



A briefing paper

Dear all,

Over the past months the question of children and communion has been a topic of conversation. At a previous Benefice Council it was suggested that I produce a briefing paper that tells at least some of the story behind the case for Children and Communion. I wanted this not to be a 'View of the Vicar' so I have drawn on material written by Steve Pearce and Diana Murrie. It outlines the history and background to the current situation.

The issue is not a new one, but it is one that bishop; Stephen raised whilst with us a few weeks ago.

Do please take time to read and pray over these issues. The care and nurture of our children is of critical importance to each of us. We do want to get things right.

The significance of children in the Kingdom of God cannot be over-stated. Jesus holds them up to adults as an example and also tells us that when we welcome a child in his name, we welcome Jesus himself. It is appropriate therefore, that we should give most careful thought to the preparation of children as they come to participate in the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whatever the local church's practice concerning the admission of children to communion before or after confirmation, the education course in this book will help children to enjoy learning about the Eucharist and sharing their thoughts and responses with adults. It has been developed from ideas generated in pioneer parishes in the Diocese of Southwell.

I know from my own experience that the spiritual life of children is enriched by receiving communion. It is good that this timely book, along with the Guidelines from the House of Bishops, are now available to provide parishes with tested material that can be used for the proper and careful preparation of children for such an important step in their Christian life. It also emphasises the importance for those children who do go forward to receive communion, of eventually being confirmed.

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Bishop of Southwell 1997

The history and the reports

It seems clear that children were present in the earliest Christian communities and were initiated into the faith along with adults. There is, of course, no explicit mention of any special approach to the baptism of children in the New Testament; they were included with the family or household, and there is certainly no mention of any baptised members being excluded from the celebration of the Eucharist. So for children, as for anyone else, membership of the Church is obtained by baptism and thereafter depends on continuing participation in the Eucharist.

The completing of John 3. 5, ' . . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God . . . with John 6. 53, . . . unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you', establishes what is necessary for participation in the Christian community. *Communion before confirmation page 8*

From a certain perspective, the history of children and Communion in the West in later centuries could be described as a story of children losing their place at the central table of the community, having to wait many years for a reasoned explanation of why this should have been done to them, and being made to wait as long again for their counterarguments in favour of reinstatement to be heard and accepted. In the East the right and need of children to receive Communion is unquestioned.

In detail, the historical exploration discovers a variety of practice and a variety of justifications which follow changes in the practice. In broad terms, though, the changes in our tradition came about in the following way. During the medieval period, for a variety of reasons, baptism, confirmation and admission to communion came to be seen as separate events. Three of the reasons are briefly outlined below: these were largely pragmatic, and a theological justification for the newer pattern was only developed later, after changes had taken place.

First, while Augustine was clear that children needed to receive communion as much as adults did, his doctrine of 'Original Sin' encouraged the notion that infants should be baptised as early as possible, to secure their future in Heaven. The growing size of dioceses meant that the bishop only visited every few years and it became impossible for him as the minister of baptism and laying on of hands to meet the needs of the population. The problem was solved by allowing a local minister to perform the part of the baptism invoking water and the signing of the cross, and waiting for the visit of the bishop for the laying on of hands. Admission to Communion, though, was still associated with the priest's performance of the baptism, not with the bishops laying on of hands.

Secondly, there was a growing tradition of the 'real' nature of the consecrated elements in the Eucharist which demanded such 'care' that the laity were denied the wine and given only bread, while children were sometimes denied altogether.

Thirdly, a regulation was issued by Archbishop Peckham at the Council of Lambeth in 1281, that those not confirmed (without good reason) should be barred from communion. This was an attempt to counter the 'damnable negligence' of parents who failed to present their children to the bishop for laying on of hands, rather than the expression of any theological or spiritual insight.

The practice of communicating unconfirmed adults and children was finally abolished at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

During the Reformation instruction and understanding became significant concepts in deciding who should receive communion. Cranmer's Prayer Book of 1549 stated that 'there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he can say the catechism, and be confirmed' — emphasising the understanding, which should presumably follow from learning the catechism, rather than the formal rite of confirmation.

It seems that from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth the great preponderance of Anglican communicants were admitted to Communion not on the basis of being confirmed, but of having been baptised and having received some minimal instruction from the parochial incumbent. (*Communion before Confirmation*, p. 17)

In the nineteenth century Confirmation developed into the familiar 'gateway to Communion', and twentieth century Anglicans came to believe that it had always been the precondition for receiving the sacrament.

In 1969 the Ely Commission was asked to reconsider questions of initiation. It reported in *Christian Initiation: Birth and Growth in the Christian Society* (CIO 1971), concluding that Baptism is complete sacramental initiation and that adults and children should be admitted to Holy Communion on that basis. After reporting on the report and referring the matter to dioceses, in 1976 the General Synod decided with a 60/40 majority not to proceed to a change in the admission of children to communion.

The minority was nevertheless large and various semi-official 'experiments' were under way. Synod returned to the issue in the early 1980s and the Knaresborough Report was published as *Children and Communion* (CIO 1985). It recommended that regulations for the admission of baptised people to Holy Communion should be drawn up and approved. Synod 'took note' in November 1985 but did nothing further. In 1991, however, a report from the House of Bishops on initiation was discussed and Synod accepted the bishops' motion to permit early confirmation, but rejected one asking for the discontinuation of 'experiments of admission to communion before confirmation'. A 1993 report on three 'experimental' dioceses (Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark) found a substantial majority of the parishes concerned were 'convinced of the positive value of admitting children before confirmation'.

Finally, in 1995, the report *On the Way* was published with encouragement to parishes to review their patterns of initiation and consider various options, including the admission of children to communion at an earlier age while reserving confirmation as a rite of adult commitment and the beginning of adult ministry around the age of eighteen. The guidelines from the House of Bishops on the admission of children to communion were published in 1996 and welcomed by Synod in November of that year. The guidelines were slightly modified in January 1997 following the debate in Synod, and are reprinted in their final form on pages 6—7. (in this a booklet)

This process in the Church of England is mirrored in many other denominations and in other parts of the Anglican Communion. Methodist and URC congregations, for instance, have been encouraged for some years now to welcome children to the Lord's Table. The Anglican Churches in Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa have already made it possible for Communion to follow baptism, before confirmation. Meanwhile Catholic practice in most places is for children to have their first communion around the age of seven, and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have always acknowledged the need of children to receive Holy Communion from baptism onwards.

The convincing arguments in favour of a change in practice seem to have been

- the nature of baptism
- the acceptance of children in the church
- children's need for spiritual nourishment
- children's need to belong
- the need of adults to 'become as a child'.

The bishops address the nature of baptism in these terms: 'The entire profession of the Christian life ... is represented in the action of baptism' (House of Bishops GS 1212). In other words, baptism makes us full members of the Body of Christ.

It is on the basis of the baptism that we are bidden to express our membership in the receiving of the bread and the wine at Holy Communion. To exclude the children is therefore to deny their baptism.

Jesus' acceptance of children was explicit and particular:

They brought children for him to touch. The disciples rebuked them, but when Jesus saw this he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me, do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.' And he put his arms round them, laid his hands upon them, and blessed them. (*Mark 10. 13, 14, 16*)

The church is being challenged to be as welcoming and accepting of children as Jesus was.

Children's need for spiritual nurture is often interpreted as a requirement to teach a body of knowledge or an explicit moral code; far more is required, however. Children grow up as members of communities, assimilating the values and habits of the adults around them as well as of their peer group. We can teach them whatever we like about being a Christian, but their experience of the Christian people around them will far outweigh what they have been told. Similarly their experience of the Christian life the joy of fellowship with other Christians, the excitement of the great festivals, the support in time of need and the regular pattern of encounter with God in prayer and sacrament will all become part of the fabric of their lives in a way that what they are just told about will not.

We all need to belong, and seldom stay in a place or group if we feel we don't belong there. This is especially true for children, who increasingly have the experience of leaving groups that don't meet their needs. Children in the seven to eleven year old age group have a great enjoyment of being part of a group, in particular one which contains adults too. It is an age when they will feel keenly any action which denies their membership or fails to include them. At this time they will feel keenly any action which denies their membership or fails to include them. At this time they need to be active participants in those activities which define the group: any exclusion must be very dearly thought out and well understood if the church community is not to reap in teenage years the lack of involvement and poor quality of relationship sown in these crucial earlier years.

'I tell you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it' (Mark 10. 15).

Jesus challenges us not only to welcome children wholeheartedly into the church, but to cherish the way they belong to the kingdom and to be like them, It is the experience of many who have knelt at the altar in the presence of children that these words strike home keenly and lake on a powerful resonance.

Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation Guidelines agreed by the House of Bishops

Since 'communion before confirmation' is a departure from our inherited norm, it requires special permission. After consultation, every diocesan bishop will have the discretion to make a general policy whether or not to entertain new applications for 'communion before confirmation' to take place in his diocese. If he decides to do so, individual parishes must seek his agreement before introducing it. The bishop should satisfy himself that both the incumbent and the Parochial Church Council support any application, and that where appropriate ecumenical partners have been consulted. If the parties cannot agree, the bishop's direction shall be followed.

The incumbent must ensure that the policy adopted for his/her parish is clearly and widely understood. The policy should be considered within the general context both of the ministry that is carried out in the parish through initiation, and also of the continuing nurture of people in the Christian faith. The bishop should be satisfied that the programme of continuing Christian nurture is in place leading to confirmation in due course.

Before admitting a person to communion, the priest must seek evidence of baptism. Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion.

There is a question regarding the age at which children may be admitted to Holy Communion. In general the time of the first receiving should be determined not so much by the child's chronological age as by his or her appreciation of the significance of the sacrament. Subject to the bishop's direction, it is appropriate for the decision to be made by the parish priest after consultation with the parents or those who are responsible for the child's formation, with the parents' goodwill. An appropriate and serious pattern of preparation should be followed. The priest and parents share in continuing to educate the child in the significance of Holy Communion so that (s) he gains in understanding with increasing maturity.

The Church needs to encourage awareness of many different levels of understanding, and support the inclusion of those with learning difficulties in the Christian community. Particular care needs to be taken with the preparation of any who have learning difficulties, including children. The incumbent should consult with those concerned in their care, education and support regarding questions of their discernment of the sacrament, their admission to Holy Communion, and their preparation for confirmation.

Before a person is first brought to Holy Communion, the significance of the occasion should be explained to him/her and to his/her parents, and marked in some suitable way before the whole congregation. Wherever possible, the person's family should be involved in the service.

A register should be kept of every person admitted to Holy Communion before confirmation, and each should be given a certificate (or, better, the baptismal certificate should be endorsed).

Whether or not a parish practises 'communion before confirmation', the incumbent should take care regarding the quality of teaching material, especially that used with children and young people. The material should be reviewed regularly and the advice of diocesan officers and other professional advisers taken into account.

The priest must decide exactly how much of the liturgy communicant children will attend. Even if there is a separate 'Ministry of the Word' for children, anyone who is to receive Holy Communion should be present in the main assembly at least for the Eucharistic prayer.

No baptized person, child or adult, who has once been admitted to Holy Communion and remains in good standing with the Church, should be anywhere deprived of it. When, for example, a family moves to another area, the incumbent of the parish they are leaving should contact their new incumbent to ensure that there is no confusion regarding the communicant status of children. It is the responsibility of the new incumbent to discuss with the children and parents concerned when the children should be presented for confirmation. Such children should normally be presented at least by the age of 18.

Since baptism is at the heart of initiation, it is important for the bishop regularly to be the minister of holy baptism, and particularly at services where candidates will be both baptized and confirmed. It is generally inappropriate for candidates who are preparing for initiation into the Christian life in baptism and confirmation to receive baptism at a service other than the one in which they are to be confirmed.

In using rites of public reaffirmation of faith other than baptism and confirmation, care should be taken to avoid the impression that they are identical with confirmation. In the case of people who have not been confirmed, it will be more appropriate for the incumbent to propose that they be confirmed.

Planning for change in a parish

On the Way, the report to the House of Bishops, outlined three patterns of initiation:

Baptism; Confirmation as at present around the age of twelve to fourteen years; Holy Communion.

Baptism; Confirmation at an earlier age; Holy Communion.

Baptism; Holy Communion; Confirmation in late teens.

Following the November 1996 debate in the General Synod and the report from the House of Bishops, Admission to Communion in Relation to Baptism and Confirmation (GS 1212), it is now open to each diocesan bishop to allow any or all of these patterns.

Each pattern has different implications for the pattern of initiation, education and nurture of people of all ages. Many parishes will have taken their pattern of initiation for granted and may now wish to think through a coherent policy which encompasses baptism, the welcome of young families, children's work, admission to Holy Communion, the style of youth work, confirmation preparation, encouraging new adult members and supporting adult disciple ship. Diocesan advisers, especially the Adviser in Children's Work, will be pleased to help parishes consider and evaluate the possible patterns.

Where there is some interest in considering a change in the pattern which is traditional in the parish, most of the following steps will need to be taken:

- Hold a discussion in the standing committee, leading, if there is sufficient interest, to:
- Some initial research, referring to recent reports and diocesan policy and consultation with other parishes and advisers.
- Ensure a substantial consideration at a PCC meeting, using a member or visiting adviser to take the lead on the item.
- Allow time for members to pray, reflect and discuss with others.
- After further discussion, make the decision at a subsequent PCC meeting.
- In the event of a decision not to proceed, plan feedback to the congregation, pastoral strategy for those most affected and a review in due course.
- In the event of a decision to proceed, plan involvement of the whole congregation (see ideas in the chapter 'Congregational preparation and learning').
- Consult with children's workers about the children's preparation programme.
- Select and train leaders for the preparation course.
- Consider the implications for the pattern of services, the liturgy and the participation of all ages.
- Communicate the planned arrangements to the bishop and to the whole congregation.
- Invite parents and children to declare an interest in receiving communion.
- Give parents details of the new arrangements, the preparation course, ways they can help or be involved and maybe an invitation to a sociable learning or information occasion.
- Receive consent forms from parents.
- Plan and deliver the children's preparation course.

- Arrange the (annual) service at which children will receive Holy Communion for the first time.
- Record the names of all children admitted to communion.
- Write letters of commendation to their new parish for any children who move.
- Ensure that Communion services meet the needs of all communicant and non communicant participants.
- Arrange to review these procedures and their contribution to the life of the church.
- Join with other parishes in diocesan monitoring and evaluation process.

Pages extracted from

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