



**COMMUNITY
UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**

*A Just Peace, Progressive,
LGBT Open and Affirming Congregation*



THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM

Meaning and Purpose

Within the Protestant tradition, only two sacraments are acknowledged: holy communion and holy baptism. The gospels relate these sacraments as two activities in which Jesus Christ participated and to which the early church gave authority. Because these sacraments are an important part of our history and tradition and inform who we are in relationship to God and one another today, we believe we are charged to be good stewards of their interpretation and practice.

Infant baptisms at Community United Church of Christ are about a covenant between God through Jesus Christ. Our congregation represents the Christian Church universal and surrounds the family having their child baptized. God through Christ promises to be present and hold this family and child in holy love.

Confession of faith baptisms are about a conscious and intentional decision to walk the path Jesus walked in dialogue with Christian history, tradition, and community. In this context, faith is not only about a set of beliefs but also what those beliefs compel the baptizand to do in the world. Confession of faith baptisms are a public sign of a pilgrimage begun.

For Christians, baptism is a public sign of a reality already present. The earliest baptismal formula we have in the Christian Church is: “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor free, there can be neither male nor female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3.28, NJB) Regardless of culture or ethnic origin, social or economic status, gender or cultural position, we recognize that God has created us connected and one in love.

Christian communities reflect that love as they accept the baptizand into their life and practice. Baptisms remind the worshipping congregation that we are to make way for this new life and ministry through our commitment to be present for the baptizand and the baptizand's family, our investment to provide programming and education throughout the baptizand's life, and our dedication to be Christ-like examples in every station of our lives.

The parents and the God-parents (if the family so chooses) promise this Christ-like example as well. The parents also covenant to participate meaningfully in Christian faith community, to enculturate the child in Christian teaching and practice, and to remind this child that she is adopted into Christ's community and into God as a Child of God. The God-parents promise to foster this covenant between parent and child and provide grace for both so that they all might remain in relationship with one another.

Recognizing the important covenant between God in Christ, and that Community United Church of Christ represents the universal Christian Church, we strongly urge all baptisms to take place in a congregational setting. We discourage private baptisms unless circumstances are urgent, such as the baptizand's life being in peril.

We also encourage parental involvement or the baptizand's involvement in the life of the church before and after the baptism so that this sacrament and its covenant are meaningful for congregational life. For the congregation to covenant their commitment, investment, and dedication to a baptizand and family who will participate only one Sunday is disheartening to the congregation and empties the sacrament of its profound meaning. Therefore, as informal policy, we strongly recommend that the family or baptizand attend one baptism service before their baptism. The family or the baptizand may then ask questions and work through the meaning of the service. We also strongly urge the family or baptizand that has not been a part of our worship community to attend worship three to four weeks consecutively before the baptism. Such attendance allows the congregation to connect with the family or baptizand, if only by sight, and begins a practice we hope will continue long after the baptism.

We also recognize that the family may have to use the staffed nursery during the course of the service. We hope this represents our congregation's commitment to their family and their baptizand.

THE WORSHIP SERVICE

All good rite and ritual is about collapsing the past, present, and future into a given moment in time. During the worship service the past meaning and understanding of baptism and its symbols are shared so that we are in dialogue with historical faith communities which struggled to make meaning and live in relationship with God and one another. We also ask family members, God-parents (if the baptizand or the family wishes God-parents), the baptizand (if not a child), and the congregation to make promises about how they shall be in relationship with one another far into the future. By invoking the past and the future, our hope is that the baptism makes real meaning and seals real promises.

Within the worship service are symbols that carry significant meaning. Below are those symbols and their meaning as we continue to interpret them.

The Water

Throughout Scripture water has so many meanings. Water symbolized birth, liberation, promise, moving from barrenness to plenty, repentance, healing, moving from death to life, rebirth, cleansing, purification, and sustenance. Many of these meanings are brought to bear as we remember God's story at the beginning of the baptismal service.

The Font

Because we place the font in front of the sanctuary chancel, we are suggesting the beginning link between baptism at the font, the Word spoken by faithful communities as Scripture is read at the pulpit, and, finally, the sharing in our common meal at the communion table. Baptism is a public sign of a pilgrimage from font to Word to full communion.

Escallop Shell

The shell represents the pilgrimage stated above, but also represents our Christian journey to all holy sites. The lines in an escallop shell are the different, individual journeys we take to a common, sacred place. The shell is also a reminder of Christ's baptism.

The Gifts

The congregation gives three gifts to the family or baptizand to symbolize our covenant and commitment within the sacrament.

The Tree

A tree is purchased to be planted in honor of the baptizand. The tree is a symbol of the baptizand's connection to creation and creation's connection to the baptizand.

A Book

A book is given to the family or the baptizand as a reminder that we, as congregation and extended family, are responsible for the education and enculturation of the baptizand. The content of the book reminds the family or the baptizand that the baptizand is a spiritual being.

Escallop Shell

Also a symbol of connection to creation, see above for the meaning.

A Certificate

The certificate serves as a reminder of the continuing sacrament shared on this special day.