

# **Baptismal Policy**

## **Introduction**

As one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Baptism is not only an important time in the journey of faith of each person baptized; but, it is also an important part of our congregation's life as a whole.

Sensing this significance and realizing that there are many misconceptions about Baptism, this booklet has been prepared in order that our membership will better understand the gifts and responsibilities of the sacrament. We hope you will find it helpful as you prepare for Baptism for yourself or your child. If you would like to discuss this information or have questions about Baptism, please contact one of the pastors.

## **What are Sacraments for Presbyterians?**

God often makes material things into channels through which divine grace is understood. For Presbyterians, the sacraments are outward visible signs of an inward visible grace. Presbyterians recognize Baptism and the Lord's Supper as special sacraments of God's saving action which are explicitly commanded by Christ in scripture. These two are seen as God's acts sealing the promises of faith within the community of faith as the congregation celebrates in public worship.

## **What Is the Meaning of Baptism for Presbyterians?**

Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ. In Baptism the Spirit demonstrates and confirms God's promise to include us and our children in God's gracious covenant, cleanses us from sin, and gives us newness of life, as participants in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism sets us in the visible community of Christ's people and joins us to all other believers by a powerful bond.

For both children and adults, Baptism is a reminder that God loves us long before we can love God. Baptism is proclamation and experience of the fact that we are who we are because God has first chosen us and loved us and called us into God's kingdom. To the question, "Who am I?" Baptism responds, "I am the one who is called, washed, named, promised, and commissioned."

Baptism does not change our relationship with God. Rather it recognizes and proclaims what is already a fact – we are God's children. It is to be motivated not by superstition nor social custom but by faith. It is not a private act of pastor and family, but a public act of the congregation. Neither God's grace nor our response to it are tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life.

## **What Are the Biblical Images of Baptism?**

Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and with His people. The New Testament scriptures and the liturgy of the Church unfold the meaning of Baptism in various images which express the riches of Christ and

the gifts of his salvation. These images are sometimes linked with the symbolic uses of water in the Old Testament. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor. 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a reclothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Peter 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1-2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 12:13). The images are many but the reality is one.

### **Who Can Be Baptized at Westminster?**

Baptism is a sign that we are a part of the community of the universal church. Thus, no single tradition of the baptismal form can exhaust the great variety and depth of the meaning of Baptism. Since Baptism signals our membership in the universal church and since its reality does not depend upon the tradition or form in which it was administered, it shall be administered only once to each person. Presbyterians baptize people of all ages.

The Baptism of infants has long had an important theological significance for Presbyterians. Each time an infant is baptized we are reminded that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. However, the unmerited grace of God is just as real in the Baptism of an adult. The Baptism of those who enter the covenant upon their own profession of faith witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for fulfillment in a response of faithfulness. It is the very essence of Baptism that we are baptized into faith rather than because of our faith. Regardless of the age, every Baptism marks the beginning of life in Christ.

In order for Baptism to have integrity, only parents committed to nurturing their children within the household of faith should have their children baptized. Ordinarily, one or both parents shall be active members of Westminster. Likewise, in the Baptism of an adult there should be a commitment to the faith and a resolve to live by faith in the Westminster community.

The church, through the session, is charged with keeping the sacraments. Therefore, each Baptism should be approved by the session prior to the event.

### **How and When is Baptism Celebrated at Westminster?**

Baptism is an act of the whole church and a sign of entrance into the church. Therefore, it is administered in the presence of the worshipping congregation, except in very special cases. On those exceptional instances, normally an elder as well as a pastor shall be present in order to manifest the communal nature of Baptism.

"Godparents," while a part of other traditions, are not integral to the Presbyterian practice of Baptism. In the Presbyterian denomination the congregation takes on the responsibilities of godparents.

Historically, the church throughout the centuries has baptized on festival Sundays: Easter reminding us of death and rebirth, The Day of Pentecost reminding us of the gift of the Holy Spirit, All Saints Day or the Sunday after All Saints Day reminding us of our fellowship in the communion of saints, and on The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, reminding us of our call to ministry. Each year the session will designate Sundays for Baptisms. Please see the card at the back of this booklet listing the dates for Baptism this year.

### **What Are the Commitments and Vows of Baptism for Presbyterians?**

Those desiring the Sacrament of Baptism for their children or for themselves shall make vows that:

- ◆ profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,
- ◆ renounce evil and affirm their reliance on God's grace,
- ◆ declare their intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church.
- ◆ declare their intention to provide for the Christian nurture of their child.

The congregation shall:

- ◆ profess its faith, using the Apostles' Creed,
- ◆ voice its support of those baptized,
- ◆ express its willingness to take responsibility for the nurture of those baptized.

### **Who Are the Participants in Baptism at Westminster?**

The following groups and individuals participate in Baptisms at Westminster:

- ◆ God
- ◆ Person being baptized
- ◆ Congregation
- ◆ Session – approves all Baptisms
- ◆ Elder – represents the session at the sacrament by presenting those to be baptized. Normally, an elder is assigned to participate, but any elder may be requested.
- ◆ Pastor – administers the sacrament. Normally the Pastor/Head of Staff administers the sacrament, but any Pastor may be requested.
- ◆ Family – The immediate family (father, mother, spouse, siblings, or children) may stand with the one who is baptized. Other family members and friends may sit in front pews which are reserved for the sacrament.
- ◆ Sponsor(s) – A sponsor is not normally a part of Baptisms at Westminster. However, for any person who is baptized, a sponsor may be appointed by the session at the request of those desiring Baptism for themselves or for their children.

### **How Does Baptism Affect Church Membership at Westminster?**

Baptism is admittance into the Christian community. At the time of Baptism a child shall be recorded as a “baptized member” of the church, and shall be numbered among those for whom the session has responsibility. As a “baptized member” (one who has been baptized but who has not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior) a

child is entitled to the pastoral care and instruction of the church, and to participate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Those who are baptized as infants may choose to confirm their baptismal vows and be commissioned as "active members" of the church any time after eighth grade. Ordinarily, preceding confirmation, there is a course of instruction taught by one of the pastors.

At the time of their baptism adults become "active members" of the church and are then admitted to the community, mission, and governance of the church, and also to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

### **What are the General Instructions for Baptisms at Westminster?**

- ◆ Because Baptism is part of a service of worship, it is not appropriate to interrupt it by taking photographs or making video recordings. Photographs may be taken after the service, when the family and the pastor can pose in the same position as the actual baptismal ceremony.
- ◆ There is normally no fee or honorarium for the officiating pastor, since it is part of a regular public worship service (unlike a wedding, for example, which is a separate service for which special arrangements must be made).
- ◆ For infant and child Baptism, parents should submit a request for Baptism of their child several weeks in advance. The choice of a date for the Baptism is not to be made by the parents alone, but together with the pastor and the session. See the list of approved dates for the current year at the back of this booklet.
- ◆ Adults wishing to be baptized need to attend one of the Investigating Church Membership Seminars held throughout the year. They will be baptized on the Sunday the new members are recognized.
- ◆ In addition to the Baptismal Certificate, which is signed by the pastor and given to those baptized or to the parents, a record of every Baptism is also maintained by Westminster Presbyterian Church. If the certificate should ever be lost, a duplicate may be obtained by calling the church office.
- ◆ Plan to meet the participating elder at the church office at 9:30 AM on the morning of the Baptism.
- ◆ Plan to meet the officiating pastor in his or her study at 9:40 AM for service instructions.
- ◆ Please remove infant bonnets before handing your baby to the pastor during the service.
- ◆ For infant Baptisms please have your child's picture taken in the nursery the morning of the service.