

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Baptism

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

Introduction

The rapid changes society has been undergoing in recent years have meant that more clergy are facing questions that touch on inter faith matters as they seek to prepare families and candidates for baptism. These guidelines offer advice and support as clergy and others try to help and guide families who are seeking baptism. As such they seek to address questions relating to individual journeys that people might make between faiths, as well as issues that can arise from within mixed faith families and contexts. They seek to offer guidance on responding pastorally and in a way that respects different traditions, whilst using the opportunity of baptism to proclaim the Gospel and remaining faithful to our understanding of this sacrament.

These guidelines deal only with questions of baptism. In the background to such requests may be issues about the care and support of those converting from another religion to Christianity. These are dealt with in a separate paper which can be found on the Presence & Engagement website.

Baptism is a once and for all, unrepeatable action, incorporating the candidate into the household of faith. As St Paul reminds us, we are baptised into the death of Christ so that we might share his resurrection and walk in newness of life (cf Romans 6.3f). Each approach to the church about baptism is an opportunity to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ; naturally, this will need to be done appropriately and sensitively. It is also important to ensure that those who seek Baptism are extended the welcome and hospitality of the baptising community in the initial encounters and discussion, during preparation, and beyond the event of baptism itself. There is much material in Common Worship: Initiation Services to help and encourage this important aspect of the church's baptismal ministry.

Adults seeking baptism

For an individual who has been an adherent of a different religious tradition but who now seeks to become a Christian, baptism is the normal means by which this commitment to Christ is to be definitively declared. The journey that leads to baptism may be a difficult and demanding one for someone who has belonged to another faith community, and care should be taken over cultural and community issues. The person concerned may experience resistance and difficulties from within their family and community. Sensitive preparation, careful pastoring and discretion will be needed from the person undertaking catechesis and preparing to administer the sacrament. In particular the rite of baptism, whilst being a joyful celebration of faith, will need to avoid any hint of triumphalism. Sometimes it will need to be recognised that normal parish practice might need to be varied, and the service may need to happen with a degree of privacy.

In some cases those seeking admission into the Christian faith may receive the support of their family who do not share this faith. In such cases it will still be necessary for those administering baptism to act with discretion and care.

When a baptised person has been received into another faith and subsequently returns to Christianity their initial baptism holds good: there is never a case for 're-baptism'. However, care must be taken to ensure that the original baptism is recognised as such by the Church of England and evidence of the baptism should also be sought. The key issues are that the baptism was administered with water and in the name of the Holy Trinity. Care should be taken with some groups that claim to baptise, but do not have the same understanding of baptism as the mainstream churches (for example the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). In the case of doubt further advice should be sought. If a candidate is unsure as to whether they have been validly baptised, and there is no record of the baptism to be found, then baptism should be administered in its conditional form.

Any adult person who is baptised should be prepared for confirmation as soon as is practically possible after the baptism and if possible on the same occasion. Confirmation will also be an appropriate rite of welcome and affirmation of faith for those returning to Christianity who are already baptised but have not previously been confirmed. In other cases a reaffirmation of baptismal promises, perhaps in the presence of the Bishop, and/or at Easter, may also be appropriate. In the case of doubt about the best way to proceed, the Bishop's advice and direction should be sought.

The Baptism of Children

It is important when parents in a mixed faith marriage approach the Church about Christian initiation that clear explanations of what this means are given. In particular it will be appropriate to explain the nature of the baptismal promises that will need to be made on behalf of the child; the fact that baptism is unrepeatable and makes someone part of the Christian family. Issues about belonging to the Church and how this will be lived out should also be discussed. It will be important to emphasise that given the formal sacramental nature of baptism; it represents full initiation into the Christian community. Baptism should always be administered in its own integrity. It should never form part of a interfaith event where the rites of other religious traditions are also celebrated.

In seeking baptism parents will be deciding to make a specific Christian commitment for their child. They themselves do not need to be baptised, nor is there a requirement for both parents to make the baptismal promises. However, baptism does involve the engrafting of the child into an existing Christian community; where this is not desired or not feasible, baptism should not be administered.

When considering who may be a godparent it is important to bear in mind the provisions of Canon B23. This requires that, as a minimum, all godparents must be baptised themselves and ideally should also be confirmed. The former requirement cannot be dispensed with, although the latter may be. A parent may stand as godparent, but they need to be baptised in order to do so. As such, it is not possible for a person of another faith to stand as a godparent. Indeed, to ask such a person to undertake this role may put them in a position where they are being asked to make promises and undertake responsibilities that they in all integrity will be unable to adhere to or fulfil. However, there are ways of associating people of other faiths with the baptism ceremony in a personal commitment to the care and development of the child. People taking on such a role, who are sometimes described as supporters, should be encouraged to fulfil the requirements of Canon B23(2) to the best of their own understanding: ‘persons who will faithfully fulfil their responsibilities both by their care for the children committed to their charge and by the example of their own godly living’. Supporters cannot supplant the need for godparents and should always be additional to the two or three required godparents.

If it is desired to involve people of other faiths in a child’s baptism as supporters, this could be done by the minister asking (either after the Promises have been made, or after the baptism itself);

“Godparents share a particular responsibility for helping N become a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. But Parents have also asked Supporter to play a special part in N’s life and so I ask:

Supporter, you too are entrusted with N’s moral and spiritual development. Will you give N a special place in your life and heart, will you care for him/her and guide his/her growth by your own example of religious living?”

Baptism and Consent

Canon Law does not require the consent of a parent before a child is baptized. In an emergency Common Worship suggests that it is the parents’ responsibility to seek baptism, but there is also recognition that parents may be absent or may not have even named the child. Common Worship also reminds the minister to assure the parents that “questions of ultimate salvation...of an infant who dies do not depend upon whether or not (s)he has been baptised”. When it comes to healthy children, whilst parental consent is not required, it is presumed as the Canons require the parents or guardians of the child to be instructed as to their responsibilities.

That said, it may always be possible to immediately determine those who have particular parental responsibility for a child. Often only one parent may approach the church for baptism; it is not uncommon to find that the other parent is absent, or living apart from the child concerned. This absent parent may be uninterested in the question of baptism; may be supportive; or may object outright. Naturally the

minister will want to enquire into the relationship the other parent has with the child and their views on the question of the child being baptised. Clergy will wish, to their best endeavours, try wherever possible to fulfil the duty to instruct both parents of the child.

If the other parent is not forthcoming, the minister is entitled to baptise the child. However, if the other parent does not agree to a baptism, or refuses to discuss the matter then the minister should seek the advice and guidance of the Diocesan Bishop. If the minister learns that a court order to prohibit baptism has been made (or is actively being sought), then baptism should be refused until such time as the court has given directions in the matter. The Diocesan Bishop should be informed of such circumstances; because of the complexities of such situations advice from the Diocesan Registrar should also be sought. The foregoing guidance applies equally to guardians as it does to parents.

In approaching baptism requests when the child comes from a mixed faith relationship, it will be important to explain the nature and importance of baptism in the Christian tradition. It may be that parents have resolved earlier that the children of the relationship will be raised in this tradition, but care should be taken to ensure that the full implications of this for Christian upbringing are understood – particularly by the non-Christian parent. The minister must try to ensure that consent to the baptism is given from a fully informed position. Other family members may have strong views on this matter and the minister should seek to support the parents as they explain matters within their wider family.

These are potentially sensitive issues, but the minister's concern, alongside supporting the family, should also be directed to ensuring how the child is going to be supported in his or her growth in faith as a Christian in a mixed faith environment. The Inter Faith Marriage Project has advice and discussion on this and other important questions – see www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk.

It may be that, after appropriate discussion, parents decide that baptism is not yet appropriate for their child. In this case, the minister should discuss other options with the couple, such as the Service of Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child. In such a service names can be formally given and a copy of the Bible and other gifts be presented to the child. Clergy should also be aware of different cultural traditions that surround welcoming the birth of a child and which may also be opportunities for giving thanks to God for the new life.