



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can the centrality of baptism be renewed?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

When we are born, we are given a name. As we grow, we develop an identity. When we are baptized, we are named children of God. Nurtured by the church, we are formed and re-formed as Christians throughout our life. Baptism, like our birth, is a one-time event. Yet it takes a lifetime to discover what it means to be “sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 231).

One of the marks of worship renewal in our time has been the recovery of baptism’s centrality for the life of faith. We have been rediscovering Luther’s assertion in the Large Catechism that, “In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life.”¹ Many congregations are asking how they might renew baptism’s centrality for their time and place. The answer here provides only an entry point to such renewal, as it deals primarily with baptism in the assembly’s worship. Resources at the end of this document treat baptism as it connects to faith formation and mission.

Welcoming to Baptism

When lifting up the centrality of baptism, we cannot assume that all who worship are baptized. In our increasingly secular culture, many who attend worship services were not baptized as children or raised in a Christian environment.

A very important aspect, then, to renewing baptism’s centrality is creating a climate that is hospitable to those who are not baptized and showing— in worship and witness—why baptism matters for the life of faith.

How does a congregation shape such a welcoming climate? There is no one right answer or set of answers, but here is a list of things to consider:

- Widen the circle of those welcoming those not yet baptized. When people are seeking baptism for themselves or for a child, they typically approach the pastor. While such meetings are essential, how can the whole assembly be a part of welcoming the inquirer?

¹ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 461.

- One dimension of welcoming the inquirer is the recovery of the catechumenate. For more information about the catechumenate, see [The North American Association of the Catechumenate](#).
- How do the ministries of the church: stewardship, music ministry, social ministry, fellowship, etc, see themselves as outgrowths of the life to which baptism calls us?
- Is Christian education for youth and adults rooted in baptism? As stated in the ELCA's set of priorities for practices of word and sacrament, *The Use and Means of Grace*:

The parish education of the congregation is part of its baptismal ministry. Indeed, all the baptized require lifelong learning, the daily reappropriation of the wonderful gifts given in baptism (Application 19B).

The service of Holy Baptism

A congregation shows the centrality of baptism by the manner in which they baptize. Does the congregation “seek to celebrate Baptism in such a way that the celebration is a true and complete sign of the things which Baptism signifies?” (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 25, quoting Luther's Works, 35:29)

Again, there are many ways the significance of baptism can be uplifted through the assembly's baptismal practices. For example:

- Do baptisms take place in the assembly (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 21)? Some still desire private baptisms, regarding the rite as a family event. While some situations necessitate baptism outside of public worship, baptism belongs to the whole people of God.
- Is the baptismal font in a prominent location? Can the assembly see the font or is it covered and hidden in a corner? As stated in *The Use of the Means of Grace*:

A baptismal font filled with water, placed in the assembly's worship space, symbolizes the centrality of this sacrament for faith and life (Principle 27).

It is helpful to provide adequate space around the font for people to gather. Some newer churches have allowed enough space around the font for the entire assembly to gather at the time of Baptism.

- Does the assembly celebrate baptismal festivals ([See “What are baptismal festivals?”](#)), thus stressing that baptism welcomes us into a community of faith?
- Is water used generously? Water is a sign of cleansing, dying and new birth. It is used generously in Holy Baptism to symbolize God's power over sin and death (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 26).

Generous and highly visible use of water is a powerful sign of what happens in baptism. When water can be seen and heard the meaning of baptism as cleansing, dying and new birth is accentuated. Many churches are including large fonts when planning building programs. Some are large enough to accommodate the immersion of adults. Some revive the ancient practice of building a font in the shape of a Greek cross. Some have running water, so that every time one enters the worship space the sight and sound of running water is a persistent reminder of baptism. Where a large immersion-style baptismal pool is not possible it is helpful to use a large pitcher or basin for pouring water over the head of the baptismal candidate. Congregations with small fonts can increase font size by purchasing a larger glass or plexiglass bowl that can be placed in the present bowl.

When adults are immersed they could be clothed in a simple alb or white garment with a bathing suit underneath. When infants are immersed clothing is not necessary.

- Are other signs used during the baptism? The rubrics for the service of Holy Baptism in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* mention the receiving of a baptismal garment, a candle and the use of oil for anointing (ELW p. 231). While not mandatory, such symbols can “appropriate the breadth of meanings in Baptism. (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 28).
- Do the baptized receive communion? In some congregations, children as well as adults are communed for the first time on their baptismal day. ([See “At what age do congregations members receive their First Communion?”](#))

Baptism every Sunday

Baptisms usually do not take place every Sunday in a congregation, but the baptized do gather. Since baptism welcomes us into the community of faith, the church, each gathering of the assembly recalls and lives out our baptism. *The Use of the Means of Grace* says it this way:

Christians continue in the covenant God made with them in Baptism by participation in the community of faith, by hearing the Word and receiving Christ’s Supper, by proclaiming the good news in word and deed, and by striving for justice and peace in all the world (Application 17C).

Baptism is at the heart of our worship. What we see, hear, sing, and enact draws us deeper into the discovery of what baptism means. For more on remembering baptism each Sunday, [see “What are the practices for remembering and affirming Baptism?”](#)

Baptism and Mission

“You belong to Christ, in whom you have been baptized. Alleluia” (ELW p. 230). These words, one of the assembly acclamations following a baptism, declare that we have been baptized into Christ.

What does it mean to be baptized into Christ? Author Samuel Torvend reminds us that being baptized into Christ is being baptized as a public servant: “Jesus is baptized, marked by the Spirit and voice, for public life” (*Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth*, p. 16.). When we are baptized, we are baptized for mission, “to care for others and the world God made, and to work for justice and peace” (ELW, p. 228).

When a congregation seeks to renew baptism’s centrality, a key dimension is this: baptism is central not only by forming a community of faith, but by forming the baptized as a mission-oriented people, called and challenged to a life of discipleship. Again, from *The Use of the Means of Grace*:

Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbors, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ (Background 14A).

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↪ What are baptismal festivals?
- ↪ What are the practices for remembering and affirming baptism?
- ↪ At what age do congregation members receive their First Communion?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📖 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📖 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📞 "Baptism: More than a Ceremony." MOSAIC: The Video Magazine of the ELCA. Fall 2002.

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds. *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis, Suzanne Burke and Richard Rouse, eds. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons: Worship Planning Guide.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, published annually.
 - 📖 Also available as an on-line subscription, [Sundays and seasons.com](http://SundaysandSeasons.com).
- 📖 Torvend, Samuel. *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth: Christian Baptism in a Post-Christian Culture.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
- 📖 Erlander, Daniel. *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life.* Also available from the [author's website](#).
- 📖 Lathrop, Gordon. *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- 📖 Schnekloth, Clint. *Washed and Welcome: A Baptism Sourcebook.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010. This book is part of the Washed and Welcome series.

Other Resources

- 📖 Hoffman, Paul. *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond.*

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