

THE CHURCH IN BINLEY WOODS

Baptism Policy

Agreed by the Church Council 4th November 1997

An Anglican-Baptist Ecumenical Partnership is clearly going to need to have a collective view on how it will deal with the mutually exclusive aspects of its denominations' own baptism practices. These are, in the Anglican church, the baptism of those who are too young to have come to faith in their own right, and in the the Baptist church, the "re-baptism" of those whose previous baptism it does not consider to be valid.

This document therefore takes you through the various statements and practices of the Church in Binley Woods since it was formed in 1986. It tries to paint more of a picture than would be possible by a list of bare formal statements.

1. Normal Provision

The *Scheme* for the church at its inauguration stated the "normal provision". This was the only formal statement until the Constitution that replaced it following the 5-yearly Review of the LEP in 1992. Notice that the statement is very brief. It does not exclude other practices, but it does not elaborate on when they might or might not be appropriate.

The normal provision shall be a service of thanksgiving, or of dedication where appropriate followed by Baptism for those who come to faith in Christ and have not been baptised previously. Confirmation will be available for those who have been baptised previously, as also for the newly baptised.

The *Scheme* is now formally superseded by the newer Constitution and other documents, and the statement above has not been included in any of them. As you will see, the "new" Constitution does not make any statement about "normal provision". This means that what is now our "custom and practice" is not written down anywhere. But this document itself is now setting out in writing what we do, and will therefore probably assume an authority of its own!

2. The Constitution

The Constitution concentrates on matters of "order" in relation to the denominations. The phraseology was for the most part taken directly from the Guideline booklet for LEP constitutions current at the time. Its effect is to permit anything practised by any of the constituent denominations, leaving the church to decide what it does within that context. Its salient point is the affirmation of multi-denominational membership for new believers. It also takes pains to distinguish between membership of the wider church (through the denominations) and "voting" membership of the local church, which is dealt with immediately after this section in the constitution, and which is conferred in a separate "act" in the Church in Binley Woods.

Baptism shall be administered according to the rite and/or practice of one of the constituent denominations, or according to an ecumenical rite approved by the Sponsoring Body, and shall be set, in normal circumstances, within an act of congregational worship.

A service of Commitment/Confirmation shall normally be administered at a joint act of worship according to an ecumenical rite adopted by the Sponsoring Body.

Preparation shall be undertaken jointly and shall include specific denominational teaching and instruction.

The ecumenical rite in use in the Church in Binley Woods includes orders for Baptism, Renewal of Baptismal Vows, Anglican Confirmation, and a Public Declaration of Faith, within the one order of service, to be used as each occasion requires. Those undertaking both Believers' Baptism and Anglican Confirmation at such a joint service are thereby communicant members of all participating denominations.

3. Custom and Practice

So what have we actually been doing?

As it happens, there has not yet been an infant baptism nor a “re-baptism” in the church, though as you have seen, neither of these is excluded in the formal constitution, nor in the original statement in the *Scheme*.

3.1 Renewal of Baptismal Vows in Water

For people who have been previously baptised and who come to a new faith, the church has a service of Renewal of Baptismal Vows in Water, which was allowed by the diocesan Bishop (and the first time it was done, it was attended by the Suffragan Bishop who was there to conduct an Anglican Confirmation at the same service). This ceremony is undertaken in a way to make it clearly differentiated from a Baptism, even though it has so far always included full immersion. Apart from the form of words used, the distinctions are (1) the prayers and immersion are not performed by the Minister, who remains out of the water, and (2) the immersion is “forwards” rather than “backwards”.

The issue of re-baptism was debated by a very full church meeting, and the outcome was the decision to avoid it if at all possible. The main reason behind this decision was the desire to affirm those members of the church who continue to experience the validity and effectiveness of their Infant Baptism.

On one occasion a member of the congregation expressed a desire for re-baptism, and was arranging for this to happen elsewhere. Happily, our service of Renewal of Baptismal Vows in Water was chosen in the end, and was ultimately understood as preferable to a re-baptism.

3.2 Infant Baptism

As can be imagined, this was a major issue in the run up to the foundation of the church. At that time (around 1985-6), our position was most influenced by the thinking of Colin Buchanan and Michael Saward, both Anglicans who did not align themselves with the indiscriminate baptism of infants, but believed that a Biblical basis can be found for the baptism of a child where at least one parent is a Christian.

This became the position of our church. However, we had to have a “fair” way of distinguishing whether at least one parent is a Christian. And so the “rule” is that at least one parent must be a *member of the Church in Binley Woods*. And the qualifications for membership of the Church in Binley Woods are also expressed in such a way as to remove any discretion except in serious circumstances. Since we are not the Parish Church, we can put this policy into practice because we are not subject to the legal requirement to perform infant baptisms indiscriminately.

As is the way of these things, the Minister receives numbers of requests for infant baptisms from local people who do not satisfy our “rule”. Sometimes families resident in Binley Woods first approach the Parish Church directly, but the policy agreed between us is that they are then always directed to the Minister of the Church in Binley Woods, since we have pastoral responsibility for our area within the parish. So how do we approach this opportunity to engage in a dialogue with someone who has sought out the church in this way? The Minister himself has dealt with these situations, whilst keeping the church informed. He has always offered a service of Thanksgiving within the context of our Sunday morning service, but responded to the question of infant baptism by outlining our church’s position and drawing attention to the positive step the parents could take in deferring their child’s baptism while they find out more about Christianity. Usually the parents’ response is to have both services, going for infant baptism at the Parish Church some time after having a service of Thanksgiving in Binley Woods. Some of those have led to a longer involvement in our church.

3.3 The Minister

Clearly a Baptist Minister will not be required to baptise anyone who is too young to have come to faith in their own right. Our relationship with the Parish Church is sufficiently close that a member of the Parish clergy would not be out of place officiating in our church at the baptism of the infant of one of our members.