

## **Spontaneous Baptism Logistics** **- by Alli Main, Project Coordinator**

The following is a walk-thru of how we pursued “spontaneous” baptisms as part of a weekend service.

We had heard of a handful of churches doing this, and were intrigued. Our concern was proper vetting – we didn’t want to just get people hyped up to do something that would, in truth, not be true to the sacrament itself. Also, how do you prepare for scores of people to get baptized on the spot? That meant clothing, toilet articles, towels, and so much more.

We met as a team to figure out how to get this off the ground running, and were just amazed at the fruits God produced! They were so successful, in fact, that we’ve decided we cannot go back to having baptism any other way!

So this is intended for you as a guide should your church decide to pursue something similar.

### **The Vetting Process**

As mentioned, the biggest concern in having the baptisms be spontaneous was making sure that they were true to the sacrament of baptism – not just something that people did to follow the crowd. Your church’s theology may be different than ours, but we had two primary values: 1) that baptism follow someone’s decision for Christ, not precede it; 2) that this was not an unnecessary “rebaptism” that was more along the lines of a rededication (we believe baptism is a once and for all event).

Our vetting was done through the talks leading up to the baptisms. For example, in June of 2010, we did a two-week series called “Live Out Loud” focusing solely on baptism. The first service looked at the different excuses people have for not getting baptized. We literally had a “whack-a-mole” game on stage, to “whack” the top ten excuses that people come up with. The second service had a shorter talk, which then led into the baptism service itself. In October of 2010 our baptism weekend closely followed a “decision” weekend where the gospel had been clearly presented and an opportunity to decide for faith in Christ offered. On the weekend of the baptism itself, the talk focused on the topic of “Just Say The Word” (the story of Jesus and the Centurion’s faith), sharing the theological reasons for baptism and the significance of following in this act of obedience.

### **The Preparations**

Knowing that we had a vetting process in place, we then moved into the ways that we were actually going to pull this off in our church. Despite being a large church, we realized that there were some serious resource challenges to work out to be able to offer this sacrament “on the spot.”

1. **The Baptistry** – we purchased a baptistry with a seat for people that the Senior Pastor could stand behind to baptize people. We then constructed stairs on either side because we placed the baptistry on the floor in one of our atriums. We had a large banner created that would cover the base of the baptistry.

2. **Controlling for Safety** – we had men’s & women’s restrooms off the atrium that we utilized for both wet and dry changing. We needed a path for those whom were about to be baptized to form a line to the baptistry, and then a path leading away back to the restrooms. We formed a large square around the perimeter of the atrium. Leading out of the bathroom were entry-way rugs (meant to absorb some water, but not large quantities of water) behind a rope that led people on the path and created a natural line. We then purchased interlocking grids (like those you’d see at a pool gym) with ultra-absorbing pads underneath them (for both safety and water absorption) that led the path away from the baptistry and all the way into both restrooms. There people were then able to change back into their clothes.
3. **The Clothing** – we knew that to be able to have people get baptized on the spot, we would have to have everything covered in terms of attire. We purchased black t-shirts, black shorts, men’s and women’s underwear, sports bras, flip-flops and towels to provide a full outfit for people who did not pre-register. We also had hair ties and combs available for people to pull their hair back if they wanted.
4. **The Volunteers** – we realized that to pull this off we were going to need a large group of volunteers at the ready. We had a volunteer leader who organized the crew that was stationed throughout the atrium, on either side of the stairs of the baptistry, in the restrooms, at the registration tables, and at the clothing line.
5. **The Attenders** – we wanted to make sure that those attending the service were still able to feel as though they were a part of the celebration! We had a stand with video cameras filming the baptisms so that we could send a live-feed into the auditorium that was shown on our 3 large screens. This way, people were able to join in on the experience. Our worship team played music during the baptisms, and that music was also on the speakers in the atrium for those getting baptized and their immediate family who may have joined them. This simple step even led some of those who were hesitant to watch the experience and then come forward themselves to be baptized.

### **The Day of the Event**

After our Senior Pastor ended his talk, he dismissed those who were ready to get baptized to the designated atrium. Our Guest Services Volunteers were there and ready to guide people to the back of the auditorium and through the open doors. Signage was used to make it very clear which way to go, but we also had volunteers leading the way.

#### **Registration**

We had 2 separate registration lines with 2 volunteers per line: one for those who had pre-registered and one for those who decided on the spot to be baptized. Those who were truly spontaneous had to fill out a card with their information, and in the other line their names were checked on an alphabetical list. Each person was then handed a white 5”x7” index card with their first name printed in large black ink that they were to carry with them all the way to the baptistry. Those who had pre-registered were then directed immediately to the restrooms to change (although most of these people already came to service dressed and ready to go) and then follow the “dry” path to get in line. Those who were spontaneous then moved to the right to the Clothing Tables.

### Clothing Tables

We used shelving already in our atrium to pile up the clothes – black t-shirts, black shorts, underwear, sports bras – according to size (S through 2XL). We had 4 volunteers that would move people through the line getting the sizes that we needed. We did this realizing that people come in all different shapes and sizes – e.g., a person may need a small top but a large bottom, or vice versa. They were all handed a towel at the end of the line. The clothing line was also helpful to those who preregistered but forgot something at home. This helped to take a lot of the anxiety away!

### Bathrooms

Volunteers then led all participants to the bathrooms. We had cubby-style bookshelves in each bathroom for people to put their clothes while they were being baptized. One volunteer was in each restroom making sure that people had everything that they needed, and controlling for any excess water to ensure safety.

### The Pathway

Volunteers were also stationed along the “dry-path” on the rugs to help direct people around the turn to the baptistry. A volunteer was also stationed with white cards and a sharpie for those who accidentally forgot their name card. The card was used by the Senior Pastor to be able to speak to each person by name which made the experience more personal.

### The Baptistry

A total of 7 volunteers were at the baptistry alone: one to assist the Senior Pastor with the cards, one to take their towel and walk it to another volunteer who would hold it for them when they came out of the water, and then 2 per each side of each staircase (4 total) to walk the people up the stairs and then help them down the stairs.

### Miscellaneous Needs

We had several other volunteers stationed around the atrium who were there to help control the water. Our biggest concern was for safety and we did not want anyone to take a spill on the tile floor. Another volunteer was serving as our counter – they would count the number of people still to be baptized and then text this information to the sound booth so they could let the band know when to lead into the last worship song.

## **Final Thoughts**

We could not have done this without a truly incredible team of volunteers who worked tirelessly throughout the week before and the weekend of the baptisms. The vision was clearly cast for them – this was about reaching people for Christ and following the Great Commission. We had volunteers wash all the clothing that was to be used beforehand (we’ve learned that if we don’t, the large numbers of people with new clothes fills the baptistry with dark, inky water from color fading). We had volunteers who came in to fold and prep the clothing for us. We had volunteers to organize and schedule the volunteers. We had volunteers who prepped the baptistry – getting it filled, secure, and HEATED! We had volunteers who laid down the grid matting and the flooring. And then of course the volunteers who worked all weekend long to make this a celebration, for an audience of One, to be marked for eternity.

For more information, please feel free to contact us: [acmain@mecklenburg.org](mailto:acmain@mecklenburg.org).