

## **Reflecting on the Baptismal Covenant: Reflection and Engagement Activity**

The United Methodist Church's Baptismal Covenant is bold! Our church has a long history of care and concern for those who are oppressed. We believe that discipleship includes the work of justice.



Now, and since the earlier times of our Christian tradition, profession of faith expressed through baptismal vows, have been central to our initiation as Christians (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 6:11; Hebrews 10:22, for example).

**THE RITUAL:** Baptism is a sacrament, a sign/act of Christian initiation. Our traditional understanding of a sacrament is as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace. There are five New Testament metaphors of initiation: union with Jesus Christ, incorporation into the church, new birth, forgiveness of sin, and reception of the Holy Spirit. In the baptism ritual, the congregation and the pastor recite the words which explain, claim, and exclaim our beliefs as a Christian community. Baptism is an act of confession and faith for the person being baptized. This ancient and holy ritual keeps central to our faith the issues of freedom and equity, made possible by the work of the triune God, in whose name we are baptized. A close look at our vows shows that our discipleship is centered in the identity of Jesus Christ and upon God's work and witness of redemptive

justice in the world. From the time the person enters the covenant community of the church, as an infant or as an adult, the baptized is expected to affirm the power of God revealed in Christ: the same power that works against domination, violence, and all systems of hatred. These are life-long vows that we learn to keep through the means of grace and discipleship. This sacrament does not mince words, but is quite clear about our responsibility to live out our profession of faith, and to keep the promises we make. An excerpt of the ritual says:

*\*\*The pastor addresses parents/sponsors and those candidates who can answer for themselves:*

PASTOR: On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

PARENTS/SPONSORS/or CANDIDATE: I do.

PASTOR: Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

PARENTS/SPONSORS/or CANDIDATE: I do.

PASTOR: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

PARENTS/SPONSORS/or CANDIDATE: I do.

During the ritual, when the pastor asks if the person being baptized accepts the freedom and power gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression, this question is not to be spiritualized or trivialized. When a new member of the church answers, "yes," to this profound question of faith, they are agreeing to a life of working to change the structures of injustice and to heal the pain created by assumptions of privilege in their many forms. Baptismal vows charge each individual to create justice – not just in society, but in the church – by taking responsibility for injustice and holding people accountable for creating justice.

**THE BELIEVER:** When a person is baptized s/he is making a confession of faith. In the case of infants/children, those who have accepted the responsibility for nurturing these in the faith, take the vows for them until such a time as the child can confirm the promises made on their behalf. The person being baptized is asked to accept the freedom and power of God for the work of peace which comes from justice. Baptism welcomes the person into a life of working against injustice and oppression of every form. The work of justice has many forms within the church. Some people will be called to ministries of teaching or preaching, challenging people to consider racism just as evil as other forms of sin. Others will work at ministries of service and healing, reminding us that systemic injustice runs not only in society but in the church as well. Regardless of the forms of ministry, baptism is the ritual which keeps central to faith the necessity of justice work.

**THE COVENANT COMMUNITY:** Equally, when a person is baptized, the congregation is invited to reaffirm their faith commitment. This sacrament involves the entire congregation. All are renewed by water and the Spirit. No one is ever baptized alone. During this sign/act the congregation is encouraged to rekindle their boldness for the vows. The ritual reminds those who have already been baptized that we have accepted power given by God for the work of justice. United Methodist congregations empowered to baptize girls and women just the same as boys and men – for in the sight of God – female is not inferior to male. Likewise, both poor and rich, both gay and straight, and both old and young are baptized. It is in the church we learn there is one baptism for all persons. It is in the church, we first practice what it means. The covenant of baptism empowers entire congregations to work for justice, no matter where injustice remains. Baptism, individually and collectively, encourages us to practice our faith in tangible ways. Our daily walk of faith enables empowered actions to alleviate the suffering and hurt of our neighbors. Our baptism initiates us into the ministry of justice and for a right relationship with God and neighbor. We are called to live out lives of love, grace, equity, justice, respect, and mutual accountability as acts of justice and freedom. For us in the church, we might be quick to see where justice and freedom are lacking in our larger society. However, our call to justice must always also look inward. What injustices within the church will our baptism call us to rectify? What systemic inequities within our ordination processes or leadership development will our baptism call us to rethink and restructure?

**ENGAGING OUR BAPTISM FOR CULTURE CROSSING WORK (best done in small groups but can also be done individually):**

1. Consider the first vow of your baptism: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" Now consider it in terms of racism and anti-racism work: "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness; reject racism, racial terror, and racial genocide; and repent of any and all of the ways you have participated in, gained privilege from, or stayed silent in the face of racism?"
  1. FIRST – jot down how you FELT when you read the paragraph.
  2. NEXT – do you think the paragraph applies to you – why or why not?
  3. THEN – discuss with your group why you think it is difficult to connect "the spiritual forces of wickedness" with ideologies and expressions of racism.
  4. FINALLY – brainstorm your thoughts about what a full commitment to the first vow of your baptism would mean if "the spiritual forces of wickedness" included racism.
2. Consider the second vow of your baptism: "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"
  1. FIRST – brainstorm the impediments or objections to disrupting, dismantling, and destroying racism – write each impediment or objection on a sticky note and put them on the table – reflect with your group.
  2. NEXT – acknowledge whether or not you have ever considered "the freedom and power that God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression" as the freedom and power to disrupt, dismantle, and destroy racism – now that this has been presented to you – how, if at all, do you feel differently about your ability as a baptized person to do so?
  3. THEN – share with your group (or with at least 1 person in your group depending on time) a specific instance where you didn't interrupt an expression of racism, what stood in your way, and what you would do differently, based on the power of your baptism.
  4. FINALLY – brainstorm with your group how your church could interrupt an expression of racism based on the power of your baptisms.
3. Consider the third vow of your baptism: "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve

him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

1. FIRST – what does the phrase “people of all ages, nations, and races” mean to you? Share with a partner at your table.
2. NEXT – with your group, consider the members of your church – does your membership reflect “people of all ages, nations, and races?” Why or Why Not?
3. THEN – with your group, consider the members of your church’s immediate community – does your church’s immediate community reflect “people of all ages, nations, and races?” Reflect.
4. FINALLY – what are 3 specific, actionable, and measurable goals that your group can name and commit to in order that your church more accurately reflects and values “the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races.”