

Sacraments and Celebrations at Decorah Covenant Church

Information about faith journey milestones for parents, children, and disciples of all ages.

Because the Evangelical Covenant Church and Decorah Covenant Church in particular, has a background that includes several streams of Christian faith traditions, there is often confusion about ceremonies and sacraments. This document seeks to clarify some of the issues related to these passages. We believe that the following positions reflect a biblical understanding that is also consistent with the Mission of Decorah Covenant Church and Covenant Affirmations (an Evangelical Covenant Church statement), including the principle of freedom in Christ. While times of celebration and commitment are important, our pietistic and evangelical traditions emphasize that the path of joyful, obedient, biblically literate, grace based, fruit bearing walk in the Spirit is both the goal and the measure of the transformed life, at every age in life, and at every stage in a spiritual journey. Participation in the life of this local church is assumed to be a part of this journey, but church membership is not a prerequisite for engaging in these sacraments and celebrations.

This document is meant to be introductory, not exhaustive. Further discussion and biblical references may be pursued with the Senior Pastor or the church council. Additional material may be found at the Covenant's website, www.covchurch.org

At Decorah Covenant, some of these milestones are regularly scheduled and others are celebrated on an as-needed basis. At all points of teaching and discipling children, youth and adults, attention should be given to teaching about these opportunities and placing them before one another in our life together.

Dedication of an Infant: This ceremony, usually included in a worship service, gives parents an opportunity to offer thanks for the gift of their child and to take vows of commitment to raise the child to delight in God's Word and to know Christ. There is also a sense of hope and expectation that the child will come to the place of receiving the New Life in Christ and a mutual commitment on the part of the congregation to come alongside the parents (and sponsors, if there are sponsors). Preparation for this recognition usually includes up to 3 sessions for parents and, in some cases, sponsors, to meet with the Pastor or mentors.

Baptism of an Infant: The baptism of children emphasizes the place of grace in God's call to his people, and the inclusion of the child in the covenant of grace seen in their parents' faith. However, equal weight is given to the expectation that the child will one day recognize God's grace in their own life, their need for a savior, and the necessity of personal faith in Christ as their Savior and Lord. Both parents and congregation make mutual promises to one another and to the child before God, so the service is typically done during gathered worship. Preparation for baptism of a young child usually includes up to 3 sessions for parents (and sponsors, if there are sponsors) to meet with the Pastor or mentors.

Baptism of a Believer: Youth and adults are baptized, typically by immersion, as a sign of

- God's grace coming to them,
- Their identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, and
- Their inclusion in the Body of Christ.

The person goes through a preparation that includes learning about the meaning of baptism and a disciple's life of faith. He/she is encouraged to make a personal confession of faith before the congregation, and to take the vows of baptism. Because of this, the decision to be baptized should not be done based on emotion or group or family pressure. It takes a lifetime to live into his/her baptism. A young person's decision about baptism should be made in consultation with parents and mentor/pastor and the scriptures. While children may express an interest in being baptized at a young age, many parents find that encouraging the child to wait until age 10 to be baptized increases the likelihood that the simple, but radical meaning of this lifelong sign will be best understood. Because baptism is also about inclusion in the Body of Christ, this service is not done privately, but with as much of the congregation gathered as possible. Believer baptisms

are typically done outdoors when weather permits, though arrangements can be made for baptism by immersion in any season.

We believe that it is faith in Jesus Christ, and not an outward act, such as baptism, either as an adult or infant, that provides assurance of the promise of eternal life.

The Lord's Supper: The Lord's Supper (Which we also refer to as "Communion" or "The Table of the Lord") is included in Worship at least once a month and on other special occasions. Modes of serving vary, but the Table is open to those who have put their faith in Christ and "desire His help that they may walk in newness of life." (From the Call to Communion in the Covenant Book of Worship) Discernment, confession and repentance are all a part of an individual's participation for the Table. Parents should see a child's interest in participating in the Table as an opportunity for teaching about its meaning, going back to the story of the Passover, the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, and the glorious hope of eternal fellowship in the presence of Christ. Parents can also help children discern where they are in their relationship with Christ, and connect Baptism and the Lord's Supper with their personal knowledge of Christ, before allowing them to participate in the Communion during worship.

Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant. Faith development in children and spiritual journeys of adults will always include different seasons and decisions. Some journeys take people far from God. Youth and adults who have been baptized at any age and in any manner can use the Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant service as a way to publicly and clearly recognize the work of the Spirit convicting, calling, and clarifying in that journey. Those who have been baptized as infants, for example, may want to connect, as an adolescent or adult, with that baptism's call and promise and make a public profession of personal faith in Jesus. Others whose journeys have taken them far from God may use this ceremony, and the two sessions of preparation for it, as a way to express their return to Christ and their desire to walk in the Spirit. The ceremony includes several "vow" type questions which are very similar to the promises made by believers at their baptism, and is typically done during a worship service. Such promises include faithful living in covenant with God and his people, seeking together to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Rebaptism Our biblical understanding of "one baptism" typically precludes rebaptism at any age. Those who wish to mark their return to faith are encouraged to participate in the "Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant" ceremony wherever possible.

Confirmation. The traditional understanding of Confirmation is as a rite of passage for all children at a certain age, marking the "confirmation" of their faith in Christ and the filling of the Holy Spirit. Decorah Covenant Church does not have a traditional Confirmation program. However, we believe that we have been, and will continue to, pursue the priorities of the first paragraph of this document and in keeping with the best intentions of a Confirmation type experience by:

1. Offering an intensive Bible survey teaching in Sunday school during 7th and 8th grade.
2. Encouraging every young person to make a public confession of faith, normally through being baptized as a believer or in the "Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant" service outlined above.
3. Seeking to match up one-to-one mentoring relationships between youth and adults at every stage in youth ministry.
4. Continue to engage the pastoral staff as a regular resource for the youth ministry targeting 7th and 8th grade students. The specific focus is to teach and discuss topics such as the Church, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and general questions, as well as to lay the groundwork for an ongoing pastoral friendship.

For more information, please contact the church office decorahcovenant@gmail.com - 563-382-1342 or Senior Pastor Don Holmertz dholmertz@gmail.com or 815-985-6634.