

BAPTIST/UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

AGREED GUIDELINES FOR BAPTISMAL POLICY IN LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

WHERE WE ARE

- 1 We recognise that Local Ecumenical Partnerships bring Christians together from different traditions without having reached agreement on all the theological issues which have divided those traditions in the past. It is, therefore, important that the policies framed for such LEPs embody mutual respect for one another's convictions and a pastoral sensitivity to the consequences of those policies for all those involved locally. In relation to baptism and associated rites of Christian initiation, we recognise the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the understandings and practice of baptism in Baptist and United Reformed churches and of building up the fellowship of the congregations of the sharing churches.
- 2 The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church (paragraph 14) requires:
 - a that baptism is the sacrament of entry into the Church and is, therefore, administered once only to any person;
 - b that baptism may be administered in infancy or at an age of responsibility and that both forms of baptism shall be made available in the life of every worshipping congregation;
 - c that baptism is always administered on profession of faith, either by the person being baptized or by his/her parent(s);
 - d that the profession of faith made prior to baptism by a believer or at an age of responsibility by one baptized in infancy is a necessary part of the process of initiation and whenever possible it should be made at a celebration of the Lord's Supper;
 - e that the convictions both of those who believe that baptism can only be appropriately administered to a believer and those who believe that infant baptism also is in harmony with the mind of Christ are honoured by the church;
 - f that baptism, whether of infants or believers, whether by pouring or immersion, should not be such to which conscientious objection is taken either by the person administering baptism, or by the person seeking it, or by the parent(s) requesting it for an infant.
- 3 The Declaration of Principle in the Constitution of the Baptist Union of Great Britain states that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins according to the Scriptures; was buried, and rose again the third day". Furthermore, in responding to the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission's Statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Baptist Union commented that the affirmation in the document that "any practice which might be interpreted as "re-baptism" must be avoided" was "wholly unacceptable in its present form since, on some interpretations, nothing could pass through so restrictive a sieve. In cases of infant baptism which are neither accompanied nor followed by any of the significant features of the initiatory process to which the report amply draws attention and where the individual involved is convinced out of an instructed conscience that Christian obedience requires believers' baptism, we cannot agree that an *a priori* universal bar should operate."
- 4 Therefore, although the United Reformed Church and the Baptist Union agree in recognising those whose conviction it is that baptism can only be administered to believers, they disagree over the recognition of those whose conviction it is that infant baptism is also in harmony with the mind of Christ and over whether someone who has received infant baptism may also receive believers' baptism.
- 5 LEPs involving Baptist and United Reformed churches will make available both infant and believers' baptism, by immersion, pouring or sprinkling with water. They will also make available the services of thanksgiving, dedication and blessing (whether for the children of church members or of those not in church membership). These will normally take place within the congregation's regular services of worship.

ONE WAY FORWARD

- 6 The simplest baptismal policy for such LEPs is that Baptist ministers and members will act in accordance with the Baptist Union's Declaration of Principle and United Reformed ministers and members will act in accordance with the URC's Basis of Union. A consequence of this is that it will be necessary to distinguish between those on the Baptist, United Reformed and Common membership rolls. Where such a congregation has only one minister, it will be necessary for such a minister to be especially sensitive to the possible conflict of convictions over baptism. If, therefore, someone who has been baptized as an infant requests believers' baptism, such a person would be regarded as wishing to become a Baptist. Any such service of believers' baptism should not be administered by a URC minister, and the person concerned would subsequently be entered upon the Baptist roll.

ANOTHER WAY FORWARD

7.
 - a. Some LEPs may decide to seek a pastoral policy which does not distinguish between members of different denominations within the local congregation. While separate rolls will still need to be maintained, it may be decided to follow a common policy for all members of the congregation. This would involve recognising the need to refrain from appealing to either the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle or the URC Basis of Union as an ultimate sanction either for or against a particular approach. Such a policy might take the following form.
 - b. Infant baptism would be available to children whose parent(s) or guardian(s) are able to make a confession of faith, are able to bring the children up in the faith and are members or regular worshippers and part of the church fellowship. Believers' baptism would be available to those who are able to confess their faith and commit their lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Before either infant or believers' baptism a course of preparation for parent(s) or candidate would precede the baptism. Believers' baptism would not be administered to those baptized as infants, except in the circumstances set out in paragraph 7(d) below.
 - c. Such a policy requires careful consideration of all requests for baptism. The minister and one or more elders/deacons/church officers or appointed visitors should visit the individual concerned or the parents of the child:
 - i. to ensure that those concerned have a sufficient understanding of the commitment involved;
 - ii. to ascertain that baptism is an appropriate step;
 - iii. if baptism is not considered appropriate, to explore alternative steps such as a service of thanksgiving, dedication and blessing in the case of a request for infant baptism, or the renewal of baptismal vows and/or a personal confession of faith in the case of a request for believers' baptism.
 - d. In exceptional cases when an individual who has been baptized as an infant maintains a conviction about wishing to be baptized as a believer, a pastoral consultation shall take place between the candidate and the minister(s) and church meeting(s). The possibility of meeting the individual's convictions by a service for the renewal of baptismal vows and/or a personal confession of faith should be thoroughly explored. If, however, that is not acceptable, the individual's request may be granted provided that the minister(s) and church meetings(s) are in agreement and that the person concerned is willing to have his/her membership entered on the Baptist roll. If there is disagreement, help and advice should be sought from the Intermediate Ecumenical Bodies and particularly from both the Baptist Union General Superintendent of the area and the United Reformed Church Provincial Moderator concerned.