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**You Are a
Godparent**

Introduction

This booklet replaces "You Are A Sponsor" by the Reverend Mr. Hayward Kehl to whom acknowledgement is made for portions of the text.

The present revision was made under the direction of the Evangelism Committee of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. It arose out of the renewed conviction that churches can and do exercise their ministry of evangelism through celebrating liturgies of faithful living, one of which is the sacrament of baptism of infants.

Evangelism means caring for persons. Baptism is one way in which local congregations embody the good news of Christ and extend God's caring for persons. One group of people sometimes overlooked but important in this experience is godparents (or sponsors). The word "godparent" refers to a special person who is asked to care in a distinctive way for a particular child. Although in practice having godparents at baptism appears optional, the inclusion of godparents adds a significant dimension to the sacrament of baptism. This is especially true today when families have a critical need for support. The godparent, in assuming a unique responsibility for a child, becomes an extension of the caring family.

The selection of a godparent is very important and parents should think very carefully before asking a relative, friend, neighbor, or church member to assume this responsibility. It is appropriate to ask a person who is either married or single to be a godparent, yet the person's age should reflect some maturity and the ability to fulfill promises made.

The responsibility of encouraging children in the Christian faith and life is a shared one between families and a church. At the baptism of a child, parents are asked to make promises, to lead their child toward an understanding of the Christian gospel and into the service of Jesus Christ through responsible membership in a worshiping congregation. They are aided in fulfilling their promises through the loving support of the church community.

Although this booklet has been written specifically for godparents, pastors and families of children receiving baptism will also find it helpful.

You Are a Godparent

Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. This sacrament should be celebrated in the worship of a congregation. Circumstances sometimes make it necessary to celebrate baptism apart from the presence of the congregation; when this happens, representatives of the church should be present.

Baptism is a covenant, an exchange of joyous and solemn promises, between three entities: the parent(s), godparent(s), and the congregation, all in the presence of God the Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit, the One whose presence makes the covenant real and holy. Baptism is "the mark of [children's] acceptance into the care of Christ's church, the sign and seal of their participation in God's forgiveness, and the beginning of their growth into full Christian faith and fellowship" (from "The Order for the Baptism of Infants," in *Services of the Church*, United Church of Christ).

Celebration, acceptance, covenant and support combine in baptism. As a godparent you have been called to a special caring for the child who is to be baptized.

Reasons for Having Godparents

The practice of having godparents originally developed in the early church because Christians were persecuted and often killed for their faith. Knowing the uncertainty of their lives, Christian

parents would invite Christian friends or relatives to make solemn promises to bring up the child in the faith.

Our world is still characterized by change and uncertainty. It is good to know that if something should happen to the parents a specific individual has promised to see that the child is brought up in the faith and in a worshiping community.

You Have Been Honored

The parents of this child have invited you to be a godparent because of their high regard for you and your faith. Trusting that you will help nurture the life and spirit which God has given to this child, the church recognizes the importance of your role by providing for your participation in the sacrament of baptism. You are being honored as a godparent both by the parents of the child and by the church community.

You Have a Solemn and Joyous Responsibility

Along with honor comes responsibility. You are being asked to assist in bringing up your godchild in the Christian faith, to help this child come to know and enjoy God, and to see that the child is offered the experiences and instruction needed to inform his or her later decision about membership in a local church. You have a special responsibility to encourage the family to care about the faith

development of your godchild. You communicate the importance of faith in God and participation in a worshiping congregation by your example and teaching.

As the child grows and matures, faith will grow and become deeply rooted and personal. When the time is appropriate, the child will, through confirmation, affirm the decisions which you and the parents have made at baptism. You should make every effort to be present at your godchild's confirmation and seek ways to rejoice in it. After confirmation, your direct responsibility for the development of the child's Christian faith is lessened, but you should still encourage faithfulness to Christ and the church. Faith grows and deepens during your godchild's life and will benefit from gentle and continuous encouragement by you.

Your Promises

The specific form of the promises made by godparents in the ceremony of baptism may vary, but their meaning is universally the same. You are asked to re-affirm your faith and to promise, with God's help, to care for your godchild's well-being, especially the child's faith. Your promise is also to help the parents fulfill their Christian responsibilities to the child. The relationship that you now have with the family will grow and deepen as you continue to care for this child with his or her parents.

Specific Things Godparents Can Do

Sometimes godparents wonder what they can do for their godchild. It is helpful, therefore, to consider various practices which have been found to be particularly meaningful. The practical suggestions which follow are quite general. You are encouraged to use your imagination and develop specific ways of demonstrating your continuing care for your godchild as he or she grows.

- Because you are a godparent, it is important that you participate in the child's baptism. Arrangements for the ceremony should be made so that you can be present. (If, however, it is not possible for you to attend, then the parents and the pastor should contact you indicating the statements made and promises asked for. You should respond by phone or letter to both the parents and pastor.) At the service, you might present your godchild before the congregation and accompany the child to the location in the church where the baptism is to take place. During the service you will publicly acknowledge your promises. At the end of the service you might offer or be asked to walk the newly baptized child around the church, introducing him or her to the congregation.
- Include the child in your prayer life. You can do this by remembering the child in

prayer and by sharing your own relationship with God through your example and by your guidance.

- Remember your godchild's birthday or the anniversary of the baptism. A little note of remembrance, a card, or even a gift would be appropriate.
- In some cultures, the godparent gives the child a special candle which is lit each year to commemorate the baptism and to symbolize the child's growing faith.
- In other cultures, the godparent provides the clothing to be worn by the child at the time of confirmation.
- When considering an appropriate birthday/baptism anniversary present, ask your pastor for suggestions regarding books, magazine subscriptions, etc. that would be appropriate for the child's faith development.
- Visit your godchild. Make time on occasion to listen to the child's experience of church school and church worship. When visiting the family, remember that this child is special to you and consider ways of showing you care.
- Invite your godchild to visit you. This might be done on special occasions such as birthdays or graduation, or to celebrate a special event, such as a first bicycle ride.
- If something should happen to the parents and they are no longer able to provide, you as a godparent would be expected to take an added interest in and responsibility for the child.

ity for the continuing well-being of your godchild. Unless the parents have formally indicated through provision in a will that you are being asked to care for this child materially in the event of their death, you are not bound to do so. The promises you make at the child's baptism are not legally binding; they are, however, a solemn expression of your personal commitment to the Christian nurture of the child.

- Recommit yourself to your promises. For example, when there are others receiving baptism in your congregation, repeat the promises to yourself. On the anniversary of your godchild's baptism, re-dedicate yourself to your promises and encourage your godchild's parents to do the same. Take time to reflect on your godchild's growth in faith and spirit.

As a godparent, you can be of great help to this child and family by your friendly interest, prayers, demonstration of caring and faith, and by your love of God. Your are special in the celebration of the sacrament of baptism for your godchild. Through your ongoing commitment to your promises you will be sharing in the ministry of evangelism and embodying the good news of Christ.