



BAPTISM GUIDELINES

Wilmot United Methodist Church

ABSTRACT

In this booklet you will find answers to common questions about baptism in the UMC and practical guidelines for a baptism service at Wilmot UMC.

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Baptism Guidelines

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PART ONE: Baptism in The United Methodist Church

What does The United Methodist Church believe about baptism?

Baptism is a sacrament. In a sacrament, God uses common elements — in this case, water — as means or vehicles of divine grace. Baptism is administered by the church as the Body of Christ. It is the act of God through the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

What is the appropriate age for baptism?

The shortest answer is, as soon as possible.

Our teaching on baptism is found in *By Water and the Spirit*. Here is the most relevant section to this question:

"Understanding the practice as an authentic expression of how God works in our lives, The United Methodist Church strongly advocates the baptism of infants within the faith community: "Because the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, extends to all persons and because Jesus explicitly included the children in his kingdom, the pastor of each charge shall earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children to the Lord in Baptism at an early age" (1992 *Book of Discipline*, par. 221)" (para. 226 in the 2004 *Book of Discipline*).

No specific age is named, but the expectation is that pastors will encourage baptism to be received promptly AND on a schedule compatible with having appropriate time for meeting with parents, sponsors, and others who are involved most directly in ensuring that the child to be baptized will be nurtured in an environment that will lead her or him to a commitment to personal discipleship to Jesus Christ in the life of the church.

While baptism is understood primarily as a means of God's grace toward the child, *By Water and the Spirit* also states:

"If a parent or sponsor (godparent) cannot or will not nurture the child in the faith, then baptism is to be postponed until Christian nurture is available."

Baptism is, among other things, incorporation into the body of Christ. The questions asked in the baptism of infants are asked not of the parents and sponsors to answer on behalf of the infant, but on behalf of themselves. Those who cannot or will not answer these questions affirmatively for themselves in good faith are not yet ready to support another in a journey toward discipleship to Jesus Christ, and so are not able to enter the covenant relationship entailed in baptism.

In instances where it is clear that the parents and identified sponsors of a baptized child may not be able or willing to live as faithful disciples of Jesus in the baptismal covenant, *By Water and the Spirit* offers this instruction:

"If a child has been baptized but her or his family or sponsors do not faithfully nurture the child in the faith, the congregation has a particular responsibility for incorporating the child into its life."

What's the difference between infant baptism and believer's baptism?

In infant baptism, God claims the child with divine grace. Clearly the child can do nothing to save himself or herself, but is totally dependent on God's grace, as we all are whatever our age. In a believer's baptism, the person being baptized is publicly professing her or his own decision to accept Christ. Believer's baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament. United Methodists baptize people of all ages who have not previously received the sacrament. Even when the people being baptized are believing adults and are ready to profess their faith, our emphasis is upon the gracious action of God rather than upon the individual's decision.

Can I have my infant christened?

Christening is not a separate or different service. It is the same thing as baptism.

May we have our baby dedicated instead of baptized?

No. The theological understandings of the two services are very different. Dedication is a human act — something we pledge or give to God. Baptism is a divine act; a pledge and gift God gives to us. Baptism includes vows of dedication, but chiefly it celebrates what God is doing and will do.

Isn't it better to wait until children can decide for themselves whether or not to be baptized?

No. We no more wait for our children to decide about being in the family of God than we wait for them to decide if they would like to be a part of our human family. As parents, we make many decisions — in matters of health, safety, education, for example — for our children. Of course, they may later reject what we have done for them. But this possibility does not relieve us of the responsibility to do all that we can for them spiritually, as we do in other aspects of their lives.

Is sprinkling the only way that United Methodists baptize?

No, our church has always offered to people being baptized and to the parents of infants the choice of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.

Do I have to choose godparents when I have my child baptized?

Parents may choose a person or persons to serve as a godparent; however, godparents are not required in The United Methodist Church.

The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* does use the term "godparent" along with the word "sponsor" and does so because in different regions and different churches one or the other of the terms is familiar and comfortable. Both derive from the ancient

practice of the church of a mature, reliable Christian serving as a mentor and encourager of persons coming into the Christian life in baptism, whether adult or child.

In all infant baptisms, the parents or other family members serve as the primary sponsor, and in many churches another Christian or two are named as "godparents"--sponsors and encouragers for the child. In the case of adults, the sponsor walks with the person on a journey of conversion, until the day they are baptized--perhaps weeks or months after having learned and experienced the way Christians live and think. When it is a child or infant, the sponsor/godparent and the parents walk with the child on a journey of conversion until they claim the way of Christ as his or her own at confirmation or some other profession of faith.

Can I choose a person who is not a Christian as my child's godparent?

A parent may choose to honor someone by asking him or her to be a child's godparent, but our *Discipline* clearly understands and calls godparents to be people of genuine faith and determination who exercise a ministry of seeing that Christ is formed in the child.

Paragraph 226 of our *Book of Discipline* says,

At least one parent or guardian shall be a member of a Christian church; or sponsor(s) or godparent(s) who are members shall renew their own baptismal vows. They shall be admonished of this obligation and be earnestly exhorted to faithfulness therein. At the time of baptism, they shall be informed that the Church, with its Christian education program, will aid them in the Christian nurture of their children.

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PART TWO: Baptism and Salvation/Baptism and Membership

Does baptism mean that I am saved?

No, salvation is a lifelong process during which we must continue to respond to God's grace. Baptism offers the promise that the Holy Spirit will always be working in our lives, but salvation requires our acceptance of that grace, trust in Christ, and ongoing growth in holiness as long as we live.

Do I have to be baptized in order to be saved?

No, but baptism is a gift of God's grace to be received as part of the journey of salvation. To refuse to accept baptism is to reject one of the means of grace that God offers us.

Does baptism make me a member of the church?

Well, baptism is the act of initiation and incorporation into the universal church of Jesus Christ, but at Wilmot Church, we require From Membership to Discipleship Classes for adult membership in the local church.

Is it required that I take vows in front of a congregation to become a member?

Yes, The United Methodist Church does expect that people who seek to unite with The United Methodist Church will profess their faith before the congregation. Membership is a relationship with other Christians who are United Methodists. Sometimes we think of membership as having one's name on the roll of the church. The United Methodist Church does have membership rolls, but the roll is simply a listing of those who have committed themselves to relationship with one another for the sake of the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ and for mutual oversight and care. This understanding should be clear from the citations given below:

Paragraph 217 in the 2004 *Book of Discipline* reads:

When persons unite as professing members with a local United Methodist church, they profess their faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, in Jesus Christ his only Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, they make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. *They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep the vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church....* (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* — 2004. Copyright © 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Further, Paragraph 219 on "Mutual Responsibility" emphasizes the covenantal and relational nature of membership and discipleship:

Faithful discipleship includes *the obligation to participate in the corporate life of the congregation* with fellow members of the body of Christ. *A member is bound in sacred covenant to shoulder the burdens, share the risks, and celebrate the joys of fellow members.* A Christian is called to speak the truth in love, always ready to confront conflict in the spirit of forgiveness and

reconciliation. (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* — 2004. Copyright © 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

The italicized material cited above makes it clear that one who is a member has to be in relationship with the other members of the church.

Paragraph 224 on receiving members “Outside of Congregational Settings” states: Any candidate for church membership who for good reason is unable to appear before the congregation may, at the discretion of the pastor, be received elsewhere in accordance with the Ritual of The United Methodist Church. In any such case lay members should be present to represent the congregation. Names of such persons shall be placed on the church roll, and announcement of their reception shall be made to the congregation. (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* — 2004. Copyright © 2004 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Clearly, this paragraph recognizes that there may be exceptions to the rule, without specifying what the criterion for “good reason” is. This paragraph allows for pastoral discretion and provides for representation of the congregation in a home, hospital, or other place.

May a person who has not been baptized participate in Holy Communion?

Yes, our church does not seek to close God's Table, although the historic and normal Christian order of the sacraments is baptism first — as birth into the family — and Communion following, as continuing nurture at the family table. Pastors and congregations reach out and encourage those who partake at the Table to share fully in the life of God's people, including coming to the front after appropriate preparation.

Does The United Methodist Church accept the baptism of other denominations?

Yes, The United Methodist Church recognizes the baptism of other Christian denominations. The *Book of Discipline* says, "A member in good standing in any Christian denomination who has been baptized and who desires to unite with The United Methodist Church may be received as a professing member by a proper certificate of transfer from that person's former church, or by a declaration of Christian faith, and upon affirming willingness to be loyal to The United Methodist Church (see ¶¶214-217)...It is recommended that instruction in the faith, work, and polity of the Church be provided for all such persons."

PART THREE: Reaffirmation of Baptism

May I be baptized again?

No, baptism is an act of God, and God does it right the first time. Our side of the covenant relationship with God will need recommitment and reaffirmation, but God always remains faithful to the divine side.

How should water be used when baptism is being reaffirmed?

Baptismal Covenant IV in The United Methodist Hymnal is a powerful ritual of reaffirmation which uses water in ways that remind us of our baptism. The Baptismal Covenant is explicit about water being used "in ways that cannot be interpreted as baptism" as the pastor says: "Remember your baptism and be thankful." (From The United Methodist Hymnal. Copyright © 1989 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)

Let me suggest two ways to fulfill this requirement of the Baptismal Covenant that will both enrich our current practice of baptism and help reaffirmation be clearly differentiated ritually from baptism.

There is an emerging ecumenical consensus based on early Christian practice that baptism should normally be administered with flowing water in some form-whether in an immersion pool or by pouring over a font, and that practices using only small amounts of water (droplets via sprinkling) should be discouraged. So, one way to make the distinction is to use large amounts of water in baptism and perhaps significantly less in rites of reaffirmation.

A second way is to be clear about who is using and administering water in which ritual. In baptism, the presiding pastor both blesses and administers the water upon those being baptized. This is because baptism is a gift from God that we can only receive, not take for ourselves. In reaffirmation, the pastor still offers the prayer over the water, but those making reaffirmation may be invited to "come to the waters" of the font to use them in ways that may be meaningful for them. For some this may be dipping their hand in the water and making the sign of the cross on their own foreheads, while for others it may be scooping out a relatively larger amount of water to place or pour over their own heads. People may choose different ways to embody their thankful remembrance of their baptism. And that's the point. While baptism is a gift of God through the church (and so through the hands of the presiding pastor), reaffirmation is a thankful response by the individual who makes it.

PART FOUR: Baptisms at Wilmot UMC

How do I reserve a date for a baptism?

Contact the church office at 262-862-6636 or WilmotUMC@gmail.com. Generally, we do baptisms during regular worship services, so have 2-3 different dates/service times in mind before you contact the office. The church office will forward your request to Pastor Lilliannet, and you'll receive a confirmation email within one week of your request.

Does the baptism have to be during a church service?

Yes, unless there is a particular disability or special need that prevents a baptism from being held during regular worship services. In baptism you are making a commitment to your child and the congregation also makes a commitment to you – to walk with you in your child's faith journey and to support your family. For this reason, the gathered congregation should always be part of the baptism ritual.

What does the church need from us before the baptism?

Once your baptism date is on the church calendar, please take the following steps:

1. Send an email to the church office (WilmotUMC@gmail.com) with the following information:
 - a. Full name of baptismal candidate (for bulletin, baptismal banner & baptismal certificate)
 - b. Parents' names (for bulletin & baptismal certificate) if the baptismal candidate is a child
 - c. Date of birth
 - d. Place of birth (Hospital name and City/State)
 - e. Names of godparents/sponsors if you choose to have them (See page 4 for information on godparents/sponsors).
2. Send an email to Pastor Lilliannet at pastorlilliannet@gmail.com to set up a virtual or in-person pre-baptismal counseling to occur during her office hours before the baptism.

Are there any fees or gratuities for baptism?

No. There is no payment or fee required for baptism. Baptism is a sacrament and means of grace. Grace is free.

What should my child wear to the baptism?

There is a tradition of white clothing (purity) for baptism, but this is strictly optional. If you have an heirloom gown, of course you may use it. But if you do not, please do not

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feel obligated to purchase something new or expensive for the baptism. Dress your child comfortably!

Should we arrive early for worship on the day of the baptism?

Plan on arriving 10-15 minutes before the start of the service. We're sure they wouldn't want to come in late to the service.

In church, can I reserve some pews for my family members?

Yes. Please email the office no later than one week before the baptism with a count of the number of friends and family members you expect. We will reserve an appropriate number of pews to accommodate all of you. Reserved pews will be located in the front of church on the (left side) of church. Parents, godparents/sponsors, and the baptismal candidate will sit in the very front pew.

What about my family members' children? Can they come into worship?

We welcome children into worship and love to see them worshipping with their families. The baptismal candidate should stay with his/her parents in the worship service until the baptism portion of the service is completed. Please advise them to ask an usher for directions for bathrooms, and other rooms.

When it's time for the baptism in the service, who should accompany us to the altar?

We'd certainly like the baptismal candidate and his/her parents to come forward. If there are godparents/sponsors, they are also welcome. Siblings of the baptismal candidate are also welcomed to come forward, but we ask that you prepare your young children for this experience and invite them forward only if you're confident that they can stay still with you during the sacrament (10 minutes). We love seeing whole immediate families celebrating a baptism together.

We'd like grandparents and other friends & family members to observe the baptism from the front pews due to space limitations up front.

Can we take pictures or video of the baptism?

We would prefer for pictures to be taken after the conclusion of the service. In particular, please do not take flash pictures during the church service. Guests taking photographs or video should please remain seated during worship.

What is the process for baptizing older children, youth, or adults?

An appropriate orientation for the baptism ritual will be arranged depending on the individual's age and circumstances. If a youth is near confirmation age, the rituals of Baptism and Confirmation may be appropriately combined. The pastor will be glad to discuss this with you. To arrange a baptism for an adult or for a combination of family members at once, please contact Pastor Lilliannet at pastorlilliannet@gmail.com.