Engaging Baptismal Rites

What happens when the water pours out at baptism? Baptism marks a decisive moment in a life of faith. Over 50 percent of laity and clergy in the United Church of Christ understand that moment as a gift of the Holy Spirit and the grace of Christ. An almost equal number of laity and 70 percent of clergy know it as their entrance into the church, the body of Christ. The baptismal font holds a pool of rich meanings: a bath for cleansing, a sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection, a welcome into God’s reign of love and justice. At baptism, we join the company of all who have passed through the waters—together we are Christians.

Such a day of water, community, and Spirit can be central in the life of an individual and a worshiping congregation. As Luther suggested, baptism, central to our faith, becomes a way of living a life of faith. Previous to baptism, you may welcome and invite someone to begin preparing for the water. At confirmation or other youthful rites, young people may celebrate their baptism and a new-found passion for the faith. Later, someone life-worn, longing for hope, remembers baptism and is lifted up with the words, “you are my beloved.” In such a reaffirmation, persons are reminded who they are and to whom they belong—God. When water flows at any baptism, the Spirit may move and an entire congregation recalls their baptisms and is renewed in Christ.

Several baptismal rites are found in Book of Worship. They include: baptism of children, youth, and adults; confirmation; reception of members; and a liturgy of baptismal affirmation within the Easter Vigil. This resource invites your congregation to examine other liturgies for baptism and rites that flow in and out of baptism to enrich your own practice.

Gather a group together to do one or more of the following activities, or do them with an established group, such as a worship committee or deacons:

▪ Ask God to reveal what God desires for your congregation as they reflect on baptism or confirmation.

▪ Examine the words and actions that are usually used in celebrating baptism or other baptismal rites in your congregation. What is said and what happens? What do participants in your group imagine or take the words and actions to mean?

▪ Reflect on such questions as these:

1. What is said or occurs when baptism or another baptismal rite seems most powerful? What disturbs you? What do you wonder about?

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.

(Galatians 3:26–28)

A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued. (Martin Luther, Triglot, Larger Catechism, IV)
2. When and how does God seem present?

3. What is the range of meanings of baptism in your congregation? How are those meanings expressed in how baptism is done in your congregation? Describe the use of water. What are the roles of clergy, laity, sponsors, family, and the entire congregation?

4. What difference does baptism make in the life of faith and in the life of your congregation?

- Look over the following baptismal rites and ideas. Select at least one of them and describe it to another person. Or stage one of them as it might occur in your congregation. Finally, consider using one of the ideas or liturgies in an actual service.

- Reflect on such questions as these:
  1. What did you find meaningful in your experience of this liturgy? What do you wonder about?
  2. When or how did God seem present in this baptismal rite or liturgy?
  3. What did you discover about baptism and baptismal rites by looking at both your local church experience and that experienced in the other liturgy?

- Please pray a prayer such as “O God, what are you saying and revealing to us about baptism and baptismal rites?” Share together any responses evoked by the time of prayer.

- Please complete the response form online at www.ucc.org/worship/ or on page the response form found in the packet.