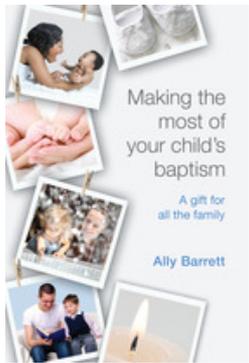


Making the Most of Your Child's Baptism – my parish's story



In 2007, I became parish priest for two parishes in Ely Diocese, and within a fortnight of arriving I found I'd taken bookings for twenty infant baptisms. I was delighted, but quickly realised that we needed to work on a way of welcoming those families so that the baptism of their children wouldn't just be a one-off event, but something that would set them on a journey of faith that would last a lifetime. It was also important that the local church community could accompany them on that journey.

A group from the congregation was convened to think through what we might do, and I started to put together some resources to help families prepare for the baptism. People usually remember that the baptism of a baby or child involves the parents and godparents making promises on the child's behalf. What people sometimes forget is that the first promise in the baptism service is made not by the parents and godparents, but by everyone else. It

was the promise to 'welcome and uphold' the child (and therefore also their family) that became the guide for what we did as a church, and for the resources we offered to parents and godparents.

We started an informal gathering at the Vicarage one afternoon a week called 'Tea, chat and toys', to which all baptism families were invited. That group then helped to plan a monthly young families' service, which we called 'Stepping Stones'. Both groups have 'grown up' – the children who first came to them as toddlers are now 7 or 8 years old, and the groups have evolved with them, so it's been great that our curate's wife together with some 'granny' age members of the congregation have now started a baby and toddler group to make contact with the next generation.

We also looked at our main Sunday services to see if they were keeping the promise to welcome and uphold. New orders of service with clearer instructions and explanations were produced, and eventually a monthly All-age Eucharist was introduced. The inevitability and acceptability of background noise has encouraged several families to come along who had not felt confident to come to main services before. A children's corner has been set aside, and the new church extension means there's room in the tower for children to let off steam while their parents can still hear the service relayed through a loudspeaker.

Meanwhile, with baptism families, I've enjoyed the challenge of trying to make what seems like a very cumbersome piece of liturgy come alive and seem relevant and even inspiring. I'm passionate about the idea that liturgy and life should have something to say to one another. We use a cut-down (but still perfectly legal) version of the baptism service, and we talk through every part of it with families beforehand. They're usually amazed at the way the dry words on the page suddenly seem to make sense and reflect their own life experience.

Often families have no religious language at their disposal, and aren't used to articulating matters of faith – the baptism service does contain a lot of 'jargon' that can be incredibly off-putting if there's nobody willing to unpack it. But as new parents, they're going through one of the most challenging, life-enhancing experiences that it's possible to have, and in almost every case they're more receptive to talking about the things that really matter – including God – than many a seasoned churchgoer.

We talk about what the promises might look like in real life. We talk about what it means to belong, about what feels possible at the moment in terms of coming along to church. Sometimes that means popping in during the week (we're lucky that we can leave our church open every day) while taking the buggy out for a stroll, and just taking advantage of the quiet while the baby sleeps. Sometimes that means meeting up with other mums at 'Tea, chat and toys'. Sometimes it might mean coming to 'Stepping Stones', or to a main Sunday service. Over time, as the child grows, keeping the promises of baptism will also mean different things, and we talk about that, too.

We talk about prayer. We talk about their hopes and fears and thanksgivings are for their child. I tell them that I'll keep a note of what they say, and write it up into a special personal prayer, to which we add a photograph of the child, then frame it and present it to them on the day of the baptism. (We use the same photo on godparent cards the size of credit cards, so they can be kept in a wallet and therefore looked at frequently!) More often than not, parents say they want to think more about the prayer, and often email me really thoughtful ideas, which they've clearly discussed and acted on. It's a privilege and a joy to watch them realise that they *can* pray after all.

The booklet *Making the most of your child's baptism* is the fruit of the last four years of meeting real families. It's also the fruit of my experiences as a mother, facing the changing challenges of trying to bring up two children to know and love God as he knows and loves them. I've been surprised by their questions, and humbled by their insights, and everything I've learned about how children think and pray (and much of what I've learned about who God is) I've learned from them.

Are we there yet, as a parish church? Not by a long way! But we're working on it, and we're realising that welcoming and upholding children and their families at baptism is both a duty and a joy – it is changing us, as a church, and as individuals, and long may that process continue!

Making Christenings All-Age, All-Stage friendly: some practical ideas

- Ask yourself about the life of the church outside the baptism service: how does your church 'welcome and uphold' children and their families? Is there more you need to do in order to keep the People of God's promise in the baptism service which will then help the parents and godparents keep theirs?
- Always ask yourself about liturgy: "What does this look like in real life?" In other words, how will the words on the page and the actions relate to the life experience, expectations, hopes and intentions of the congregation? Different age groups and people at different stages of faith will have different experiences to which the service might relate – how can you try and make sure that everyone who is at the service experience something that engages them and has a lasting impact?
- Involve people as much as possible in the liturgy – design your order of service so that it's clear when everyone should be making the response, use visual cues to help people navigate their way through the service sheet, find useful things for children to do (such as pouring the water into the font, holding the shell and the towel (if you use them) etc. Use movement if you can – start the service at the front of the church and move to the font for the baptism. Use big gestures, lots of oil, lots of water... make the service feel as multisensory and generous as you can. If there are older siblings who are already baptised, encourage them to bring their own baptism candle and have it re-lit at the service.
- Try to connect the baby's baptism with the baptismal identity of the congregation – you can do this during the talk, and also sprinkle the congregation with water from the font after the child has been baptised.
- Try to find points of connection between the liturgy (as an expression of the church's expectations) and the family's expectations and willingness to engage. Prayer is a good one – invite the parents to write a prayer for their child to be used in the service, and include their prayer and a photo of the child in a frame which is presented to them at the end of the service. If you have the resources, how about printing off enough copies of the prayer-and-photo to give a copy to everyone in the congregation as a way of inviting them to pray for the child? With the parents' permission, a copy could also be kept by the church. Why not get the whole congregation to contribute towards something during the service? Perhaps hand out pens and small pieces of coloured paper to everyone and ask them to write a simple blessing on it – you could use a template such as the one on the right, with the child's name and the start of the sentence pre-printed. These could be collected in and stuck into a small scrapbook or similar and presented to the family (rather like some families do at funerals to keep a record of who came and their messages of condolence!). Younger children could be encouraged to draw a picture on their paper or have their hand drawn round and name written in it if they can't write yet themselves.
- Use all-age welcomers at baptism services – could a family from the regular congregation be there at the door to greet families and their guests? This would be a reassuring sign that the church is child-friendly, and that they are welcome as they are, and can enable baptism families who don't usually come to church to get to know families who come regularly. Children who act as welcomers can also help with other aspects of the service, such as leading prayers, reading readings, lighting the paschal candle, etc.
- Provide colouring books / work books (downloadable from <http://reverendally.wordpress.com/baptism> and crayons for children to use during the service – and use the same images as illustrations for the main order of service so that parents and children are both 'on the same page'.
- Make sure people have something to take away – a prayer card, or some object to remind them of the experience and any pledges they may have made, etc. I know one priest who buys up baby socks from charity shops, uses them during the talk as a visual aid, and then gives everyone one to take home at the end as a reminder.

Joanna, may God
bless you with.....