

Towards October 2024 Synthesis



Ecumenical Gathering hosted by the
Archdiocese of Armagh and Diocese of
Dromore

Overview

This event, hosted by the Archdiocese of Armagh and the Diocese of Dromore on 25th April 2024, aimed to offer a model of local ecumenical dialogue to explore how synodality might strengthen our collective Christian contribution to reconciliation and the healing of our communities. It was supported by the Council for Ecumenism of the Irish Episcopal Conference, the Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Meeting, the Irish School of Ecumenics and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Participants included representatives of local inter-church groups in the neighbouring areas.

It was an occasion to celebrate the friendship and the sense of common mission that already exists between Christians in Ireland and reflect on the challenges and opportunities for our future work together, inspired by the synodal process.

The work was set in the context of the synodal process in the Catholic Church as it has been experienced in Ireland and globally to date, with an overview of the historical context, the objectives of the current Universal Synod and the findings from the listening that has taken place so far at all levels of church life, from the local to the national to the global.

Particular emphasis was placed on the significance of journeying with other Christians as part of this synodal process, and the way in which these inter-church relationships contribute to peace and reconciliation, with particular significance in the Irish context.

The challenges identified in the Irish synodal process, such as the outreach to those who have walked away from the Church, the legacy of the abuse crisis, the welcoming of migrants and refugees, transparency and participation in governance – notably for women and young people – and supporting families are all shared in different ways with Christians from other traditions.

The contribution of the synodal methodology, especially the Conversations in the Spirit, and the circularity of the listening – including the local church throughout the process and allowing people to confirm that they have been heard correctly – was explained, with an invitation to those from other denominations to experience the methodology in practice and explore what it might offer to our inter-church dialogues.

Learning from the experiences of other Christians

In our journeying together with other Christians in the synodal process, we are encouraged to make space and to take time to listen to their experiences to explore what we can learn from those aspects that are shared and also from our differences.

On this occasion Rev Tony Davidson from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland shared about a project entitled *Considering Grace*. This project collected 120 stories to help explore how the Presbyterian Church in Ireland had responded to the four decades of conflict in Northern Ireland. Rev Davidson reflected on Jesus' encounter with the Woman of Samaria (*John 4:5-30*) noting how, in this encounter, Jesus came as one seeking help. In undertaking this exercise in listening and reflection those guiding the process for the Presbyterian Church were conscious of the many ways in which they needed help: particularly academic expertise, funding and from people willing to share their stories.

The stories were shared by Presbyterians from different backgrounds, including ordained ministry, lay people, members of the security forces, those working as first responders (e.g. doctors, nurses, undertakers), victims and survivors, perpetrators of violence, politicians and quiet peacemakers (e.g. teachers, civil servants). Christians are called to approach the past through the lens of the Gospel, seeking to remember therapeutically in a way that contributes to healing, and to remember truthfully, as a contribution to the work of justice.

The project also included interviews with people from outside the Presbyterian Church invited to contribute as 'critical friends'. Rev Davidson spoke of the need for outside help to remember faithfully and avoid the trap of listening only to ourselves, remaining in the echo chambers of our own prejudice. He recalled the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak with the Word of God." The process required the Presbyterian Church to face with courage the challenges about instances where victims of violence felt neglected or abandoned, or experienced pressure to forgive rather than meaningful accompaniment in their suffering. There were challenges about divergence in experiences between local congregations and denominational structures, notably a disconnect from working class communities. Questions were raised about the failure to adequately challenge sectarianism and to prepare people for ministry in the context of the reality of conflict.

Since the completion of the project, the sharing of the stories with people from diverse backgrounds, including those who were perpetrators of violence, has provided opportunities to reflect on our shared humanity as revealed in experiences of suffering.

Rev Davidson concluded by reflecting that during the period of the penal laws of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century in Ireland, the Presbyterian and Catholic churches had a shared experience of discrimination, exclusion and suffering. In later years, as these

churches gained influence and became powerful they became rivals and this shared experience was largely forgotten. Today they are coming together again in a shared experience of weakness and marginalisation with a new appreciation for the need to build relationships with our fellow Christians from a place of humility and grace.

Learning from our experience of inter-church relations on the island of Ireland

Dr Damian Jackson, General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches, affirmed the challenge and the opportunity conveyed in the theme of Journeying together as Christians in Ireland. Our identity as Christians is rightly rooted in our local context, but this theme calls us to lift up our gaze to the wider context and do so together.

Noting the extensive references to engagement with other Christians in the Synthesis Report of the Universal Synod, he chose to focus on the following dimension:

Baptism, which is at the root of the principle of synodality, also constitutes the foundation of ecumenism. Through it, all Christians participate in the *Sensus fidei* and for this reason they should be listened to carefully, regardless of their tradition, as the Synod Assembly did in its process.

In 2009 the Irish Inter-Church Meeting took baptism as the focus of its inter-church dialogue, with close reference to the fruits of international theological dialogues on this theme (See Appendix 1). Dr Jackson recalled some of the key themes from that dialogue: Archbishop Richard Clarke of the Church of Ireland reminded participants that for those traditions that practise sacramental baptism it has a deeper and prior significance to that of Church membership – it is about entering into a relationship of grace with God in Christ. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin spoke of the importance of visibly witnessing to our common baptism, while acknowledging the many ways in which we currently fall short of this – from taking baptism for granted, overlooking its true significance or even using it to reinforce sectarian divisions with talk of being ‘baptised Catholic or Protestant’. Professor Drew Gibson of the Presbyterian Church emphasised the potential for baptism as public witness to the Gospel. Even those Christian denominations among the ICC membership who do not practise sacramental baptism can connect to this work through their understanding of the transformative grace of the Spirit in our lives.

Reflecting on how the national inter-church structures in Ireland seek to live out together our baptismal calling and our connecting in Christ it was noted that this was done by creating space

for fellowship through dialogue – building relationships of trust, by sharing gifts from the different traditions, by providing through the national structures a vehicle for collective action on issues of shared concern – speaking together and modelling unity in diversity in the public square.

Archbishop Eamon Martin shared from his personal experience as a member of the Church Leaders (Ireland) Group alongside the President of the Irish Council of Churches, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, emphasising the value of supporting one another in prayer and standing together in solidarity in the work for peace, reconciliation and the common good.

Significant anniversaries and milestones marked last year, such as the centenary of the Irish Council of Churches, the fiftieth anniversary of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement – which the Church Leaders' Group marked with a joint visit to Rome – have served as opportunities for reflection and thanksgiving to God for what has been achieved so far in the work of inter-church relations and the contribution of that work to peace and reconciliation.

The questions posed by the universal synodal process have particular resonance for the context of inter-church relations in Ireland in which the search for peace, reconciliation and justice is so central to the churches' collective response to what it means to love our neighbour and journey together as Christians on the island of Ireland.

Conversations in the Spirit

Following a reflection on the Road to Emmaus, participants engaged in Conversations in the Spirit centred on the following questions:

- How is our journeying together as Christians contributing to the work of healing and reconciliation in our community?
- How might the synodal process support us to go deeper in working together as Christians for the healing and wellbeing of our communities?

Key themes:

Hope: this gathering, and the wider synodal process, have generated a great sense of hope. The challenges before us are significant, but the synodal process offers a methodology with which to approach them. The unity that is evident in the gathering is a welcome contrast to the separation between ordained and lay people that can often be experienced in many denominations. It makes visible and real our common baptism and the shared identity in Christ that flows from baptism. The synodal process helps convey that together we are one baptised people. There was a real sense of community in the gathering, underpinned by a willingness to come together in grace and humility and set aside our differences. Participants spoke of “breaking down barriers” and “building bridges”. It was particularly encouraging to witness how participants began from very different places in terms of their lived experiences, but quickly found common ground in terms of their concerns and hopes for the future. Even between our different experiences of living in community there is much to connect us in our shared experience of suffering and understanding of vulnerability and the fragility of life.

What we are called to do together: The importance and value of deep listening was a recurring theme. Listening contributes to understanding and to acceptance. In the absence of that understanding we tend to exaggerate differences. The synodal process allows us to encounter people from diverse backgrounds and hear their story. In a society where we are increasingly concerned about polarisation and division this synodal listening provides a uniquely positive experience that was very welcome. Words like “refreshing” were used to describe the experience. There was a shared concern for those who are on the margins and an awareness of the power of our collective Christian witness when we stand together with those who are most vulnerable, such as migrants and refugees. It was noted that healing means different things to different people for some it is about addressing the conflict of the past, while others are more

focussed on the culture wars of the present. In coming together at local level, it is important that we do not forget our responsibilities to the wider world.

Centrality of prayer: When our dialogue is supported by prayer and underpinned by faith-filled reflections we can have confidence that the Spirit will guide our discernment. Prayer brings us together in unity with one voice, another powerful reminder of our shared baptism. The moments of shared silence are another integral element of the spiritual dimension of this experience. The Conversations in the Spirit provide a model that is both effective and authentic. In this context we are supported to experience and appreciate the gift of our faith.

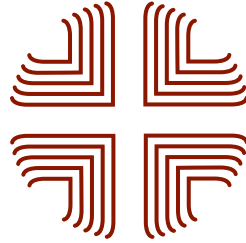
Reaching younger generations: Participants consistently placed high priority on the need to connect with young people. Their absence from events of this nature was keenly felt across the traditions.

Continued commitment: There needs to be more of this kind of event and it needs to be brought to the heart of different local communities. Only with strong foundations at grassroots level can this process achieve its true potential. There was a recognition that it is time consuming to organise these types of event, but the experience of being present is very enjoyable as well as enriching. At local level the attachment to our own church can be a barrier to the development of inter-church relations and it is important to be intentional in the creation of authentically diverse spaces. This process requires us to step out of our comfort zone – for some participants this was their first experience of inter-church dialogue.

We need to better communicate the responsibility of all the baptised to get involved and bring their leadership to this process. The synodal process offers a hopeful vision but it will take work, commitment and grace to make this a reality. The question of how we are really journeying together as Christians needs to be faced with courage and honesty.

Conclusions

The learning from this event will be shared widely as a resource for local inter-church groups, for the national inter-church structures in Ireland as well as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and for the Irish synodal pathway and the international synodal process in the Catholic Church.



**Churches
in Ireland**
Connecting
in Christ

**Irish Inter Church
Meeting**

Baptism

19th November 2009
**Emmaus Conference
Centre**
Swords, Co. Dublin

IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING
Thursday 19 November 2009

BAPTISM and the ecumenical project in Ireland
Outline of the address by Bishop Richard Clarke (Church of Ireland)

Because there is a great deal that we can take for granted with regard to baptism, even in the context of the relationship between different Christian traditions, there is an attendant danger that we take baptism itself for granted.

We feel comfortable today with the reality that almost all the Christian traditions which practice infant baptism will recognise the baptism of other Christian traditions as being “valid” (to use that valuable if rather juridical term). Hence, the idea of “re-baptism” or even conditional re-baptism, should an individual choose to move from one tradition to another, is firmly eschewed. Our comfort with this may prevent us from thinking through what we thereby actually saying about the significance (and I would want to say the *huge* significance) of baptism for the Christian Church as a whole.

The European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu in September 2007, which brought together all the main Christian traditions in Europe, urged churches in the different European countries to continue their study of baptism together and to seek further rapprochement around our understanding of baptism. The purpose of today is, I believe, to be a springboard (or, in a different metaphor, “a clearing of the decks”) for further committed and joint exploration into how different Christian traditions in Ireland may gather around the sacrament of baptism, and find a new space for furthering the ecumenical project as we recall an essential and existing one-ness we have in Jesus Christ. Yes, there are and will continue to be differences and even divergences on any road towards further unity and these we may not ignore or evade, but there is the central truth that baptism is already expressing - that of shared unity with Christ, cf Lumen Gentium :

Lumen Gentium 15. The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honoured by the name of Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. For there are many who hold sacred scripture in honour as a rule of faith and of life, who have a sincere religious zeal, who lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour, *who are sealed by baptism which unites them to Christ*, and who indeed recognize and receive other sacraments in their own Churches or ecclesiastical communities.

I am acutely aware that what I have to say may not seem to be of value to those traditions which are not sacramental in their practice, but which have always had a central role in the life of the Irish Council of Churches. I hope that they will feel however that there is a vital contribution which they should make to what is an open and mutually respectful conversation on baptism

Five strands or themes for our discussion –

1. Doctrinal understanding of baptism in the different traditions

I cannot claim to know in any detail the doctrine of baptism as defined by the different Christian traditions. I therefore begin with an Anglican understanding, and let us see in discussion where that takes us. Baptism is expressed in the Church of Ireland's traditional catechism in this way -

Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

Later, in speaking of the inward spiritual grace of baptism, the catechism describes baptism as effecting a change whereby we become "*children of grace*"; we have entered into a relationship of grace, a covenant of grace with God in Christ.

It follows from all this that although baptism is always within the context of Christian community, the Body of Christ, it is also in another sense *prior* to membership of a particular Christian tradition within the wider Christian Church, however we are choosing to define the Church Universal. (If this were not the case, we would have to re-baptise when an individual moves from one Christian tradition to another.) WE need to understand more clearly how each of our traditions thinks doctrinally of baptism. We would, I believe, each be enriched.

2. Recovering the centrality of baptism.

Need to remind ourselves of how important baptism was in the early centuries of the Church. Obvious even from the great scale of the baptisteries we see in continental Europe, eg.

- the fourth century baptistery in Poitiers, reckoned to be the oldest Christian building extant in France.
- the huge baptistery in Florence where the most wonderful artwork is to be seen, even by the standards of Florence.
- the magnificent octagonal baptistery in Milan, now underneath the cathedral, where almost certainly St Ambrose baptised St Augustine.

All of them impressive large buildings reminding us of just how central baptism was to the life of the western Christian Church in the early centuries. Can we **together** work to restore baptism to the place it should have in the life of each of our traditions? Have we become casual about baptism, with no "discipline" of baptism in most of our traditions today? Baptism is not always taken seriously within our congregations, yet baptism is surely something which should require preparation, is of great seriousness and, for those of us who practise infant baptism, is placing a solemn trust of immense gravity on the parents and sponsors who bring a child for baptism.

May one think the unthinkable, and suggest that **modes of preparation for baptism** are something we might work on together?

3. Beginning all ecumenical discourse from the starting point of baptism

All other vocations stem from baptism – ie, baptism is the primary vocation. All other vocations, whether to the ordained ministry, to marriage, to religious life, or anything else, should have their origins and meaning in the primary call of Jesus Christ which is rooted in baptism. The recovery of such an understanding will not solve the problems and challenges of different understandings of ministries, lay and ordained, within the Church as a whole, but it places them in a very different context.

In view of what Christians still say *together* about Baptism, can we not use our unity on the matter of baptism, rather than our differences, as a starting point for *all* Christian conversation towards unity - make our baptism the starting point for ecumenical dialogue rather than our problems with one another? What might we all say about baptism? Cf. WCC document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982 :

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. (Lima Document) Baptism (1) - Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people.

That is hardly trivial – the institutional difficulties must surely be secondary to the enormity of a shared incorporation into Christ, and into the covenant between God and God's people. Perhaps even ecclesiology and missiology should only be done in the context of the meaning of baptism for all the baptised?

4. A new concentration on the “fruits” of baptism – the working out of baptism in the life of the Church

WE associate with St Augustine a distinction between sacramental validity and efficacy (Donatist schism). From his theological starting point, he found he had to accept that what might be *valid* might not necessarily be regarded as *efficacious*. In other words, you might have received a valid sacrament without it necessarily doing you any good! If we turn Augustine on his head (tempting at times!) may we not see that making what we accept as valid *also efficacious* is part of the Christian vocation? That it is our duty to seek for all Christians that their baptism may, with our encouragement, also be deeply efficacious? The Lima document saw that baptism brings with it an ecumenical imperative also :

BEM. Lima - Baptism (10) : As they grow in the Christian life of faith, baptized believers demonstrate that humanity can be re-generated and liberated. They have a common responsibility, here and now, to bear witness together to the Gospel of Christ, the Liberator of all human beings. The context of this common witness is the Church and the world. Within a fellowship of witness and service, Christians discover the full significance of the one baptism as the gift of God to all God's people.

What is being said here is that it is within a context of fellowship / *koinonia* and shared service to the world that we can each discover and appropriate the full significance of our baptism.

5. Spirituality and baptism

Baptism is not only about unity in Christ. It contains in all our traditions an emphasis on repentance and on newness of life through and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do the different traditions understand such central themes in the spirituality of individuals and of the church communities? Again, there

is huge gain to be made in learning from each other, and so finding a new spiritual enrichment in the lives of each of our Christian traditions.

Pursuing all of these five strands will not of itself effect the unity of Christ's Church on earth. What I do believe is that in baptism, we have a rich lode for Christian understanding that we have not properly followed in the ecumenical venture. Baptism in recent times has not been a place for vituperation or polemic between most of the different Christian traditions. It is the place where we already have a unity in Jesus Christ. Our gathering together around baptism can only bring good to each of us, and can only further the task of unity entrusted to us by Christ.



Inter-Church Meeting BAPTISM AND THE ECUMENICAL PROJECT IN IRELAND

Speaking notes of
Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin
Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland

Emmaus Conference Centre, 19th November 2009

The very first sentence of Bishop Clarke's reflection is central to our overall reflection today. "There is a great deal that we can take for granted with regard to baptism...; there is an attendant danger that we take baptism for granted".

I suppose that this taking for granted is certainly complicated by the cultural situation, especially in the Republic of Ireland. Baptism was taken for granted. All Christians were expected to be baptised and this presumption continued even when the quality of faith and the relationship with the Church life became weaker. Baptism was and is still "taken for granted" rather representing a real sense of Christian commitment and belonging to the Church.

Baptism has become for many just a social event, at best an enrolment service into the Christian community, or a moment of catechesis for parents rather than a moment of the realisation of real regeneration and the initiation into new life.

Where baptism was enrolment, then it became in a complex Irish culture almost sectarian: "I was baptised Catholic or I was baptised Protestant". In such a context it was difficult to look at the sense of the real unity which links all Christians with the Church and with others through our common baptism. We were divided and at times sectarian and we tended to be cautious and suspicious of each other's baptism. For a long time the general canonical presupposition was that the baptism of others was to be evaluated with caution if not suspicion. Re-baptising was very common; even the term "conditional re-baptism" which was supposed to show some possibility of the mutual recognition of baptism, may really have been just a more politically correct affirmation of the fundamentally dubitative tradition.

Christian communions in many parts of the world, not least in Ireland, live in the shadow of long divisions and of socio-political conflicts that still have to be overcome. The Peace process in Ireland was assisted by Christian leaders. The process of healing and reconciling memories has still a journey to travel and the exploration of the significance of our common baptism is an important dimension to such a healing process and the process of overcoming sectarianism.

Progress in this sense is being made. Bishop Clarke has mentioned some of the various agreed documents of Christian Churches of the Roman Catholic, Reformed, Protestant and Orthodox Churches on the nature of baptism. I would draw attention to a study on the *Ecclesiological and ecumenical implications of a common baptism* contained in Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (Geneva-Rome 2005). The current Joint Working Group, of which I am Catholic Co-Moderator with Metropolitan Nifon of the Rumanian Orthodox Church, is carrying out a study of reception of ecumenical documents within Churches and paying special attention to the reception of documents on common baptism. From the initial anecdotal information gathered, it is clear that the practice of re-baptising is still quite common today in some traditions. Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Not only should any impression of re-baptism be avoided but the Churches should work towards both educational but also structurally visible ways of witnessing to our common baptism. A good simple example might be some form of common format among Churches for baptismal certificates.

Moving from the official dialogue between Churches back to the practice and the popular religious culture of our Churches in Ireland, I believe that in the Roman Catholic tradition there is a great diversity regarding the popular understanding of baptism. Different understandings, often marked by generational differences, come into consideration and still play a role in people's understanding of the sacrament. When I was born, because my mother was sick, there was what was then considered an inordinate delay in having me baptised: there was a delay of one week. Today there is no such rush, but one still hears anecdotes of grandmothers faced with delay in baptising their grandchild occasionally doing a quick private baptism in the kitchen just in case anything might happen to the newborn in the meantime. The sense of original sin and possible exclusion from eternal life is still strongly present in some of the older generation. For many of that generation the water of baptism symbolised above all the cleansing effect of baptism on the sinful soul.

For many younger people, the ceremony of baptism is the occasion in which the birth of the new child is celebrated socially, with an appropriate religious blessing. Paradoxically, even the most secularised of Irish still have a deep-seated liking for blessings. At times pre-baptismal catechesis is seen as an occasion for evangelization or pre-evangelisation of parents and of reaching out to parents who have drifted from active Church life, reminding them of their responsibilities for the child's future as a Christian and as a good citizen. Rather than baptism being an act of the believing Christian community, baptism is seen as an opportunity for the catechesis of those on the margins of such a community.

I draw attention to these aspects of current culture in many of our Churches, because the more the popular understanding of baptism drifts from its theological roots and becomes more a cultural event, then the more baptism will be taken for granted or emptied of its true content and so the search for real common understanding will recede. In the Catholic tradition sacraments can only be understood and celebrated within a living

and believing Christian community. With growing secularisation in society there is a real danger that debates about sacraments will be determined within the framework of secular society rather than in a theological context. Here the Churches could work together in establishing a common pre-baptismal catechesis, sharing in the process of the catechumenate, and in fixing clearer norms regarding the minimum faith environment required for admission of a child to baptism.

In the Catholic tradition baptism is a sacrament, namely “an act of Christ and of the Church through the Spirit” (Directory on Ecumenism, 1993, n.129). The celebration of a sacrament in a community is a sign of the reality of its unity in faith, worship and community life. Baptism constitutes a sacramental bond of unity. “All Christians who receive the one Baptism into Christ’s one body have also received a radical calling to communion with all the baptized” (JWG, p.69). This is the basis, even despite difference, for the call to common witness in society. This can be witness concerning the good of society, but also about our common understanding of religious realities and a reclaiming in public life of Christian festivals, especially Easter and Pentecost which have a deep baptismal significance. The significance of our common baptism should be a keynote in the setting out of the identity and mission statement of all our ecumenical endeavours and structures.

In the Catholic tradition the recognition of common baptism does not on its own constitute a sufficient basis for Eucharistic communion, since that would require full ecumenical communion in faith and life. The exceptions which are recognised in Catholic practice regarding the reception of communion by members of others Churches in special circumstances requires clearly recognition of common baptism. Similarly it is recognition of common baptism which is at the basis of some of the formal invitations extended to other Christian Churches to participate in major ecclesial events such as Synods of Bishops and more significant international ecclesial assemblies. It is important that local ecumenical cooperation not be reduced to social contact but that reflection on the theological implications of our common baptism but an important dimension of all ecumenical collaboration, including on prayer, on the word of God and worship.

Baptism is an act of Christ and of the Church through the spirit. It is an act of purification and of regeneration. Through baptism the child becomes an adopted child of God. Baptism is an act of purification in that we entrust each new life new into the hands of God who is more powerful than the dark powers of evil. Baptism redefines the understanding of the nature of life and of parenting.

You will find a longer quote in my text of the homily of Pope Benedict on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord earlier this year which is an interesting catechesis for parents and a reflection on the how our understanding of Baptism can challenge society’s vision of parenting:

“In baptism we restore to God what came from him. The child is not the property of the parents but is entrusted to their responsibility by the Creator, freely and in a way that is ever new, in order that

they may help him or her to be a free child of God. Only if the parents develop this awareness will they succeed in finding the proper balance between the claim that their children are at their disposal, as though they were a private possession, shaping them on the basis of their own ideas and desires, and the libertarian approach that is expressed in letting them grow in full autonomy, satisfying their every desire and aspiration, deeming this the right way to cultivate their personality. If, with this sacrament, the newly-baptized becomes an adoptive child of God, the object of God's infinite love that safeguards him and protects him from the dark forces of the evil one, it is necessary to teach the child to recognize God as Father and to be able to relate to him with a filial attitude. And therefore, when in accordance with the Christian tradition children are baptized and introduced into the light of God and of his teachings, no violence is done to them. Rather, they are given the riches of divine life in which is rooted the true freedom that belongs to the children of God a freedom that must be educated and modelled as the years pass to render it capable of responsible personal decisions".

John's Baptism pointed the way towards the meaning of Baptism, even though it was very different from the sacrament that Jesus was to institute. At the moment of the Baptism of Jesus a voice comes from Heaven and the Holy Spirit descends upon him (cf. Mk 1: 10); the heavenly Father proclaims him as his beloved Son and publicly attests to his universal saving mission. The mission of Jesus will however only be fully accomplished with his death on the Cross and his Resurrection. In Baptism the redeeming Blood of Christ is poured out on us and purifies and saves us, regaining for us the dignity and joy of being able to call ourselves truly "children" of God. In the Catholic tradition Baptism is the door to and is linked with the other sacraments.

Baptism also has a Trinitarian dimension. Today there are new challenges regarding the rejection of the traditional scriptural and creedal Trinitarian formulae of Baptism and there are attempts to use alternative formulae, which have no roots in tradition. Baptismal formulae are not ours to be adapted in terms of the culture of the day.

Baptism is of profound importance in the life and the constitution of the Church. The goal for the search for full communion is realized when all the Churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in its fullness. The mutual recognition of baptism implies recognition in some way recognition of the apostolicity of each other's baptism and thus opens the path for further recognition of the presence of apostolicity in each of our Churches and drives us to express together that common apostolicity and full unity.

BAPTISM and the ecumenical project in Ireland

Seeing Baptism from the Outside - A response to the address by Bishop Richard Clark by Prof. Drew Gibson (Union Theological College, Belfast)

I would like to thank Bishop Clark for his address and offer a response that picks up seven phrases from his address but a response that contains just one single idea. Instead of thinking about baptism from the inside, let's reflect on how baptism is seen from the point of view of those outside the church. In other words, let's consider baptism from a missional perspective. To put that idea in context, Bishop Clark talks of *baptism as defined by the different Christian traditions*. As a Presbyterian from the Evangelical stream of that church this forces me to face a problem. Here is how baptism is defined by one of the key documents of the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world. (WCF 28.1)

In the Irish context, this definition sets the Reformed tradition somewhat at odds with itself. Historically we have been strongly influenced by antiCatholicism and by revivalism. This means that the above definition, which comes frighteningly close to baptismal regeneration is very uncomfortable for many. Wanting to hold on to the Westminster confession of Faith, evangelical Presbyterians find themselves forced to affirm statements that have an iconic place in our tradition even when they look awfully like what many want to reject. Putting it bluntly, in practice we do not have a coherent definition of baptism. This, in turn, gives us real problems with Bishop Clark's laudable aspiration: *May one think the unthinkable, and suggest that modes of preparation for baptism are something we might work on together?*

It's a great idea but if the Evangelical wing of the Reformed churches hasn't its baptismal theology sorted out it is unlikely that any joint preparation can be considered. But, let's think another unthinkable, maybe agreement on the theology of baptism isn't actually of primary importance; let's think for a minute about baptism as a public witness to the Gospel, a witness that the community can see and to which it might respond. Why don't we be really radical and just park for a while our different baptismal theologies and practices that reflect different understandings of the relationship between the church and the surrounding community. Let's think missionally, how does our baptismal practice look to the community outside the church?

Bishop Clark's statement concerning the great historic baptistries was strongly missional. *All of them impressive large buildings reminding us of just how central baptism was to the life of the western Christian Church in the early centuries*. Just as the baptistries were big public statements, so baptism itself also should be conceived missionally. It is a public statement of faith, the faith of the Church and the faith of particular individuals within the church. We must make sure that our baptismal practice is actually saying what we want to say to the watching world. I fear that what we are saying by our practice is not what the world outside is actually hearing. Did those great baptistries speak of the glory of God or of the suffering servant

or of the life giving Holy Spirit or did they speak of the generosity of a human benefactor or the pride of a human political or ecclesiastical ruler? How did the community see them? What does our baptismal practice say to the watching world?

Bishop Clark says: Perhaps even ecclesiology and missiology should only be done in the context of the meaning of baptism for all the baptised?

I believe that mission is a good context for looking at anything so I might reorder the words here to say, 'Perhaps even ecclesiology and the meaning of baptism for all the baptised should only be done in the context of mission.' (I know the grammar's a bit off but you know what I mean. If baptism is a public statement of faith then how it is perceived by the watching world is at least as important as how it is perceived ecclesologically and ecumenically. We can make the same shift in centre of gravity, perhaps more subtly, in the following sentence to bring the missional component to the centre.

... it is within a context of shared service to the world that we can each discover and appropriate fellowship / koinonia and the full significance of our baptism.

I believe it is beyond doubt that fellowship and ecumenism only really flourish in the context of a church that is actively committed to the *Missio Dei*, and conceiving baptism as a public statement of faith has much more 'koinonial' and ecumenical potential than seeing it as an intraecclesial affair. The full significance of our baptism is realised in mission as we join with God himself in going to his world with prophetic and gracious love. If Christians are moving in the same missional direction as the Holy Spirit himself, then there is almost an inevitability about growth in fellowship.

What does the watching world think as it looks in at our endless deliberations over intraecclesial affairs? What would the world think if it saw a set of communities which differ on many things but are committed to bringing to the world the Gospel of which baptism speaks. Which is more attractive... and more authentic?

Two more of Bishop Clark's ideas are strongly missional. The first is:

All other vocations, whether to the ordained ministry, to marriage, to religious life, or anything else, should have their origins and meaning in the primary call of Jesus Christ which is rooted in baptism.

While I would not be at ease with some of the theology implicit in this sentence, Baptism is indeed the marker of God's primary call to all human beings. God calls all people, everywhere to himself. In this sense it is inclusive, in the way that calling to marriage or ordination are not. It speaks of the reaching out of God to all ages, races, classes, ethnic groups etc, etc. Under this primary call all other vocations take their secondary place. See the missional thrust?

But, as Bishop Clark points out, baptism also speaks of a Gospel that is exclusive.

Baptism is not only about unity in Christ. It contains in all our traditions an emphasis on repentance and on newness of life through and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Baptism's nature as public declaration speaks clearly of the offer of new life that God holds out in Christ Jesus. It speaks of dying to sin and rising to new life and of the 'washing of regeneration'. It is an invitation to those who have not experienced these to come and join us who have experienced them, therefore our baptismal practice ought also to be a joyful invitation to come, not to come to any single ecclesially defined community but to come to the One in whom alone new life is to be found. Does the watching world see in our baptismal practice a mumbo jumbo of meaningless words or does it see a social event, an excuse for a party or maybe it sees a well fenced Masonic ritual to which only the inner circle are invited?

In conclusion, like it or not, baptismal theology and practice will continue to divide the church but that need not worry us unduly. Of much more concern is what the world sees as it observes our baptismal practice and listens to our theological debates. A church in which the public witness of baptism speaks with clarity to a needy, hurting world would surely be on the right track in its theology and practice. A church where this witness is truly lived out in self giving mission will have a far more hopeful future as a united body than we might dare to dream. Just as Reformed Evangelicals in Ireland don't lose too much sleep about consistency in their theology of baptism, perhaps we should give ourselves to ensuring that in our baptising the world sees the Gospel embodied and in our speaking of baptism the world hears the Gospel proclaimed.