

Infant Baptism Policy

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Preface

This document gives reasoning and teaching to explain our approach, as well as procedures to follow.

Theology, Obligations and Freedoms

It is possible to argue from Scripture that baptism is the specific reserve of individual believers rather than infants. It is also possible to argue from Scripture that infants of believing Christian parents may have their children baptised. This is a genuine grey area. As a C of E church we have obligations to offer baptism to children, but we are encouraged in Canon Law to properly prepare families for the baptism. The intent is to honour baptism as a scriptural rite; administering it in such a way that reflects the importance of baptism.

Initial distinctions

There are two clear categories that relate to infant baptism.

1. For families that clearly belong to the church community in an obvious and committed way, the procedures for infant baptism are straightforward. Parents are offered a Thanksgiving service or a Baptism service, with no additional requirements, other than the need to properly understand baptism, (especially for the child also if the child is a little older than a baby). A team member or the Vicar can have a conversation to clarify this matter. For any 'church children/youth' that are being baptised (aged 5-18), church will also set aside times to teach and prepare candidates, so that they are entering into the rite with their own faith demonstrated, and not simply being baptised at the request of parents. This will involve Children's leaders or the Youth leader.
2. For families who are not clearly part of the church family, we need a different approach.

The Requirements of the Baptism Text

The commonly used texts in a baptism service require parents of infants to make solemn and serious promises. They as parents must personally believe and trust in the Father, Son and Spirit. They must turn to Christ and away from evil. They must promise to raise their child within the household of faith (meaning the local church). Given that the service itself points us to the necessity of having believing and committed parents, the church needs to ensure that all enquirers are helped towards this position in preparation for their child's baptism.

Common misunderstandings

Outside of the church community, some parents can sometimes imagine that baptism is simply a rite of passage in the context of British Christendom culture- "We're Church of England so we always have our children baptised." This is an inadequate misunderstanding. For those who ask, the church must offer a fuller explanation of baptism to any enquirer, outlining in particular the need for parents to clearly believe and trust in Christ personally, if they wish for their child to be baptised.

Requirements

So what would indicate that the parents are ready to have a child baptised?

1. INVOLVED: Parents happily engaging with God's community through a series of meeting times and shared community experiences.

2. **UNDERSTANDING:** Parents learning about the Christian faith so they can hear and understand what it means to know and follow Christ.
3. **COMMITTING:** Parents beginning to express faith in their words and actions, to demonstrate that they are truly trusting and believing in Christ.

These three requirements are not overly precise (as each family is different), but the heart of these requirements is necessary. These three requirements are needed ahead of the promise of baptism. Once all three requirements are ***clearly beginning to emerge***, plans for an infant baptism can begin. Forward movement in all areas is sufficient.

The process:

Initial contact

People may call the office to request a conversation about a possible baptism. Others may request baptism via church groups or other connections. In the first instance, our Administrator (or leaders in these ministries) will respond and will cover the following elements:

- St. John's warmly welcomes baptism enquiries.
- We offer two positive options; a Thanksgiving Service (which celebrates and gives thanks for the birth of a child, with no obligations on the parents regarding faith), and a Baptism Service, which publicly commits the parents as active Christians to raise their child as a follower of Christ within the family of the church).
- Most parents would like the opportunity to discuss these options with someone; we will provide an initial conversation (face to face) with someone from church (who has been trained in this area). Contact details can be taken, with the promise of a follow up call/ email to arrange a meeting. This is not a promise of anything, just the offer of a discussion.
- At this meeting, the Team member will get to know the family situation and the reasons for the request. They will then give a simple explanation about the two options of Thanksgivings and Baptisms. If the family wish to explore infant baptism, the team member will outline the two steps that lead to baptism: step one needing to be completed before a baptism plan can be agreed.

Step One: Providing helpful initial routes towards baptism

For a new family to explore and express faith as easily as possible, the church needs to offer a range of 'entry points'. Invitation to the following points needs to be warmly offered.

1. Attending All In services, informal services and MSC socials. These times, which are meant to be relaxed and accessible to whole families, can provide a positive series of experiences of the church as community, whilst communicating aspects of the Christian faith. This experience should lead on to attendance at services where children's groups may operate.
2. Attending faith exploration courses. For those who genuinely wish to explore and discover the Christian faith, attendance at evangelistic courses is appropriate. This would provide a taste of community and space to learn about Christ.

These two avenues would ideally be combined over a period of time, to show that the parent(s) are truly engaging positively with faith and God's community. During this process, friendship and support would be offered, so conversation and discussion could help explore faith and encourage positive expressions of faith.

In addition to these two, some parents may prefer (at this initial stage) to choose the Thanksgiving Service instead of an infant baptism. This service has no requirement on the parent to fully express personal faith in Christ or join the church community, and is thus less challenging. It may provide a gentler beginning for some families, who may wish to go further with faith in the future at some point.

Step two: Clarifying parental faith, and planning a baptism service (with follow up)

Parents will discuss their own faith journey as a preamble to making plans for the baptism. If faith is evident, plans should go ahead. Our baptism (and Thanksgiving) services happen in the context of a family service. A planning meeting with the family would be arranged, to agree the date of the service, the content of the baptism section, to agree godparents or sponsors, to agree follow up.

Follow Up

The baptism is in fact a beginning, not an end. Arrangements for further contact, support and integration need to be in place AHEAD of the baptism service.

This may involve:

- The full or partial completion of an Alpha Course (or equivalent).
- Agreed attendance in a community's Sunday service.
- Integration into some church group/MSC; taking friendship and family into account.

For those who may naturally struggle to attend courses because of child care or work issues, the church will need to provide help or alternatives (babysitting or more convenient times to meet).