

## Children and Communion

### A potted history



*This text was presented by our Vicar, David Monteith, at Candlemas 2003, as background information for us as a parish as we considered admitting children to communion before Confirmation by the Bishop.*

*In due course we decided to go ahead.*

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### A potted history of Children and Communion

**Passover** – This meal of liberation bound the people of Israel together in community. Children had a place of honour and often led the adults in reliving the experience. Jesus would have been familiar with this and may even have played the child's role in this meal.

**Last Supper** - this meal was most likely a Passover meal but it inaugurated a new community of liberation. This tradition was kept alive through house churches which would have included whole households.

**Initiation** – Jesus was baptised with water and the Spirit came down upon him. In the New Testament some baptisms are mentioned with the laying on of hands and others without it. There is no evidence of a separate baptism rite for children. Baptism seems to have involved adults with repentance, public testimony and ritual washing. But most assume because of evidence from social studies that whole households were baptised.

**Early Practice** – Justin Martyr in the mid 2nd century describes a baptism which is followed with a kiss of peace and then communion. Tertullian and Hippolytus at the end of that century describe a baptism with a later laying on of hands, following communion. This is indicative of a two-stage initiation: baptism and laying on of hands (which becomes confirmation).

**Augustine (4th/5th century)** – bishops had administered baptism but Augustine's doctrine of original sin required babies to be baptised as soon as possible to ensure their entry into heaven. This meant huge numbers of baptisms and the Bishops could not cope with the numbers, so baptism became the responsibility of local church leaders. Bishops came round less often and later to do the laying on of hands. Admission to communion was associated with the local priest's baptism not the laying on of hands.

**East/West** – the Orthodox churches have always admitted children to communion. Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion are all done at the same service of initiation into the church.

**Medieval period** – due to high incidence of illness and infant mortality, many babies were baptised by midwives. Dioceses became big and unwieldy so that many people were never confirmed. Indeed Thomas Aquinas argued that confirmation was not necessary for ordination. This period was also marked with clericalism in which the sacraments became more and more distanced from the laity.

**1281** Archbishop Peckham at the Council of Lambeth decrees that those not confirmed may not receive communion. Confirmation had become an 'optional extra' and so this was an attempt to restate its importance.

**1552** Archbishop Cranmer's prayer book stated 'there shall be none admitted to the Holy Communion until such tyme as he can saye the Catechism, and bee confirmed'.

**The Reformation** emphasised the importance of understanding and established what is now the more familiar pattern of infant baptism followed by confirmation when the person has 'come to years of discretion'.

**1662** Cranmer's position was modified at the Savoy Conference before the publication of the Book of Common Prayer. So it now read 'and there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be confirmed or ready and desirous to be confirmed'. Confirmation was viewed not as an essential part of initiation but more a test to see whether the catechism had been learnt.

**18th & 19th century** Anglicanism admitted communicant on the basis of being baptised and having received some sort of instruction from their local clergy. Bishops were supposed to do confirmation tours every three years.

**19th century** had movements (Anglo Catholicism and Evangelicalism) which sought to reconnect with early church practice. So Confirmation again became important but with the influence of enlightenment thinking it became the gateway to Communion for young adults with a two stage initiation: baptism followed by laying on of hands by Bishops who were exercising an apostolic ministry.

**1950's** onwards saw the change from Sunday School being an afternoon event to a morning. This happened alongside the Parish Communion movement which shifted the main service from matins in the morning or evensong at night to the Eucharist with children being involved (or not) in various ways – 'the Lord's people around the Lord's table on the Lord's day'.

**1967 The Ely Commission** concluded that Baptism is a complete sacramental initiation and that adults and children should be admitted to communion on that basis. In 1976 the General Synod finally voted on it not to proceed to this change in a 60/40 vote.

**1980's** Other Anglican provinces including New Zealand, South Africa and Australia make provision to admit children to communion.

**1985 The Knaresborough Report** published as 'Children and Communion' following other work by the World Council of Churches on the nature of faith development in children. It recommended that all baptised people should receive communion. General Synod took note of it but did nothing. However, the Dioceses of Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark are deemed places of experimentation with this idea. A further report entitled 'Children in the Way' asked for a resolution of the issue as matter of urgency.

**1991** Synod accepted a House of Bishop's proposal to permit early confirmation but rejected a motion asking for the discontinuation of experiments to admission of communion before confirmation.

**1993** The experimenting dioceses reported that a substantial majority of parishes were 'convinced of the positive value of admitting children before confirmation'

**1995 'On the Way'** encouraged parishes to review their patterns of initiation including to consider admitting children before confirmation while reserving confirmation as a rite of adult commitment and the beginning of adult ministry in the late teens.

**1997** General Synod published 'Guidelines on the admission of children to Communion before Confirmation'. Southwark Diocese publishes its own guidelines which state that we hold a dual policy, counting both Communion before Confirmation and Confirmation before Communion as equally valid, depending on the traditions, circumstances and needs of individual parishes. If children are admitted, it is in the context of appropriate education and usually at about the age of 6 or 7.

### ***Questions commonly asked***

#### **I thought some children already received communion...**

Some do because their parents share some of their wafer with them but they do not receive communion themselves.

#### **Are children able to understand?**

Children have understanding appropriate to their age. For example they can understand some of the historical facts, something of the specialness of the meal and that it is about the love and presence of Jesus. The word sacrament is the Latin translation of the Greek word 'mysterion' and so adults also have difficulty in understanding this mystery. Many adults now come new to church and receive communion without realising that they are supposed to be confirmed.

#### **Is there a right age?**

Experience from other churches suggests about 6 or 7 but the developmental stages of children vary a great deal and so sensitive pastoral care is needed.

#### **Children will not approach it in a godly and reverential way!**

This is also a danger for adults but God's grace does not depend on us! With proper support and education at church and home, a child may approach it with as much respect as is possible. The Anglican emphasis on communion as a very personal/individual matter has changed to a more corporate fellowship meal with spiritual food for the journey.

#### **Children enjoy a blessing so why change things?**

They do and this evolved as a reasonable solution when they were not able to receive communion. It is always an option for both adults and children.

#### **Will they receive bread and wine?**

The church has always taught that receiving either element is to fully receive communion but we probably would suggest that children receive the wafer and then dip the tip of it in the chalice to also receive the wine (communion by intinction).

#### **What sort of education?**

We'll need to work out the details but the education of parents is as important as the preparation of the kids themselves. Special classes and teaching Eucharist's would be considered. Some children

may decide not to receive communion and that will be fine. If parents refuse to let their children receive who want to then there will be problems. But as with every other parent decision, children will need appropriate information for them to understand this decision.

### **What if non-admitted children put their hands out to receive?**

It is impossible for the ministers of the Eucharist to remember who receives and who doesn't so this responsibility must go to parents. But if it happens, no real harm is done to the sacrament or to the child.

### **What happens if a family move and the next parish has a different practice?**

This will probably be true with respect to most things but when a family moves, the incumbent can write a letter to the new vicar who should be able to make some accommodation.

### **Will admission to communion alter the meaning of confirmation?**

Yes – it will no longer be seen so much as a rite of passage to communion but as a more adult affirmation of faith. Over 50% of confirmations are now that of adults. We would expect the age of confirmation to rise somewhat from 10 to mid teens. Confirmation will become another sacred moment in the faith journey. This will be a further imperative to sort out our work with teenagers.

### **What will happen in church schools?**

If we decided to go ahead with this, the parish priest and head teacher would need to revise the school policy. In general it is recommended to have a consistent policy between church and school but this is not always possible.

### ***What happens next?***

- Please talk about this with your friends from church and pray that God may guide us to make the right decision for Holy Trinity.
- There will be a congregational meeting on March 2 following the morning service to discuss these matters.
- Following that, the planning group will send a report to the PCC with an indication of where the mind of the community lies.
- The PCC will discuss the matter. It will require a two-thirds majority to bring about a change in practice.
- The Bishop will be informed of any change
- The practical arrangements will be worked out.

***David Monteith***

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