

Baptism During A Pandemic

Our Book of Order states that the session should “encourag[e] new believers to be baptized” and encourage parents “to present their children for baptism without undue haste or delay.” W-3.0403. As we enter the sixth month of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is becoming desirable and necessary for believers and parents who have delayed baptisms to request the administration of this sacrament. In this situation, those seeking baptism should not be discouraged, for baptism “marks the beginning of the new life in Christ,” which should not be withheld from anyone who earnestly seeks it. W-3.0402.¹ Rather, provisions should be made, working with the family and the session, to ensure safety to the fullest extent possible while abiding by the provisions of the Book of Order and honoring our ecumenical relationships and agreements.

W-3.0404 requires that “[o]n behalf of the Session, a ruling elder presents each candidate for Baptism.” Additionally, W-3.0402 states that while “Baptism is ordinarily celebrated on the Lord’s Day in the gathering of the people of God,” there is also a provision for baptism at other times and situations; however, “the congregation should be represented by one or more members.” Taking these two provisions together, baptism may be administered with no one but the family, the pastor, and one ruling elder on Session who both presents the child for baptism and answers the questions to the congregation on behalf of the congregation. In this situation, the pastor would ask the questions to the congregation, to the elder. Although in many congregations this question is ordinarily asked by the elder, in this situation the elder represents the congregation, and it would surely be awkward for the elder to answer their own question. The congregation could participate electronically as well.

In terms of the application of water, many Presbyterian churches are having the parents of young children (or, in the case of an adult believer, it could be a member of the believer’s household) apply the water, although the pastor says the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The Book of Order says the following:

Accompanied by a visible and generous use of water, the minister of Word and Sacrament shall address each person by their Christian or given name and say: “[Name], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). The water used for Baptism should be from a local source, and may be applied with the hand, by pouring, or through immersion. W-3.0407.

Note that the actual act of baptism is described in the passive voice without specifying that the minister shall apply the water. Thus, the Book of Order does not disallow the practice of allowing a household member to administer the water. The needs of the family, rather than the tradition of the congregation, should be considered first, with pastoral sensitivity.

The recognition of one baptism is an important component of our ecumenical relationships. As such, it is an important question whether this admittedly unusual practice of having one person state the

¹ See also 1 Peter 3:20-22: “And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”

baptismal formula and another apply the water would hold water, so to speak, ecumenically. At least one ecumenical source has indicated that this practice would not call into question the ecumenical recognition of baptism; a contact within the Archdiocese of Detroit has indicated that Roman Catholics would not consider a Presbyterian baptism invalid on this basis. While further research is necessary to confirm that other ecumenical partners would not see this administration as a barrier to mutual recognition of baptism, the indication from the Archdiocese indicates that baptism in this manner will probably be generally recognized.

Christ commanded us, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19. Continuing God's work in baptism during this unique and often difficult moment in history will bring our congregation a sign of hope and joy amid challenge and change, reminding us all of God's promise: "I am with you always, until the end of the age." Matthew 28:20.

Grace and peace,

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