

Community of Christ

Baptism, Confirmation, and Church Membership Policies: Additional Guidance and Reflections

Inspired Counsel

- Inspired Counsel presents vision, principles, and direction that clarifies, deepens, or expands the church's understanding of God's nature and will.
- Once inspired counsel is included in Doctrine and Covenants, World Church officers are responsible for interpreting it and writing commentary and policies to implement it in the life of the church.

Policy Statements

- Writing church policy involves prayerful consideration on a range of issues. Of course, the overall vision of inspired counsel that leads to policy carries the greatest weight. Thought also must be given to what degree the church can respond to the counsel, given theological understandings, cherished traditions, divergent cultural perspectives, and sensitivity to pastoral concerns.
- Policies are church officers' best understanding of how to proceed at a particular time. They are subject to refinement if new insights emerge through the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Church policies are written in a directive style so they can be plainly understood, consistently applied, and more easily translated into many languages. This style may seem legalistic to some, but it provides clarity.
- It is not possible for a policy to address every detail, nuance, or potential question. People are encouraged to ask questions when faced with uncertainty or unanticipated situations. In fact, questions can greatly benefit policy refinement.
- Policy statements are not meant to describe all the rich theological, scriptural, and spiritual truths that undergird the policy. That content is provided in other documents created for that purpose.

Importance of the Sacrament of Baptism

- Nothing within the "Baptism, Confirmation, and Church Membership" policy statements lessens the importance of baptism in Community of Christ belief or practice. In fact, Doctrine and Covenants 164:3 calls church members to "examine the depth of your baptismal commitment" and "become fully immersed in the servant life of Christ." It

urges disciples to “live the meaning of your baptism daily.” Also, those who are not yet baptized are invited by the Living Christ to follow in the “way of righteousness and peace” and be “baptized of water and the Spirit.”

- Baptism remains an essential sacramental part of establishing sacred covenant with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The church will continue to teach and practice baptism by immersion in water, conducted by authorized priesthood, and followed by the sacrament of confirmation. This will be our standard practice throughout the church.

Acceptance of Other Christian Baptisms

- Following provisions of Section 164, we will accept into church membership through confirmation people who previously expressed commitment to Jesus Christ through Christian baptism. This path to membership is allowed in response to the evident action of the Holy Spirit to draw some Christians, who have strong testimonies of the power of their original baptisms, to seek church membership.

Doctrine and Covenants Section 20

- Some have expressed concern about the relationship of Doctrine and Covenants Section 164 to Section 20. Doctrine and Covenants 164 addresses the status of Section 20 in paragraph 2a:

Instruction given previously about baptism was proper to ensure the rise and cohesiveness of the church during its early development and in following years. However, as a growing number have come to understand, the redemptive action of God in Christ—while uniquely and authoritatively expressed through the church—is not confined solely to the church.

- The prospect of instruction given early in the church’s life being subject to further interpretation is clearly anticipated in Doctrine and Covenants:

...Instruction which has been given in former years is applicable in principle to the needs of today and should be so regarded by those who are seeking ways to accomplish the will of their heavenly Father. But the demands of a growing church require that these principles shall be evaluated and subjected to further interpretation. This requisite has always been present. In meeting it under the guidance of my spirit, my servants have learned the intent of these principles more truly.

—Doctrine and Covenants 147:7

Be respectful of tradition. Do not fail to listen attentively to the telling of the sacred story, for the story of scripture and of faith empowers and illuminates. But neither be captive to time-bound formulas and procedures. Remember that instruction given in former years is applicable in principle and must be measured against the needs of a growing church, in accordance with the prayerful direction of the spiritual authorities and the consent of the people.

—Doctrine and Covenants 161:5

You have already been told to look to the sacraments to enrich the spiritual life of the body. It is not the form of the sacrament that dispenses grace but it is the divine presence that gives life. Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be

unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church. In such matters direction will come from those called to lead.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:2d

- Section 164 is direction given in response to the needs of a growing worldwide church. It is further interpretation under the guidance of the Spirit. It honors the principle and practice of baptism as a basic step of covenant-making with God in Christ while not categorically dismissing all other Christian baptisms as “dead works” as described in Section 20.
- Through a process of prayerful study and deliberation that was blessed by the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit at the 2010 World Conference, the church clearly expressed consent and support of this direction as authoritative for the church today.

Other Methods of Baptism

- Some are concerned about provisions in the policy to accept baptisms “of water” that were done by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. In early Christian history, while baptism by immersion was a common practice, baptism by means other than immersion also occurred. Reference is made again to Doctrine and Covenants 162:2d, which states: “It is not the form of the sacrament that dispenses grace, but it is the divine presence that gives life.”
- After thorough exploration of several theological, scriptural, and practical issues around the world, the World Church Leadership Council determined the overriding factor in accepting other Christian baptisms was if the person participated through faith in the choice to be baptized “of water.”

Infant Baptism

- The question of infant baptism remains a concern for some, albeit, for different reasons.
- Our church is firmly grounded in the belief that children do not need to be baptized as infants to avoid eternal damnation as a consequence of original sin. Church leaders are firmly united in this belief.
- Churches that practice infant baptism do not all share that belief. Some baptize infants to emphasize that the grace of God acting through Christ blesses human life and makes us part of the Body of Christ, even when we are not aware of it.
- Some people in our fellowship were baptized as infants and later in life consciously chose that baptism as their initial Christian commitment. They want to become church members on the basis of their original baptism.
- Church leaders are not of one mind about what to do in these instances. Because there is a lack of clear direction and because our church has a deeply rooted belief about baptism as a faith choice that needs to be remembered, no provision is made for accepting infant baptism as meeting the requirement for church membership.

- While some are relieved with this outcome, others greet it with sadness. However, our inability to reconcile and resolve divergent perspectives around this issue should not keep us from moving ahead.

Resources for Alignment of Discipleship

- People requesting membership through confirmation based on their previous Christian baptism should understand the vision, mission, message, sacraments, and basic beliefs of the church.
- Resources they need to be familiar with are:
 - English
 - *Walking with Jesus: Disciples in Community of Christ* (2nd edition of *Walking with Jesus: A Member's Guide in Community of Christ*; available January 2011)
 - *Sharing in Community of Christ* (being revised based on new policies; available January 2011)
 - *We Share: Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs* (www.CofChrist.org/discernment/weshare/)
 - *Becoming a Generous Disciple*
 - French
 - *Nous Partageons: Identité, Mission, Message et Croyances* (www.CofChrist.org/francais/nouspartageons/nouspartageons.pdf)
 - Nous proclamons Jésus-Christ, Déclaration sur la Christologie
 - L'Écriture dans la Communauté du Christ
 - Nous Sommes Un, Nous Sommes Plusieurs
 - Principes de l'Histoire de l'Église
 - *Réponse Généreuse du Disciple*
 - Spanish
 - *Nosotros Compartimos: Identidad, Misión, Mensaje, y Creencias* (www.CofChrist.org/espanol/nosotroscompartimos/nosotroscompartimos.pdf)
 - Proclamamos a Jesucristo, una Declaración de Cristología
 - Escritura en la Comunidad de Cristo
 - Somos Uno, Somos Muchos
 - Principios de la Historia de la Iglesia
 - *RGD (Respuesta Generosa del Discípulo)*