



St. Peter's Episcopal Church

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Dear Parishioners and Friends of St. Peter's Episcopal Church,

I am writing to you today about some very important changes we are making in celebrating the **SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM** here at St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

This weekend, I had a wonderful meeting with our new parish **Baptism Preparation Team**. It has been a priority for me for a while now to establish a Baptism Preparation Team in our parish. The first thing I wanted to do was listen to their suggestions and ideas and to share my own dreams. I want to be open to doing what is best for our parish and for the families who come to us to request Baptism. It was a great conversation with the spiritual growth of our parish family as the priority and guiding force.

As you know, one of the strong points of our parish (and of my own pastoral ministry as a priest) is to be welcoming. Our shared ministry as a parish is a ministry of "welcome" modeled on the ministry of Jesus.

When parents of young children request to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism for their child, we always want to be welcoming. In fact, we have always been very welcoming to every family who has come here. But, being "welcoming" goes beyond responding to a request that parents make to have their children baptized at St. Peter's. It has to go deeper. It is our job to connect these families into our community. The early Christian community after the Resurrection of Jesus "devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." When Jesus met people, he met their needs and then he challenged them to grow in faith.

Of course, we want to continue to be welcoming. Being welcoming does not simply mean responding to someone's immediate need. Being "welcoming" also means that we do everything that we can to connect these young parents to a living, active life of faith in Christ. And, this is the job, not only of a priest, but of every member of our Christian community.

At the Baptism ceremony, parents stand before God at the Baptism Font, and before the Christian community and they make the commitment to raise their child in the faith. And, a big part of

raising a child in the faith is being actively connected to a parish community. We can't do this faith thing alone! In fact, just the act of reaching out to the church for Baptism proves that fact. Faith is lived in community.

Did you ever notice in the Episcopal Church that we do not do "private" baptisms but we only baptize children during our Sunday Eucharist? The reason is that Baptism can only happen within the community. During the Baptism Ceremony we, the assembled community, pledge to do all in our power to help these young families in this journey. The community plays an important role and the response of the community during the celebration of Baptism is significant.

That is what I want to focus on today. How WE can help them!

When young parents request Baptism for their child at St. Peter's, there has been a common theme: the parents have usually had an "issue" or sadly have been made to feel unwelcome at a church of another denomination. The issue is usually that the other church would not baptize their child because the parents are not married or because an issue with sponsor/godparents. In the Episcopal Church, we believe the parents are the best ones to select sponsors and Christian role models for their children so that is not an issue for us. While I do not ever want to take anyone away from another church or denomination, if they have officially "checked out" from their former faith tradition, I always welcome them here.

After very long conversations with parents, they often say "this church is just what we are looking for." Or, "this is the kind of open-minded environment we want our child to grow up in." Often parents will comment on how welcoming we have been to them. And, 9 times out of 10, they will tell us how committed they are to remain connected to our parish and to start bringing their kids every week. And, 6 times out of 10, we never see them again. It is not only an issue at St. Peter's. It is something that every church deals with. But, we can do better! And because we are so focused on discipleship here, we are going to do all that we can do to help these families to grow closer to God.

So, beginning immediately, there will be some changes here at St. Peter's Episcopal Church when parents request to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism in our faith community. The intention of these changes is out of **LOVE** and ultimately to **HELP** families to be more committed to their faith. The changes are also geared to creating a stronger sense of community within our parish.

I would like to highlight these changes below:

- Beginning immediately, when parents call the Parish Office and ask to have their child baptized, the first step will be to set up an **initial meeting** with the parents, two members of our parish Baptism Preparation Team and myself so that we can get to know one another. We also want to have an initial conversation about why they want to have their child baptized, why they chose St. Peter's, and what their faith means to them. We hope to learn more about their faith journey and their relationship with God.

- If the parents are ready to make the **commitment** to be **active participants** in the life of St. Peter's Episcopal Church by being regular and faithful participants at our Sunday Celebration of Holy Eucharist and in the life of our parish, we will then encourage them to explore the Baptism process more. We will then invite them to attend a **Baptism Preparation Session**. This gathering will consist of the parents of the child to be baptized, the child's sponsors/godparents, our parish Baptism Preparation Team, our new parish Director of Youth & Family Ministry and myself, the parish priest. This will be a time for them to get to know each other, to build relationships and to have conversations about their Christian faith and life as a parent.
- If parents are new to St. Peter's (or have not been engaged in the life of our parish) we will then invite them to regularly attend our Service of Holy Eucharist and to get involved in the life of our parish **for a few months before a baptism date is scheduled**. We want parents to experience the life of our parish and to see if our parish is a good fit for them before they make a commitment to become members. We also want them to be immersed in the parish where they will raise their children. It will also be a good time for them to meet other members of our parish family. (There is no "magical" time to celebrate Baptism. Some people believe that a child needs to be baptized immediately in the first few months of life. This is simply not true. If Jesus didn't say it, don't believe it.)
- There will now be 6 Sundays scheduled on the parish calendar at different times throughout the year when the Sacrament of Baptism will be celebrated during our 10:00A Service of Holy Eucharist. When scheduling a baptism, parents will then be able to choose from one of those scheduled dates. There will most likely be other children getting baptized on any of those Sundays. Most parishes in our area have a similar fixed schedule for Baptisms and families easily work around those dates. In the past, families could choose whatever date they wanted. This is no longer possible with the way the new program is structured with the Baptism Preparation sessions.

The mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church is to **LOVE GOD. LOVE OTHERS & MAKE NEW DISCIPLES**. We believe this new process for celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism fulfills our mission. Our priority is to be welcoming! A big part of being welcoming is to help people to go deeper into being a disciple of Christ and to be changed by that encounter.

Let us continue to pray for our parish in this exciting time of growth! All that we do here is always done to draw people deeper and deeper into the heart of God! Please help us to spread the word about our new Baptism Preparation process to your family members and friends!

Peace,



(Rev.) Scott A. Ciosek
Rector