

Baptism by Immersion for Adults with Learning Disabilities

Support and Guidance for Church leaders



A note about baptism by immersion for adult believers: Prospects Across Scotland works with many different denominations and are aware that churches have different theology and practices regarding baptism, such as infant baptism, or sprinkling of adults. We do not endorse one way over another. These resources have been produced to support those churches who practice immersion baptism of adult believer. We may be able to help you if you require different resources.

It is a matter of great joy when a person with learning disabilities wishes to be baptised, however, it may throw up a number of questions for church leaders. We offer a few suggestions here:

Consent:

- If they have a legal guardian – support workers should be able to tell you - they would need to be in agreement about the baptism before anything else. This is a high priority. There is no point in discussing it and trying to gauge understanding if the guardian does not give permission for it.
- It is important to check if the person been baptised previously.
- If baptism is not possible, are there other ways to encourage and celebrate the person's faith in Jesus and belonging to the local church?

Relationship:

- Each situation will be unique. Take time to get to know the person. This is often best done informally, in a place that is comfortable and familiar to them. Try to get to know about their life story and faith journey.
- Include others who know and understand the person concerned. They may have a better understanding of the person's faith.
- If communication is difficult, see if there is anyone in the church who is able to help, with tools such as Makaton, Talking Mats, pictures etc. Try asking people working in care, Speech and Language, or education.
- It is essential that the person is not being coerced or under pressure to be baptised.

Faith and understanding:

- Be very careful about making any judgement on people's understanding of who Jesus is and what baptism means. Our experience with people with learning disabilities is that they know more than we think and often more than us - it's the expressing it that is hard for them.
- Lack of intellectual understanding is not a barrier. God sees and speaks to the heart.
- All people have been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and are individually known to Him (Psalm 139), Matthew (10:29-30)
- Faith is gift from God (Ephesians 2:8 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God')
- God loves a childlike, trusting response to Him (Matthew 18:2-4) 'He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven'
- What people with learning disabilities may lack in intellectual capacity is often outweighed by qualities such as welcome, love, friendship, honesty, joy, kindness, faithfulness, trust and enthusiasm – fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit.
- Does the person have the opportunity to receive regular Bible teaching and worship in ways that they can understand and respond to?
- Do they attend church regularly, and how meaningful does it appear to be for them? Try talking to family or carers about their perspective if unsure. What difference does coming to church, prayer or worship make? How do you see their relationship with God being demonstrated? It may be in subtle ways such as seeing the person becoming deeply peaceful during prayer.
- Is it possible for the person to be part of a small group where it might be easier to ask questions, explore and experience faith?
- Adapt your usual baptismal candidate preparation to suit the person. PAS has resources you may find helpful.
- Watching videos or attending baptismal services may aid understanding of what baptism is about. Getting other people to talk about their experience and reasons for baptism.

Practical Issues:

- Does the person have mobility issues, or are they a wheelchair user?
- Are there any additional health concerns to be aware of?
- Does the person enjoy water – do they swim, enjoy showers or baths? Will they manage to have their head under water?
- Is the person also autistic? Do they have any sensory issues with water, light or sound? With hands being laid on for baptism or prayer? With anxiety? It is very supportive to have a clear visual timetable of the service, the order of baptism and pictures of the people helping.

- If full immersion seems difficult, how else might baptism be practiced – sprinkling, water poured over hands, going in pool but just having water poured over them etc?
- Consider safety, such as slipping, entry into baptismal pools etc. Do a risk assessment.
- Temperature of water (if it's an outdoor baptism, the person should be prepared for cold water – a wetsuit may be appropriate)
- What to bring, what to wear (trainers will mitigate slipping) changes of clothes – make a checklist for carers – see a sample below.
- A visual timetable of the service may be helpful – see sample below
- What facilities for changing, drying hair and so on?
- Transport to and from the baptism

Celebration:

- Help the person choose a favourite song, chorus or hymn.
- There may be special prayers or readings that are meaningful for them.
- Who do they want to invite? They may need practical help to do this.
- Consider making the service as accessible as possible, using language the person can understand, and visual aids such as pictures, videos, or props. This is a good opportunity to invite other people with learning disabilities.
- Who would they like to help them with the actual baptism?
- Offer them the chance to share something of their faith with the church, in a way that is appropriate – such as a nod of the head in response to a question, a video story made in advance, or something read out by another person on their behalf testifying to their relationship with God. It doesn't have to be a spoken testimony on the day.
- Consider refreshments and something to eat afterwards. The person may need them, perhaps having been too nervous beforehand. It's also another way to mark the occasion.
- Videos and photos of the baptism are a good way for the person to remember and share memories of their baptism.
- Give a small gift such as a certificate, card or Bible in a suitable translation – or suitable picture book or worship CD if the person doesn't read.

Real Life Stories:

The minister met with **Jemma**, a woman with Down's Syndrome, in her own home, for conversations about baptism. This included washing the dishes together – an activity familiar to her, and one which helped explain baptism! She had limited capacity to intellectually understand the theology, she showed by her heartfelt worship, regular attendance at church over many years and daily prayer that she did indeed know and love Jesus. Full immersion would have been physically impossible, so she was sprinkled with water instead. She was a much-loved member of the church, who was able to offer friendship and welcome.

Robert and Callum were both helped to prepare 1:1 for baptism by their pastor. He took them for coffee and cake at a local café several times to talk about baptism with them. Robert says: *"It wasn't about me, it was about Jesus. I didn't want to be at the centre"* At the service the language was 'user-friendly' so that both they and the congregation could understand. Both Robert and Callum were baptised by immersion. They become members of their church and help by welcome at the door, and in many practical ways.












Gary was well-known to a local church for many years, coming to its café almost every day. He had attended other churches previously, but having built up friendships, he decided to attend this one after lockdown. He attended every Sunday and came along to many other events too. He did the Alpha course, and during that he asked to be baptised. The pastor met with him individually. He, and his support worker also met with two other church leaders that he had friendships with, to watch videos of baptism, and help him think through the practical issues – this church uses a local loch for baptisms! They acted out the baptism with a third person, so he knew what would happen. They made a visual timetable and checklist for him, so he knew what to bring and what to expect. They also ensured that he could go first, to reduce any anxiety. He answered a couple of simple questions before being baptised and prayed for. He was delighted to be presented with a Bible, with a simple translation, as a gift afterwards. He continues to be involved in the life of the church.








When **my daughter**, who has Down's Syndrome, was baptised - I thought the roof of the church would be blown off by the loud cheering and encouragement of the folks in the church - they were never a quiet bunch in that church but even they surpassed themselves!!

When **Nelson** joined a new church, and saw others getting baptised, he told the pastors that he would like to be baptised too. They contacted his guardian who was able to tell them that he had already been baptised. She said that he would love to be the centre of attention by being baptised again.

Examples of visuals used to help get ready for an outdoor baptismal service:

My baptism

	I am going to be baptised on Sunday 20 th August
	After church, I will go to the loch. Claire will sort a lift for me and my support worker.
	I must take a picnic lunch and drink and a bag with the things on my checklist.
	I will eat when I arrive, with everyone else
	At around 14:45, the baptisms will start
	I can say something about why I am being baptised if I want to
	Duncan and Chris will go into the water with me. They will take my arm if I need it. Duncan and Chris will baptise me. I will be the first person to be baptised.
	When I get out of the water, my support worker will have a towel for me
	I will get dry and into my warm clothes
	I might want a warm drink and hat and gloves in case I am cold.
	Once the baptisms are finished, I will be taken home

For my baptism, I need to bring with me:	
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Picnic lunch and drink
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Warm drink
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Big towel
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Change of clothes that are warm for afterwards
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Warm hat and gloves (in case I am cold afterwards)
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Picnic blanket
<input type="checkbox"/>	 Joggers, polo shirt and old trainers to wear for my baptism



We used <https://globalsymbols.com/> to produce our resources.