

Disclaimer: Please note that this paper does not represent the views of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa or DEWCOM, unless specified otherwise.
Status of paper: Discussion document for Synods 2010
URL: <http://mcsadewcom.blogspot.com/2010/03/infant-baptism-synod-2010-discussion.html>

Preamble:

The Methodist Church accepts baptism as a Sacrament of welcome into the Christian church. For this reason we exercise a preferential option for infant baptism. It is our conviction that all people can be welcomed into our faith. Welcoming children is a clear sign of the grace of God already at work in our lives. Our African context affirms the value of children being recognised as forming part of the greater community. "It takes a village to raise a child". The Sacrament of Baptism as practiced by the MCSA resonates with this view. The vows clearly reflect that baptism does not only concern the individual/s presentation for a religious rite, but that these children belong to a greater community that pledges to nurture these children as they grow in faith. Although baptism involves the whole community, the MCSA asks that one of the parents be a member of the church because this parent acts as the link between the family unit and the community to which the child is presented.

Conference's request to DEWCOM centres around the person/s who present the children for Baptism and effectively asks whether a child's inclusion into the community should be granted or rejected on the basis of those who bring them to the community.

By refusing such baptism the church effectively states that the "sins of the parents shall be visited on their children". There are no theological grounds to refuse the signs of welcome to the children of "sinners". The vows of baptism gives the assurance that the community would come alongside anyone who is blessed with the raising of a child, to support them in any way that would ensure the child's Christian formation. It is at our peril that we make the reliability of the promises of individuals the only criteria for the baptism of children.

Baptism is the proclamation that the Spirit of God is at work, the community claiming that God's work of grace is for this child independent of the person who presents them to the people of God. Baptism of a child is not a reward for the good behaviour of parents, but is the open display in the context of community of God's prevenient grace. If we were to only baptise the children of the good, what criteria could we put in place to assess whether parents comply? Sadly, we are tempted to set up criteria such as the payment of church dues, belonging to the correct uniformed organization, none of which of course guarantees favour with God. The best the MCSA can say is that God's grace is unconditional. In the light of this perspective, we suggest the following questions be discussed:

1. Under what circumstances should a person other than the parent/s be permitted to present a child for baptism?
2. How do we respond pastorally to a couple who are not married, but who want their child to be baptised?
3. How does the church support a single-mother who has had her child baptised?
4. What is our church's position towards male members of our church who father children out of wedlock? What promises should such a person make about the Christian upbringing of his child?

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