

The Practice of Baptism in the Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA
Summer 2015
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Introduction

During my conversations with pastors around the topic of youth ministry in congregational life, one of the areas of discussion was the practice of baptism. As I began to hear the various experiences in baptism as it pertained to congregational life, it became apparent to me that it would be valuable for other pastors and churches to hear how others are practicing baptism as a way to give them the opportunity to make their own practice of baptism more meaningful and memorable. In this short report I will be sharing the following information surrounding the practice of baptism in congregational life within the Conference answering these questions: “How are youth invited to baptism?” “How are candidates prepared for baptism?” “What special things are done at the baptism to make it more meaningful?” “Are those baptized given anything as a remembrance?” and “Is there any follow-up to the baptism?”

“How are Youth Invited to Baptism?”

- Most churches put an announcement in the bulletin to contact the pastor if interested.
- In some cases, the pastor discerns who may be of the appropriate age of accountability, and then arranges a meeting with the individual and their parents to discuss the meaning and importance of baptism.
- Many churches do not assume that participating in catechism instruction automatically means that a person will then want to be baptized, so at the end of the instruction, individuals are given the opportunity to decide if they would like to be baptized.
- Some churches require an additional step of initiative on the part of the person wanting to be baptized. After individuals take the baptism class they need to talk to the pastor individually on their own if they would like to be baptized. If the pastor does not hear from them the assumption is made that the person does not desire baptism.

“How are Candidates Prepared for Baptism?”

- Catechism/membership/baptism classes range in length from three to 12 weeks (held during Sunday school hour or other times throughout the week).
- Resources such as *God’s Story, Our Story* by Michele Hershberger, *From Resurrection to New Creation* by Jon Pahl, *Being God’s People* by Ervin Stutzman, and *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* are being used.
- One pastor requires each candidate to read through the Gospel of Luke.
- One church asks the candidates to interview their parents and grandparents about their “coming to faith” experiences.
- Many churches have each candidate give a testimony at their baptism, so during the time of instruction one of the tasks is to formulate a testimony around three questions: Why do they want to be baptized? What is their favorite Scripture and why? What do they like most about their church family?
- Another way of preparing candidates for giving their testimony at baptism is to have the elders come in to the instruction class and share their faith stories as a way of modeling their own faith statements.

- Some churches choose a mentor for each candidate during baptism, and the mentor is asked to at some point share with the baptism candidate “Why I am an Anabaptist Christian.”
- There are a few churches where all the preparation which happens before baptism is for the pastoral staff to meet with each candidate to make sure they have a commitment to Christ and understand what baptism means.
- Some churches require a step of checking with the parents to see whether they feel their child could be baptized.
- Where the possibility exists, Baptism candidates in a few churches are taken on a field trip to either Behalt in Berlin, Ohio, or Menno-hof in Shipshewana, Ind., to learn Mennonite history.

“What Special Things are Done at the Baptism to Make it More Meaningful?”

- The choice of either pouring, sprinkling, or immersion is given to each candidate in most churches.
- Some pastors will involve those being baptized in the planning of the baptismal service.
- Some churches involve a significant adult such as a mentor or parent in the pouring of water into the hands of the pastor over the head of the person being baptized.
- Most churches have the candidate gives a testimony either extemporaneously, by writing it out and reading it, or through videotaping.
- In most cases, an individual prayer is given for each person being baptized, either by the pastor or by a person chosen by the individual.
- In some cases, the whole family is invited to come forward to pray with the individual before their baptism.
- One church reported adding a personal touch by having the candidate choose a song they would like to have sung by the congregation while they are being baptized.
- Another church has started the tradition of having the parents write a letter of hopes and aspirations for the child at their child dedication, and then it is read at their baptism.
- One church invites the candidates to bring water from a source significant to them in a vessel from home. Candidates have brought water from a source near their home, a creek running through their grandparents’ farm, and also the Jordan River brought back by a relative.
- One church reports that Scriptures are read provided by the person being baptized and also others in the church pick a Scripture that best describes them.
- One church has the tradition of communion being served during the baptism service and those who were baptized help to serve the communion.
- A couple of churches have the tradition of using a horse trough for doing the baptisms that is brought in to the sanctuary for the occasion.

“Are Those Baptized Given Anything as a Remembrance?”

- In some churches a pitcher is used for the baptism and given to the one being baptized with their name and date of baptism inscribed on it.
- In a similar fashion, some churches give a towel to the baptismal candidate to dry off with which has their name and date of baptism embroidered on it.
- One church has a tree planted in the arboretum for each baptismal group along with a plaque indicating the names of those baptized in that group.
- In many churches, a picture is taken of the baptism and given to the one baptized along with a certificate of baptism.

- One church reports that at the baptism no mementos are given, but at graduation hymnals are given to each senior with the congregation members signing a note on the page of their favorite hymn.
- One church reports that a card is given to each candidate with signatures from the congregation indicating that they are willing to journey with them in their faith.
- One church goes to the extent of having comforters made by the ladies' group given to each candidate.
- Some churches will give a Bible as a gift to each person being baptized.
- Similar to the pitcher gift above, in one church a mug is given to each person being baptized with their name and date of baptism on it.

“Is There any Follow-up to One’s Baptism?”

In most churches there appears to be little to no follow-up with each person baptized specifically regarding their baptism, but there were a few specific ideas that were shared.

- One church includes baptism is part of their annual covenant signing ceremony. In this way, church membership is intimately connected with the practice of baptism.
- In one case a church does their membership instruction after the baptism service in order to keep contact with those baptized.
- In one church, seven people commit to pray for the person baptized every day for the next year.
- Another church reported that elders are assigned to check in on each one baptized for the next year.

Additional Thoughts

- Most churches connect baptism with church membership but there are a couple of churches which do not require church membership when a person is baptized.
- In most cases, the baptism service is part of a regular Sunday morning worship experience. In those cases where a special service is held it is usually because of doing immersion baptisms at a local lake or pond, or in some cases, at Camp Luz.
- Following a great Mennonite tradition, some baptisms involve a special potluck fellowship meal afterwards.

Conclusion

Hopefully this information that has been shared will prove to be helpful as you and your congregation think through its own traditions regarding baptism and that potential new traditions could emerge as a result of seeing what others have been and are currently doing. For more specific information about any of these ideas please feel free to contact me at 419-302-4666 or keelerr@bluffton.edu.