

NCCA Faith & Unity Commission

Summary of Commission's Responses to  
"One Baptism Towards Mutual Recognition (A Study Text)."  
(9th Assembly WCC, Porto Alegre, Brazil, February 2006)

## 1. Contents

This response paper is in four parts:

1. List of contents
2. Introduction to a response to "One Baptism Towards Mutual Recognition (A Study Text)" from the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) Faith & Unity Commission
3. The Commission's short summary of the ecclesial implications of the document
4. A full summary of responses to Questions §§83-108 by Members of the NCCA Faith and Unity Commission.

## 2. Introduction.

The very first sentence in this document makes it clear that it is a study paper and not a convergence text. It is a document which attempts to encourage another level of discussion about baptism and baptismal practice thirty years on from "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," the highly significant convergence document produced by the World Council of Churches in 1982. As such, it invites the reader to place baptism firmly within the broader context of Christian initiation which as a whole consists of pre- baptism formation, water baptism, chrismation/confirmation, Eucharist, and post-baptismal formation. The paper takes this comprehensive approach as a way of helping churches identify aspects of initiation that are shared with other churches, even if there are divergences in the way they celebrate baptism per se. The paper then uses this broad perspective on baptism/ initiation to challenge churches to think again about what it means to claim mutual recognition of baptism, theologically, ecclesiological and pastorally. Further, it explores the challenges of achieving among Christian churches mutual recognition of baptism, it revisits the obstacles to mutual recognition that still exist, and considers its implications in terms of ecumenical practice.

The document provides the following sections:

Section I which reconsiders the meaning of "recognition" in a general sense within the ecumenical movement;

Section II which provides the biblical background to and liturgical history of baptism;

Section III which examines the significance of baptism: its function, sacramentality, and its relationship to the notion of church membership;

Section IV which considers God's initiative in baptism and examines themes of Christian formation;

Section V which suggests ways for churches to achieve a fuller mutual recognition of baptism. This section contains questions which invite churches to examine what changes have taken place since the adoption of the World Council of Churches publication "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (BEM) in 1982

Section VI which reiterates the goal of ecumenical endeavour *viz* "full visible unity as realised in Eucharistic fellowship."

The paper reiterates areas of general convergence in understanding baptism such as that it should be administered with water in the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It acknowledges the common recovery of the catechumenate (instruction in the faith prior to baptism). It celebrates the fact that mutual recognition of baptism arises from an acknowledgement of the shared apostolicity of churches, and poses the challenge to the churches to discern the apostolicity of the rite itself as it is placed within the larger pattern of Christian initiation.

The range of meanings of baptism is explored i.e. that it not only joins the candidate to Christ, but "actualises the whole history of salvation." The pneumatological and trinitarian aspects of baptism are affirmed, as well as that it is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism is recognised as leading to the reconciliation of Christians with God and with one another, as well to the entrustment of the candidate with the mission of the church. Baptism it is suggested also "signals a critical starting point in the believers' engagement with the ethics of the kingdom of God." It is the forerunner of full participation in the life of the Christian community, and prefigures life-long growth of the baptised person into Christ.

The paper then suggests that the mutual recognition of baptism is fundamental to the churches' search for visible unity. It offers in sections §§83-108 questions which help the churches explore more deeply those areas where differences still exist.

### **3. Ecclesial Implications of Members' Responses to "One Baptism Towards Mutual Recognition."**

*Disclaimer:*

"There is room and space in the World Council for the ecclesiology of every church which is ready to participate in the ecumenical conversation and which takes its stand on the Basis of the Council, which is a "fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour." (Toronto Statement, WCC, 1950, Clause 3).

Nothing that follows in sections 3 and 4 of this document should be seen to undermine the tenet of inclusion which pressed above and which is underpins all ecumenical discourse.

1. Members agree that considering baptism as part of an ongoing process of initiation and formation in the faith points up ecclesial commonalities between churches even when their baptismal rites differ. An example of such an ecclesial commonality is the seriousness with which formation within the baptismal community is viewed across denominations.
2. Viewing baptism in this context also diminishes the need to consider differences of practice with respect to baptism e.g. distinctions between infant and adult baptism
4. It also allows an appreciation of baptism in both its personal and communal dimensions.
5. Mutual recognition of baptism is determined by generally agreed criteria: the use of water and of the name of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
5. "Spiritual baptism," non-elemental or sacrament-of-the-whole-of-life approaches to baptism found in some churches are deeply respected by the so-called mainstream churches. These ways of understanding baptism do not undermine the love, respect and essential goodwill between members of the ecumenical movement. It is probably fair to say however, that the exact nature of the ecclesial implications of significant divergences from orthodox baptismal practices have not been determined or articulated.
6. Baptism is into the whole body of Christ yet it is lived out within the life of a particular denomination or local ecclesial community.

7. a. Recognition of baptised Christians of other denominations implies recognition of the validity of the baptism they received.
7. b. Recognition of baptised Christians of other denominations implies recognition of the Church in/by which the baptism took place.
8. Neither the exact nature of the practice of confirmation within churches, nor the choice of the language of "sacrament" or "ordinance" with respect to baptism will undermine the mutual recognition of baptism per se.
9. Mutual recognition of baptism between churches does not necessarily imply either informal invitation to share in one another's Eucharistic celebrations, or full ecclesial communion, both of which depend on other ecclesiological convergences, examples of which might be mutual recognition of ministries/orders and the degree of communion that churches share.
10. Whether informal Eucharistic sharing is encouraged may depend on whether churches see Eucharistic sharing as an effective sign of ecclesial unity or an anticipatory sign of ecclesial unity hoped for, but not yet formally reached.

**4. Appendix: A Summary of Responses to Questions §§83-108 by Members of the NCCA Faith and Unity Commission.**

§83 *With baptism placed in the larger contexts of Christian initiation and the believer's life-long growth in Christ, can churches ask afresh the question, "Can we now recognise the baptism of other churches?"*

Members welcomed the broader context for considering baptism (i.e. within a process of life-long formation in the Christian faith). This contextualisation de-emphasises the distinctions between infant baptism and believer's baptism, and allows a consideration of baptism in both its personal and communal dimensions. The majority of members' denominations recognised baptism that is water baptism in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Whether immersion in water (sometimes three-fold) takes place as part of the rite is still a significant criterion for recognition in some traditions. For those for whom a form of "spiritual baptism" (without water) or "internal change" is affirmed, there is still pain at putative "non-recognition" (notwithstanding deep respect) of their baptismal understanding by the "mainstream" traditions.

§ 84 a. *How does the liturgical practice of your church reflect its theological understandings of baptism, Christian initiation, and the process of continuing growth into Christ?*

For the churches of most members, baptism (whether of infants or adults) is understood as the rite of incorporation into Christ as well as the beginning of an ongoing process of initiation and/or a lifelong process of formation in the Christian faith, each of which is offered through participation in the life of a particular tradition through a local faith community. (Even the funeral rites and practices of many churches, in their use of paschal candles and funeral palls for example, reflect the baptismal identity of the deceased person, and their belonging to the community of the baptised). Diverse views concerning how the various stages of initiation are realised, and what the culmination of a Christian initiation process might be, are inscribed into the various liturgical rites and practices of the traditions. Beliefs and practices about confirmation/chrisation, admission to Holy Communion and about attribution of membership of the Church illustrate these differences. However none is felt to present a stumbling block serious enough to unsettle the theological consensus around the meaning of baptism.

This theological consensus is manifest in the many shared elements that may be found within baptismal liturgies such as renunciations of sin/evil, affirmations/confessions of faith, and thanksgiving. It is also

manifest in the seriousness with which all traditions view ongoing formation in the faith of all the baptised.

§ 84 b. *How far does finding similar patterns in the life of other churches enable your church to discern common theological understandings which would lead to a mutual recognition of baptism?*

Roman Catholic and Lutheran baptismal rites are similar to those of the Anglican Church. The Uniting Church has similar patterns of baptism, though has some ambivalence about the place/ necessity of confirmation. Eastern Orthodoxy uses a three-fold rite even for infants which then enables immediate participation the Eucharist. Many Protestant churches insist on adult baptism and/ or full immersion and may or may not have a rite of confirmation. Some churches believe in inner/spiritual baptism where there is no water use or, necessarily, any specific baptismal rite. This paper challenges the Christian denominations to widen their understanding of baptism beyond the rites themselves, to explore the implications of those rites for the whole of the Christian life; and to discern commonality against the background of the wider vista of processes of initiation and formation, commonality which is discernible across the gamut of variant practices.

§85 a. *How does the celebration of baptism in your church make clear that baptism is into the whole body of Christ, and not simply into a local congregation and a particular denomination?*

The rites of baptism used by most member's denominations are supported by prayer, blessing, and exhortation which make explicit that the baptised are now members of the Church universal through their incorporation into Christ. In no baptismal liturgy described by members of the Commission was denominational identity or allegiance referred to.

§85 b. *How does your church's understanding of membership reflect this understanding of baptism as entry into the one body of Christ?*

As the fullness of the body of Christ is understood to be present in the life of the local faith community, membership of the local church through baptism is understood to signify membership of the body of Christ. This does not mean of course that the canonical norms of any one denomination bind (or privilege) members of any other. Some churches would claim that that the church as the body of Christ can never be divided, but this does not obviate the fact that unity has been impaired and must be restored.

§86. *How far does recognition of a person as a baptised Christian imply some recognition of the baptism which they received, and of the church in which it was performed?*

The recognition of a person as a baptised Christian naturally implies acceptance of the baptism they received as well as of the ecclesial community within which they were baptised. The effectiveness of the baptism is accepted on the ground of the faithfulness to the apostolic faith of the church in which it was administered. Mutual recognition of baptism reflects ecclesial recognition.

§87 *How do congregations actually express the fact that they recognize the baptism of other churches?*

They might do this through formal statements by church leaders and by participation in ecumenical dialogue at national and international levels. At the local level congregations might share in ecumenical services; and celebrations/local feasts and festivals. Church communities might share resources, pray together and for one another; and might participate in shared mission/advocacy.

All these ways of working together imply recognition of a shared baptism. Other more explicitly theological expressions of recognition of baptism are: making public an invitation to communion to those who might be visiting from other denominations through the text of service booklets and announcements in the liturgy for those who are able to do this; by not requiring re-baptism when

people enquire about membership; by the use of ecumenical baptism certificates, and possibly through shared catechesis which the members viewed as appropriate for formation in the apostolic faith, but that would need to be supplemented by catechesis into the traditions and practices of local church communities.

§88 a. *Do churches which recognise the baptism of other churches, admit members from those others to Eucharistic communion? If so, what further expression could this recognition find? If not, what additional requirements must be met for such admission to take place?*

Some Christian denominations do invite baptised and communicant members of other churches who attend their services to participate fully in the Eucharist. (This is true of the Anglican and Uniting Churches). Others like the Lutheran Churches do if certain faith stipulations are satisfied. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches are unable to extend this invitation. How each church tradition determines this is posited on their view of how Holy Communion and ecclesial communion are linked. For some, Holy Communion signifies a sharing that precedes ecclesial communion and expresses hope for its realisation; for others Holy Communion is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion and is in fact its visible expression. It depends on whether churches see the Eucharist as a sign of unity or a way towards unity.

§88 b. *Can we speak of “degrees of communion”, or “degrees of recognition”, in which the recognition of baptism is the first step towards “full communion” marked by the sharing of the Lord’s Supper?*

The phrase “degrees of communion” is helpful, as it signals that the grace of God is at work among all people and that the unity of the Church has not been lost. It also reminds us that the unity which we have been given is impaired or partial and that we have a duty to continue to seek reconciliation.

“Degrees of recognition” is however rather ambiguous in this context as it cannot (logically) apply to baptism *per se*. Clearly, however, recognition of baptism is the first step towards full communion and it is this that encourages the ecumenical commitment to ongoing, dialogues, shared study and common witness.

§89 *What patterns have developed in your church or local congregation that help it celebrate its baptismal foundations, and renew its commitment to its baptismal faith and mission?*

Where baptism takes place within normal Sunday worship and involves a whole worshipping congregation the implication is that they will be involved in responsibility of care and fellowship towards the newly baptised. The baptism service itself includes a reaffirmation of the Apostles Creed. An opportunity to re-affirm baptismal vows is offered once a year in most denominations during Easter services following the Lenten season of repentance and of renewal of the baptismal commitment. In addition to this some communities would include a form of re-affirmation of baptismal vows during patronal festivals or other key celebrations. Routinely, the affirmation week by week of the Nicene Creed in the Eucharistic services of many churches, and therefore the reminder of “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins” provides a direct reference to a congregation’s baptismal foundations.

§90 a. *If your church practices confirmation, how clearly does it understand its specific origins and development within the tradition of your church?*

The specific origins and development of confirmation as a rite of initiation is understood by the clergy, leaders and those theologically trained in the churches which practise it. Those preparing for confirmation ought also to be made aware of its meaning and provenance. The fact that it is a rite separated from the original three-fold initiation (baptism, Eucharist and confirmation) in the early centuries of the Church makes it difficult to ascertain its theological meaning and value as a separate

rite in today's church, and probably explains the range of ways it is, and has been, understood in different Christian denominations.

§90 b. *Have you developed your theology of confirmation in a way that reinforces, rather than undermines, the fundamental importance of baptism?*

In the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II confirmation has been set firmly within the rites of initiation of the Church of which baptism is the primary rite. The Orthodox Church has never separated chrismation and the laying on of hands from the baptismal rite, and has no need of an additional rite of confirmation. The Anglican Church sees confirmation as a means whereby those baptised as infants, might make an adult affirmation of faith which, when accompanied by the laying on of hands of the bishop, imparts with sacramental efficacy the grace needed to empower a candidate for a life of Christian service. There is a move by the Australian Anglican bishops to return to a situation of original single-rite baptismal practice for adult candidates, administered by the bishop, in which the practices of water baptism in the name of the triune God would be followed by chrismation and the laying on of hands, which have more recently been associated with Confirmation. In the Uniting Church any teaching for confirmation or for the ongoing need for learning/discipling would reinforce the fundamental importance of baptism.

§90 c. *Can the mutual recognition of baptism be furthered by the awareness that confirmation, whenever it is practiced, is set within the broader context of the believer's life-long growth into Christ?*

Of the members of the Commission whose churches practice confirmation no one has suggested that a variety of approaches to and understanding of confirmation constitutes a barrier to mutual recognition of baptism.

§92 *How is it possible for a person to share in the constitutive meal of the church, the body of Christ, without having been incorporated into the body through baptism?*

Within most mainstream churches those who are not baptised would not be encouraged to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, as this sacrament is recognised as being spiritual food for those who are incorporated into Christ and are participants with Christ in the life of faith. (Some see Eucharist as a culmination of Christian initiation which begins with baptism). In most of our churches, occasionally, people do come forward to receive the sacrament ignorant of the fact that, technically, they are not spiritually prepared for it. Here God's grace is understood to redeem any anomaly. There is however also a concern to prevent an ongoing situation by which a person might in ignorance "profane the body and blood." (I Corinthians 11:27). This situation would therefore be handled pastorally, and one hopes with sensitivity.

§93 *Is it appropriate to require the baptism of those who, in their previous church, were numbered among the baptized?*

In keeping with the spirit of BEM and of various local covenants and agreements most churches recognise the baptism of those who were baptised with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It would not be deemed appropriate to require that these Christians be re-baptised.

§94 a. *How does membership in your church relate to membership in the Body of Christ as a whole?*

Baptism it is understood primarily as the rite of incorporation into Christ, and not the rite of incorporation into a particular denomination. Membership of the local church is not the focus, although it is usually understood as implicit within the condition of being a member of the church universal.

In addition some denominations use the language of “membership” to denote recognition of the completion of a rite of passage which attributes to a baptised person a new identity as an adult Christian, and requires a renewed confession of faith and/or avowed intention to support the local church community in a variety of ways. (Sometimes a rite of “confirmation” is the liturgical expression of this “rite of passage”). This, whilst often deeply significant for the new “member,” does nothing to add to their baptismal status of member of the Church of God through incorporation into the Body of Christ.

*§94 b. Does the requirement for rebaptism take sufficient account of God’s action in a person’s life, from the time of their prior baptism until now?*

Following general affirmation of the spirit of the BEM document (1982), few Christian churches who are active in the ecumenical movement would require re-baptism of those Christians who have been baptised in another church. In fact most consider baptism unrepeatable. There may be some situations where the evidence of an earlier baptism cannot be produced and/or the baptised person is unclear whether it did actually take place. In these situations some churches would offer a “conditional” baptism: conditional in case the earlier baptism never actually occurred. Some Christian Churches believe so strongly that full immersion is the only valid expression of baptism and might therefore insist on “re-baptism” of new members. Arguably it could be said that such a stance takes insufficient account of God’s work in a person’s life from the time of their prior baptism until now, although this might be disputed by those churches whose convictions might seem slighted by that suggestion.

*§94 c What pre- and post-baptismal catechesis is appropriate in cases of rebaptism?*

The catechetical/formational processes of most Christian churches are flexible and designed around individual stories and life experiences, and would hopefully accommodate a situation where “re-baptism” might be deemed appropriate.

*§95 How can your church help such persons to find ways in which they may experience a renewal of their baptismal faith?*

Aside from the renewal of baptismal vows on Easter Sunday (which can also be done on other occasions throughout the year), the Church offers many opportunities to grow in one’s faith – encouragement to regular worship and discussion of texts, regular study sessions throughout the year, and encouragement to continue study at a local theological college.

*§97 In cultures where the choice of godparents has become a “favour” to family members and friends, or a matter of social custom, are there ways in which churches may explore the appointment of additional sponsors who are active within the life of the Christian community?*

Some churches have baptismal liturgies that do not include sponsors. In the majority of churches proposed sponsors are involved in the preparation of the baptismal candidate and (if an infant) of their family. The demand of the sponsor to live out their own baptismal faith in company with the candidate is then made clear, and most sponsors readily accept the role and commit to it with conviction and joy. In some churches, a distinction is made between a sponsor who is a committed practising Christian, and a “special friend” who is a person who has love and goodwill for the candidate but who has little connection with the faith. These latter are acknowledged as attendants (and witnesses) to the baptismal rite, and they are encouraged to support the candidate by their presence at the baptism, but do not share the spiritual undertakings of a Christian sponsor. Where candidates or parents of infants seeking baptism are unable to find a committed Christian sponsor, the Christian minister might explore with the family whether a member of the congregation could fulfil that role.

Some churches have clear guidelines governing their ongoing support of these families, though in most cases parents themselves generally work this out within their own family environments through the

individual prayers and customs they develop in the nurturing of their children. There is often encouragement by the two faith traditions represented in the family that parents cooperate with one another in sharing their traditions with their children, and attending different feasts/festivals in both churches.

§100 a *How can the church discern the faith of persons who are unable to articulate and communicate their faith verbally?*

Faith is discerned in these participants on the basis of the evidence of their being present at worship, and it can often be witnessed through the joy of their participation. Where faith is not outwardly discernible the strength of the faith of parents and carers on behalf of these candidates for baptism would be understood to be operative. This mirrors the method by which faith is discerned to be present in the situation of an infant baptism.

§100 b. *In what ways does your church provide for the incorporation of persons with disabilities into the life of the Christian community?*

The Church recognises that people with disabilities are human beings, people fully included within the love God has for the whole creation. Inclusion is assured by churches offering opportunities to participate in church services and events through the provision of transport or other assistance and through the addressing of physical accessibility issues. Ongoing pastoral care and a ministry of encouragement would customarily be offered to people with disabilities. The danger though is that this response might be limited to the needs of individuals in particular parishes rather than representative of “pro-activity” towards accommodating groups of people with disability.

§102 *Has the use of the term “sacrament,” or of “ordinance,” by another church prevented your church from recognising its baptism? If so, can the reflections in this study document help towards mutual recognition?*

Churches which base their acceptance of baptism on whether water was poured and the Trinitarian formula pronounced by the celebrant would not consider the use of either terminology as a barrier to recognition.

§103 a. *Which variations in baptismal practice reflect a healthy diversity within the one Body of Christ?*

The Church generally has tolerance of the following different practices: both infant baptism and adult baptism; how the water component of baptism is used i.e. sprinkling, pouring or full immersion; baptism through the use of still or running water. The presence (or not) of anointing, and, if present, whether with oil or water.

§103 b. *Which variations reflect a significant divergence from acceptable practice, a divergence which threatens the unity of Christ’s Body?*

A significant divergence from acceptable practice for many churches would be to baptise in a name other than Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

§108 a. *How can churches discern and respect the authentic Christian witness of those who follow alternate baptismal practices?*

Most churches are deeply respectful of denominations whose intention is to be part of the biblical tradition, even if their baptismal practices might diverge from traditional forms. Their practice would be respected if not necessarily recognised. “By their fruits you shall know them.” People imbued with the Spirit of God will manifest the fruits of the Holy Spirit as outlined in Galatians 5:22. Authentic Christians will manifest some or indeed many of those fruits. They are to be accepted and celebrated.



Thus while a certain degree of communion between the churches can be discerned, there are also limits to that communion.

§108 b. *How far are some churches prepared to modify their practice for the sake of the unity of the church?*

If the modification of practice is seen as merely a pragmatic response to the fact of divided churches, then while it would help restore unity, it would still leave potential points of division at a later date. A modification of practice based on a genuine renewal of church life would have a more lasting impact on the unity of the church.

Noted concern from The Salvation Army Delegate

“Where BEM included boxed comments around areas of divergence and comment by the Salvation Army and the Religious Society of Friends, the present document (“One Baptism...”) seems to leave this (the) non-element/sacrament-of-the-whole-of-life position without a voice. However this voice is expressed in statements such as that issued by the WCC’s Faith & Order Commission following the Breklum Meeting in 2009: “There are those churches whose ministry does not include the use of outer sacraments but see themselves as part of the sacramental life of the church.””

*National Council of Churches Faith & Unity Commission,  
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