

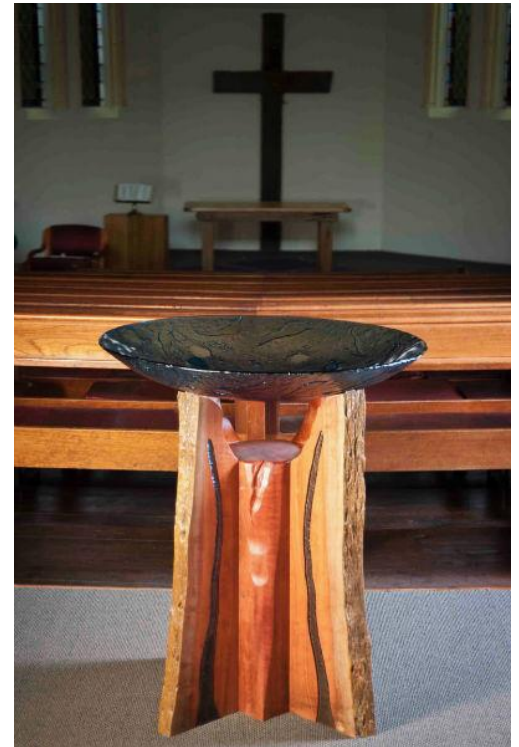
Jack baptised himself

[Julie Perrin](#)

16 July 2019

The first time Jack came to the church he baptised himself. The font was new, the water inviting, and he dunked his ten-year-old head right in. The sea-blue glass font had recently been installed in the foyer on a sculpted piece of redgum. The brief for the designers was to make it accessible to all ages — they were delighted to hear of its instant appeal.

Jack's mother Fi followed him around at a short distance as he stepped, heavy-footed through the space. He held his hands in front of him as a kind of bumper. Jack was wearing headphones, a precaution against the too-much that so many people and such loud singing might be. But on this first visit he was relaxed and roving. Occasionally he made loud sounds that broke into the silences between the words of worship, but there was a gladness in them, no signals of distress. Jack liked the lectern at the front and came right up and stood before the person speaking. His tall-boy presence registered curiosity and that's not a bad thing in church.



Over the next five years Jack made semi-regular appearances at Sunday morning worship. He also liked church camp. A bush camper from early in life, he was content around campfires and among the tall trees of the campsite. Jack's dad was not a church-man but he too was relaxed at camp. Jack's parents took turns to tag-team in watching over him.

After these early introductions Jack's mother started asking him, 'Do you want to go to church?' He made a clear nod time and time again. And so Fi would bring him and follow him or sit on the floor with him or lie down with him on the cushions at the front. There are many possible aisles and pathways and places to sit inside and around this inner-city neo-Gothic church building. The minister and congregation wanted the spaces to be inhabited. Jack made his home in them.

When he was 15 Jack's parents requested he be baptised. They'd asked themselves: If Jack could tell them, would he want to be baptised? His gladness to be amidst people was telling in itself, was in-part his answer.

In the weeks before his baptism, Fi read Jack a baptism story. She talked to him, touching his forehead where the sign of the cross would be marked. They watched videos of people being baptised. As the day drew closer he said the words over and over: 'Jack's back-tism'.

On the Sunday morning everyone came out of the pews and gathered in the wide foyer at the entrance of the church. Baptism was, after all, about coming *into* the congregation. The children spread around the font on cushions on the floor. There was a circle of chairs for people who needed to sit. Everyone else stood in a wide semi-circle that became a full circle as Jack, his parents and godparents stood with the minister beside the sea-blue font.

"There was laughter, big smiles and astonished eyebrows from his parents and folk who realised how unexpected this enthusiasm for interaction was."

The minister spoke and Jack watched the font intently. Prayers were said. Suddenly Jack veered off to the side. His parents followed, sensing his anxiety to escape the attention. The minister nodded and kept going, looking towards them as he spoke. There was a plan B if Jack needed to stay outside the

circle-of-too-much-attention. But Jack came back, gripping onto his parents, pulling them close to him. His mother said she could feel his heart thumping and it seemed like nothing less than a miracle to her that he was willing to come back to the font.

There's a formal exchange when the people seeking baptism and the congregation are asked to declare what they ask and what they promise. The minister asked Jack what he wanted. Jack opened his mouth and spoke a word beginning with B. He put one hand up to his heart, and with the other to steady him he bowed his head over the water. The minister poured three handfuls of the water over Jack's forehead as he bent over the wide glass basin. Then the tall teenager stood up, shaking the remnant drops away and reaching for them as they trickled down his neck onto the small white towel he'd been given.

Then came the part where the newly baptised person is walked around the circle to be greeted by the congregation. 'Now it's time for Jack to be introduced to us — so far as he's up for it,' said the minister. There's an awareness of the drama that too much exposure can bring to autism. It can be traumatic.

Jack's mother walked on one side of him, someone from the church council on the other. Jack shook hands with people, looking not at their eyes but at their hands as they held his. Some of them hugged his mother. Then the trio returned to stand with Jack's father and the minister. But Jack wasn't finished, he darted off again, solo this time, going around the circle shaking hands, then clapping and holding his arm up in the high five position. There was a ripple of excitement. I saw Jack's grandfather wiping his eyes and pocketing his handkerchief. When Jack reached the font he set off again for a third lap. There was laughter, big smiles and astonished eyebrows from his parents and folk who realised how unexpected this enthusiasm for interaction was. Jack shook hands with yet more people and all the while smiled to himself. Once he was back, his parents signalled to him to stay with them, they offered him his headphones.

A blessing was sung, words from the Hebrew Bible: 'The Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face to shine upon you the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.' The request for peace so perfect for a boy for whom the world was often anything but peaceful.

Moments later the children picked up small twigs with the soft fringed leaves of a casuarina. At the end of the baptism, and according to local custom, they flicked water from the font onto each other and the people around them. There is always laughter at this point — giggling and squealing at wetness and a few well-aimed flicks from the older more practised children. Then they reluctantly let go the fine twigs, drying their hands on their clothes. Jack did not join in but neither did he shy away. Most of the congregation were ready to move back to the pews, a few stayed in their seats in the circle, prolonging the moments around the font.

Jack watched the movement closely, as the seats began to empty. He nabbed an empty seat between two adults. He sat there grinning, looking from side to side with satisfaction. His parents watched Jack, tears in their eyes as he sat with equanimity in a place of his choosing. Their relief and wonder were palpable.

At length most people returned to the pews for the sermon. Jack stayed where he was, beaming.

source: <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au>



Julie Perrin is a Melbourne writer and oral storyteller. She teaches The Art and Practice of Oral Storytelling at Pilgrim Theological College in Parkville. Her collection, *Tender: Stories that lean into kindness*, is published by MediaCom. Image of font in Brunswick Uniting Church, Vic. by Eva Rugel