

Risk Assessment Full Body Baptisms

Version Control

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Event or service this assessment relates to:	Full Body Baptisms
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Risk	Controls to consider	Additional information	Action by whom?	Completed – date and name
Officiator to announce at the start of the Service	Despite how tempting it is - do not go in the pool before or after the service. (I have actually managed to borrow a proper baptism pool from Liddington, which comes with a step which if I take it away after the baptism will make it virtually impossible for a child to actually get in.)		Isaac	
Church Officials	Read and Sign to say they have understood the attached document.		Liaison/Sides people/Wardens	

Church Safety Info Sheet: Baptisms and Safety

Baptisms¹ have been carried out for millennia and are not considered as a major Health and Safety issue. Most of the measures that need to be put into place to protect people from harm are usually common sense and done routinely, but this Info Sheet has presented the significant issues to help those who undertake Risk Assessments carry out a balanced assessment of what is actually needed.

It is often the case that the normal, day-to-day activities are often not given a second look when it comes to Risk Assessments. Often, when something is seen as a sacred rite or ritual, it is even more likely that it will not be considered. Usually this is because people are reluctant to modify something that has been carried out for so long, even if it is only to introduce some simple measures to prevent a common accident from occurring.

One thing is for certain – there is nothing inherently dangerous about baptisms and what risks remain are manageable.

It is important – like with other areas of safety and health – to ensure that the measures that are put into place are balanced with the actual risk (that being the probability of injury or ill health considered alongside the severity).

Slips and trips

The first, and probably most obvious issue, is that of slips and trips. People with bare feet who have just been immersed in water could easily slip over on tiles or lino flooring, trip over something that has been left lying around.

The best method to prevent people slipping over is to use a good slip-resistant floor surface and keep spillages and water splashes to a minimum, by mopping up as soon as practicable.

Many slip-resistant floor coverings are now available for use in baths, showers and WCs in commercial premises, and have been successfully used in swimming baths for some time. This kind of flooring would be recommended especially for new baptism pools in newer premises.

Specialist testing can be undertaken on flooring to establish the resistance to slipping, but for many circumstances, the simplest test can take the form of running a finger over the flooring – some resistance to the movement of the finger should be sensed. This simple test is a useful indicator and needs to be carried out in both wet and dry conditions and in varying directions (some surfaces perform better in one direction than others).

¹ This Info Sheet covers full-body baptisms, however the same general principles can be followed for other forms of baptism, and this would need to be reflected in the Risk Assessment.

Bath mats, rugs and similar can provide a useful means to collect water and prevent slips, so long as it is heavy enough and does not slip on the floor. On many occasions, the mats and rugs themselves prove to be a greater hazard than the flooring it was placed on because the mat does not have a good backing. Use larger mats with a flexible but yet heavy backing, as used on the large mats used in most commercial premises (offices and shops).

Shoes themselves could exacerbate the situation as not all shoes have soles that are slip-resistant enough indoors on wet surfaces. Rubber soled shoes often have adequate slip resistance and these, along with deck shoes and even some kinds of flip-flops and open-toed shoes, might reduce the chances of people slipping over.

However, shoes themselves can also lead to more risk especially if they do not fit properly or if they move when walking (as do most flip-flops).

Sharp objects in or on flooring can often become undetected, especially where people normally walk on the surface using shoes, which is the case in most Churches. Examine all flooring to ensure it is free from sharp edges, nails and other objects that could cause someone an injury. Take special care over checking the edges of carpets, especially at stairs, where the edging strips often contain many nails used to grip the carpet, and also check carefully at joins. Vacuum clean if possible before the baptism to remove any debris brought in on the shoes of others.

Steps and stairs are often negotiated to gain access to and from the baptistery and to areas used for changing. These need to be suitable slip-resistant to prevent people slipping on the floor and falling down the steps. Where the steps are near to the baptistery, the same kind of flooring as used there should suffice, as long as it is resistant enough to slipping. People should be able to dry as much as possible before travelling to change, to prevent water pooling and causing slip hazards on the floor.

Tripping hazards in the area need to be eliminated. These include things like clothing, towels for use afterwards, shoes or sandals and cables for microphones. For someone who has just been baptised, the mix of emotion and the potential for being disorientated might lead to an elevated risk of tripping over something.

Falls

While considering the above issues, it is also worth considering falls from height. Some baptisteries are recessed into the floor, while others have been installed above the normal floor level. In either case, where there is a risk that someone could fall, it is necessary to consider this in the Risk Assessment, especially if the person is likely to fall into the water.

The risks are especially high if children – especially unsupervised – are in the area. As such, children should therefore be supervised

appropriately at all times. If there are steps or other access points that can be closed off, this should be done. For example, in a baptistery installed in one church, where people have to walk up a short flight of steps to get to the edge, there is a child-gate installed at the bottom of the flight of steps.

Any barrier used to protect people from falling from height needs to be of adequate construction and so designed to prevent people falling. Usually, the barrier would need to be 1100mm high, and include vertical bars or other features that prevent a ball of 100mm being passed through (this is the standard test used to check that balustrades and banisters pass the building regulations). All other design features of stairs should conform to the building regulations (including the 'rising' and 'going') if they are new.

As highlighted above, ensure that steps and other spaces are so designed to prevent people slipping and falling, by choosing suitable anti-slip surfaces.

Water – bacterial and fungal growth

It is quite common for volumes of stagnant water to become a soup of bacteria when left at room temperature (or worse, a slightly elevated temperature). There are many diseases that could come from water, not least Legionnaires Disease, which leads to flu-like symptoms and can be deadly. While this disease is often associated with air conditioning systems, in fact any water system or storage tank could harbour bacteria.

Not all bacteria and fungi will lead to illness, but the same general measures are used to control all water-borne diseases. Perhaps the most straightforward control measure would be to reduce the amount of time water is in the baptistery for – fill it before use, bring it to temperature, use it and then drain it. After draining, ensure that the baptistery is dried and, where required, cleaned before putting back any covers. With no water, the bacteria will survive.

While anti-fungal treatments are sometimes used for other water tanks, the manufacturers of most modern fibreglass units often do not recommend this treatment is used, and these treatments might not be suitable for this application. From a safety and health perspective, treatments can work when administered correctly by competent people and this treatment needs to be the correct type for baptisteries because not all treatments are suitable for contact with the skin or eyes.

Also be careful to ask if of anyone who has a verruca. Although some sensitivity is required when asking such questions, it is important so as not to spread one person's verruca to others. Any verrucas should be properly covered using a proprietary waterproof dressing, available from most pharmacies for use at swimming pools. Other than verrucas, the chances of any disease being passed from one person to another is so low as to be remote and needs no further consideration.

If plans are to use a local river, contact the Environment Agency and Local Council to see if there are any reasons why it should not be done in the area. Some water courses are polluted and the sources of pollution can include sewage works and drain outfalls, nearby farms, factories and disused land, and from nature (including from rat's urine, which can cause Weil's disease).

Water temperature and room temperature

Immersing someone in old water could cause a shock to their body, and the reaction might be unsettling at least, and if the temperature is very cold, and for a prolonged period, more serious health conditions should result. It is therefore important to ensure that the water is heated if possible.

Although Church Safety does not recommend a temperature, the temperature should be reasonable enough not to feel the water as being too cold. 'Lukewarm' is ideal. The temperature would need to reflect the people being baptised (as some people would be more susceptible to feeling the cold) and some denominations might have their own standards set out.

It is also worth noting that people will need to walk to some kind of changing area where they need to dry off. Before they get there, they will need to walk through some areas that might not be all that well heated. To prevent people feeling the effects of the cold, it is important to have the Church heated appropriately, perhaps to a higher temperature than normal.

The sooner people can dry off, the better. Dry towels should also be readily available and it should not be expected that people should share. It might be that people would prefer to use their own, and could bring a towel along with their change of clothing and a suitable bag to take water-logged clothing back for drying.

Hygiene

If there is a group of people to be baptised, one area that needs to be sensitively thought through is that of personal hygiene. Sometimes, it might be preferable to carefully consider the order of people or to politely ask people to shower or bath beforehand.

In any case, matters of personal hygiene need to be handled with care and sensitivity.

Likewise, it is useful to ask people to not put on strongly scented perfumes or deodorants beforehand, and to be careful about the clothing they choose to wear.

Heaters

Baptisteries contain a large volume of water, and some considerable energy is needed to warm up the water to a suitable temperature. Sometimes, a pipe runs within the water which is connected to the central heating system, and as such the heating must be on for the heater to function.

Electrical heaters are sometimes used. Like with all electrical equipment, care is to be taken to make sure it is safe for the intended use, for example by undertaking a Portable Appliance Test periodically. This is especially important for a baptistery heater owing to the combination of water and electricity. Even if the heater is subject to an annual Portable Appliance Test, it should be checked over before use and if it has been stored unused for some time, a new test would be recommended.

In the case of electrical heaters, ensure that the power is fed to the heater using a Residual Current Device (RDC or Trip Switch) that will detect, and protect against, earth-faults that could lead to an electric shock. Take care to ensure that trailing leads (including extensions) are not overloaded and that the sockets and leads will not enter the water. Remove electrical heaters before the baptistery is to be used and turn off all extensions that have been used to supply power to the equipment.

Nearby electrical equipment

Electrical equipment and outlets nearby might be subject to drips or splashes. Think about switches and sockets nearby as these could be the source of an electrical shock if they get wet. It would be best to isolate all power nearby, but if this is not possible, the outlets should be splash-proof (e.g. the type intended for outdoor use). Sockets could be temporarily covered with plastic.

Note that there should usually be no hazard when using a radio-microphone or a simple hand-held, hard-wired microphone. Note that some sound systems use something called 'phantom power' which should ideally be turned off when using a hand-held, hard-wired microphone. It might be more appropriate to use a microphone capable of picking up sound from a further distance (shot-gun type).

Maintenance

It is important that any baptistery is maintained to keep it in good order. For most modern units, the manufacturer's recommendations should be followed to ensure that the baptistery, and all associated equipment, is properly maintained. Older baptisteries are often part of the building fabric, which could date back many years, and these might need to be overhauled by a specialist contractor (e.g. a pool maintenance company).

The designs used in many Churches varies considerably, so there is no single rule- of-thumb, however, cleaning is a number one priority and – ideally – all water should be properly drained and the baptistery fully dried after use. This will prevent bacterial and fungal growth, some of which can cause disease in Humans.

General maintenance might include cleaning with a low-hazard cleaning fluid and checking seals for effectiveness, grout and seals for freedom from bacterial growth and checking taps and drains function properly. Heating equipment must be tested periodically, and depending on the type, specialist testing might be required for gas and electrical heaters.

It would be recommended to perform maintenance a prolonged period of disuse, and to ensure that the baptistery is fully water-tight. A leak could cause untold damage to the fabric and structure of a building, and might be un-noticed until it is too late.

Another important consideration is the condition of the covers – where used – that are placed over the baptistery. While some are designed as simple covers to prevent the ingress of dust, others form a functional floor surface on which people use each week. The state of any floor-like cover needs to be checked over periodically (and should be included in the five-yearly inspection undertaken in many churches). In any case, a simple inspection can be undertaken each time the covers are removed to check for signs of distortion, stress, rot or other damage that could affect the ability of the floor to withstand the load placed upon it.

Information and Instruction

As part of the training sessions, it is important to reassure those people who are to be baptised about the process and how they will be baptised.

Even the simple things can – and should – be discussed. Take for example a person who relies on their glasses – they will need to know that they should take them off at the last moment and pass them to another person, and that they will get them back as soon as they ask for them. Included in the instruction should be taking a breath before being immersed and the means to signal to the minister that they are ready to be immersed (this should be some positive signal, such as a quick nod).

The choice of clothing is also an important consideration as some clothing absorbs more water than others and could make movement more difficult or lead to more water being spilled on flooring. For example, jeans or woollen jumpers would become very heavy when wet and should not be worn.

While this is very basic, and must not detract from the important spiritual aspects of the training, it is nevertheless important. It might be that a small number of people could be enlisted to support those who are a bit uncertain as mentors or guides.

Personnel

The final consideration is about personnel who will be performing the ceremony and who will supervise. Whoever is baptising will need to be able to immerse the other person so strength might be necessary, along with a reassuring attitude to others as there is no doubt that many people will be out of their comfort zone.

It is also important to think about having others nearby who could render assistance if it is needed. An additional able-bodied person, at the very least, should be available. Even better, someone with a current first-aid certificate who is familiar with resuscitation techniques to be undertaken in the case of drowning would be advisable. However, these aspects of the ceremony are well-versed and commonplace so that these risks are usually very low.

Summary

There are a number of key considerations relating to safety and health when baptising, however most of these issues are easily overcome and some simple and straightforward actions are often all that is needed to ensure that the ceremony goes according to plan and without injury.

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Need further help?

You can get advice about Health and Safety from your Environmental Health Department, which is part of your local District or Borough Council and fire safety advice is available from your local Fire Brigade.

If you are part of a larger organisation, there is usually someone you can contact to get advice and information from.

This leaflet has been produced for general information only and contains guidance on best practice. Additional measures over and above those suggested in this InfoSheet might be required in some circumstances. No liability is accepted for the content and the way that you use the information.

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