

Baptism and Receiving Members

INTRODUCTION

The Brethren have always taken seriously the Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20).

As the Great Commission is fulfilled, people enter into membership to experience life, fellowship, and growth together in relation to God through Jesus Christ.

In the Church of the Brethren, members are received by baptism, by transfer of membership, and by reaffirmation of faith.

BAPTISM

The Church of the Brethren came into being as eight people were baptized in the Eder River, in Schwarzenau, Germany, in 1708. Early Brethren took considerable risk by being rebaptized, an action that separated them from the state churches into which they had been baptized as infants. “Anabaptists” was the name given to people who chose to be rebaptized. The first Brethren baptism in America took place in the Wissahickon Creek, near Germantown, Pa., on Christmas Day, 1723.

Meanings of Baptism

Baptism has meaning for the individual who makes a commitment to Christ, and it has meaning for the fellowship of faith to which the individual also makes a commitment and in which membership is held. It is important that candidates for baptism be instructed in Christian belief and in the history, beliefs, and practices of the Church of the Brethren.

Baptism as practiced by Brethren is by trine immersion and is for people old enough and mature enough to understand the meaning of choosing to follow Jesus Christ. We call this “believers baptism.”

Brethren believe that:

- *Baptism is a response to God’s saving act through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*
- *Baptism is an act of obedience to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.* Jesus was baptized, and the New Testament calls all who believe to be baptized.
- *Baptism is a symbol of cleansing and new life.* It is an outward sign of an inner experience. There is a new creation, a new birth. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).
- *Baptism is a public witness of the covenant relationship with God.*

- *Baptism is an initiation rite into the church, the body of Christ.* To believe in Jesus Christ means to believe in his church and to be a part of it. Baptism is the moment of entering the church, of assuming responsible membership.
- *Baptism is an ordination into ministry.* All people, as they join the church through baptism, are called to minister through their life and work to their neighbors in the world.
- *Baptism is a beginning.* It is understood not as something completed but as the start of the Christian's pilgrimage of faith.

Settings for Baptism

Baptism is considered a corporate act involving the whole congregation. It is important, therefore, that baptism be a part of the worship experience of the congregation during a morning worship service or at another time when the community of faith is gathered.

Some people may come to an experience of commitment outside the local church setting—such as camps, retreats, or other small-group settings. We rejoice when this happens. We believe, however, that baptism should take place in the presence of the congregation and be administered by the pastor of the congregation.

There may be circumstances in which private baptism is appropriate. In such situations, the officiating minister represents the entire congregation. When informing the congregation of a private baptism, the minister may wish to share the special nature of the service.

Deacons or other designated people usually assume responsibility for all physical arrangements. When a baptistry in the sanctuary is used, it should be filled with warm water. Appropriate rooms should be provided for dressing and preparation. If the congregation uses a stream or other body of water for baptism, the place selected should be free of distraction, and a place for changing clothes should be nearby. Baptismal robes worn over other simple clothing are often used by both the minister and the people being baptized. Such robes help to enhance the dignity and beauty of the occasion.

The minister should instruct each candidate for baptism in advance of the service. A visit to the place of baptism will acquaint the candidate with the location of the baptism and dressing facilities.

The minister should do everything possible to help each candidate approach the waters of baptism without fear or embarrassment. A simulation of the baptism is helpful. The candidate should be instructed to kneel in the water, sitting on his or her heels. Hands can be clasped in front of the chest, placed on the legs, or used to cover the nose. The minister then places a hand over the candidate's nose, while gently pushing the head forward as the candidate bends at the waist. After being immersed three times, the candidate remains kneeling in the water. The minister lays hands on the candidate's head and prays for forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is important that the prayer be personalized for each candidate.

The baptismal setting may be enhanced by appropriate music before or after the baptism. Participation by family members and the involvement of other members of the congregation are appropriate, as are symbols such as candles.

ORDER OF SERVICE FOR BAPTISM

The following order of service is suggested as a pattern. It may be altered, enlarged, or abbreviated as desired.

Prelude

Call to Worship

ONE

We gather this morning around water made ready for baptism.

ALL

We recall Noah and his family turning from death to life as they faced the rising waters with trust and obedience.

ONE

We remember Miriam who watched her infant brother Moses in the waters of the Nile.

ALL

And we recall Moses, years later, leading the Hebrew people through the waters into their liberation.

ONE

We remember God's people crossing the Jordan River into the promised land.

ALL

And centuries later Jesus entered that same river to be baptized by John.

ONE

We gather around water that reminds us of God's gift of new life: water that reminds us of the historic quest for identity, water that holds constant before us the call to obedience, water that invites us to liberation.

ALL

Today we come to the water and in spirit wade in the water with those being baptized as we renew our covenant with God.¹

Unison Prayer

Almighty God, we cherish your goodness to us. You forgive us with redeeming grace. You empower us with your Holy Spirit. You bless us with new life in Christ, life which endures forever.

So send your Spirit this day to bless (name), to bless (name), to bless (name).
Give *(him/her/them)* new life in Christ through baptism.

Make *(him/her/them)* your blessing to others, as *(minister/s)* of grace and peace. And make each one of us faithful to the vows we have made to you and to one another. Through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.²

Meditation on Baptism

The Baptismal Service

After the candidates have been asked to come forward and have been appropriately introduced, the minister shall say to them:

Today you are being received into this community of faith and into the Church of the Brethren. As part of the whole church of Jesus Christ, we offer you our rich heritage and invite you to share fully in our life and mission.

As you are received into the (name of congregation), we intend to be a true family of faith to you. We commit ourselves to be for you a loving fellowship, to be a means of grace in your life, and to offer opportunities for worship, study, and service. One of the happiest times in our life as a church is when new people choose to become members. We welcome you with joy.

While the minister and candidates are changing clothes, there may be organ or other instrumental music or the congregation may sing. When all are ready for baptism, the minister shall enter the water and take the first candidate by the hand, assisting the person to kneel in the water. The minister shall stand in the water facing the congregation, the candidate kneeling in front of the minister, facing toward the minister's right or left.

One of the following sets of vows may be used:

A

MINISTER

Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son and do you receive and trust him as your Savior and Lord?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Will you turn away from all sin and will you endeavor by God's grace to live according to the example and teachings of

CANDIDATE

I will.

MINISTER

Will you be loyal to the church, upholding it by your prayers and your presence, your substance and your service?

B

MINISTER

Do you repent of your sins and confess and accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Do you promise to live in keeping with the teachings and spirit of the New Testament?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Do you promise to be a faithful member of the church, the Body of Christ?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Do you desire to seal these vows in Christian baptism?

CANDIDATE

I do.

C

MINISTER

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the revealer of God's love and purpose for the world?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Will you repent of sin, accept God's forgiveness, and live by the teachings of Jesus?

CANDIDATE

I will.

MINISTER

Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, receiving our support and prayers and giving yourself freely to us?

CANDIDATE

I will.³

The minister shall say one of the following:

A

(name), upon your confession of faith made before God and these people, you are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.⁴

B

(name), upon your confession of faith made before God and these people, you are baptized in the name of God the Creator, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit the Sustainer.⁵

As each name of the Trinity is spoken, the minister shall immerse the candidate forward, pushing the head gently and fully into the water. Then, laying both hands upon the head of the kneeling person, the minister shall pray:

O God, we are thankful for the commitment made today by (name). May (she/he) experience your forgiveness, acceptance, and peace. Send your Holy Spirit upon (her/him) to guide and to empower. Enable (her/him) to walk in newness of life, using (her/his) gifts in praise to you and in service to others. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.⁶

Then the minister shall help the baptized person rise, extend the hand of Christian fellowship, speak a word of blessing, and assist the person in leaving the water.

Hymn or Special Music

During this time the minister and the newly baptized people shall change clothes and return to the service.

Congregational Welcome

MINISTER

Please join with me in reading the words of welcome.

CONGREGATION

With joy we receive you as part of this congregation. With you we renew and reaffirm our vows of faith. We promise to surround you with the love and encouragement that will enable you to grow strong in compassion, vigorous in service, and sure in the way of Christ.⁷

Blessing

The minister or another designated person shall offer words of blessing.

May the blessing of God be upon all who have made new and renewed commitments this day. And may we go forth together in service, glorifying God's name and responding to our neighbors' needs. Amen.⁸

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR BAPTISM

Alternate Baptismal Statement

(Sister/Brother) (name), you have confessed here your faith in God and your desire to be recognized as a member of the body of Christ. Upon this confession of faith I now baptize you:

**In the name of the God
who created and loves you;
In the name of Christ
who forgives and heals you;
In the name of the Holy Spirit
who renews and empowers you.⁹**

Prayer

God of all people, we ask your blessing upon (name) who has come seeking love, acceptance, and new life as a member of the body of Christ. May *(she/he)* feel the warmth of your loving embrace, now and always. May *(she/he)* walk boldly the paths of faith paved by your forgiveness, your wholeness. May *(she/he)* know constant renewal of this fragile faith, upheld by that power which comes only from your presence within. Pour out your Spirit upon all gathered here, and especially on (name), reborn this day into the body of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.¹⁰

Renewal of Baptismal Vows for the Congregation

After the last baptism, the minister may turn to the congregation and say:

Relive the time when you promised to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and vowed your faithfulness to the church. Let this time of baptism mark the renewal of your baptismal vows.

Then the minister lifts water in her or his cupped hands and lets it fall back again while saying:

Sisters and brothers, the water is for us all. Remember your baptism and be thankful.¹¹

ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR THE BAPTISMAL SERVICE

The baptismal service may be enhanced by the presentation of gifts from the congregation to the newly baptized members. An appropriate book, especially a Bible, is one such possibility.

Some congregations invite the baptismal candidates to light a candle before they enter the baptistry. Asking family members to come forward and stand at the side of the baptistry during the baptism and asking sponsors or deacons to stand with the family are ways of showing support for the baptized person. Other significant forms of making the baptism meaningful can become cherished traditions within the congregation.

RECEIVING MEMBERS BY TRANSFER OF LETTER, REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH, AND REBAPTISM

People who wish to be received into the church should be instructed in the history, beliefs, and practices of the Church of the Brethren and should be familiar with the history and mission of the congregation. They should be received during a regular worship service.

Some congregations rebaptize people who were baptized as infants or who have not previously been baptized by trine immersion. There are also people from other faith backgrounds who wish to become Brethren by means of trine immersion baptism.

They should be given instruction on the meaning of baptism and on the procedure to be followed during their rebaptism.

Statement of Vows

When the people to be received have been asked to come forward and have been introduced, preferably by sponsors or fellowship friends, they may answer the following questions:

MINISTER

Friends in Christ, you have previously made confession of your faith and have been members of his church. We rejoice in your decision to become members of this congregation, in full covenant relationship with the believers who worship and serve God in this place. Do you now reaffirm your faith in and loyalty to Jesus Christ, our Lord, and his gospel?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

As you unite with this church, will you worship, serve, and share in its program, supporting it by your earnest prayers, regular attendance, loyal service, and faithful stewardship, as God gives you strength?

CANDIDATE

With God's help, I will.

MINISTER

Do you promise to live and share with us in the bonds of Christian fellowship, giving and receiving Christian love, sharing and bearing one another's joy and pain?

CANDIDATE

I do.

The congregation should be asked to stand and read in unison the following welcome as printed in the order of service:

CONGREGATION

We welcome you with joy and affection into this household of faith. We pledge to you our help, our prayers, our concern, that we may all increase in the knowledge and love of God. We trust God for strength to follow with you in Christ's way, keeping together the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Amen.

In place of or in addition to the above reading, the minister may welcome new members as follows:

The members of this church bid you welcome in God's name. On their behalf, I give you the right hand of fellowship. We pray that all of us, united in Christian love, may grow in all Christian graces in the service of our Lord.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR RECEIVING MEMBERS

MINISTER

Knowing that Christians never fully arrive, but are always in the process of becoming, do you now reaffirm your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Believing that Christianity is experienced in a faith community that supports and strengthens us in time of weakness and doubt, and that learns from us as we learn from it, do you promise to live and share with us in the bonds of Christian fellowship?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Recognizing that the church is organized to fulfill its mission, will you worship, serve, and share in the program of the (congregation) by your prayers, regular attendance, loyal service and outreach, and faithful stewardship?

CANDIDATE

I will.

MINISTER

Becoming a member of this congregation, will you make every effort to witness to the Christian gospel and keep alive the concerns of the Church of the Brethren where you live and work?

CANDIDATE

I will.

RECEIVING ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

The Church of the Brethren provides for associate membership for people who are members of a Church of the Brethren congregation or a congregation of another denomination, but are unable to worship in the congregation where their membership is held.

When the candidate for associate membership has been invited forward and been introduced, the following questions may be asked:

MINISTER

We are pleased to receive as an associate member of this congregation (name), whose primary membership is with the (congregation or church), which commends *(her/him)* into our care. Do you affirm your faith in Christ as Lord and Savior?

CANDIDATE

I do.

MINISTER

Will you join with us in our life together as a worshiping, serving, and witnessing community of faith?

CANDIDATE

I will.

MINISTER

We joyfully welcome you as an associate member.

ASSIMILATING NEW MEMBERS

New members will need encouragement to become fully integrated into the life of the congregation. Following are suggestions for facilitating this assimilation:

- Introduce members at a reception to which the congregation is invited.
- Provide new members with membership packets that include a brief history of the congregation, a copy of its budget, constitution and bylaws, and other informative material.
- Provide new members with sponsors, to whom questions may be directed. Sponsors will assist new members in making entry into significant events such as love feast, or other special celebrations. Sponsors may serve prior to the time the new members are received and for a period of time following.
- Post pictures of new members on a photo board.
- Print brief biographical sketches of new members in the church newsletter.
- Ask new members to fill out a time-and-talent survey and encourage them to use their gifts in meaningful and appropriate ways.
- Invite new members to enter a small group such as a support group, choir, or study group.

ENDNOTES

1. Glenn Mitchell
2. James M. Beckwith
3. Carol A. Wise
4. Wise
5. Wise
6. Wise
7. Wise
8. Wise
9. Norlyn Davis-Driver
10. Davis-Driver
11. Sam Flora, adapted