

## **CONVERSION AND BAPTISM: SUGGESTED GUIDELINES (1982)**

The Conference of 1981 adopted the Faith and Order Committee's report on this matter but requested the Committee to provide further practical and pastoral guidelines. The Committee responds as follows.

When a person requests baptism after an experience of radical renewal, the following guidelines should be borne in mind:

1. Such a request may come from someone who has not been baptised or confirmed, or who has been baptised but not confirmed, or who has been both baptised and confirmed. It will be necessary to discover which is the case before deciding on the appropriate response.
2. But first it is important that the request be welcomed because of its importance for the person making it. The experience which motivated it should be explored for all that may be learned from it. This will take time. A number of pastoral sessions on a one-to-one basis or in the company of others will be required for the fuller understanding of what has happened, and in preparation for the next step to be taken.
3. It should be recognised that there are aspects of the experience itself which point beyond the immediate request for baptism. The primary element is normally a new knowledge of the reality and love of God, and the fundamental response is one of praise, which may be expressed in joy, song or 'in tongues', and spilling over into a need for deeper commitment. Such gifts are for the benefit of the whole body of Christ, and should be honoured as such.
4. At the very outset a prayer of thanksgiving and a blessing, perhaps with laying-on of hands, such as might be used in any pastoral relationship, would be an appropriate personal response. If thought fitting, such a prayer could include reference to the grace of God signified in baptism and powerfully experienced now.
5. The person should be helped to understand the experience more fully within the larger context of the Christian life of service, fellowship and worship.
6. Expectation of further refreshment and renewal should be encouraged, as should expectation of the absence of such experiences. Both should be shown to be inescapable and complementary elements in the Christian pilgrimage.
7. The importance of giving practical expression to the experience should be explored, including possible vocations to particular tasks or offices in the church and the wider community.
8. Arrangements should be made for further teaching to be given about the faith and its individual and corporate expression – if possible in the company of others, as in a pre-confirmation or post-confirmation class.

9. If the person has not been baptised, baptism – by immersion or otherwise as desired – would be the appropriate sacrament. It could include opportunity for the person to share the experience with the worshipping congregation, as well as opportunity for the congregation to join in affirming their faith. Indeed, every service of baptism affords such opportunity for the congregation.
10. If the person has not been confirmed or received into membership, confirmation – with the laying-on of hands as an act particularly fitting the experience – would be the appropriate next stage.
11. If the person has already been baptised, the reasons why re-baptism is not possible should be explained:
  - (a) It would suggest that the first baptism was not a true expression of the grace of God acting through it, or of the incorporation into God's family the church which took place then.
  - (b) It could unsettle the faith of others who have not had a vivid experience of conversion or renewal, but who nevertheless have grown in grace through faith in Christ without desiring a second baptism.
  - (c) It would divide the church into the once-baptised and the twice-baptised; would thus be injurious to the peace and unity of the church; and would sow doubts in the minds of many about their own standing in the Christian community.
  - (d) It would encourage the belief that, even for those who have been previously baptised, baptism upon confession of faith is necessary for all who seek full Christian commitment.
12. The use of water as in baptism should be discouraged, even when the rite is stated not to be baptism. This is because of the powerful association between the elements, the actions and the words in the sacrament of baptism through the centuries and around the world, and because such an act would cause confusion between what is baptism and what is not. For the sake of the corporate life of the church, such confusion should be avoided.
13. When public confession of an experience of renewal is nevertheless deemed to be desirable, the sacrament of holy communion should be explained as being the appropriate sacrament for this kind of sharing.
14. Specially recommended for inclusion in such a service would be:
  - (a) An opportunity for the person to testify to the experience of renewal after some guidance as to how this might most helpfully be done.
  - (b) A prayer of thanksgiving for the blessings received, such as in Alternative Thanksgiving B on pages B33 and 34, MSB.
  - (c) A renewal of the covenant vows by the person and the congregation, as in paras. 16 and 17 on pages D9 and 10, MSB.
  - (d) All the above could follow the sermon which would prepare for them.

- (e) Opportunity for the person to assist in the distribution of the elements, where deemed desirable, as a further sign of sharing, commitment and ministry.
  - (f) Alternatively the covenant service in its entirety, including an opportunity for testimony as above, could be used.
15. Further opportunity for development in faith and action should be provided through participation in a class or fellowship group, and through guidance and help with any vocational responses which might be made.

*(Agenda 1982, pp. 27-9)*