

Chapter

one: Initiation

This chapter contains comments on the following services in the Leader's Book:

BAPTISM AND RELATED SERVICES

Baptism and Reaffirmation
of Baptism called
Confirmation

Baptism of a Child

A Congregational
Reaffirmation of Baptism

A Personal Reaffirmation of
Baptism

The Covenant Service

(Each of these also appears
in the People's Book.)

PERSPECTIVES

In recent times, there has been an explosion of interest in the meaning of baptism across the whole spectrum of the Christian churches. The Uniting Church has been faced with issues arising both from within its own body and through our wide ecumenical contacts. The Commission on Liturgy has listened to these questions, respecting the diversity of the church, and has carefully formed its services from the standpoint of our received traditions. The liturgy should exercise a pastoral function, both offering healing and opening up new possibilities. A rich provision of services is one sign of this.

Confirmation, too, has been the subject of much debate in recent years. The question — What does confirmation mean? — has been asked for over a thousand years, with varied answers. Historically, confirmation was one of a whole complex of ritual actions in baptism, without a distinct, separate meaning. Early in the church's life, it had come to be seen as a 'strengthening' of the baptised for their mission. By the Reformation, the emphasis in both Catholic and Protestant thinking tended to lie on the educational value of confirmation. In the twentieth century, we have perhaps come to see it as a rite of passage into the adult worshipping community.

In its origins, however, confirmation had to do with baptism, and was never meant to be any more than a spelling out of what baptism means.

This suggests that it is an appropriate occasion on which Christians may affirm for the first time that the faith into which they were baptised as children is the faith by which they will live as adults. Confirmation thus becomes the first, public and solemn affirmation of that baptism which took place in infancy. It is a sister rite to those in which individuals or congregations reaffirm their baptism, at Easter, or at the beginning of a new year, or at some other turning-point in their lives.

The potential for all this is found in the several services in this section of *Uniting in Worship*, and we shall now comment on them individually.

BAPTISM AND THE REAFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM CALLED CONFIRMATION

The first service in this group is one which provides for complete initiation: baptism–confirmation–eucharist. The first service is also distinct from the second, 'The Baptism of a Child', in that it implies that the norm of Christian baptism

is that of an adult. The Uniting Church is not at a point at which this matter can be finally settled. But in terms of the history of the church, such a step is possible. If the Uniting Church is a missionary church, there *will* be *adult* candidates for baptism/confirmation. As the century moves towards its end, it is less and less likely that baptism will be requested for the children of people who have no commitment to the church. The candidates will (as the *Basis of Union* says, and probably in this order) be 'those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility.' (paragraph 7)

Strictly speaking, candidates who confess the Christian faith and are baptised do not require a separate rite of confirmation. As note (xi) of the service says, 'A person who professes faith in Christ in baptism is by that act alone a confirmed member of the Uniting Church'. It goes on to say that there is no objection to laying hands on such a person with prayer — it is good apostolic practice — and a prayer that asks for 'strength' is also appropriate at such a point in a person's life.

It goes without saying that this, and all the notes before the services are worth reading carefully!

THE SERVICE

Any pastor will have some views on the wisdom of the first rubric! Baptism follows best on the Ministry of the Word because that is the way it happens in the New Testament. 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' says Peter, succinctly, after his preaching on Pentecost (Acts 2:38). Baptism is a response to God's Word.

But there may be a hundred reasons why it might occur more happily elsewhere in the service — for example, earlier, before babies start crying. In reality, many of the 'pastoral' reasons given for some other place-

ment of the baptism don't stand up to examination. In most of our congregations, which are not large, a family with a baby (and toddlers) should feel perfectly at home. Crying does not invalidate baptism! The pastoral preacher ought to know that baptisms are probably not the best time for profound theological treatises, even on baptism, and will temper the sermon to the occasion. After all, there is a great deal of teaching in the service itself, including through the actions and symbols. It is to be hoped that we are past the time when a baptism is the only opportunity taken to teach the congregation about baptism, or to 'get at' the parents. People who have such rare contact with what the church believes and teaches about baptism, should not be being baptised or having their children baptised.

Note (iv) indicates that only in the most unusual circumstances should baptism occur other than in the face of the congregation at its regular Sunday service. This is chiefly to preserve the churchly or congregational orientation of our understanding of baptism.

One practical reason for placing the baptism earlier in the service in many congregations will be that Christian education programs require the younger members to leave after the Gathering or the early part of the Service of the Word. Note (i) in Baptism of a Child (LB 33) recognises this.

1 HYMN

One of the gains of recent hymnals is the larger variety of hymns on baptism. The *Australian Hymn Book* has somewhat gone to extremes to provide hymns for only one candidate at a time (not enough 'they' hymns!) though Judith O'Neill's very fine hymn 411 ought not to be overlooked even with a crowd. The Scottish paraphrase of Romans 6 at 409 is a useful preaching of the Word, and Fred Kaan's hymn at 413 uses the biblical imagery very well. It is really the 'Flood Prayer' (see below) in verse. In *Sing Alleluia* nos 20 and 26 should be considered; the latter, by Keith Pearson, is based on an ancient text which makes the link between baptism, passover and Easter.

2 PRESENTATION

This reads rather formally, but its intention is the opposite. Opportunity ought to be taken to welcome brothers and sisters and friends of the candidates, as well as parents, and as warmly as possible. It gives a place in the liturgy for the elder who has been involved with the person or the family, and that is an important recognition of their ministry. It underlines the fact that in the Uniting Church decisions about who is to be baptised are not taken by minister alone, though it is usually the minister who will initiate the proposal. This is not a threat to the minister's prerogatives: it is a protection. If the church really feels that it is inappropriate to baptise someone, or even inappropriate at that time, it is important that the decision be a shared one. See notes (v) and (vi).

The reason for the two different statements by the elder is that this service is likely to be used on many occasions as the Confirmation Service of a group of people, all of whom have been baptised. The Baptism itself will thus be omitted (see note (x)) and we learn that the candidates are here to affirm the faith into which they were baptised. But where some (or all) have never been baptised, it is important to announce from the beginning that this significant sacrament is to be celebrated. Let it be a warm welcome, and let the announcement set a high tone!

3 SCRIPTURE

There is a huge range of possibilities given here, with no intention that more than perhaps two should be read. If you have decided to have the baptism before the Service of the Word, this section becomes very important, since it is a brief 'word', and the baptism/confirmation is a response to it. Baptism should not take place in isolation from the Word.

4 THE MEANING OF BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

This is an attempt to state the meaning in as brief a space as possible, with simple and short sentences. Read it slowly. Print it on the Notice Sheet for later perusal. Though brief, it sets out the essential biblical teaching, on which the next section depends. There is much material for preaching here!

5 RENUNCIATION AND AFFIRMATION

The opening sentence adds to what has just been said, and will naturally flow on from it (though #4 is addressed to everyone, and #5 to the candidates). Then an important link: 'in the light of the gospel we proclaim'; hence the importance of having done that — if not in the readings and sermon at this service, then conspicuously in preparatory groups and at other services. The questions which follow are asked in the light of the gospel. Without having heard the gospel, without God's Spirit already at work in us, we cannot answer them aright.

There is an evangelical movement implied in the questions: first, repentance, turn from your sins (the Greek word for 'repent' means 'turn around'!); second, turn to Christ whose cross and resurrection are recalled in a short sentence; third, pledge your allegiance to God the Holy Trinity. The 'renunciation' of the power of sin and death is made in the name and the power of Christ, who has defeated them for us, and in whom we live from this day on. These questions do not imply some sort of preliminary test through which candidates must pass before they can be baptised. The work of faith is Christ's from beginning to end: we know we have need of repentance because of Christ; we are enabled to repent because of Christ; we are able to live a new life only in Christ.

A symbolic gesture may accompany this moment of decision — Jesus' gesture of touching ears and mouth of those he healed. It is called the 'Effata' after Mark 7:34. The meaning is stated in words which the minister ought to learn by heart, so that he/she can say them without holding a book. By the healing power of Jesus, we are enabled to hear his Word, and to tell it forth. The gesture (which is optional: the rubric says 'may') must not be made in a formal way. Imagine how Jesus would have done it. It works well when it demonstrates a deep relationship within the love of God, the pastor's knowledge of a candidate for baptism.

Then comes the Affirmation of Faith, the Apostles' Creed — which is cast in the form in which it originated in the early church: a series of questions and answers. This not only makes it more dramatic, it also makes it apply more directly: this is *our* faith which we are proclaiming. As an act of allegiance in itself, it is appropriate for everyone to stand, the candidate(s) with the Christian community, in a symbol of solidarity.

6 PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Here will be noticed a close parallel with what happens in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In that service, there is a prayer of thanks over material things — bread and wine — on which the Holy Spirit is invoked, in order that the people may receive the body and blood of Christ. Here, in baptism, there is a prayer over the water, that by God's Holy Spirit the person baptised in it may partake of all the promises of God in Christ. There is a consistent sacramental theology here, and this is signalled by beginning the prayer in the same way as the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at the Lord's Supper. The emphasis is on thanksgiving, the characteristic note of Christian worship.

The way we do this in the Uniting Church's liturgy is in line with Reformation practice. Luther abbreviated the Catholic rite and omitted the blessing of water in its mediaeval form. He replaced it with a new prayer which was based on scriptural images: the Old Testament images of the flood and the Exodus, and the New Testament account of the baptism of Jesus in Jordan. This is how we sanctify the water for baptising. The Commission on Liturgy has drawn on this tradition for two alternative prayers, one using more of the Old Testament images, one using fewer, with a final paragraph which invokes the Spirit on the person, through the water, that they may (in the first prayer) be 'raised to new life in Christ, and continue to be his faithful disciples', and (in the second) 'die to sin, be raised to new life, and strengthened to serve you in the world'.

At no point does this service suggest that there is anything 'automatic' about the saving grace of God. We can nullify this sacrament and all its blessings by refusing to respond to the Word of God. We can later attach ourselves to 'another god'. But let us not make the opposite mistake, of saying that baptism has nothing to do with salvation. That would be contrary to Scripture (see Romans 6:3–5 on dying with Christ in baptism; Colossians 2:12 on death and resurrection; Titus 3:5f on the washing of regeneration; 1 Corinthians 12:13, baptised into one body of Christ and made to drink of one Spirit). The earliest Christians had no doubt that a dramatic transformation was signalled by baptism. Old lives were made new. Conversion was a reality. The Bible, and the early liturgies, naturally used dramatic images to convey this — more so than with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, perhaps because that is received more frequently, whereas baptism is received once for all. On the other hand, baptism is not a single event: it is a particular event, datable indeed, occurring to a particular person in a particular place, yet beginning a process which flows through an entire life. William Willimon has said that baptism is 'a once-and-for-all event which usually happens when we are babies but takes our whole life to finish'.

Actually, no church teaches that baptism is essential to salvation. God is not limited by his own sacraments. God works by the Spirit outside the church and outside the sacraments. But inside the church we are given word and sacrament and we are charged to administer them faithfully. That is what these services attempt to make possible. They do not limit the theological discussion which must continue in its proper context; the language of worship is part of that, but must be allowed to express meanings more powerfully and more poetically than the rational definitions of doctrine.

[Note: I am indebted to D'Arcy Wood and Christ Mostert for their unpublished writings in this area.]

7 THE BAPTISM

This is about all that Calvin allowed to remain! And it is the central part of the rite. Baptism is by water in the name of God, the Holy Trinity. No more is required (though a great deal more may be implied).

The Fifth Assembly (1988) laid down an invariable formula of words to be used at baptism. No baptism which occurs with different words can be regarded as Christian baptism. It is not insisted upon only because of ecumenical understandings with other churches, who accept ours as Christian baptism because we have convinced them that we have a consistent rite. It also involves a faithfulness to the way the church has taught and practised this sacrament from biblical days.

The *Basis of Union* (paragraph 9) speaks of the historic creeds thus:

She (namely the Uniting Church) receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and guard the right understanding of that faith.

The formula used at baptism may be similarly regarded. The church is currently engaged in a new struggle to find ways of expressing its beliefs, for instance, about the intimate relationship between God and Jesus Christ which in the early centuries it expressed as Father/Son. We cannot abandon what that image gained for the faith unless and until we have another image which does as well. Our attempts so far have not reached that point. To speak of 'Parent, Child, Spirit' gains sexual inclusiveness at the cost of individuality. 'Son' or 'daughter' expresses a strength of relationship to 'father' or 'mother', with nuances of interdependence, independence and inheritance which the language of 'parent' and 'child' cannot. The Uniting Church will continue to baptise 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' in solidarity with the rest of the universal church. But we may not give up the search to express the faith in language which embraces the feminine, the multicultural, the social or any of the other, more recent, insights of human experience and scholarship (see *Basis of Union* paragraph 11). Nor should we abandon the language of the Bible, the native tongue of the church.



Photo: Eddy Marmur

The modes of baptism

It may surprise some members of the Uniting Church that the Commission on Liturgy makes it quite clear that there is an order of preference as to the method of baptism. (See note (viii) and the rubric in this section.) *Immersion* is first. Immersion is an option in the Uniting Church. The fact that it is not often used does not diminish the fact that the meaning of baptism is best demonstrated through it, and that the biblical pattern clearly envisaged it. *Pouring* is the second mode, which means that a generous amount of water is used. It does not imply the use of a jug, despite the illustrations in some books! The human hand is a perfectly adequate (and indeed preferable) instrument for pouring water. *Sprinkling* is not ruled out, but it is a poor third. This does not mean that the Commission thinks that baptism is more effective if a litre of water flows over the candidate than if a small trickle does. But the Lord chose water as a sign of his gracious action, and the sacramental gesture should be gracious. Sacraments are a challenge to us to rejoice in the creation, and to use created things to celebrate the mysteries of incarnation and redemption.

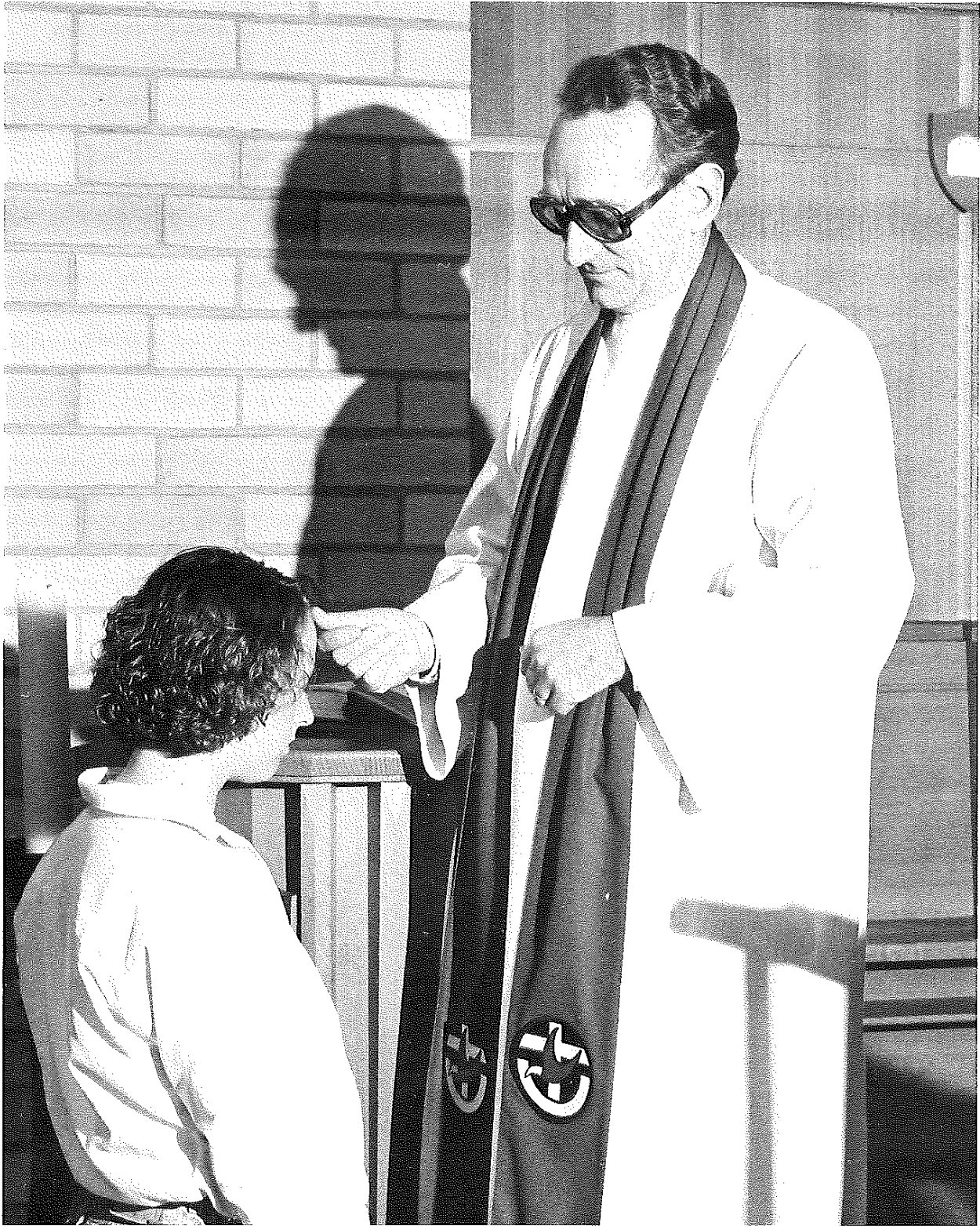


Photo: Eddy Marmur

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Christians have made the mark of the cross on each other for centuries. It is an outward way of expressing our most cherished hope. In the early church, it was the usual sign, made with the thumb on the forehead, at anointing (chrismation) in baptism. It is a blessing which expresses the heart of baptism: that we are Christ's. It is a mark of ownership. The full potential of meaning is spelled out in the formula used by the Presbyterian Church of the USA:

N . . . , child of the covenant,
you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism,
and marked as Christ's own for ever.

This meaning may be more graphically expressed if an actual anointing with oil takes place — but that is not provided for in the Uniting Church services.

But it is a sign-act, a ritual expression. It does nothing which baptism does not do. It is important that the action (especially if other people are invited to follow the minister in making the sign) does not overshadow the more significant symbol of water.

THE DECLARATION

This is a proclamation akin to that of marriage: all is now completed. And that means a new member of a congregation, the local expression of the catholic church. It is appropriate for the minister to carry the child or lead the older candidate through the congregation, perhaps encouraging people to greet them. This is a sign-act too — of the community nature of Christian baptism — as contrasted with the highly personalised interpretation of many, both inside and outside the church. As someone has said: 'Baptism doesn't happen to individuals: it happens to the church!'.

8 HYMN

This is the time for those candidates for confirmation who have already been baptised to join those who have just received the sacrament. The meaning of confirmation will be most clear when it is possible to have a baptism at the same service, and it is dramatically important that the baptism take precedence. I recently read an entry in a Baptismal Register — 'Baptised for Confirmation'. A complete inversion of the order and meaning! It is baptism which is the sacrament, and confirmation takes its meaning only from it. A hymn on the baptismal theme could therefore be sung even if there is not a baptism that day.

9 LAYING ON OF HANDS

Note that there are three movements here. The first is silent prayer, followed by an extempore prayer by one or more people. The second is a set prayer over the candidates, based on Isaiah's account of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is said 'with both hands extended over the candidates', a traditional gesture for invocation and blessing. Perhaps an assisting elder may hold the minister's book for this. The third movement is the actual laying on of hands, on each individual, with a brief formula which should be learned by heart. If the congregation is not used to responding Amen, the minister should remind them beforehand of its importance, so that each candidate knows that the whole people is praying with and for him/her. The Aaronic Blessing, said or sung, brings this solemn act to a conclusion.

10 RESPONSES

The only preliminary to baptism in this service is the affirmation of faith, the candidates' and the church's. There are no baptismal vows. What is provided is a response in faith and life which flows from the gracious act of God confirmed in baptism. Thus the newly-confirmed members may make a 'brief statement of faith', or give a testimony or a word of thanks.

Then comes the formal response, very simply and practically worded. The responses are in terms of personal life, contribution to the life of the church, and mission. Note that mission is defined as participation in God's mission: it is not one's personal mission. Christ is the missionary, through the Holy Spirit. This understanding is also in the final part of the Uniting Church's Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (LB 103) where we pray to be made one with Christ, one with each other and 'one in ministry in the world'.

The congregational members then rededicate themselves as a missionary people, living out their baptism together with their new brothers and sisters in the faith.

11 PRESENTATIONS

The rubric is self-explanatory. Some parishes ask the elder to deliver the certificate personally in a home visit after the service.

12 OFFERING, ETC.

This and the next sections form the usual responses to the Service of the Word, leading to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper (see LB 89). The first two prayers at #14 have a strong emphasis on the outward thrust of the faith proclaimed in baptism, the very opposite of baptism seen as a personal possession. The Presbyterian Church of the USA has called its recent service of Confirmation 'Commissioning', rather than 'Reaffirmation', to make this point.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

It is appropriate that Holy Communion be the culmination of this series of actions. The community into which a new member has come is a community which gathers in obedience to its Lord around a Table, and breaks bread together. The suggestion is made that the bread and wine be brought forward by the newly-confirmed members — or by a family where there is one candidate. [But see the commentary on the Offering and Setting of the Table in the chapters on the Service of the Lord's Day.]

Note that there is a special thanksgiving for insertion into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving at a Confirmation (LB 100). It gathers together the themes of covenant and commissioning, incorporation into Christ and the gift of the Spirit. Other appropriate special thanksgivings are those for the Baptism of Jesus (LB 95) and Pentecost (LB 99).

THE SENDING FORTH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

This corresponds to the fourth section of The Service of the Lord's Day, but makes a special provision for Baptism/Confirmation services.

16 BAPTISMAL CANDLE

This symbol was introduced in the 1981 booklet, following the example of the Methodist Church of the U.K. in its 1975 Service Book. It is familiar too from Roman Catholic and Orthodox practice, and was welcomed in many congregations as a simple sign of the light of Christ (Matthew 5:16). Uniting Church members were glad to receive the custom of other churches whereby a conscientious Christian parent (or godparent) could re-light the candle with the child on the anniversary of the baptism, perhaps with a prayer, celebrating a 'spiritual birthday' and deepening the child's understanding of the importance of this event in their life as they grew up.

Experience, however, has pointed to one danger. Because of its novelty, and because it is a very visible symbol, it has proved in some cases to be more memorable than the washing with water, which is the

major sign of the sacrament. A similar misunderstanding can apply to the sign of the cross. Partly for this reason, the Commission on Liturgy decided to separate the act of baptism from the giving of the candle, which was clearly a secondary symbol. Here the candle becomes a symbol of the missionary aspect of baptism, a sign of our taking the light of Christ out into the world. Matthew 5:16 thus takes on its proper significance.

17 WORD OF MISSION

A powerful and traditional charge, and a good model for what this new element in The Service of the Lord's Day should be.

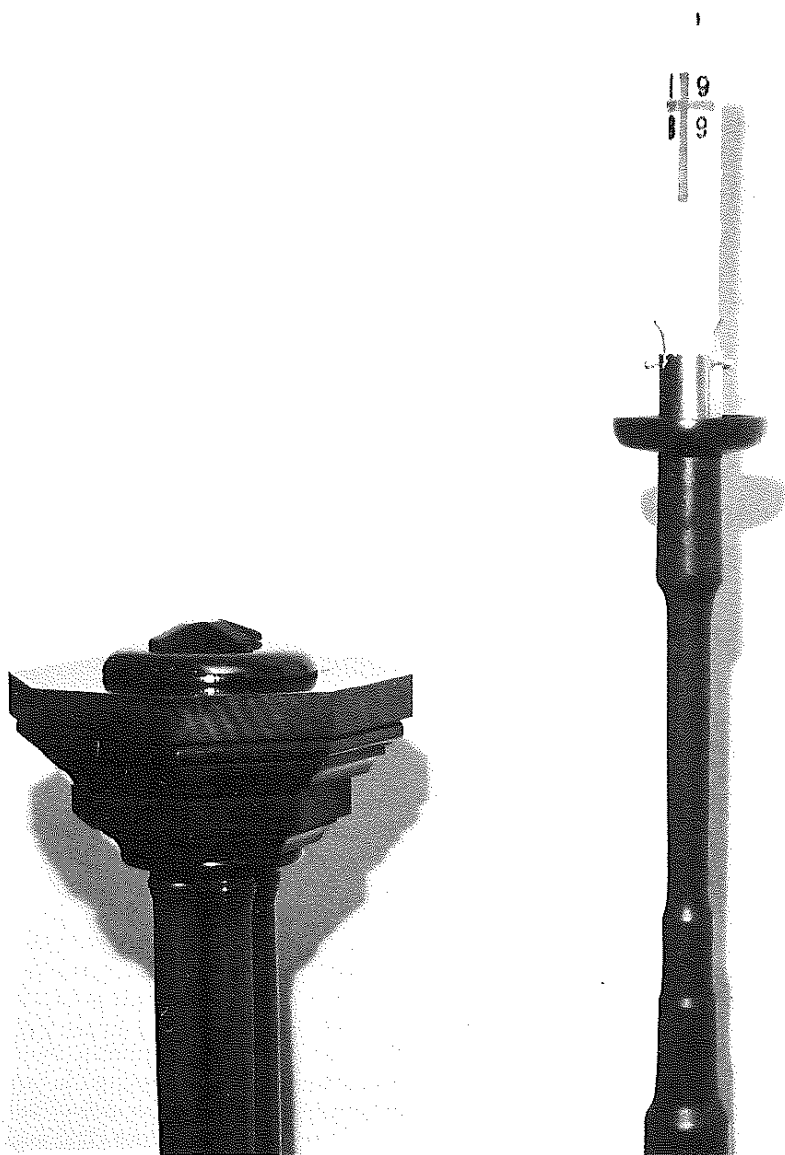


Photo: Eddy Marmur

The Easter Candle

There was another danger also in the borrowing of this rite. The candle has no meaning beyond its being given at baptism. However, in Catholic and Orthodox churches, its meaning is directly linked to Easter, with Paul's image of our baptism being our dying and rising with Christ. In those churches, the paschal candle is lit at the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ at the Easter Vigil, and its light is spread throughout the congregation as people light their own candles from the great candle in the church, and take them home. The great paschal candle remains alight for services through the fifty days of Easter, and is then relit for baptisms, eloquently making the connection between the gospel and the sacrament. Thus if the Uniting Church is to avoid sentimentality over the introduction of a candle, it needs to reclaim this evangelical understanding, and light a large candle on Easter Day (or at the 'midnight' or dawn service), perhaps using the words of the presentation in this service. It should then be relit for baptisms, standing by the font, and the presentation candles given to candidates or their parents should be lit from it.

At a later stage, the Commission on Liturgy will provide further resources for the Easter season.

BAPTISM OF A CHILD *PERSPECTIVES*

Why a separate service? Why not a single baptismal liturgy since there is one baptism, and the meaning is the same, whether the candidate is infant or adult, child or mature person? The answer is logistics. The Commission on Liturgy would affirm all the above, but it proved impossible to set out a service on the page format of *Uniting in Worship* which allowed for both candidates able to answer for themselves and those who cannot. The two main services, however, are closely parallel, and it is possible to bring elements of the service with a child into the first service as required. It was our judgement, however, that most baptisms in the Uniting Church at this point of its history would be of children.

Why 'of a Child'? The experience of many pastors is that a significant number of candidates are no longer infants, but whole families, with children of different ages, or young children who were not baptised as infants.

The Uniting Church affirms that children are part of the church, the church today, not the church tomorrow. If we do not believe that, and do not intend to act on it, we should not baptise them.

THE NOTES

The notes largely follow those for the earlier service, making obvious modifications. One interesting one is (viii) where it is said that immersion in the case of a baby or young child is not recommended. The church to the time of the Reformation, and the Orthodox churches today, see no problem in this. The size of many ancient fonts clearly indicates that babies were fully immersed. It may be more accurate to say that adult candidates may find the experience of immersion more meaningful (though the sacrament is not made more meaningful by one mode or another), but immersion for a baby is not excluded if requested.

And what about note (xii) concerning communion at the baptism of a child? If we follow our own logic, the newly-baptised should receive communion. In the Orthodox churches this occurs, in order that the whole rite of initiation should be celebrated at the one time. Children do not wait to fulfil their membership. The privileges of membership are open from the moment of baptism. The Orthodox also have the advantage of mixing bread with the wine in the chalice, and serving it (to everyone) with a long-handled spoon. That makes it eminently edible by a small child. We might dip a piece of bread in the cup before putting it in the child's mouth. This advice is given, not in the expectation that it will often happen, but because it might be asked, and there are good reasons for the request! As the Note says, it is not necessary.

Note (xiii) also touches on a pastoral concern. A minister is occasionally asked to come to a hospital and baptise a baby who is expected to die. The request often comes from deep within people who are not very well instructed in the meaning of Christian baptism. Such a moment is probably not the best time for a theological explanation. However baptism should not be given without also expressing the church's belief that baptism makes one part of a large and caring family, and that that church family holds itself ready to welcome and surround the baby's family with love. That is true whether the child lives or dies. If the child lives, there is a great opportunity to show what the church is, by celebrating the fact of the baptism (which has been necessarily shortened) in the face of the congregation which, one hopes, will have been praying for the child and

supporting the parents. The use of most of this service, with sensitive adaptation, will set forth fully what the church means when it baptises.

THE SERVICE

[Comment is made only on provisions which differ from the first service.]

3 SCRIPTURE

The required selections from Matthew or Romans are the same as for the former service, but the additional ones are specially selected. The Acts passage allows the affirmation that 'the promise is to you and to your children'. And the Colossians passage makes the connection with circumcision. The Reformers and John Wesley frequently used the parallel between circumcision and the baptism of infants. Jewish parents bring their sons for circumcision on the eighth day, and thereby the child bears the sign of the covenant of Abraham (Genesis 17:9-10). He belongs from his earliest days to the family of Israel. So, the Reformers taught, it is right that believing parents bring their children for baptism, for Christian children share in the new covenant in Jesus Christ by their baptism.

5 RENUNCIATION AND AFFIRMATION

See the commentary on the parallel section above. The accent is on the church's faith, declared in the words of the Apostles' Creed, and the only question to the parents is about their faith, not their child's. In the light of the covenant promise, they are asked whether they believe that the good news of Jesus Christ enables human beings to turn from darkness and walk in the light of Christ. That is, they are asked if they believe that the gospel is effective in people's lives. If so, then this child, for whom the promise is claimed, will be enabled by God's grace to live in Christ. It is a question about their faith and their hope, in the context of the church's faith and hope. It is at least a minimal indication that the child will be raised in the faith and family of Jesus Christ. It is not, however, a qualification for their child's baptism. That is a decision of the minister and the Elders' Council, and they will have satisfied themselves that there is a founded hope that the child will be nurtured in Christian love. The simple question in church occurs only after considerable pastoral conversation between minister, elder and parents.

7 THE BAPTISM

The address to the child comes from the baptismal liturgy of the Reformed Church of France, and is perhaps the clearest statement available on the theology of grace which undergirds the practice of the baptism of infants and children. The minister is encouraged to learn the words by heart so that they can be spoken directly to the child.

8 RESPONSES

The responses are asked of the parents, and have to do with the context in which the child will be raised. They are placed here deliberately to avoid the sense that the child is baptised on a contractual basis — but that the free grace of God having been declared in the baptism which

Godparents?

The service makes no mention of godparents. The role they played in our previous traditions varied, but generally godparents were Christian believers who might be relied on to take an interest in the Christian upbringing of the child. Nowadays, it seems that godparents are chosen on the basis of being friends or family, with no suggestion of a religious commitment. In some cases, there is an understanding that godparents would take special care of the child if the parents were unable to — but these socially ascribed substitutes have nothing to do with baptism.

The services have a great deal to say about elders, and give the elder associated with the candidate (or his/her family) a key role in the service. This preserves the lay ministry — pastoral and evangelical — which was once provided by godparents and which, in the new services of the Unit- ing Church, is the responsibility of elders.

But there may be individuals or families who have Christian friends, preferably church members, who wish to take the traditional role, and the church should welcome this. These 'sponsors' might stand with the candidate or the family during the baptism, and associate themselves with the parents' responses at #8.



Photo: Eddy Marmur

has taken place, certain solemn and joyful responsibilities follow. And again the congregation affirms its own nature as baptised and committed people.

BAPTISMAL CANDLE

See above. The candle is presented to the child, but is then handed to a parent or sibling to hold. If it is possible for the family to leave the church with the minister, well and good. This is one practical reason why this act takes place at the very end of the service. If there is some delay before leaving, the candle could be put on a stand or in a tray of sand near the font, and collected before leaving. It would be a pity — and would negate its symbolism — to extinguish the light before it has been carried into the world!

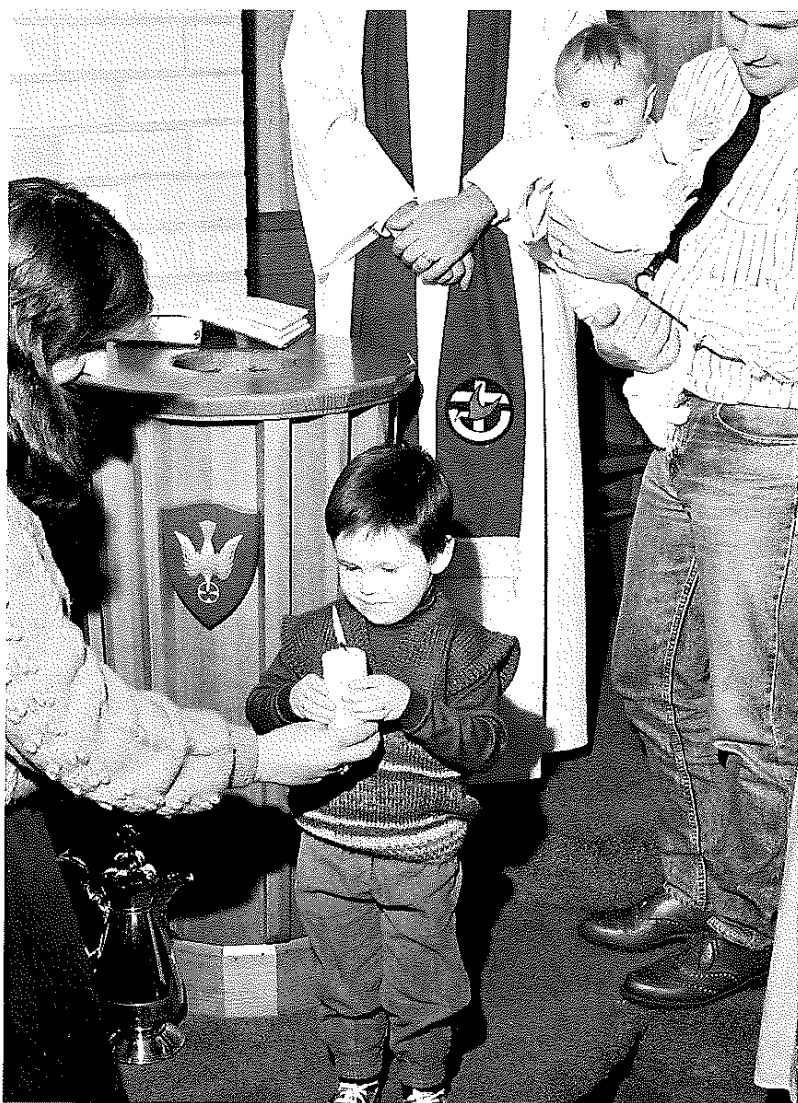


Photo: Eddy Marmur

Baptism and Easter

The reference in Note (i) to the use of this service in the Easter season is worth a further comment. The Uniting Church has not yet drawn on the rich traditions surrounding the celebration of Easter. A few congregations have experimented with a prayer vigil on the eve of Easter and have found it a memorable experience. But many of our people go on holidays; Easter, if it is marked at all, is not celebrated with one's home congregation. This is a loss, since it is the most important festival of the year. The various elements of the traditional Easter vigil — the lighting of the paschal (Easter) candle, the rich provision of readings tracing the history of our salvation, baptism or the reaffirmation of baptism, the proclamation of the resurrection, the Easter eucharist — could well be divided up and observed during the *fifty* days of the Easter season. This would mean that everyone in the congregation would be part of the Easter festivities, and some of the significant acts would be reserved for the non-holiday period.

A PERSPECTIVES

CONGREGATIONAL REAFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM

worship, but our own is never explicitly claimed. It is thus difficult to understand that baptism is a *process*, something begun at a certain date and time, and 'grown into', broadened and deepened as the years mature. This is a great loss.

Sister churches have kept the privileges and responsibilities of baptism before their people by an annual reaffirmation of baptism. This has been part of the Easter vigil service in the Roman Catholic Church in recent times. We only need to think of Luther's recollection, 'I am baptised' in moments of darkness and doubt to recognise that such an affirmation has a place in Protestant worship as well.

Note that the title of the service is Reaffirmation of Baptism, not of baptismal vows. It is the *event* of our baptism we recall, God's action and the responsibilities that it entails, not a particular form of words which may or may not have been used at our baptism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The three optional openings indicate that this service can be used on Easter Day, on Pentecost or on some other occasion. Each introduction evokes a particular aspect of the baptismal life.

2 REAFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM

The event of our baptism was not simply the administration of water in the name of the Trinity. It committed us to the gospel, and it was undertaken in the light of the gospel. Thus the three, crisp questions take us through the evangelical movement of faith: the call of Christ, the turning away from sin through him, and the renunciation of evil in his name. Some have thought that this last question smacks of an outdated view of sin, but the Commission took the view that this question deals directly with issues which everyone faces. There are choices to be made, and they can only be made through Christ, whose we are through baptism. Note the parallels with the renunciation and affirmation in the Baptism and Confirmation service (LB 21), and the commentary at that point.

The questions lead to the confession of faith, in the same form that it is found in our other baptismal services: a threefold set of questions based on the Apostles' Creed, ending with the statement that this is a faith we are not ashamed to declare. It is the Christian's pledge of allegiance. This perspective may help those who have thought that the creed is a kind of doctrinal contract, requiring our signature at the end of every clause. Rather, it is a shout of victory, and the affirmation of a bond with Christians past, present and future.

Then follow the responsibilities, the yoke of Christ joyfully shouldered. The congregation which regularly affirms these promises is truly apostolic, a witness to Christ in the world. They are like the promises made by adult candidates for baptism and confirmands in the first service (see LB 28).

3 RECOLLECTION OF BAPTISM

Our baptism may be recalled more vividly by the use of the sign of water. The Assembly has made it clear that there is no such thing as rebaptism. Baptism occurs once-and-for-all; but it may be recalled many times. Such a recollection was part of the daily prayers of the early Christians; some Christians enact it every time they enter their church, dip their fingers in water and make the sign of the cross as they move to a place for prayer.

Not all Uniting Church members will find this provision helpful, but it is there for those who will. Note that the use of sprinkling, which is discouraged by Note (viii) on LB 33 as a mode of *baptism* is recommended here. This is *not* baptism, it is a recollection. The use of large quantities of water, or of immersion, would almost certainly mislead some people and create confusion. Nothing apart from the human hand is suggested for its distribution! Nor is it necessary to do it with great solemnity — the nearest analogy is water-play for children. We are enjoying that part of creation which in the mystery of God's love is the sacramental sign of our belonging to Christ and creation made new.

The use of the sign of the cross, which follows baptism in the other services, is a possible alternative or additional symbol.



Photo: Eddy Marmur

7 PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Note that the full text of these prayers appears in PB 34–5, enabling full response. A prayer of commitment concludes the reaffirmation service.

8 THE PEACE

This greeting takes on a special meaning in this context — its original significance, in fact. Only the baptised could greet each other in the peace of Christ, the early fathers taught, because they were purified by Christ. This kiss was no ordinary human gesture. And only the baptised were admitted to the feast for which this was the welcoming gesture, the supper of the Lord. The introductory words before the general greeting state this very well.

For those who do not expect a liturgy book to provide for personal testimonies, it may be worth noting that the purpose of any liturgy is to ensure that the faith of individual people is set forth simply and clearly, in the context of what the church believes. That is more theologically demanding than most people think. One may speak off the cuff, or in the fullness of emotion, and one may seriously distort the gospel by what is said or left unsaid. To allow such deeply personal statements to be made, and at the same time to ensure that the whole faith is proclaimed: that is the special service of liturgy!

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES REAFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM

The service provides the possibility, in a way that a congregational service cannot, of making personal witness to a decision or a turning-point. One can make such an affirmation of faith without referring to baptism, of course, but the connections are there for a church which believes that the sacraments are God's gifts to the faithful, and proclaims the gospel of the one Lord Jesus Christ. Read carefully the Notes (LB 58, see PB 37) and Introduction (LB 59).

2 WITNESS

Again the rubrics say clearly what is intended.

5 BAPTISMAL CANDLE

In contrast to the Congregational Reaffirmation, another symbol of the baptismal services is reintroduced: the candle. A new candle, given on such an occasion, may be a striking reminder of what has happened to the person, and of Christ's promises. The candle is lit, and the promises claimed by the person him/herself.

6 REAFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM

See the commentary on the Congregational Reaffirmation above.

7 PRAYER WITH LAYING ON OF HANDS

Uniting in Worship describes confirmation as an affirmation of baptism. If confirmation is a first public affirmation, and if the Congregational Reaffirmation is an annual event, this service allows for a very personal re-embracing of the faith. The human gesture of laying on of hands is very appropriate. It is no empty gesture, but a sign of solidarity with Christ and with the church. Those on whom the church lays hands are never alone. Several optional sets of words to interpret this act are provided, and/or the Aaronic Blessing may be sung, as at baptisms.

8 INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

The witness of one person's recommitment is a demonstration of the power of the gospel 'to enable us to turn from the darkness of evil and to walk in the light of Christ' (LB 37). At this point, the minister may invite others to make a similar commitment. Prayer may then be offered, but the minister or other leaders may wish to counsel further those who come forward, and invite them to explore one of the provisions in *Uniting in Worship* for the affirmation of their faith. For those who respond, and have never been baptised, the service entitled 'A Celebration of New Beginnings in Faith' (LB 432) may be appropriate at an early point. It may be right for the person to consider baptism and to prepare for it at a later time.

It should be clear that this whole service is intended to be open and flexible, an evangelical expression of the faith in appropriate contexts.

The Scottish covenanters of the 16th and 17th centuries bound themselves by religious and political oaths to maintain the cause of their religion. The most significant was the Solemn League and Covenant between the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the English Commons and Westminster Assembly in 1643. Their professed aims included the maintenance of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland and reform in the Church of England, and the preservation of liberties of citizens, parliaments and the king. However, it also had strong elements of penitence and confession and the desire to be corrected and reformed by God. As a political measure it had limited success, but the idea of the covenant holds an important place in Scottish church history.

The making of church covenants was also characteristic of Puritanism in general in the England of this period. From this stream came English Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. The members of an Independent congregation made their covenant in writing, each subscribing his/her name; and this was sometimes done in the context of worship. The emphasis in these covenants was primarily on the relationship between members forming a congregation, rather than on their individual relationship with God. A covenant initiated a congregation but was not an important part of its continuing life. In recent years, some Congregationalists observed an annual Covenant Sunday. So the idea of making covenants came to John Wesley from his Puritan forebears. But there was also an influence from the high Anglicanism of his parents in his view that the sacraments too were covenantal in nature. One entered into the new covenant with God in Christ through baptism, and renewed this relationship every time one knelt at the Lord's Table. Whatever the sources of Wesley's service, he certainly made the covenant a signal feature of the Methodist revival. In his usage, the covenant was a solemn reaffirmation by the whole people of God of the one covenant which bound them to God, to Christ and to each other.

THE COVENANT PERSPECTIVES SERVICE

This service comes to the Uniting Church from the Methodist tradition though the idea of covenanting is shared by all three traditions.

The service in *Uniting in Worship* is based on the revision in the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* in the U.K., but the connection with baptism has been strengthened at a number of points, with the encouragement of theologians of the church of its origin.

THE NOTES

In Methodism, the Covenant Service is held annually, usually at the beginning of the calendar year. Occasionally Advent, as the beginning of the 'liturgical year', is chosen; equally Easter has been seen as an appropriate time, since it makes the link with the new covenant in Christ very clear. Because of summer holidays in Australia, the service may be planned for early February as church activities begin for the year. It would be an appropriate conclusion to a special period of mission, or a stewardship program.

Note (ii) is fair warning that few people will want to take on the obligations of such a solemn covenant without spending some time examining the words and their own life. The words of the covenant itself (LB 74) are also contained in *People's Book*, 50. Alternatively, they may be printed in the news sheet a week or more before the service, and the service explained. In this case, they should carry the following acknowledgment: From *Uniting in Worship — People's Book*, page 50; used by permission of The Methodist Faith and Order Committee and the Methodist Publishing House, London.

2 ADORATION

These well-loved words are modified from a service composed in 1922 by the Rev. George Robson. The congregational responses (and the prayers are printed in full in the *People's Book*, 44) are from the ancient hymn *Te Deum*, We praise you, O God.

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD

The suggested readings belonged to the 1936 edition of the service, and reflect the theme of covenant, but the lectionary readings for the day may be substituted.

THE COVENANT

The introduction makes it clear that the initiative for the covenant at the heart of this service is not ours, but God's. If the Uniting Church is a true flowing together of traditions, it will be right to say to a congregation of any origin, 'today we meet, as generations before us have met. . .'

The Introduction also declares that 'this covenant is renewed each time we meet at the table of the Lord' (LB 72). That is, the eucharist is not an addendum to the Covenant Service; the Covenant Service is a specific form of the eucharist.

The words from 'Beloved in Christ' to the covenant itself, are John Wesley's reworking of his Puritan sources, in modern English. For many they will evoke very deep memories, rather as the words of the hymns

of Charles Wesley or Isaac Watts do. For those who find 18th century English poetry less than helpful, so also will this service be. The service should not be rejected on those grounds — else a lot of fine writing will no longer be found to assist the church in its prayers. Some explanation and orientation will be needed. If worshippers allow the words to become familiar, by reading and prayer, they draw from the treasury of things old and new which Jesus reminded his disciples were the legacy of those who are fit for the kingdom (Matthew 13:52).

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Note (iii) is perhaps rather too understated: to make sense, the Covenant Service must bring us to the Lord's Table.

The idea of covenant has also been taken up in several other churches in our century, notably in the Churches of South and North India. It has been proposed as the form of reconciliation and union between churches, and has been incorporated into ecumenical services for Holy Week in England. However, its clearest parallel in other traditions is the annual renewal of baptism, so it finds a special place in the Uniting Church's several provisions for this purpose.

