for the persons and the whole congregation affirms the faith of the universal church by saying the Apostles' Creed.

The congregation prays a prayer of thanksgiving and the persons are baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and signed with the cross. The congregation then prays for the candidates, they are charged to be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ always and a blessing is said over them. The newly-baptised are then presented with a lighted candle.

5. What, then, does baptism do?

Baptism is a gift of God's grace to the church. Instituted by the risen Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:19), it marks a person's turning to God and entry into the new covenant with God and with God's people. Just as there is one Lord and one faith, there is one baptism (Eph. 4:4-6).

Baptism is the sign of all that God has done for us in creation, covenant, Christ, church and coming kingdom. It dramatises our central story, tells us who we are, calls us to repentance and plunges us into discipleship. Baptism signifies the person's acceptance, pardoning, cleansing and receiving the Holy Spirit. As such, baptism is a sign of the coming reign of God in our midst. It is not, therefore, primarily about how we *feel*, but it goes much deeper, to who we *are* in our "heart," and whose we are, to the marrow of our being, to the depths of our soul. It makes us new people in Christ.

Furthermore, it is a sign which actually does what it signifies; it is an effective sign. Baptised persons, having died to self and become re-centred on God, are related to God in a new and different way; they are newly created, they recommence the Christian story in the way it was meant to go. Furthermore, baptism grafts the person into God's people. In this way, the Spirit creates the community.

What defines the Christian community is not primarily ideology, or common feeling, or polity, or even agreement on points of theology and ethics; but engagement with God. It is participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, resulting in forgiveness and hope.

Baptism, whilst a gift of God, transforms the one being baptised and brings about obedience and life-long growth in personal maturity, worship, witness and service. It produces a life centred on nothing other than the worship of the Triune God. The baptised life is one of submission to being reshaped by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ. It drowns the old identity, so that out of what has been killed, a new person can grow. We have a new character, a new identity – we are literally new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

The baptised life is therefore the cross-bearing life (Mark 8:34). It means dying to self and our natural inclinations and living according to the priorities and values of God – above all, by compassionate love. As Jesus broke through all the conventional social barriers of his day and was one with the hungry and poor and wretched, so are those who have been baptised into his life.

To nourish us, Christ's baptised people are constantly fed by word, bread and wine. The Lord's supper recapitulates the baptismal covenant. It continues to transform us into the likeness of Christ, as we eat and drink in faith the bread and wine which effectively signify body and blood, and thus we participate in his risen life. Consequently, the baptised life is never static, but always being refashioned and remade into Christ-likeness.

Baptism is a gift to the church and administered within the church. While baptism and Lord's supper are not for the world, but for the church, like all God's gifts, baptism is given for the sake of the whole creation.

6. What does it mean to be a member of the covenant community?

The church has been called into being by God's initiative. It is God's creation whose purpose is worship, witness and service in the fellowship of the Spirit. The community of the faithful exists through time and in different places and cultures. It interprets Scripture and carries the tradition. It is within the church

family that new Christians are nurtured and find their meaning and purpose in God.

The church is therefore much more than a voluntary organization of like-minded people who come together for mutual support and practical efficiency.

While God has brought the church into being and continues to nourish and care for it, God's people are called to be faithful to the covenant and live with Christ as their Lord.

The local congregation is "the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ" (Basis of Union, 15a). The universal church is embodied in the local congregation, and the local church is part of the universal church.

"Through baptism, we are made, and discover ourselves to be, brothers and sisters of Peter and James and John; of Mary and Martha and Lazarus of Bethany; of Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus; of Ambrose, and of Monica and her son, Augustine; of Francis of Assisi and Clare, his disciple; of Luther and Calvin; of Susanna and Samuel Wesley and their renowned sons, John and Charles; of John XXIII and John Paul I; and of an almost infinite host of others whose names have been forgotten by us but not by God." (Stookey 1982:30)

7. But isn't Jesus' call to discipleship more important than the ritual of baptism?

As baptised people, as re-centred and transformed people, being citizens of God's kingdom means living for the praise of God and being caught up in God's ministry in the world. In the company of God's people, our lives are an expression of worship. We discern what God is doing and we participate in it according to our God-given gifts. As the Spirit renews us in Christ, it is the Spirit who grants the privilege of ministry as we participate in God's mission in the world. The Spirit gives gifts to each Christian for the common good and the accomplishment of God's mission. This ministry may be expressed in ways as varied as the ways of God.

It is not therefore helpful to say that the call to discipleship is more important than baptism. It is more accurate to say that the call to discipleship flows from the significance of baptism, or that baptism is the gateway to a life of discipleship.

It is important to keep the primary focus on what God has done, is doing and will do for us in Christ. Only then do we see ourselves, and our response of discipleship, clearly.

8. Isn't baptism in the Spirit both separate from and more important than water baptism?

Recent New Testament studies have argued that the gift of the Spirit and water baptism are really part and parcel of the same process, and have been so from the earliest days of the church. Hearing the Gospel, responding to the Good News, turning to Christ (repentance), the immersion in or the pouring of water, anointing with oil (as a sign of receiving the Spirit), putting on new clothes, becoming part of the Christian community, being enlightened, receiving the bread and wine – and so having one's whole life redirected towards God – are all part of the Spirit-laden conversion process. Baptism is the whole process; it condenses, focuses or sums up the whole of the Christian life.

It is for this reason that the New Testament writers were anxious to report Christian baptism as being different from John's baptism – it was more than immersion in water; it was receiving the Holy Spirit as well, and much more besides. In fact, we can really only understand the meaning of the water bath in the New Testament within the context of the person who was being initiated receiving the Holy Spirit. When the New Testament speaks of (Christian) baptism, it means more than the immersion or pouring of water alone. It is a whole conversion process which is guided by the Spirit and includes the gift of the Spirit. Furthermore, the person is baptised in the name of the Father, the Son *and the Holy Spirit*.

When Paul speaks about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians, he then goes on to speak of “a still more excellent way” in 1 Corinthians 13 – which is the way of love. This is the supreme gift of the Spirit and highest expression of Christian discipleship. As we pray for the coming of the Spirit on the person being baptised, we can expect to see that being expressed in Spirit-inspired love in the disciple's life.

9. Do I need to be rebaptised if I change my denomination?

No. We are baptised into the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In baptism we become a member of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. It is for this reason that the various Christian denominations recognise one another's baptism. If we join another denomination, we are not baptised again.

On the other hand, if a person has been “baptised” by a group which we do not recognise as being part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons, they need to be baptised.

(Some of the marks of belonging to the one holy, catholic and apostolic church are: a. worshipping God as Father, Son and Spirit; b. confessing Jesus as God and Saviour; c. receiving the Old and New Testaments as unique, prophetic and apostolic testimony; d. recognising the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as authoritative statements; e. accepting the statements of the great Ecumenical Councils of the early church; f. living in fellowship with other parts of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.)

10. Why is the church so strongly opposed to a person being re-baptised?

The Christian church has universally, from the earliest days, rejected the notion of re-baptism. Baptism, as we have seen, involves the action of God. In baptism, we appropriate the promises of God. If the church were to approve re-baptism, it would be like saying, “God, you once promised your love and new life for this person, but we're not sure if you really meant it. Do it again. You brought this person into the covenant community, but we are not really sure that they are part of the community.” To agree to re-baptism is like saying that God's promises can not be trusted; that we can not be sure that the Spirit has acted. Obviously, the effect of this would be to call into question the validity of all baptisms.

Those who ask for re-baptism usually do so because they have had a fresh spiritual experience and wish to mark it in some way. We do need to celebrate such experiences, but it is also important to see such a deeper spiritual experience as an outworking of their baptism. Again, we need to note that the

Christian life starts with the initiative of God, and not just the subjective experience of the individual. Furthermore, baptism is not the possession of the individual; it is Christ's act in the church.

The church makes adequate provision for the reaffirmation of our baptismal vows. We do so in the personal reaffirmation of baptism we call Confirmation. We do each time we participate in the Lord's supper. We do so each time we are present at a service in which a person is baptised. We also make provision for both corporate and individual reaffirmations of baptism (see *Uniting in Worship 2*). These are clearly, however, re-affirmations of the original baptism; not a second or subsequent baptism.

Even if someone is baptised, later abandons the faith altogether and then returns, we do not re-baptise them. Since the early centuries of the church when people sometimes denied Christ under the pain of persecution, their baptism was regarded as valid, but not effective while they lived apart from Christ. When they reaffirmed their faith, the baptism was regarded as effective again. This means that the person was no less baptised even when living as though they were not baptised. Just as the prodigal son was still a son in the pig sty, he was living as though he were not a son. In the same way, a person may deny their baptism by their lifestyle, but they are no less baptised. When they return to Christ, their original baptism becomes effective again.

11. But, don't other denominations re-baptise?

No. Some churches that do not baptise babies and young children will baptise teenagers or adults who have been baptised as children. They do not see this as re-baptism, because they deny that the original baptism is valid.

12. Why do we baptise babies?

We baptise babies because:

(a) We recognise that God's grace goes ahead of us. "While we were still weak ..." Christ died and rose for us (Romans 5:6) and "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

It is for this reason that the minister says in the baptismal service:

N and N,

for you Jesus Christ has come, has lived, has suffered;

for you he endured the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary;

for you he uttered the cry, 'It is accomplished!' For you he triumphed over death;

for you he prays at God's right hand;

for you, N,

even before you were born.

In baptism the word of the apostle is confirmed;

'We love, because God first loved us.'

We cannot save ourselves. We are totally dependent on God. The baptism of babies reminds us of this.

(b) Secondly, we baptise babies because our faith is a corporate one. Baptism is an initiation into the covenant community. In the power of the Spirit, the Christian community nurtures and disciplines those who are baptised into it. As Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, “The promise is to you and to your children” (Acts 2:39).

13. By baptising babies, are we not turning baptism into something mechanical, or even magical?

No. Every baptism marks God’s decision for us in Christ, long before our decision for God. In baptism, we call on the Holy Spirit to continue God’s work of salvation. Baptism then calls forth the response of faith. It is our initiation into God’s community, the church, and presupposes life-long commitment. The fact is that, sadly, some people choose to deny God’s grace and cut themselves off from the Christian community.

Perhaps we may think of it as a naturalisation ceremony into God’s kingdom. If a person is an adult they can choose to respond to the invitation to become a full citizen of a new nation – with all the benefits and responsibilities that that entails. The children of parents who are naturalised are also included, even though they may understand little or nothing of what is happening in the ceremony. Such children also have all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as their parents do. (They may, of course, renounce their citizenship later, and take up citizenship of another nation, but that does not make them any less citizens of the country up to that point.)

14. But what about the babies we baptise and never see again?

The Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union* tells us that the Uniting Church will baptise “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.” We need to recognise, therefore, that the congregation has large responsibilities, and will need to put in place strategies to fulfil these.

The problem arises when parents say that they intend to work with the congregation in nurturing the child in the faith and then fail to do so. This makes it difficult or impossible for the congregation to fulfil its responsibility.

This is a genuine pastoral issue, with which many ministers and church councils continue to wrestle. Some congregations suggest that, if neither of the parents are church members, that they have a *Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child*. Other congregations/presbyteries minimise the expectations of “baptism on demand” by restricting baptism to the few Sundays of the year when baptisms are traditionally held (e.g. Easter, Pentecost, All Saints, Advent). In the UCA’s *Becoming Disciples* process, we recommend that people be prepared for baptism for an extended period, to give them time to explore their life issues and questions about the faith, to learn the basics and to prepare spiritually.

The *Becoming Disciples* process takes people through four phases:

Inquiry. Friendship and hospitality are offered to persons not currently Christians or members of the

church. They are encouraged to explore their life questions in relation to the Christian faith.

Formation. Once the person commits to exploring the faith in depth, they are welcomed into the Christian community, given a sponsor or companion, and engage in reflection and study on Christian behaviour and belief.

Candidacy. At this point (usually the six weeks of Lent) the candidate engages in an intensive period of preparation, including prayer, fasting, spiritual retreat and examination of conscience. This culminates in baptism (or confirmation) at the Easter Vigil.

Integration. During the season of Easter, the newly baptised reflect on their Easter experience of dying and rising with Christ as the core symbol, principle and motivation in their lives and engage in active ministry.

These stages must not, however, be seen as a rigid program, but need to be offered to each candidate with sensitivity to the Spirit's working in the person's life. The rate and ways in which a person moves through the process will vary considerably from individual to individual.

(Information on the *Becoming Disciples* process may be found at:
<http://assembly.uca.org.au/cudw/worship-resources-and-publications>

15. What about “christening” and “dedication”?

“Christening” is a rather old-fashioned term. It means “en-Christ-ing”, but in common usage it often refers to simply a naming ceremony. In the Uniting Church, we use the biblical term “baptism.” To avoid confusion, it is better that we use the term baptism consistently and avoid the term “christening.” (“Chrismation,” on the other hand, refers to the pouring of oil, which may be part of the rite of baptism. It is possible that is part of the origin of the word “christening”.)

The dedication of infants is not a biblical practice. Appeals are sometimes made to Hannah's giving of Samuel to God (1 Samuel 1:21-28). The Hebrew word in 1:28 comes from the verb “to ask” and is a word-play on Samuel's name (see 1:20). In any case, it is actually more in the way of a special case than a common practice. The presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) is a little different. It was common practice to present the first male child in the temple (see Numbers 18:15-16). The origins of this may be the Hebrews' rejection of the custom of some of their neighbours; that of the sacrifice of the first-born.

The Uniting Church also has a Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child. This is not to be confused with baptism, and may mark a stage on the way to baptism. This service combines thanksgiving for the birth or adoption of a child, the blessing of the child, and the self-dedication of the parent(s) to their task. It is appropriately used on the first occasion on which a child is present in the worshipping community, but it may be delayed, e.g. in order for family members to be present. Part or all of this service may be held in a home or hospital, at the discretion of the minister.

16. What about people who have intellectual disabilities?

It is entirely appropriate that people with disabilities may be baptised. When we recognise that Jesus' ministry was especially with the outcast and marginalised people of his day, it becomes obvious that God's love and promises are also for those with intellectual disabilities – perhaps even *especially* for

them.

Furthermore, faith is not so much having a clear and well articulated theology, but rather a firm trust and dependence on God's goodness. It may well be that people with intellectual disabilities have a deeper faith than those of us who need to reason it all out. A service of baptism for a person with an intellectual disability also reminds us all that God's love is for all, not just those who have a particular level of mental capacity.

When baptismal services are conducted with colour and symbols and a rich dramatic quality, these speak louder than words, and can be readily grasped by all.

17. What does the UCA require Ministers and congregations to do?

1. Be open to baptising adults and children

While a minister or congregation may not exclude all babies and infants from the possibility of baptism as a matter of policy; nevertheless, each congregation has the responsibility for pastoral discernment. We do not have to baptise everyone who asks for it. Indiscriminate baptism cheapens the sacrament. Just as the church council may discern that an adult person is not yet ready for baptism, it may also ask the family of a young child to continue to prepare for baptism. Most congregations and ministers see it as an opportunity to present the Gospel and bring the family into faith.

2. Prepare people adequately

Baptism can not be performed on a whim. People take serious vows in the presence of God. The congregation accepts a grave responsibility. The Tenth Assembly commended the *Becoming Disciples* process to congregations as a way of preparing people for baptism (or confirmation, or personal reaffirmation of faith).

For further information, go to {TIM LINK
<http://assembly.uca.org.au/TD/worship>}

3. Baptise people in the context of congregational worship

As we have seen, in baptism the person is incorporated into the covenant community. To have private baptisms apart from the congregation, without the congregation present, is like having a wedding with only one of the partners entering into the covenant of marriage present.

We do make provision for emergency baptism (e.g. when a person is in hospital, is not expected to live and wants to be assured of God's love as they face death), but this is always then announced to the congregation at the earliest opportunity. Of course, if the person recovers, they are welcomed into the Christian community, perhaps using the *Service of Personal Reaffirmation of Baptism*. Alternatively, the baptismal vows may be repeated at that point (although the person is not, of course, rebaptised).

4. Baptise people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Other forms of words are not acceptable. The Uniting Church can not act alone in this. We are part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. While it is true that, in places, the New Testament speaks of baptising people "in the name of Jesus", even within the New Testament era itself we see the rapid development towards the full Triune formula (Matt 28:19).

By decision of the Assembly, we are committed to baptising people in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The minute reads:

That all Ministers of the Word and others authorised to administer the sacrament of baptism be required to use the following words as the baptismal formula, without variation or exception:

NN (Christian names), I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit
(Minute 88.24.3)

Other formulas, such as “in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer” are not equivalent and may not be used. Such other formulas do say important things about God, but are not modern-day translations of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The whole of the Triune God participates in creation, redemption and sustaining. Furthermore, such terms only describe some *roles or functions* of God, not the *being* of God. In the baptismal formula we have no choice, both because of our understanding of baptism, and because of our ecumenical agreements.

The terms “Father” and “Son,” (but not Holy Spirit!) are masculine and this may create problems for some. The Uniting Church does, however, encourage the use of a wide range of imagery for God in all other contexts.

If we do not use the baptismal formula as required, other churches may have difficulty recognising the baptism.

5. Do not re-baptise people

Baptism is unrepeatable for the reasons outlined in Question 10. Participating in a second baptism calls into question the validity of the original baptism, with the possible disastrous pastoral consequences that many people will question if they are validly baptised.

(In rare cases, where a person genuinely does not know if he or she has been baptised, and it is not possible to find out, a conditional formula may be used, “If you are not already baptised ...”).

6. Follow closely the notes to the Service of Baptism in Uniting in Worship (2)

The notes which precede the actual order of the baptismal service have been very carefully considered over a long period of time and are important. The notes form part of the whole service, which has been approved by the Assembly.

7. Reassure people who question their baptism

At times people question their baptism if the Minister who administered the baptism is subsequently discovered to have been involved in ethical misconduct. While immorality by church leaders is a serious matter and needs to be dealt with, it does not render the baptisms conducted by that person invalid. The primary Baptiser is God, and God is faithful.

18. Why do we not baptise people by immersion more often?

The Uniting Church asks that generous amounts of water be used in baptism and urges that baptism be by immersion or by pouring water over the person. Sprinkling is discouraged. Some other branches of

the Christian Church do not recognise sprinkling as a valid form of baptism. On the other hand, baptism by immersion, wherever practical, is encouraged. Baptism by immersion at Easter time best makes real the rich symbolism of Romans 6.

19. What is the relationship of baptism to the Lord's supper?

As our daily meals express our desire to renew life (together and individually), so the Lord's supper expresses a renewal of our life together in Christ, whose beginning is marked by baptism. Clearly, the Lord's supper has far greater significance than the coffee hour after church. The Lord's supper is "holy" communion – different from other forms of eating and drinking. In it we recognise the presence of the Lord and reaffirm his life, death and resurrection as the true source of our life. It expresses the unity with him and with each other which is established at baptism (see above). It is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and looks forward to the Age to Come – the Reign of God into which we have been initiated in our baptism.

The early church therefore excluded the persons not yet baptised, not just from receiving the elements of bread and wine, but from being present at the communion service. This was not seen as discriminatory, but as helping the not- yet-baptised to experience the Lord's supper with awesome force when their time came.

As for the early church, many churches today see the final stage of the baptismal service as the first participation in the Lord's supper by the newly-baptised.

The Basis of Union therefore says: "In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his *baptized* people ..." (par 8). The Fourth Assembly of the Uniting Church in 1985 recognised this close link between baptism and the Lord's supper when it said that baptised children could receive communion.

Ironically, many congregations then found it difficult to allow some children to partake and not others, so the table became open to unbaptised children as well. This weakened even further the nexus between baptism and the Lord's supper – to the impoverishment of our understanding and experience of both. (Wesley's comment about the Lord's supper being a "converting ordinance" does not mean that he thought that people not baptised should receive the supper.)

Clearly no one wants the church to become overly legalistic about this. We need to deal with it in a caring and pastoral manner. It is not a matter of inclusion or exclusion, but rather of maintaining the integrity of the sacraments. Those not yet baptised, of whatever age, may be encouraged to come forward for a blessing. People who are not baptised and who participate in the Lord's supper can be encouraged to prepare for baptism. Clear and consistent teaching about the depths of significance of the sacraments will help us to move forward, and help people to participate far more meaningfully.

20. What is the relationship between baptism and confirmation?

In *Uniting in Worship 2*, the full name of the Confirmation rite is "The Reaffirmation of Baptism called Confirmation".

Confirmation originated in churches where the Bishop could not be present at the baptism service. He then confirmed the baptism at his next visit to the congregation by laying hands on the newly-baptised. Later, confirmation became an opportunity for teenagers or adults to make public confession of the faith into which they were baptised as children.

Up until a few decades ago, only the confirmed could receive the Lord's supper. Because confirmation usually occurred when people were in their late teens, it was seen as a convenient time to permit people to be eligible to vote in church meetings and be eligible for election to the councils of the church. This is still the requirement in the Uniting Church regulations, although many people no longer see this as helpful. Confirmation should be a time of spiritual growth and renewal, not a hurdle for participation in church management.

(Please note the information on the *Becoming Disciples* process in the answer to Question 14 above. The process may lead to baptism, to confirmation, or to a personal reaffirmation of faith.)

21. What is the relationship of baptism to church membership?

Given all that has been said above about the meaning of baptism, about the relationship of baptism to conversion, about what baptism does and about being a member of covenant community, it will be clear why there is the closest possible link between baptism and church membership.

In the Uniting Church we currently have three forms of membership:

- (a) baptised members – comprising all baptised persons not yet admitted to confirmation;
- (b) confirmed members – comprising persons confirmed by the church or in a manner recognised by the church;
- (c) members-in-association – being persons who are granted this status in accordance with the relevant regulations.

At present, only confirmed members and members-in-association may vote at congregational meetings and are eligible for election as Elders or Church Councillors, provided of course, that they have the necessary gifts for the office. Only confirmed members may be elected to serve on Presbytery, Synod and Assembly.

This sometimes creates a difficulty when people who were once confirmed and are no longer active in the life of the church claim the right to vote at meetings. On the other hand, baptised members who are very active in the life of the church but may never have been confirmed are not eligible to vote or serve. Prior to the Tenth Assembly in 2003 a discussion paper was therefore circulated proposing that we simplify it all and get over some of the difficulties by having one form of membership, consisting of those who (a) are baptised, and (b) are actually active in the worship, witness and service of the congregation. This did not receive sufficient support, mainly because Church Councils feared the responsibility of having to decide when a person was active enough to be regarded a member. The matter is still under discussion while congregations continue to work at resolving the issue.

22. How can we best deepen and enrich our theology of baptism?

Someone has said that when we take hold of the little finger of baptism, we find we have hold of the whole fist of theology. Once we begin to think about the significance of baptism, we are led to think about our identity as Christ's people, about creation, about God's covenant with people, about the person of Jesus Christ, about the nature of the church, about the gift of the Holy Spirit and about God's final renewal of all creation in the age to come.

Once we begin to see baptism in this way, it is apparent that it is not just a saccharine sweet moment when we make approving noises about a baby – a heart-tugging interlude into the occasional worship service when we have “visitors”! It is the heart of who we are and what we are on about as church.

This becomes apparent when we recover the ancient church's practice of baptising people at the Easter Vigil – which originated as an all night service culminating in baptism at the rising of the sun/ risen Son and then the joyful feast on Easter morning. We are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ. We are new creations, new people, a converted people, transformed by Christ. We are re clothed with Christ. We are enlightened by Christ. We are naturalised citizens of God's Reign.

This requires a change in the way we talk about the Christian life. We constantly need to make the links between our worship practice, what we affirm we believe and the way we live our lives. It means introducing the notion of “baptismal living” constantly into our conversations, and sermons and prayer. It means celebrating baptism lavishly, allowing the full power of the symbols to take hold of us.

It certainly helps to use vivid symbols which communicate the full biblical meaning of baptism to that particular congregation. Some symbols may speak for themselves; others could be explained. Some examples might be:

The possibility of full immersion is encouraged – see the answer to question 18. This communicates clearly dying and rising with Christ. New church buildings should be designed with fonts large enough to make this possible. As baptism becomes less of a routine act for all children born and is linked more with a life of active discipleship, it is likely that we will see more adults who come to faith being baptised, and being baptised by immersion. Meanwhile, some UCA congregations or Parishes of other branches of the Christian church, have transportable fonts which may be used. Flowing water (living water, see John 4:15; John 7:37-39), if possible, is preferred. It is of the nature of water to splash and gurgle and sparkle. We should ensure that it is permitted to do so. Whatever way the water is administered, lavish quantities should be used.

Ensuring that the font is fully visible (like the communion table) every Sunday to remind us all constantly that we are baptised. In many churches fonts are placed near the entrance to the church building so that people have to walk past them each time they enter. People may then dip their fingers in the water as they enter and leave the church and mark themselves with the sign of the cross to symbolise their baptism. Other churches ensure that the lectern, font and table are visible at the front of the sanctuary to continually remind the congregation that God speaks in word, water, bread and wine.

Many fonts are octagonal to remind us of the “eighth day”, the day of the age to come, the new creation, the day of eternity of which we are citizens by baptism.

Appropriate banners showing images of creation, flood, the Exodus, the baptism of Christ, the descent of the Spirit, the heavenly Jerusalem may be used to decorate the worship space.

The timing of baptism also speaks of its meaning. Easter is the traditional time (preferably the Easter Vigil, to make possible baptism at dawn to mark the rising sun/risen Son) or otherwise another Sunday in Easter. The baptism of Jesus, the day of Pentecost and the first Sunday in Advent are other festivals which mark a new beginning and are appropriate baptismal days.

Anointing with fragrant oil reminds us that we are Christ's, the anointed one (Christ = Messiah = the anointed one). Anointing with oil has a rich biblical heritage. It is a sign of God's blessing and a sign of consecration and setting apart for God. Kings and priests were anointed in Israel, and anointing was also used in healing. (Some examples are: Exodus 28:41, 1 Samuel 15:1, 2 Samuel 23:1, 1 Kings 1:34, Psalm 23:5, Acts 10:38.) *Uniting in Worship 2* includes anointing as an optional part of the Service of Baptism. (Normally olive oil or another pure vegetable oil is used, with a fragrance added.)

Babies may be baptised naked and then clothed in white. Teenagers and adults may be brought in clothed in white to mark their cleansing and forgiveness, or given a white robe over their clothes on emerging from the font. (It is wise to warn the people being baptised that white may become see-through when wet. Swimsuits may therefore need to be worn beneath their baptismal robes or clothes.) The church building or other place of baptism is also decked with white cloths. In some Asian cultures white is, however, the colour of death, not life. If that meaning is carried for the candidate or congregation, another colour should be chosen, preferably one with more appropriate associations.

Lighted baptismal candles may be given. Ask people to re-light these for a time of private or public reaffirmation on the anniversary of their baptism.

Songs and music need to be carefully chosen to enrich the baptismal service.

In many parts of the baptismal rite, lay persons can participate, signifying the newly baptised's being received into the membership in the body of Christ.

The notes to *Uniting in Worship (2)* offer helpful suggestions and are worth reading carefully.

The preacher will no doubt take the opportunity to remind the congregation of the heart of baptism to help people enter into the rich symbolism.

Many churches do not explain the rich symbolism of the baptismal service in any detail to candidates prior to the day. This allows the symbols to speak for themselves and make their full impact. The season of Easter is then a reflection on the experience when the symbols are explained. In a sense, of course, the whole of life is a discovery of the meaning of our baptism.

23. How can we introduce change – wisely?

Many congregations would benefit from a deepened awareness of baptism. This can be gradually brought into sermons, Lenten studies and Bible study groups over a period of time. There are some excellent books and other resources available to help those preparing to enrich a congregation's

appreciation. Some resources are noted on this website.

One of the most vexed questions confronting a minister and church council is the request for baptism from people with little or no association with the church. Clearly they have a very different understanding of baptism from ours. We want to extend God's welcoming grace, but we don't want to cheapen the sacrament by trivialising it, or turning it into a secular "naming ceremony" overlain with a little religious sentiment.

People appreciate being asked to rise to a challenge, and often do. We do not do people a favour by giving the impression that the Christian life consists of little or no expectation. This form of Christianity is not appealing to people, and is certainly not consistent with the Gospel call to discipleship!

Here are some ideas which some churches have implemented:

They have ensured that people have known about the Service of Thanksgiving for and Blessing of a Child. *"Our church does baptise the children of families where at least one parent participates in the life of our congregation, so that we and the parents take joint responsibility for the nurture of the child in the Christian faith. We also have the option of another service in which we thank God for the child and ask God's blessing for the child. This is different from baptism, and still leaves open the possibility of baptism at a later date. We'd like to explain and discuss both options with you."*

They have reduced the number of baptisms on "demand" by agreeing to set aside a few Sundays as baptismal Sundays e.g. Easter Day or another day in the season of Easter, Pentecost, the Baptism of Christ (January) and/or All Saints (1 November), or the first Sunday in Advent. *"We are delighted that you have asked about baptism, and would be happy to explore the possibility with you. I'd like to send you our congregation's policy on baptism and then, when you've had a chance to think about it, come to discuss it with you."* (It would clearly be helpful if the Ministers' fellowship and/or Presbytery have agreed on a common policy, so that people don't simply shop around and take the least demanding option.)

They have introduced a period of baptismal preparation (the Becoming Disciples process, or Catechumenate) to prepare people for baptism. *"Thanks for asking about baptism. I think you would agree that baptism is a major step and therefore we would ask people to consider it very carefully. We have an Inquiry group starting next month. You are very welcome."*

When the Church Council is not yet convinced that a person is ready for baptism, or that parents are ready to bring children for baptism, advise them, *"By now you will have come to appreciate that the Christian church sees baptism as perhaps the most important event in our lives. We are therefore committed to walking with you until we both discern that you are ready for this momentous step and ready to take on the responsibilities that it entails. We therefore offer you a further period of preparation and commit ourselves to continue to pray for you and work through this with you."*

Occasionally, after a process of mutual discernment, the church and the people exploring the possibility of baptism discover that they are not yet ready for baptism. This may come in a way that leaves the door open. *"Please continue to give careful thought and prayer about this. Then perhaps come back to talk further about baptism. I hope you do."*

24. What assurance does baptism give us?

Down through the ages, as Christians struggled with discouragement and doubt, they found tremendous assurance in making the sign of the cross and saying, "I am baptised." In this way, they reminded themselves that they are Christ's and are bound to him for all eternity.

In the same vein, William Willimon has said,

When you ask in desperation, "Who, in God's name, am I?" baptism will have you feel water dripping from your head and the oil oozing down your neck and say, "You are, in God's name, *royalty*, God's own, claimed and ordained for God's serious and joyful business." (1980:27/28)

We are baptised into the reign (kingdom) of God. We belong to God for all eternity. The symbolism of baptism points to our dying and rising with Christ. In baptism we have already passed from death to life. It is therefore very appropriate for baptismal symbols to be used in a funeral service. We belong to God in this life and the next.

Further reading

Daniel Benedict Jr, 2002, *Come to the Waters: Baptism and our Ministry of Welcoming Seekers and Making Disciples*. Nashville. Discipleship Resources. (One of the most useful books around, linking our understanding of baptism with helping others to come to a point of personal faith.)

Robert Bos, 2005, "That Other Controversy: Debates over baptism in the UCA 1979-2003, *Uniting Church Studies*, forthcoming.

(This article traces the history of the Uniting Church's conversations about baptism and proposes some constructive ways forward.)

Lars Hartman, 1997, *Into the name of the Lord Jesus: Baptism in the Early Church*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark.

(This important book considers carefully all of the New Testament passages on baptism, as well as key documents from the early church fathers.)

Rodney Horsfield, 1984, *Baptism an Evangelical Sacrament*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press. (The six studies in this book are: 1. What is the Gospel? 2. Baptism and grace; 3. Baptism and the Holy Spirit; 4. Baptism and faith; 5. Baptism and the church; 6. Baptism and nurture.)

Joint Commission on Church Union, 1964, *The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering*, Melbourne: Aldersgate.

(This was one of the formative documents for the Uniting Church. It speaks of the ministry of the whole church and places a statement on the sacraments within that context, looking particularly at the New Testament witness.)

Aidan Kavanagh, 1978/1991, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press.

(The first part of the book deals with the meaning of baptism. The second part of the book deals more with the reforms in the Roman Catholic Church following Vatican II.)

Bill Loader, 1987, "Baptism in Context – the New Testament Witness," *Trinity Occasional Papers*, VI/1, pages 37 to 46.

(A very useful consideration of baptism in the New Testament in the context of the teaching on salvation. This article is available on line. See further resources.)

Keith D. Pearson, 1977 and 1982, *Baptism and Our Children*. Melbourne: Uniting Church Press.

(This little booklet of just 15 pages briefly sets out the meaning of baptism and has a brief statement about the baptismal service. It may have been designed to give to the parents requesting baptism for their children.)

Leigh Pope, 1986, *Helping Children Participate in Holy Communion*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press.

(Following the decision of the Fourth Assembly in 1985 to allow baptised children to participate in the Lord's supper, this book was prepared to allow congregations to implement the change.)

Laurence Hull Stookey, 1982, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*, Nashville, Abingdon.

(A good solid book in the Wesleyan tradition which considers all the key angles. Chapter headings are: 1. Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church. 2. Life in Christ: The Church's Response. 3. The Who's Who of Baptism. 4. To Keep and Renew until Death. 5. But is it Biblical? 6. What Went Wrong? 7. How Can We Set Things Right? 8. Reform of the Service of Baptism.)

Tumut-Gundagai Uniting Church Parish, 1997, *About Baptism*, Melbourne, Joint Board of Christian Education.

(An engagingly written little book for parents requesting baptism for their children.)

Uniting Church in Australia, Assembly Commission on Doctrine, 1988, *Understanding the Church's Teaching on Baptism: An Expanded Statement by the Assembly Commission on Doctrine*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press.

(A detailed account of the Uniting Church's position on baptism.)

John Watt, 1983, *Joining the Church: Good News for Parents and Children About Baptism*, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press.

(Another booklet to help parents requesting baptism for their children.)

William Willimon, 1980, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, A Model for Christian Life*, Nashville, Upper Room.

(A very helpful and readable book. I have given it to upper high school students to read as they prepare for baptism.)