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## BAPTISM

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### Focus

**T**he Sacrament of Baptism is understood and appropriated in a variety of ways both in the church and in Metropolitan Community Churches depending on who you are in dialogue with. The focus of this discussion presents an opportunity for participants to grow in their awareness of how this Sacrament has and continues to impact the spiritual journeys of our brothers and sisters.

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### Some Centering Quotes on Baptism

“Baptism is a sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.”  
(John Calvin)

“Baptism serves our faith as a token and proof of our cleansing; it is a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are abolished, remitted, and effaced. As Christians, we ‘ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our minds with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.’ Baptism also ‘serves as our confession’ before others; hence, baptism is an ethical action.”  
(John H. Leith, et al.)

“Baptism celebrates a work that is complete in the work of Jesus Christ; it also celebrates a work that is never complete in human history, namely, our sanctification. Baptism looks to the future.”  
(John H. Leith)

“‘Baptism belongs to the church’ no other organization or society practices it. Yet baptism is not the church’s act, but Christ’s act in the church. ... Baptism is a sign of identity Christ gives the church lest we forget that we are God’s people, and become content to be just another human organization. The sacrament is given by the power of the Holy Spirit to the community of the Spirit.”  
(Laurence Hull Stookey)

“What we receive in baptism is not an identity negotiated in conversation with our communities or culture such as our sexual and gender identities are; it is an identity over which we have no control whatsoever. It is sheer gift. ... It is God’s great ‘yes’ to us based not upon our own merits, but upon divine love revealed in Christ. The nature of elements of our Christian identity may be obscure to us and how we best act out our identity in various contexts might be a legitimate subject of dispute, but the identity itself is not negotiated, it is given.” (Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*)

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I'm ceded—I've stopped being 'Theirs—  
The name 'They dropped upon my face  
With water, in the country church  
Is finished using, now  
And 'They can put it with my Dolls,  
My childhood, and the string of spools,  
I've finished threading—too—

Baptized, before, without the choice,  
But this time, consciously, of Grace—  
Unto supremest name—  
Called to my full—'The Crescent dropped—  
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,  
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank—too small the first—  
Crowned—Crowing—on my Father's breast—  
A half unconscious Queen—  
But this time—Adequate—Erect,  
With Will to choose, or to reject,  
And I choose—just a Crown—

(Emily Dickinson, c. 1862)

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## A Testimony About Baptism: Stories of Grace

**Contributed by Kharma Amos**

When I was 12 years old, I responded to the altar call at the First Baptist Church in my hometown in middle America. Tears ran down my face as I came forward in a public affirmation of my decision to become a Christian and to invite Jesus into my heart and life. I met the Pastor down front and while the folks around me continued to sing the melodious (and myriad) verses of *Just As I Am*, I prayed 'the sinner's prayer' with the Pastor and celebrated the fact that my life would forever be changed by this moment of salvation. If I'm honest, I will admit that part of what I hoped I had been saved from was being me -- not just the me who was a sinner like every other person, but the me who was a sinner (I thought) because of my history of abuse, self-mutilation, and my inherent sense that there was something 'different' about me that was abhorrent to God (among other things). I was baptized a few weeks later along with a few other pre-teens and teens, as well as three adults, on Easter Sunday in front of overflow crowds who celebrated our new life in Christ. It was a proud and public proclamation that I had chosen Jesus and would remain safe in his arms no matter what for the rest of my life. My baptism was a holy moment in my life that I truly understood as an "outward and visible sign of an inward grace."

When I was 14, I left the Southern Baptist church and began attending the United Methodist Church where a few of my friends went and where I felt more comfortable with the style of worship and the content of the messages I heard. I remember picking up a booklet at some point in time about Infant Baptism. I also remember the automatic response I had: "This was wrong." I do not recall whether I had heard this message overtly or not, but I had clearly learned during my time in the Baptist church that baptism was something reserved for adults as a part of their profession of faith in Christ. I argued passionately with my friends in the United Methodist Youth Fellowship about this. How could an infant make a choice to be

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Christian? How did a baby even know the stories of Jesus? I listened with some skepticism as they explained to me that the Baptism of infants was a covenant made by the parents and extended family and church to place the child in the care of Christ and the church and to raise the child in such a way as to lead to their own profession of faith when they were able. When I first witnessed an infant baptism, and the family, godparents, and others presented the child as one of God's own and covenanted to raise her in the church and to teach her about Jesus so that she might come to choose to be a Christian in a public "Confirmation" of these vows when she was able, I had the sense there was definitely something sacred about it.

The first Baptism at which I officiated as an MCC minister was for a transgender woman who had, in her understanding, recently completed her transition from male to female. She had been baptized as a Christian some 50 years prior to this as a young boy named Robert (a pseudonym), and had lived most of her life feeling out of sorts with this identity and life. Now, she was ready to ask for the fullness of God's blessing on the Christian journey she would be undertaking as Roberta. And on this part of the journey, she was choosing to live with nothing less than full authenticity and wholeness. Many people from MCC who had been with Roberta during her transition gathered with her at the swimming pool of one of our church members. They sat around the edge of the pool with their legs dangling in the water and their hands hovering over it in a gesture of blessing as we prayed together and asked God to let this water wash over Roberta as a reminder that she was (as she was) the Beloved of God. She renewed baptismal vows similar to those she had a lifetime ago, and publicly acknowledged her desire to live as a Christian, following in the footsteps of Jesus as her complete self. And as we pronounced her chosen name, the one that fit her, and baptized her, I would not have been the least bit surprised if the heavens hadn't opened and the Spirit had descended as a dove. This water ritual was undeniably "an outward and visible sign of an inward grace," and a sacrament of transformation.

Many ministers who take Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) or who serve in various capacities as a chaplain are asked to interface with people who hold diverse beliefs about baptism. It is not uncommon in hospital settings for MCC ministers to be called on to perform baptisms for still-born infants and/or deceased individuals. Many other denominations prohibit their clergy from performing such a ritual because, for a number of very different reasons, it diverges from their stated doctrine about Baptism. To be fair, not all MCC ministers would feel comfortable performing such a ritual either. However, hospitals often ask us to because in MCC, we embrace such a broad spectrum of understandings about Baptism that we are able to enter this conversation more openly and freely. There are a lot of questions that surround this, of course, but the poignancy and deep need for God's comfort and grace makes many of them seem less urgent and/or important. In a play on words from one of the teachings of Jesus (about the Sabbath), some ask, "Is humankind made for Baptism or was Baptism made for humankind?"

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### **Some Historical Notes**

"The early church adopted a form of baptism from their Jewish upbringing, called proselyte baptism. When Gentiles wanted to take upon themselves the laws of Moses, the Jews would baptize those Gentiles in the authority of the God of Israel. But in the New Testament, people were baptized in the name of God [the Parent], God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – which meant they had elevated Jesus to the full status of God. Not only that, but baptism was a celebration of the death of Jesus, just as Communion was. By going under the water, you're celebrating his death, and by being brought out of the water, you're celebrating the fact that Jesus was raised to newness of life. ... There's no hard evidence that any mystery religion believed in gods dying and rising, until after the New Testament period. So if there was any borrowing, they borrowed from Christianity. ... The practice of baptism came from Jewish customs, and the Jews were very much against allowing Gentile or Greek ideas to affect their worship. ... These two sacraments [communion

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and baptism] can be dated back to the very earliest Christian community – too early for the influence of any other religions to creep into their understanding of what Jesus’ death meant.”

(J. P. Moreland, interview by Lee Strobel)

In light of this early history of baptism, it is also important to remember that during the colonial period there were many native peoples who were forced into baptism and their names changed without their consent in a missionary effort in large part by the Catholic Church to spread Christianity.

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## Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Baptism

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):* What did baptism symbolize for you in your formative years? Does the symbolism still “ring true” for you today? If not, in what ways has the symbolism and meaning of baptism evolved over time? What life experiences helped to shape your current understanding of baptism?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* What insights did you gain both through sharing your thoughts and understanding about baptism, as well as listening to what others had to share?

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## Additional Thoughts About Baptism

### Some Additional Quotes

“Common to both infant baptism and adult baptism is the affirmation that we are recipients of the gift of God’s love and are claimed for God’s service. Just as in the Lord’s Supper we are fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation, so baptism declares that something is done for us. Whether baptized as children or adults, our baptism signifies primarily what God has graciously done for us, and it is upon this that faith rests.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

“It can be argued that the two forms of baptism – infant and adult – together express the full meaning of baptism better than each would alone. ... Adult baptism gives greater play to the conscious and free response of a person to God’s forgiving love in Jesus Christ. It stresses explicit public confessions and personal commitment to the way of Christ. But if practiced exclusively, adult baptism may tend toward a view of faith as preceding rather than responding to God’s initiative.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

“Infant baptism, on the other hand, declares the sovereign grace and initiative of God. It demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. ... It expresses loving reception into a confessing community that takes responsibility for helping this child to mature in faith as a member of the Christian community. It makes clear that baptism is a beginning of the process of growing into Christ and that this process of growth cannot take place without a supportive community of faith.”

(Daniel L. Migliore)

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### MCC Stories, Our Stories

In Metropolitan Community Churches, we include a wide spectrum of beliefs about the sacrament of Baptism – what it means, how to do it, who can do it, what prerequisites it requires, etc. As an MCC minister, I have had the joy of baptizing infants whose parents and church family covenant to care for them and raise them in Christian community, administering a “believer’s baptism” for adults who are choosing to walk the path of Christ for the first time, and re-baptizing people who are embarking on a completely new phase of their life and who feel they need to re-contextualize the sacrament as their most authentic selves. I have baptized people by sprinkling and pouring water and by immersing people in baptisimals, rivers, lakes, oceans, and swimming pools. MCC is an ecumenical denomination that respects and includes varied theological beliefs about baptism and its power and significance.

What implications does this have for how we talk about Baptism, what we say about it, and what we hope the end product of our discussion will be (e.g., one “Right” idea about Baptism, a fuller understanding of how Baptism has reflected and/or facilitated our transformation, more and/or more diverse examples of God’s grace at work in our lives, etc.)?

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### Biblical Passages About Baptism

1 Corinthians 1	Galatians 3
1 Corinthians 10	John 1
1 Corinthians 12	John 3
1 Corinthians 15	John 4
Acts 1	Luke 12
Acts 10	Luke 20
Acts 11	Luke 3
Acts 16	Luke 7
Acts 18	Mark 1
Acts 19	Mark 10
Acts 2	Matthew 20
Acts 22	Matthew 28
Acts 8	Matthew 3
Acts 9	Peter 3
Colossians 2	Romans 6
Ephesians 4	

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### Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

*Points of Reflection (Small Group Reflection):* If Baptism were a requirement for Membership in MCC, would there be any difference between receiving a member who was baptized as an infant but who would not voluntarily choose to be baptized as an adult, and receiving someone who did not wish to be baptized as an adult but whose parents did not baptize them? What would make one more or less “qualified” for Membership in MCC?

*Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):* How can we testify to the power we have experienced in this “outward and visible sign of an inward grace” (if we have) and also listen to the alternative ways others have experienced this? What, if anything, do we risk losing of the power or meaning of our own experience of baptism by accepting the validity of someone else’s experience that may differ?

## Pulling it All Together: A Water Blessing

Setup: Create a small altar or table with a cover, a bowl containing water, and perhaps a pitcher to pour the water into the bowl. You may want to select some music about water to play in the background (or water sounds from nature – ocean, rushing river, etc.) and/or select a few songs that the group can sing together. Song suggestions include: *God, You Have Moved Upon the Waters* (Marty Haugen), *Wade in the Water* (African American Spiritual), *Take Me to the Water* (African American Spiritual).

Have the group gather in a circle around the table. Invite them into a few moments of silence as you pour the water into the bowl. Sing a song together and/or offer a brief opening prayer before inviting each participant to come forward and place their hand(s) in the water, noticing how it feels – e.g., how cool or warm it is. Invite each of them to bless themselves by touching or splashing the water to their heads/hands/body ... stating the name by which they want to be called ... and some type of blessing (e.g., “You are God’s Beloved,” “Remember Your Baptism and Who You Are in Christ,” “Be refreshed and at peace in the Divine,” etc.). After this, allow people to return to their seats and sing together a final song and/or offer a brief closing prayer.

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## Additional Resources

Alexander, Marilyn Bennett and James Preston. *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 by the World Council of Churches

Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004.

Smith, Marjorie Proctor. *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.

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

White, James F. *Sacraments as God’s Self Giving*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.