

Helping the Congregation Support the Newly Baptized



“People of God, do you promise to support *name/s* and pray for *them* in *their* new life in Christ?” the pastor asks, and the assembly responds, “We do” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 228). The congregation’s promise—made before God in worship—is as important as the promises made by parents and sponsors, and ought to be treated as such, since the congregation is essential to the newly baptized learning to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace (p. 228).

Take the Promise Seriously

The first step in helping the congregation take this promise seriously is to unapologetically declare, to both the congregation and those preparing for baptism and their families, that this congregation takes this promise seriously. By being baptized in this faith community, candidates for baptism or their parents are inviting this expression of Christ’s body into their lives. This might be a most countercultural statement, since many people regard their lives as their own and the raising of children as something left to parents’ sole discretion. Praying for the newly baptized may lead the congregation to reach out to the newly baptized when they are absent from God’s faithful people, particularly from hearing God’s word and receiving the holy sacraments. Both the congregation and the newly baptized should know that in baptism God makes us part of one another’s lives.

Tell the Congregation What Is Happening

As obvious as it sounds, we help the congregation support the newly baptized by telling the congregation what is done to support the newly baptized. For example, while birth-to-three ministry may be the responsibility of a few individuals, they minister on behalf of the entire congregation. Congregations should find ways to remind members of what birth-to-three ministry is, the purpose it serves, and who the children are in this age group. (The *Splash!* family of resources from Augsburg Fortress can help your congregation in its birth-to-three ministry.) This is equally true for everything the congregation does to support the newly baptized.

Intentionally Remember the Newly Baptized

In the early centuries of the church’s life, the week after Easter was devoted to helping the newly baptized explore and understand their baptism at the Easter Vigil. Congregations might create a time for the newly baptized (or their parents) to reflect upon their experience of baptism and be reminded of the significance of the rite. During this period, the congregation could pray with thanksgiving for the newly baptized.

Support Parents in Their Baptismal Promises

Congregations do a wonderful job in supporting parents in fulfilling the promises they make when their children are baptized. Many congregations find it helpful to periodically assess what they are doing. For example, one congregation decided that presenting Bibles in third grade is “late” in many children’s lives. This congregation now presents a picture Bible to children when they are three or four years old, and a study Bible at high school graduation, as well as the Bible presented to

third graders. Congregations might consider giving a copy of *Living the Promises of Baptism: 101 Ideas for Parents* (Augsburg Fortress, 2010) to families when their children are baptized.

Expect the Newly Baptized to Serve

“We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share,” the assembly says to the newly baptized (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 231). Thinking of the congregation as “the body of Christ” reminds us that every member, including the newly baptized, is essential. The congregation can help the newly baptized name and claim their particular gifts and intentionally connect them with avenues of ministry, both within and beyond the congregation, by which they can give thanks and praise to God and bear God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.

Welcome the Baptized at the Table

“Admission to the sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the church to those who are baptized” (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 37). We welcome and support the newly baptized when we take their desire to receive Christ, truly present in the meal, seriously. Welcoming the newly baptized at the Lord’s table will lead the congregation to welcome them at the tables in the fellowship hall, the classroom, and the meeting room, and it will empower the newly baptized to sit at tables with those in need of justice, sustenance, and the good news of the gospel.