

Consultation on Believers' Baptism

Kingston,
Jamaica
January 2015

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6 (NRSV)

A Consultation on Believers' Baptism¹ was held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Kingston Jamaica from January 8 through 10, 2015. It was convened specifically to consider ways in which the thinking among those traditions that have normally practiced only believers' baptism might have changed in the thirty years since the publication of the Faith and Order Convergence Text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982. Through the papers presented by each of the participating communions along with reflections from Faith and Order, the participants sought to discern the places of convergence in their understanding of the mode, meaning and practice of baptism as well as to name the hindrances to the general acceptance of those practices that do not accord with their own understanding.

The participants were grateful for the hospitality shown by the Jamaican churches, and to the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands for their explanation of how they live with two practices of baptism within one church.

Recognizing the historic nature of the event as the first conversation of its kind since the publication of *BEM*, the consultation was filled with a spirit of excitement as relationships were deepened and new learnings discovered. Common affirmations were celebrated and differences were met with an attitude of respect and wonderment. At the conclusion of the consultation, a new hope emerged for continued conversations and meaningful ecumenical advance.

- The participants gave thanks for *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in its call for churches to recognize in *BEM* and one another the "faith of the church through the ages;" and also the more recent document *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition* (2011).
- They recognized that relatively little time has been spent on mutual reflection by traditions which do not practice infant baptism and gave thanks for this opportunity for open and honest reflections on the meaning, practice and shared understandings of baptism.
- They give thanks to God for the ongoing call to oneness as made manifest through the initiative of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions, the general support of the participating communions and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.
- They further give thanks for the presenters from the Baptist World Alliance, the Church of the Brethren, the Disciples of Christ, the Mennonite World Conference, the Pentecostal movement and the Churches of Christ/Christian Churches, while

¹ It is noted that believers' baptism can be used for paedobaptism and credobaptism but for purpose of the consultation, believers' baptism denotes credobaptism

regretting the absence of the African Instituted Churches and their unique ecclesiological and cultural perspective.

- They give thanks for the spirit of listening and the mutual respect demonstrated by the participants and guests in the consultation.
- They give thanks to God for continuing to reveal God's mission and purpose through these conversations.

Having engaged in the process of discernment together they make the following affirmations:

- We continue to affirm with *BEM* that believers' baptism is the most clearly attested pattern for baptism in the New Testament.
- We acknowledge the growing acceptance, among some of our traditions, within the process of Christian initiation of a place for infant baptism.
- We recognize the challenge to believer-baptist churches to find ways of affirming the importance of children in the life of the church.
- We affirm the diversity of the meaning and mode that exists between and even within traditions who are practitioners of believers' baptism.
- We affirm the importance of acknowledging that baptism is into Christ and his body, the Church, as well as into a particular congregation and church tradition.

As there was great enthusiasm with those places of agreement so there was great interest in naming those areas that require further exploration. The participants noted various areas, which gave them new insights:

- The potential for new understanding of the image of the Christian life as a journey which includes initiation, participation in the Lord's Supper, the development of the fruits of the Spirit, and meeting with Christ at the end of time.
- The change that takes place when we understand the Holy Spirit as the source of our diversity as well as our unity.
- The need to give expression to the fact of our unity in Christ now alongside the reflection of this in the unity of the Church.

We invite the traditions from which we come to continue to explore the following questions:

- Is there dynamic equivalence between the journey from infant baptism to confirmation and from infant dedication/presentation to baptism of believers? And, if the primary purpose is to create disciples, does the order of the process matter?
- Can there be a thorough exploration of the ways in which ministers and others in local churches have to achieve a balance between fundamental theological insights and practical pastoral circumstances? Can there be a deeper appreciation of the wide variety of circumstances in which persons seek some kind of reaffirmation of commitments that may have been made by their parents?

- If our traditions were to allow “rebaptism” out of pastoral concern for a particular person, in what sense could it be said that we believe baptism is an unrepeatable act?
- If such “rebaptisms” were seen as a sign of recommitment, are there other existing rituals (such as foot-washing) that could be used to signify recommitment.
- Does there need to be a more developed, and more clearly articulated, theology of children and family in our believers’ baptism traditions?

The participants suggest that all churches within the one ecumenical movement be invited to consider:

- Whether they need to reexamine their understanding of ‘ordinance and sacrament’, ‘sign’ and ‘symbol’? Is a new vocabulary needed to talk about baptism? The participants felt strongly that the time had come for a fresh examination of the understanding of sacramentality.
- Since the traditions practicing only believers’ baptism are not the only ones in which what some churches regard as ‘rebaptism’ takes place, how do those other churches justify their practice?
- What is at the heart of baptism: believing, remission of sins, belonging, the action of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit...?
- In what ways, and with what limitations if any, can they affirm that diversity is a gift of the Holy Spirit as well as unity?
- Can we truly separate the question of baptism from the wider table of ecclesiological concerns?
- When a person is baptized, are they baptized into a local congregation, a tradition or the one body of Christ?
- What fears act as obstacles in the way in which discussion of the issue of baptism takes place?

We celebrate the fact that God continues to move in the church and is present at baptism in all our churches. We lament the continued divisions and barriers to mutual recognition as we seek to obey the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) and “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3),” so that we “might all be one (John 17:21).” We pray God might continue to guide and direct the Church as we seek to live fully into the one hope of our calling (Ephesians 4:4).

Joint statement issued by Consultation participants