



DIOCESE OF YORK

Discussion Papers

Admission of Baptized Children to Communion before Confirmation

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THE CHILDREN'S BREAD

Children & Holy Communion

Robert M.E. Paterson

1991-2001

INTRODUCTION

This booklet began life many years ago when studying for a thesis on what I then thought was the uninspiring subject of catechisms. That research led to an aside about the training of children and young people in the Faith of Christ, their admission to the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the nature and role of confirmation, something which interested me greatly because of my pastoral work with young people.

In 1984 the Church in Wales issued clerics, parishes and deaneries with questionnaires entitled *Members of One Body*, in an attempt to initiate discussion about the nurture of children in the Church. I was vicar of a parish where the P.C.C. took the challenge seriously and set up a series of study sessions to look at principles, to consider parish policy and, directly from the experience of the lay people, to press for the separation of admission to Communion from Confirmation.

In the 1980's some parishes had started to implement elements of the various schemes but some failed because they were not formally approved and appraised, so, when push came to shove, they lacked authority. We, therefore, pestered for an approved pilot scheme which was granted in 1991. Much of what follows was written for the introduction of that pilot scheme.

We need to be clear that what was proposed was **one** way of solving a complex problem. A fair summary would be to say that three broad answers are given to the baptism – confirmation – discipleship conundrum:

1. Confirmation and admission to Communion at Baptism, with or without a later rite affirming mature discipleship.
2. Admission to Communion following Baptism at some point (immediately or later) with Confirmation as the rite of affirming adult discipleship.
3. Baptism without admission to Communion, followed at some later point by Confirmation and consequent admission to Communion.

It is pattern **2** which is being encouraged in the new Regulations.

Robert Paterson.

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1

COMMUNION AND CONFIRMATION

"I was always taught, Vicar, that you shouldn't take communion until you were confirmed. Isn't that true?" A tricky question! "Yes, you may well always have been taught that. But, no, it was certainly not the whole truth."

The first issue to tackle in dealing with the question of children and communion is the relationship between confirmation and admission to communion. We are likely to find that the popular mind on this relationship is insecurely based in theology and history.

History

Forgive me if I start with a much-simplified Anglican history lesson. From 1549 (the publication of the first Book of Common Prayer) to the middle of the seventeenth century (the execution of King Charles I in 1649) we could say that, with few exceptions, the Church of England ruled in England and Wales – the situation in Scotland was far more turbulent and complex! - and the pattern of initiation was baptism, confirmation and communion for every subject of the realm. This had been the reforming Archbishop Peckham's rule in the thirteenth century, and yet, even in those days when Church and State were more-or-less one, the rule was applied flexibly. Imagine the distances travelled on horseback over very poor roads by the Archbishops of York whose diocese, until the nineteenth century, covered an area of more than six of today's dioceses, or the Bishops of St David's whose diocese stretched from the furthest point of south-west Wales to the Marches near Ludlow! What with their duties in the House of Lords, you would be very fortunate to see a bishop in your area - let alone your parish! - more than once every few years. So, if he wasn't there to confirm you, your local priest admitted you to the sacrament and you were confirmed when the bishop was next in the neighbourhood - and there are some very amusing stories of mass confirmations from the old days!

The so-called English Reformers who brought the Anglican way into being during the sixteenth century were happy to admit to communion Christians of the European Reformed churches, either as members of the 'Stranger' congregations or as visitors to Britain. These were Lutherans, Calvinists, Zwinglian, and so on, many of them not confirmed, some even repudiating the need for confirmation. And not only the Reformers but seventeenth century High Churchmen like Bishops John Cosin, Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor and Archbishop John Sharp of York all welcomed non-confirmed Christians to communion. This has important echoes for us in our own openly-ecumenical age when, thank God, it is virtually unknown for a baptized Christian in good standing from another denomination to be refused Holy Communion in an Anglican church.

By 1649, dissenting groups had begun to spring up, and they spread, particularly during the Commonwealth or interregnum (after the execution of King Charles I and before the restoration of Charles II in 1660). So, when the Prayer Book of 1662 appeared, the previous rule had to change: "*And there shall none be admitted to the holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.*" This covered three groups of people: *i.* those we have already mentioned who, for reasons of geography, would not be able to attend a confirmation for some time, *ii.* Those who had recently been baptized because they could not be baptized as infants during the Commonwealth and whom it would take some time for the bishops to confirm, and *iii.* the growing number of dissenters.

In 1662, the principles were laid down clearly: confirmation is the proper practice for those who "are baptized and come to years of discretion" but, by referring to those "ready and desirous to be confirmed", other Christians whose churches do not practise confirmation were welcome to the sacrament of Holy Communion on an occasional basis. Thus, by 1662, the small numbers of what we today call 'free Church' people who normally worshipped in their chapels, joined the people of the parish church on Communion Sundays, a practice known as 'occasional conformity'. This was one of the few points of spiritual contact between Anglicans and those who were otherwise non-conformists, a practice described by

Richard Baxter as “this healing custom”. Bishop Jeremy Taylor (a prominent High Churchman) wrote: “to make the way to heaven straiter [narrower] than God made it, or to deny to communicate with those with whom God will vouchsafe to be united, and to refuse our charity to those who have the same faith, because they have not all our opinions, and believe not everything necessary which we over-value, is impious and schismatical.”

In the reign of Queen Anne (1702-1714) this became a matter of considerable debate and, in the House of Lords in 1704, Archbishop Thomas Tenison of Canterbury (known, among other things, for his acceptance of dissenters) strongly defended what he called the ‘principle’ of occasional conformity. The Vicar of Bray (an anonymous poem written about 1720) refers to the issue:

When Gracious ANN became our Queen,
The Church of England’s Glory,
Another Face of Things were seen,
And I became a Tory;
Occasional Conformest [*sic*] base
I damn’d, and such Evasion,
And swore the Church wou’d ruin’d be
From such Prevarication.
*That this is Law, I will maintain,
Unto my dying Day, Sir,
That whatsoever king shall reign,
I will be Vicar of Bray, Sir.*

After the Corporation Act (1661) and in the time of the Sacramental Test Acts (1763 and 1768) receiving the Sacrament according to the usage of the Church of England was necessary for the holders of many Crown appointments, places at University, etc., regardless of confirmation or even Christian belief. Thus, for example, in order to preserve the right to hold office as Mayor, members of the Carter family (notable Unitarians) received Communion in Portsmouth Parish Church; to preserve his conscience, Isaac Watts (who refused to submit to the sacramental test) attended a ‘nonconformist academy’ rather than a university.

An identity crisis

It all changed in the early years of the nineteenth century. Matthew Grimley has written, in *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*:

The constitutional changes of the 1820s and 1830s posed an unprecedented threat to the continuance of the established Church, because the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and the granting of Catholic Emancipation in 1828-9 had in effect destroyed the old identification between full citizenship and membership of the Church of England. Hitherto, the justification for Parliament’s control of the Church had been that its membership was restricted to Anglicans and so it was a representative Anglican assembly. But the constitutional changes meant that Church and political nation were no longer congruent. Although many Anglican leaders had supported the legislation of 1828-9 on grounds of toleration, they now had to consider its implications for the established Church.

The repeal of these Acts came at a time when transport was beginning to become easier and faster, and episcopal absenteeism was becoming more noticeable! Their combined effect led to what we today would describe as an Anglican identity crisis and conspired to the novel use of Confirmation as a distinguishing mark, even a definition of what it meant to be a member of the Church of England. It was another case of Anglicans making bad defensive decisions.

A desire to emphasise the importance of episcopacy and define the boundaries of a Church which perceived itself to be under threat led to renewed interest in the 1662 Confirmation rubric (above). ‘No communion without confirmation!’ was the cry. Naturally, this approach forced the remaining ‘occasional conformists’ into ‘non-conformists’. There were still powerful dissident voices - Archbishop A.C. Tait of Canterbury declared in 1885 that such a restrictive “interpretation ... is quite untenable. ... All who have studied the history of our

church ... must know how it has been contended that the Church of England places no bar against occasional conformity” – but they did not prevail.

Now here we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century, unable to pretend any longer that “every person we meet in the street is a recently-lapsed Anglican” [Bishop John V Taylor] and with strong ecumenical links. Churches are forced to consider seriously the sacrament of belonging to Christ’s Church and its liturgical expression. We are driven by the witness of the Bible and fundamental theology to acknowledge that baptism is the universal sign of admission to the Church of Christ. Regulations for admission to communion are a matter of what a Church says is right for the time, but membership of the Church (in terms of initiation) is complete in baptism. Despite this, we still find clerics - even Church leaders - confusing confirmation with ‘belonging to the Church’ or ‘becoming a member of the Church’, or even ‘becoming a full-member of the Church’ - as though the Church has half-members! We need to be specific and clear: confirmation does not confer on the Christian any nature or status beyond that which baptism has already granted him/her. At last we are beginning to see this issue clearly.

Whether those who are baptized as adults - particularly those baptized and anointed as adults - need to be separately confirmed is another matter; fortunately, now that many adults are baptized and confirmed by the bishop generally means we don’t have to grapple with this issue too often!

Thus the rule of thumb applies: If you are an adult Christian and you belong in the Anglican Church, you ought to be confirmed. If you are a guest, we do not ask you to be confirmed but respect your status as a full member of the Church of Christ. However, confirmation does not make you more of a Christian than you became in baptism and by faith and the lack of it does not bar you from Communion.

Holy Communion

So, what are the requirements for admission to Holy Communion in the Church of Jesus Christ? We read in Acts 2:

Those who accepted what Peter said [on the Day of Pentecost] were baptized, and some three thousand were added to the number of believers that day. They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray. Acts 2. 41, 42

The people “accepted what he said” (and verse 38 tells us that he told them to repent and be baptized so that their sins would be forgiven and they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit). That gives us three qualifications: **a. Repentance**, **b. Faith** (in the sense of ‘trust’) and **c. Baptism**. But there is also an obvious fourth, by implication, **d. Participation** - “they met constantly ...”, they witnessed, they cared for others beyond their number, etc. (v. 42). This ‘participant’ category has left us with the double meaning of ‘communicant’ as one who receives communion and also one who participates in the life and mission of the Church (see vv. 45 & 47), a participation of which sharing in communion is a vital sign. When you are in this communicant relationship with Christ and his Church, so is your family (see v. 39). The Eucharist is the great symbol of belonging to which repentance, faith and baptism have admitted us:

When we bless the cup of blessing, is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, though many, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake. 1 Corinthians 10. 16, 17

If you look at the Eucharist, you find that each time we celebrate we (who are **baptized**) act out these basics of our life in Christ: **repentance** in the Prayers of Penitence, **faith** in the Liturgy of the Word and **participation** in the Liturgy of the Sacrament and the Dismissal for service.

Now where does that leave us? Any Christian - a repentant believer who has been baptized and is involved in the life of the Church and God’s mission - may come freely to the Supper of the Lord. Where does the New Testament say anything about age? That’s an important

question. It doesn't. Don't get me wrong, it's not that age and maturity are unimportant, but it's not to the central issue. Where age is important is where confirmation comes in.

2 'ONE BAPTISM FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS'

How often have you seen something like this in a parish magazine: 'Six young people were welcomed into full membership of the Church when the Bishop celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation last month'? Dear editor, membership of the Church of Christ (in terms of initiation) is conferred fully by baptism; confirmation does not make you more of a member than you were by being baptized, nor does it complete something left incomplete at baptism. And, in the tradition which formed me, I would want to say that confirmation is sacramental, as a sign of grace, but not an institution of the Lord nor universally necessary for all God's children, therefore not a Sacrament of the Gospel. And, by the way, it is the congregation which 'celebrates' ("Lift up your hearts. / **We** lift them to the Lord."); the bishop presides.

So we remind ourselves that there are four aspects of being a communicant: **Repentance, Faith, Baptism and Participation**. I want to focus on Baptism, without in any way minimising the other three aspects.

Baptism is the primary sacrament; it is the liturgical 'way in' to the life of the Church, and it precedes the Eucharist (the other 'Sacrament of the Gospel'). The verb 'to baptize' means 'to dip or drench' (not 'to sprinkle' or 'to make the sign of the cross') with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as a permanent mark of divine ownership and new life in Christ. It is, like conversion, not repeatable. ['Christening', the common nickname for baptism, to which we no longer give official recognition, originally meant 'being made a Christian' in the general sense of identification with the Christian religion. The biblical word helps to keep our minds clear.] There is no distinction between infant (that is, 'non-speaker') baptism and adult baptism: both are ceremonies done to you by someone acting on behalf of Christ and the Church. Adult baptism has always been the norm, but infant baptism is to be commended for families in which one or both parents declare Christian faith.

It is important to grasp that there is no distinction between baptism in infancy and adulthood, except that the sponsors and guarantors are different. Baptism is the primary sacrament, the only form of Christian initiation required for full communion.

The First Anglican Liturgical Consultation in Boston in 1985 and the *Fourth International Consultation* in Toronto in August 1991 both called for all baptized persons to be admitted to communion throughout the Anglican Communion - a position which gained widespread endorsement, together with the call for repentant, believing and participatory discipleship. Moreover, these Consultations have been clear that (in the words of the Toronto recommendations): "confirmation and other rites of affirmation ... are in no way to be seen as a completion of baptism or as necessary for admission to communion."

Confirmation

So we move on to look at confirmation, the liturgical 'seal of the Spirit'. If it isn't the door to communicant status, then what is it? It is ...

- a. a sign of the continual (and continuing) strength of the Holy Spirit necessary to live a life which pleases God; and
- b. a personal affirmation of the decision and covenant of baptism. This is part of the later evolution of the ceremony.

The word 'confirmation' reminds us that by this act, strength is added both to the sign and to the affirmation.

Where, then, did this rite of confirmation come from? In the past it was often attributed to Acts 8. 14-17:

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent off Peter and John, who went down there and prayed for the converts, asking that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Until then the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, that and nothing more. So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

This, however, proves *not* to be the origins of the ceremony since Acts 8 simply describes an unique event not found elsewhere in the New Testament, the first growth of the early Church outside the environs of Jerusalem. This particular laying on of hands and receiving the gift of the Spirit has to do with the formal recognition of the growth of the new church outside Judaism and nothing to do with standardising a normal practice of initiation.

Confirmation was first practised as a ceremony after baptism (in some places from as early as AD 70) - and a possible model for this (not an exact parallel) was taken from Acts 19, though this also describes an unique event, this time at Ephesus:

When he [Paul] asked them [a number of disciples], "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" they replied, "No, we were not even told that there is a Holy Spirit." He asked, "Then what baptism were you given?" "John's baptism," they answered. Paul said, "The baptism that John gave was a baptism in token of repentance, and he told the people to put their trust in one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus; and when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues of ecstasy and prophesied.

Acts 19. 2-6

By AD 200 in the West and 400 in the East, we can be confident of a widely performed ceremony which immediately followed baptism (infant and adult) in which, in its fullest form, the bishop stretched out his hands over the newly-baptized, anointed them, placed his hand on the head of each one with prayer, and signed him/her with the cross on the forehead. In some places this was a simple anointing ceremony with no direct prayer for the Spirit. Alas, this baptismal confirmation became a victim of the evangelistic success of the Church! As the Roman Church grew West and North and the African Church grew South, bishops couldn't be present at all (even most) baptisms and splits began. The Western Church, conscious of the high mortality rate of infants and bound to the dogma that a person could not be saved unbaptized, began performing baptisms soon after or even at birth; thus baptisms had to be delegated to priests. Confirmation, now separated from baptism, was performed at a later stage, when groups of the baptized could be brought together. In an attempt to secure the link between baptism and confirmation, administering confirmation was normally regarded as a prerogative of the Bishop. On the contrary, the Eastern Church chose to keep the ceremonies together so that priests both baptized and anointed candidates, a single event, not two ceremonies. Considerable doubt is shed on any assertion that Eastern 'chrismation' is equivalent to Western confirmation, and it is certainly incorrect to claim that the Eastern Church has ever practised confirmation in the sense which the Western and post-Reformation Church has.

There is, therefore, no theological barrier to prevent priests confirming, though this has not normally been Anglican practice and the Canons and liturgies of the Church of England do not permit it. We have become conditioned by our practice, and may need to think it out more clearly. Since it is agreed that baptism is a primary episcopal function, though it is often delegated, it ought to be possible to delegate the lesser, derived rite of confirmation. Parish priests who baptize adult candidates before the bishop comes for confirmation are indulging in topsy-turvy liturgical practice because when the bishop comes to the parish or deanery, it is he who should baptize. (We might note that when the Church of England went to Australia, in the absence of bishops confirmations were conducted by archdeacons.)

As we know, Orthodox candidates are baptized and immediately 'confirmed' with the words: "The seal of the Spirit". This has not been unknown in the Western Church - the Princess Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth I) was baptized and confirmed at three days old by the first reformed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, in 1533.

Traditional Roman Catholic thinking associates baptism with forgiveness and new birth (a rite of conversion) and associates confirmation with witness and discipleship (a rite of sanctification). "One sacrament," it was said, "in two signs." A neat way of putting it, and one that many Anglicans have found appealing - though it doesn't match the theology or practice of the New Testament, nor the historical roots of the two rites.

Anglicans worldwide are renewing their understanding and practice. In some provinces, a ceremony of post-baptismal anointing has been introduced (this is normally optional and is not to be confused with the signing with the cross) and some would describe it as confirmation in its ancient form. I am aware that this issue has been raised among the scholars but, as far as I know, nothing more official than an evasion has resulted.

Be that as it may, there is much work to be done on this. At present, most provinces of the Anglican Communion still have rites of confirmation which, in the case of people baptized as infants, are intended to follow several years later. If we are to accept the principle that all the baptized may be communicants, we might wish to revise our rites of baptism to ensure that liturgical expression is given to 'the seal of the Spirit', and to provide a separate 'confirmation' rite for those baptized in previous liturgies. Exciting possibilities lie before us in providing opportunities for adult expressions of Christian commitment.

The age of discretion?

I hope you are convinced that there is no barrier to any Christian in good standing receiving Communion, and that age does not come into it. But not every Christian is adult or mature in mind and spirit. The gradual separation of confirmation from admission to communion has meant that it can be left to more mature years than age 9-12 which has become the norm in many places. The state says you should stay at school until you are 16 years old and you would do well to keep learning for longer; you may not marry before you are 16 (without parental consent from 18); you may not learn to drive a car until you are 17; and you may not vote until you are 18. You would be a minor. These are, of course, arbitrary ages - averages, if you like - but they work well enough to make sensible laws. So why do parts of the Church give their only period of preparation for mature, lifelong discipleship somewhere between the ages of 9 and 12? The answer is simple: because it was thought to be the only means of access to the Eucharist (and, cynics would say, because we are likely to lose them after that). Now that we have seen the fallacy of this view, we can move the training for adult discipleship to a sensible age, an age of reasonable maturity, what Archbishop Thomas Cranmer called "years of discretion", around 16-18 years. Training given in the late teens will stick and will form a useful map for a lifelong pilgrimage. Reflective commitment at that age will be realistic to the challenges of service and less affected by the fluctuations of the emotions in the early teenage years. In the sixteenth century it's what Cranmer, his fellow-Reformers and his opposite numbers in the Roman Catholic Council of Trent were both aiming at - though none of them succeeded.

Supporting discipleship

The former House of Bishops Guidelines and the new Synodical Regulations not only encourage a high standard of Christian nurture for all children but also give parishes the opportunity to introduce a Christian foundation course for those in their later teens - perhaps in conjunction with normal adult confirmation training or associated with something like the 'Emmaus' or 'Alpha'. One of the main reasons (apart from poor nurture of young communicants) for the failure of some 'children at communion' schemes has been when clerics or parishes have given in to pressure to return to confirmation at an age which is too young. Almost invariably, this is not a matter of eagerness in discipleship, but naked peer pressure - even family pressure - particularly where there are neighbouring parishes not participating in the scheme sending children to the same school. P.C.Cs. and clerics need to be aware that they could face such pressure and should be positive in presenting the advantages of the scheme, including the desirability of postponing part of a young Christian's commitment to a more appropriate and mature age.

When these matters were first being taken seriously in the 1970s and 80s, Anglicans began their adult Christian discipleship in their teens. The pattern is already far more diverse and looks likely to become more diverse still. In this context, it would seem to be sensible to remove all reference to age from adult declarations of faith and to take a leaf out of the Methodist practice of covenant renewal. The term 'renewal' in the context of marriage or ordination vows or answering the call to be a disciple always seems perverse to me because it implies that these commitments might be about to expire if they are not renewed; nevertheless, an annual commitment to Christian discipleship focused liturgically on baptism in Easter-tide may meet the need. And, in the same way that membership of the Electoral Roll must periodically be 'renewed', all who apply to join a new Roll could be asked to attend a simple course in Christian belief and practice during Lent.

All this involves accepting three broad bands of Christian development: the infancy stage of total **dependency**, the middle stage of **growth**, and the later teens and adulthood of developing **maturity**. By participation in the sacrament children and young people gradually come to appreciate what it means to be united to Christ in his death and to receive his risen life, what the apostle Paul calls 'recognising the meaning of the Lord's body when eating the bread and drinking from the cup.' (1 Corinthians 11. 29). It has become my view in recent years that there is no logic to separating the admission to Communion from baptism.

It should be our prayer that all the baptized disciples of Jesus - of whatever age - will grow with us in their fellowship at the Lord's table and that all of us will be equipped and refreshed to serve him faithfully to the praise of his name and to the end of our lives.

3

THE CHRISTIAN NURTURE OF CHILDREN

We have looked at the conditions for admission to communion and the role of baptism, communion, training and confirmation in the growing process of following Jesus.

People sometimes ask me, 'Why don't we keep the children in the Crèche and Sunday School until they're old enough to understand and behave?' That is sometimes just a request to the vicar to ask the parents of noisy children to exercise a little more control over them, but sometimes it arises out of a deep misunderstanding of what's going on. In fact, anyone who pursues a policy of integrating children into adult worship will never escape criticism. It would be easy to slip back, believe me! Let me share my own convictions.

Discovering what I thought I knew

To some extent we are all products of our experience and upbringing. In the early 1970s, before my wife and I had children of our own, I had misgivings about all this sort of thing. A young couple convinced me by their own example of the vital importance of children and young people being involved in the church's worship and the teenagers didn't leave in droves but became involved in a large Christian youth group. I knew in my head that faith is not the sole prerogative of adults but I had to discover it in experience.

I also came to recognise that in a church that baptizes babies and children, we have no right to exclude them from our worship - any more than we would have the right to exclude baptized people who have only one leg! The long-term results of integrating children and adults in worship (and it takes at least 5 years, often 10) are noticeable. There is a lack of teenage church-shock. In the classic Anglican set-up a child graduates from Sunday School via confirmation classes, matriculates in adult worship which he/she usually finds bizarre and then leaves. No wonder - the teenager is simply suffering from acute religious culture shock! Instead, involve young people and children from the earliest age possible and they will see worship as natural part of the process of Christian growth.

I have discovered that there are also advantages to adults in worshipping with children. It helps to give us an authentic perspective, a child-like attitude that sometimes breaks through our hard shells in wide-eyed, simple trust. Joining in the songs and the actions - a sign of

maturity, if ever there was one - reminds us that we are all children of the same Father. And there are advantages for children in worshipping with adults. It's very important for children to know that they're involved in something they don't understand and that can't yet be explained to them, something which is being discovered. A certain amount (not an overdose) of boredom with some traditional Christian liturgical forms does not harm a child: we all have to learn to appreciate what is beyond our present grasp. All-age worship should definitely not be worship at its simplest level - as long as the children know they are welcomed and affirmed in Jesus' name.

It seems to me that we cannot afford to be other than totally committed to a significant proportion of Christian worship for all ages - and committed in principle as well as in practice. Such worship will be diverse (perhaps chants alongside choruses, orientated to different ages at different times and often quite messy) but authentically Christian. I know it works and in a range of contexts. Without it, any admission of children to communion prior to confirmation is almost certain to come unstuck. Now it doesn't matter whether you are an adult or a child, the faith of Christ comes to each of us uniquely because it is a gift from God who relates to us personally. Meeting Jesus is personal: there is no script to be followed (though the formal betrothal may be a liturgical event). I like to think of worship as the people of God travelling home. It's not a neat process, but it's what every child of God needs, regardless of age.

So the new Regulations and all the advice that surrounds them make it very clear that good Christian nurture – teaching the Faith and building up the Body of Christ – and quality worship are important for all ages from cradle to grave.

The Great Commission

The fundamental association of evangelism, liturgical inclusion and nurture is found in Jesus' 'great commission':

Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples; baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. I will be with you always, to the end of time. Matthew 28. 19 & 20

As far as our young people are concerned, all Christians hope and pray that, as a result of the Church presenting Christ to them ('Go ..!'), they will receive him. We put much effort into teaching the faith of Christ to them ('Teach them ...') - a gradual process to help each one get a clear picture of the Father, Jesus, the Spirit, humanity, discipleship and the Church. What we often forget is that most of us catch faith by a process of nurture. How did *you* get here? By the care of your parents? - the witness of a friend, a teacher, a minister or a youth leader? - through a crisis? A small number of people turn to Christ first at some kind of an evangelistic event and some by faithful teaching, but the largest proportion of us by far are Christians because, in the first place, we caught the faith of Jesus from another Christian.

Baptism as a mark of belonging is part of that 'catching' the faith because it's about being cared for within the community of the baptized, and we neglect it at our peril. A child knows when s/he has been caught by the love of Christ. That young disciple will be in the later teens before being ready for full training as a mature Christian and aware of the importance of making an adult declaration of faith before God's people, but meanwhile what better way to grow than by prayer, the Scriptures and Communion (fellowship which includes sharing from the family Table)? The Eucharist is a set of powerful signs about which theologians could write 50 books apiece and which also the simplest heart and the youngest believer can fully comprehend. The riches of this sacrament of Christ's death and resurrection are inexhaustible - by it we are converted again, turned to face Christ crucified and fed by his risen life.

However, I want to make clear that this in no way conflicts with a strong commitment to teaching the Faith at all ages.

And finally ...

I should add a few final notes.

Some of the papers which commend Communion for children appear to give as their most powerful reason in favour that “children feel left out” if they are excluded. As a father of three children who have long fled the nest I understand the feelings behind that appeal but I reject it as an argument in favour. I do not give my children everything they want just because they want it. There are far more important reasons for this practice than giving in to children's desires, however well-intentioned parents and children may be.

There is a widespread custom (often a sign of frustration with an unsympathetic system) of parents sharing a piece of the eucharistic bread with their children. It's a token of love. Unfortunately, it has the undesirable consequence of making the parents, rather than the Church, decide who shall be a communicant. That can't be right, however well-intentioned.

Some people are concerned that the Regulations involve P.C.C. discussion, record-keeping and a little form-filling: this, they say, turns the whole thing into a bureaucratic exercise. I understand but let me assure such sceptics that it is the way to make certain this works. The Church of England is committed to this; parishes which do not practise the admission of children to Communion before confirmation cannot refuse communion to children who have been formally admitted in another parish. We belong together and the Regulations are easy to comply with, so please use them.

Our children are not ‘the Church of the future’ - what a patronising expression! - for they are part of the Church of today. It must always be our priority, as Jesus said, “never to cause the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in me [for] I tell you, they have their angels in heaven, who continually look on the face of my heavenly Father.” (*Matthew 18. 6,10*)

Please give thanks to God for the young people of the Church. There is so much to encourage us all in every one of them.

Lord God our Father,
we thank you for all the young people of your Church.
Strengthen them in the faith of their baptism
and, as they prepare to share with your people in Communion,
fill them with the grace and gifts of your Holy Spirit;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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ADMISSION OF CHILDREN TO HOLY COMMUNION BEFORE CONFIRMATION

A brief theological and historical paper by the Right Reverend Colin Bennetts Bishop of Buckingham

The aim of this brief paper is to lend theological support to the idea that, given suitable guidelines, children may be welcomed to the Holy Communion.

The baptism of infants began very probably in the time of the apostles, when whole households were baptised following the conversion of the head of the family (cf. Acts 15). It was a natural, inclusive development of the Jewish practice of circumcision (cf. Colossians 2: 11 &12). Infant baptism is universal by the time of Irenaeus (c180 AD) and explicitly ordered by Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century. By the time of Cyprian (c250AD) and certainly by Augustine (late fourth century) the practice of infant and children participating in the Holy Communion was firmly rooted in the North African Church.

As for confirmation, evidence suggests that up to the time of Augustine this rite was combined with baptism. This is, of course, the practice of the Orthodox Churches to this day. Nor did it completely disappear in the West. Queen Elizabeth I received both sacraments together as an infant. However, by the 16th century it was normal for the two rites to be administered separately, a situation perpetuated by the Reformers. Confirmation seems to have been regarded by Cranmer as a test of the believer's understanding of the meaning of Communion. This is toned down somewhat in 1662 version of the Prayer Book where such preparation and testing is prior to and independent of confirmation itself. Nevertheless, confirmation was clearly seen as the appropriate "certificate" which admitted the bearer to communion. The rubric which allows "those desirous of being confirmed" is little more than a grudging concession, introduced to take pastoral accounts of the rare visits of the bishop!

In the wake of the Oxford Movement last century, confirmation took on once again a more sacramental significance, such that it became linked to baptism as a further act of initiation.

Probably one of the most significant changes in Anglican church life this century has been the introduction of the parish communion. Gradually the practice arose of bringing children to the rail for a blessing. This was no doubt prompted by the heartfelt desire to include children as part of the Christian family at one of its most solemn and joyous moments. But the head was also engaging in the issue.

The 1944 report *Confirmation Today* dismissed the idea that baptism and confirmation represented two different levels of membership. Following the Lambeth Conference 1968, Anglican churches in New Zealand and North America began to admit unconfirmed children to the Holy Communion. In 1971 the *Ely Commission on Christian Initiation* recommended to General

Synod

- i **The Church should make explicit its recognition of baptism as the full and complete rite of Christian Initiation.**
- ii. **It should be permissible for the parish priest, at his discretion, to admit persons to communion (if they so desire) who have been baptised with water in the name of the Trinity.**

General Synod chose not to adopt these recommendations, but that did nothing to stifle the growing debate. In 1980 the Alternative Service Book made the strong suggestion that baptism is neither a temporary nor partial measure. It included the following in the baptism rite.

Priest: God has received you by baptism into His church
All: We welcome you into the Lord's family

In 1982 the much acclaimed document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches at Lima. The Lima Document (para 14) was polite but firm when it suggested that:-

"Those churches which baptise children but refuse them a share in the Eucharist before such a rite (i.e. confirmation) may wish to ponder whether they have fully appreciated and accepted the consequence of baptism"

The Knaresborough Report of 1985 *Confirmation before Communion?* proposed sweeping changes in the practice of admission to Communion, based on a thorough study of the theology and history of Christian initiation. The report rejects firmly what it calls "sectarian groups who operate a strictly controlled membership policy and who manage clearly the borders between the Church and the world". Its recommendations were clear and specific.

- a. that baptism with water, in the name of the Holy Trinity, is a complete sacrament of Initiation into the Body of Christ;
- b. that confirmation is not an absolutely necessary prerequisite for the admission of persons to Holy Communion;
- c. that it is desirable, both for clarity of principle and for effective pastoral practice, to permit the admission of baptised persons to Holy Communion, before Confirmation;
- d. that Confirmation should remain in the Church of England as a sacramental means of grace to accompany an adult profession of faith.

In the last two decades both General Synod and the House of Bishops have given serious thought to the issue of communion before confirmation. In 1996 a clear majority of bishops declared themselves in favour of further carefully monitored experiments in this area and guidelines were issued by General Synod in 1997 (GSMisc.488).

So much for a bird's eye view of history. But our theology must also be clear if our pastoral practice is to be true to Scripture as our inheritance of faith. For Christians the starting point of our understanding of God's nature, and of his dealings with the world, is the person of Jesus, supremely in his incarnation, death and resurrection. The pivotal point of our understanding of Jesus (and this is clearly seen in all our Gospels) is His suffering and death. Those who seek to follow God by following Jesus must share in His death and resurrection if that discipleship is to have any meaning (cf. Matthew 16:24). Baptism is the effectual sign of our identification with Jesus in His death and resurrection (Romans 6 : 3 and 4). It speaks, not only of a new beginning, but also of a changed lifestyle (Romans 6: 5 - 7).

We have already noted that the early church practised infant baptism from an early date. They believed, as does most of the church today, that this is not disproven by scripture. Rather it is the intention of the teaching of both Old and New Testaments. This is not disputed. However, what is challenged is the view that the newly baptised child is a Christian in the full sense and that baptism is the complete rite or sacrament of initiation. There is of course strong element of New Testament teaching which demands individual repentance and faith as necessary for a proper appreciation of all that is offered embryonically in baptism. No one would wish to deny that. The crucial question for us however is whether in the case of baptised children such a response is a prerequisite for admission to communion or whether it follows on naturally from it. Put slightly differently, do we have to 'deserve' communion by displaying a proper understanding and appreciation of it in advance, or can we receive it as a gift of God's grace - just as we receive baptism? It is not unlike the debate on the related issue of inter-communion in our relationships with, say, the Roman Catholic Church. Should we regard the shared Eucharist as the goal of our pilgrimage, or may we not legitimately partake of it now as food to sustain us on our shared journey

We believe that it is the grace of God, lavished freely upon us. that requires an inclusive approach to the issue of children and communion. Of course, as adult Christians we put a high priority on the use of our God-given intellect, and rightly so. But a grasp of all the theological subtleties can never be a prerequisite for receiving the grace of God. If, as is generally agreed, the Lord's Supper is a means of receiving God's grace, why should those who by baptism are within the covenant family be denied this blessing? Good pastoral practice suggests that children and young people who are already members of the church should be cherished and nurtured. We believe that an equally good theological case, derived from the nature of God in Christ, clinches the matter

If the practice of communion before confirmation becomes accepted, many will understandably be anxious about the future of confirmation itself. We believe that, far from being a long opportunity for evangelism and teaching the very opposite could be the case. More and more adults are taking part in courses such as Alpha and Emmaus. These could easily be developed into something of an adult catechumenate, leading to an adult profession of faith in confirmation. This would be a "passing out parade" consistent with the military uses of the term. It would mark the point, not so much of membership, but of a mature readiness for "active service". In other words, not the final chapter of church allegiance but the next chapter in committed discipleship.

Communion Before Confirmation?

The Reverend Ashley Wilson

September 2002

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Communion Before Confirmation?

The Context

In 1997, the House of Bishops published guidelines on the *Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation*.¹ The guidelines, whilst allowing for such admission, gave discretion to every diocesan bishop to make a general policy whether to allow applications for communion before confirmation in his diocese. In my first clergy mailing after ordination as a deacon I received a copy of a letter sent by The Archbishop of York to all parishes in the diocese.² The letter set out the policy of the diocese on children and communion:

We shall not be proceeding with communion before confirmation, but the bishops will be open to the possibility of children of a younger age being presented for confirmation.

and expressed the hope that:

we shall continue further to reflect on and discuss this matter.

This essay is a response to the Archbishop's letter and is intended to form part of the reflection and discussion which the Archbishop hoped to see.

A number of circumstances and experiences have prompted me to reflect further on the nature and theology of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist.

First, the experience of teaching a confirmation class of nine and ten year-olds. I actually found it very difficult to teach the Christian faith to children of this age. They were, unsurprisingly, not interested in theological or philosophical niceties and debate. It proved very difficult to find an appropriate level at which to pitch the teaching – my only option seemed to be to present a superficial and neatly packaged version of the Christian faith in language they could understand. But I was uneasy with many of the simple presentations of the Christian faith which they might have understood – they did not sit easily with my own faith. Perhaps the problem here was mine – a lack of confidence in presenting Church teaching without also being able to offer qualifications and nuances (a liberal faith dying a death of a thousand qualifications)? The only effective way that I found to communicate was through stories – biblical stories, Christian stories and personal stories. In this way we explored a great deal of what it might actually mean for our lives to be a Christian. However, almost all of the children (six out of a group of seven) had been regular attenders at Sunday School and had heard most of the stories before. When asked why they wanted to be confirmed the children invariably answered that they wanted to be able to receive communion – though in a few cases I suspect that it was really the parents who wanted their children to receive communion. There was absolutely no suggestion that they were making any kind of 'adult' commitment to the faith or to the Church, they simply wanted to feel that they

¹ See appendix 1

² David Hope, 'Communion before Confirmation' Trans. ed. All Parishes in York Diocese. (York, 2000). See appendix 2

belonged and could take part. I assume that the children's motivations reflected the way that confirmation had been 'sold' to them by their parents, and indeed by the Church, i.e. as admission to communion. However, most of the material available for confirmation preparation assumes that we should be teaching about the Christian faith in more depth than might be encountered in Sunday School. My own understanding of confirmation was that it represented a mature commitment to the Christian faith and a desire to be associated with those Christians who comprise the Church of England. My own background is in the Baptist denomination and so the emphasis on 'adult commitment' may be to some extent a distorted understanding of the Church's position as a result of my own experience. However, there remain a number of unresolved tensions between my understanding of confirmation, the children's understanding of confirmation and the understanding assumed by much of the confirmation preparation material.

Second, the admission of my own son to communion before confirmation (at the age of nine) in Durham diocese. Durham diocese decided to allow individual parishes to admit children to communion – provided that the move was approved by the both the incumbent and the PCC, that suitable preparation would be provided, and the proposals were acceptable to the Bishop. Our parish decided to proceed and eight children were admitted to communion in April 1999. Matthew's motivation was very similar to the children in the confirmation class – he wanted to receive communion. He had been asking for probably two or three years whether he could receive communion and recently we had begun sharing our wafers with him. It seemed that he could sense the importance of communion and somehow realised that this was the key moment of the service but felt excluded at precisely this point. We had wanted to persuade him to wait before confirmation until he was ready to make a choice for himself – we certainly did not want to push him through confirmation simply for the sake of receiving communion. The decision to admit children to communion before confirmation was able to address Matthew's desire to belong and our own concerns about confirmation. It seemed to be the ideal answer and indeed proved to be a very positive experience for us as a family, for all the children admitted to communion, and for the church.³ In accordance with the House of Bishops' Guidelines, Matthew continued to receive communion in Nunthorpe (though this was something of an anomaly as other children of his age could not receive even though they wanted to) for some time before finally deciding to be confirmed.

Third, the unease I felt at the breaking of the bread in the Communion service. The ASB words (now with an alternative in Common Worship) were:

We break this bread
to share in the body of Christ.
**Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.**

In our parish we attended a family communion service each week where a third or more of the congregation were children and they remained in church throughout the service. In these circumstances the words at the breaking of the bread were simply untrue (we did not **all** share in one bread) and the effect was one of considerable discomfort. I still feel uncomfortable with these words even when there are only one or two children in the congregation – receiving a blessing simply does not resolve this tension (well, not for me, though perhaps it does for some of the children).

³ See extract from parish magazine – appendix 3

Fourth, reading a number of published statements about the Eucharist and about Christian Initiation – in particular the Lima statement of the World Council of Churches⁴, the Toronto statement of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation⁵, and two House of Bishops statements: *Eucharistic Presidency*⁶ and *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity*⁷. These statements all emphasise the importance of the communal nature of the Eucharist, the importance of baptism as the foundational sacrament of Christian initiation, and the *koinonia* (or unity) created by participation in the Eucharist. These reports highlighted further tensions. If Eucharistic unity is so important and baptism represents admission to the church why are we in the Church of England refusing to communicate baptised Christians who are clearly members of the church (i.e. children) and what is that doing for our *koinonia*? If the Eucharist is truly communal, why is the status (other than baptism) of individual members of the congregation relevant to whether they receive communion or not? If we truly believe that baptised children are members of the Church then surely they should automatically be admitted to the Church's central sacrament? Perhaps in the Church of England we are not really sure of the status of baptised children within the Church. Certainly, when we speak of "Christians" we often mean "Christian adults".⁸

These experiences, and the tensions to which they gave rise, left me with a number of questions surrounding the whole process of Christian initiation. In particular, what is the nature and theology of baptism (particularly in relation to 'membership' of the church, and particularly in the case of infant baptism) and of confirmation? How do (and how should) baptism and confirmation relate to admission to communion and to 'adult commitment'. At what age (if at all) should Christians be confirmed and how should they be prepared? Can the tensions outlined above, and the apparent inconsistencies between the published statements and current practice, be resolved?

⁴ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982)

⁵ David R Holeton, *Christian Initiation in the Anglican Communion: The Toronto Statement 'Walk in Newness of Life'. The Findings of the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto 1991*, Grove Worship Series 118 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1991)

⁶ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency: A Theological Statement by the House of Bishops of the General Synod*, Gs 1248 (London: Church House Publishing, 1997)

⁷ House of Bishops, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity: An Occasional Paper of the House of Bishops of the Church of England*, Gs Misc 632 (London: Church House Publishing, 2001)

⁸ Maxine Green and Chandu Christian, *Accompanying Young People on Their Spiritual Quest* (London: National Society & Church House Publishing, 1999)

Current Practice

*On The Way*⁹ encourages parishes and congregations to consider an integrated approach to Christian Initiation that should cover:

- The welcome, formation and sacramental initiation of adult enquirers
- An appropriate pattern for responding to requests by non-churchgoing parents for their children's baptism
- The appropriate time for admission to communion of children baptised in infancy
- Provision (where appropriate) marking the entry into adulthood of young people growing up within the church

The policy of confirming younger children has links to all of these aspects of initiation. Can confirmation (and the preparation for confirmation) be the same for both young children and adult enquirers? If not, do we really have two forms of Confirmation? Congregations are often concerned about admitting children to confirmation as this would mean that many baptised but non-churchgoing children would be eligible to receive communion. It seems to me that this problem (if such it is) is the result of baptism policy rather than of any decision to admit baptised children to communion. Should confirmation continue to function as admission to communion? If so, and we are to confirm younger, there should be provision to mark entry into Christian adulthood, which would in turn raise questions about adult enquirers – should they now go through confirmation or a rite of adulthood or both?

On The Way notes that three patterns now co-exist within the Church of England:

1. The Reformation tradition of confirmation, as simultaneously the gateway to communion and to Christian adulthood
2. Confirmation of younger children as their entry to communion, recognising that their entry into Christian adulthood will follow at a later stage
3. the admission of the baptised to communion, with confirmation coming later as a gateway to Christian adulthood

It seems to me that whilst the intention of the second pattern is to recognise entry to Christian adulthood at a later date, this often does not happen in practice. I suspect that this is partly because congregations and clergy are not familiar with the liturgical provision for such recognition of adulthood and also, perhaps chiefly, because the popular perception of confirmation among congregations is still equivalent to the first pattern above and there is simply no expectation that any further ceremony will take place.

Canon B27 *Of Confirmation*¹⁰ sets out the requirements for confirmation candidates – namely that they should have been baptised and ‘instructed in the Christian faith and life as set forth in the Holy Scriptures, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and the church catechism’. They should have ‘come to years of discretion’ and ‘be able to render an account of their faith’. Canon 15A prescribes that members of the Church of England should have been confirmed before

⁹ General Synod, *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995)

¹⁰ General Synod, *The Canons of the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 6th ed, 2000)

being admitted to communion¹¹. In other words, the canons assume the Reformation pattern described above.

In *Methodist Worship*¹² confirmation is linked with Reception into Membership rather than with admission to communion

The service of Confirmation and Reception into Membership marks a significant point along the journey of faith which starts with baptism.¹³

At a service of Confirmation, baptised Christians are also received into membership of the Methodist Church and take their place as such in a local congregation.¹⁴

The Methodist Conference has encouraged local Churches to admit baptised children to communion.¹⁵

In *A Children's Creed for the Church*¹⁶ the following statement appears:

It is said that children may not receive communion because they do not properly belong *but it is true that children belong from the time they are baptised.*

The official position of the Methodist Church, then, is in line with the third pattern above, although many local churches in practice still follow a discipline similar to the Reformation pattern.

In the Roman Catholic Church, admission to communion follows first confession once children have attained the "age of reason", deemed to be seven years. Confirmation then follows when the individual wishes to make a mature confession of faith, usually not younger than 14 years of age. This movement towards the frequent communion of children was instigated in the early twentieth century by Pope Pius X.

In Orthodox Churches children receive both Chrismation and communion (from a spoon) immediately following their baptism. In theory such children are then communicant members of the church although in practice infants rarely receive communion following their baptism until they are about six or seven years of age. I am not aware of any liturgical equivalent of Confirmation (as understood in the Church of England) nor a rite of entry into Christian adulthood in the Orthodox churches.

¹¹ though, interestingly, this requirement can be dispensed with in the case of a baptised person in immediate danger of death

¹² The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999)

¹³ The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Worship Book* 61

¹⁴ The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Worship Book* 61

¹⁵ The Methodist Church, *The Methodist Worship Book* 114

¹⁶ The Methodist Church, 'A Children's Creed for the Church', *Good News for Children: A Newsletter for Workers with Children in the Church*, January 1998

History & Tradition

Whilst acknowledging that there is relatively little evidence in the New Testament relating to children and communion, Colin Buchanan makes the case that

the only ‘admission’ of which the New Testament gives evidence is the single ‘admission’ into the body of Christ provided in baptism, and that that admission *is*, by the same act, admission to the Lord’s table.¹⁷

He also observes that there is in Scripture no mention of a category of baptised non-communicants. Arguments from silence are notoriously weak but this observation is undoubtedly accurate, and if (as we do) we can accept infant baptism on the basis of scripture then the same arguments should lead us to conclude that children were also communicant. Buchanan refers to Acts 2.42-47, 1 Corinthians 10.1-4, and 1 Corinthians 10.17 with 12.13 and concludes that in Paul’s thinking baptism admitted to communion.¹⁸ He also makes the important point that

Teaching *followed* admission and sprang *from* the place already given in the worshipping community.¹⁹

In the Didache, in Justin Martyr and in Hippolytus baptism leads directly into communion – in the case of Hippolytus, children are explicitly mentioned.²⁰ By the time of Cyprian in the middle of the third century there is ‘evidence of infant and child communion and this continues for centuries’.²¹ The patristic authors did though have an increasing expectation of preparation before baptism.

This pattern began to change from the sixth century onwards. Infant mortality prompted an insistence on early baptism. Frequent communion became less and less common. The cup was progressively withdrawn from the laity after the fourth Lateran Council (1215) and unweaned infants, who had been communicated in wine only, could no longer receive. The concept of first communion following first confession arose in the medieval church and a pattern similar to current Roman Catholic practice developed.²²

The English Reformers introduced the requirements of mature understanding and thorough preparation before confirmation which now preceded admission to communion.²³ This became the settled pattern for four centuries of Anglicanism. Hence, while this pattern is perceived in the Church of England as being the ‘traditional’ pattern (as indeed it is for this particular Church) it is only relatively recently in the history of the wider church that it has been introduced.

¹⁷ Colin Buchanan, *Children in Communion*, Grove Worship Series 112 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1990)

¹⁸ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 5-6

¹⁹ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 6

²⁰ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 7

²¹ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 7

²² Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 8

²³ Church of England, *Book of Common Prayer (1662)* (Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press & SPCK) – see *The Order of Confirmation*

Theological Statements & Reflections

*Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*²⁴

This Faith and Order Paper does not consider directly the question of the admission of children to communion. However, it does accept the practice of infant baptism and sets out understandings of baptism and the Eucharist which have become the foundation for much ecumenical discussion:

Administered in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity.²⁵

The Eucharist is essentially the sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and blood of Christ. In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, Christ grants communion with himself. God acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. In accordance with Christ's promise, each baptised member of the body of Christ receives in the Eucharist the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and the pledge of eternal life.²⁶

It seems quite clear that for all churches the communicant status of baptised adults is never in question. The problems arise when considering the status of baptised children – presumably there is some doubt as to the effectiveness or 'completeness' of infant baptism. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* leaves open the questions surrounding infant baptism but does observe:

The differences between infant and believers' baptism become less sharp when it is recognised that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community. The practice of infant baptism emphasises the corporate faith and the faith which the child shares with its parents.²⁷

In order to overcome their differences, believer baptists and those who practise infant baptism should reconsider certain aspects of their practices. The first may seek to express more visibly the fact that children are placed under the protection of God's grace. The latter must guard themselves against the practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism and take more seriously the responsibility for the nurture of baptised children to mature commitment to Christ.²⁸

These comments, of course, are aimed at churches engaged in ecumenical discussions. *Within* the Church of England, infant baptism is accepted and practiced almost universally. Further, the completeness of sacramental initiation in water-baptism is widely accepted by Anglican scholars. The previous teaching, propounded by Mason in the 1890s and by Dix in the 1930s

²⁴ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*

²⁵ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 3

²⁶ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 10

²⁷ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 5

²⁸ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 6

and 1940s – that confirmation is the sacrament of the giving of the spirit, the second half of a two-part ceremony of water baptism plus the laying on of hands – is now considered untenable²⁹, although it continues to be a popular perception in the pews. In fact, in many cases, the Church of England seems to practice infant baptism whilst not accepting children as full members of the Church until they can make their own confession of faith (a believers' baptism position). If sacramental initiation is indeed complete in water baptism, and we accept the practice of infant baptism, surely the theological logic requires that we admit all the baptised (children included) to communion.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry goes on to suggest that it is the Eucharist which demonstrates the unity of baptised believers and supports their life of faith:

The Eucharistic communion with Christ who nourishes the life of the Church is at the same time communion within the body of Christ which is the Church... Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each Eucharistic celebration.³⁰

The Eucharist is precious food for missionaries, bread and wine for pilgrims on their apostolic journey.³¹

If we believe that the initiation of children into the church is complete at their baptism, how can we deny them unity with Christ and the Church and refuse them the sustenance for their journey of faith?

*Eucharistic Presidency*³²

In the context of a discussion about lay presidency this statement examines the place of the Eucharist in the life of the church in the broader context of the worship and mission of the church.

Through baptism, by the Spirit, we are incorporated into Christ, made members of his people and acknowledged as children of the Father. Through the Eucharist, The Church is nourished and upheld in its ongoing life, as it is given to share in the father's gift of the Son through the Spirit.³³

The statement goes on to emphasise the Trinitarian dimensions of the church's life and the inter-relatedness of all Christians :

... the Church [is] 'communion' (*koinonia*) – a sharing in the life of the Holy Trinity and therein with fellow-members of the Church.³⁴

²⁹ Colin Buchanan and Michael Vasey, *New Initiation Rites: A Commentary on Services Authorized from Easter 1998*, Grove Worship Series 145 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1998) 9

³⁰ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 14

³¹ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* 15

³² House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency*

³³ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 17 § 2.14

³⁴ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 17 § 2.15

...by virtue of our baptism into Christ and thus into the Trinity, there is no difference of value or worth of persons before God.³⁵

To be baptised into the Church is to be baptised into a community of persons who mutually constitute one another through their dynamic relations with each other; individual members discover their identity through their membership of one another... Much damage has been done by doctrines of the Church which begin with the individual, converted believer and then proceed to ask how this believer might be related to others.³⁶

Thus [the Church's] members are intrinsically related to each other as constituent members of one vast community, a community which reaches out to embrace every generation, race, colour, gender or class.³⁷

So then presumably the important question about baptised children is not how they are to be related to others but rather how we are to recognise and demonstrate our mutual dependence (note that the identity of adults is in part constituted by their 'dynamic relations' with baptised children) and our common membership with them of the body of Christ.

In its section on *The Church's Ministry and Ministries* the statement defines the ministry of the people of God as 'sharing in the priesthood of Christ'.

Through baptism, all Christians are called to a ministry and service as God's fellow-workers: 'baptism... projects us into the ministry of reconciliation'.³⁸

...in the New Testament, the Church is described collectively as a priesthood...³⁹

Thus the entire Church, corporately, in its worship and mission participates in the continuing priesthood of Christ.⁴⁰

However, the Church of England, seems reluctant both in practice and in theory to extend these considerations to baptised children. Perhaps it is an uneasiness about allowing children to be involved in the life of the Church which underlies the reluctance to admit them to communion? The idea that the 'priesthood of all believers' includes baptised children is not one that is commonly expounded. Indeed much of the Church's attitude to children seems to spring from a 'deficit model of young people'⁴¹ – children are seen as having a deficient rather than a different spirituality, as 'empty vessels' which we must fill, and only adults are seen as 'real' Christians. Children's views are treated as cute but not serious and their questions are treated with mild amusement. Is it any wonder that children rebel against church when they are treated in this way and when they are excluded from communion. Why should we expect them, when they 'come to years of discretion', to want anything to do with the Church? How is children's spirituality to develop and how are they to learn about the faith if they are not allowed to participate and they do not feel that they belong. The importance of

³⁵ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 18 § 2.17

³⁶ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 18 § 2.18

³⁷ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 21 § 2.27

³⁸ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 23 § 3.6, quoting *The Mystery of Salvation*, Doctrine Commission report (1995)

³⁹ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 23 § 3.8

⁴⁰ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 24 § 3.9

⁴¹ Green and Christian, *Accompanying* 14

learning through participation and through belonging have been documented by psychologists Piaget and Westerhoff respectively.⁴²

It is worth quoting the full text of *A Children's Creed for the Church*⁴³:

It is said that children are the Church of tomorrow *but it is true that they are part of the church of today*

It is said that the church is for consenting adults *but it is true that Jesus said "let the children come to me"*

It is said that children may not receive communion because they do not properly belong *but it is true that children belong from the time they are baptised.*

It is said that children should be quiet in Church *but it is true that children are often the only ones who join in*

It is said that children come to be taught *but it is true that children can be teachers*

It is said that children need to understand before they can worship and receive communion *but it is true that children often lead the way*

Children are not 'empty vessels', they are filled with God's spirit. The Holy Spirit can speak powerfully through children as well as adults, the call to evangelism and service comes to all regardless of age. Learning is for adults as well as children – which of us properly 'understands' the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Eucharist? Surely the discovery and development of gifts in both children and adults is a key function of the Church. If the priesthood of all believers includes children then surely the full diet of Christian worship should be available to them.

John Pridmore⁴⁴ points out the consequences of the doctrine of the Incarnation for our understanding of children's spirituality:

...unless we are 'adoptionists' we claim that the Word took human flesh from his mother at Nazareth... that the historical Jesus was 'God with us' from his conception... We hold that once on earth a life was lived in which at every stage – in infancy, in childhood, in spotted adolescence and on into mature adulthood – the human nature and the divine were 'joined together in one person'... The truth for us is that there is a life in relationship to God appropriate to each moment of the 'continuous now' of childhood. *A model of spiritual development which postpones to adulthood any possibility of a full relationship with God is a denial of the incarnation.*

Conversion, confirmation, being 'baptised in the spirit': according to our various traditions, we grown-up disciples still set out our different high hurdles for the little child to surmount before we count him or her one of us...

⁴² see discussion of learning in C S Donne, 'Children and Communion before Confirmation' (MA thesis, King's College, University of London, 2000)

⁴³ The Methodist Church, 'Creed',

⁴⁴ John Pridmore, 'Our Gift to the Child-Jesus: Free Dinosaur but No Hamburger', *Church Times*, 22 December 2000, 8 emphasis added

... the dominant managerial ideology of the Church insists that all that is elfin and anarchic in our common life be brought under executive control. So the swaddled child is enwrapped as a body for the grave. It is not only to the entombed Lazarus that Jesus says 'Unbind him and let him go'.

This emphasis on children as different (as opposed to deficient) but equally valuable members of the Church depends on an ecclesiology which recognises the communal nature of the Church and the inter-dependence of all the members – but that is precisely the ecclesiology of *Eucharistic Presidency*!

The Eucharist is not an event for the autonomous believer, but the Church's participation in the Trinity's life, in which context the individual believer finds his or her place.⁴⁵

In the Eucharist, the baptised community is nourished and renewed in its corporate life through union with Christ and the Father through the Spirit... the Eucharist is thus not simply expressive of our *koinonia* with one another but formative of it.⁴⁶

Many of the objections to the admission of children to communion are founded on an understanding of children as individual, autonomous believers who are somehow unsuitable for communion. These objections disappear when the communal nature of the Eucharist is recognised. The implications of this ecclesiology have yet to be fully appreciated.

The concept of deficient spirituality and understanding in children produces further tensions in the case of people with mental disability and adults with learning difficulties. Churches often wish, quite rightly, to welcome these people into the life of the Church and many of them are confirmed and admitted to communion. This is readily accepted even though, on the basis of the deficit model, their spirituality and understanding are 'inadequate'. The goalposts have been moved! The criteria now are age and 'appropriate' understanding. Spirituality and understanding gradually develop in all of us so why should admission to communion become simply a function of age? Communion before confirmation would allow people with 'different' spirituality and understanding to be incorporated into the life of the Church without any need for confirmation (which could become the age-related rite of entry to adulthood).

*The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity*⁴⁷

This is a response to the paper *One Bread, One Body* produced by the three Roman Catholic Bishop's Conferences of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland in 1998. The House of Bishops expresses its conviction that Eucharistic sharing is a 'sacrament of unity that is growing as well as of unity that is complete' and addresses the 'affront at the altar' caused by the ban on Roman Catholics receiving communion at an Anglican celebration of the Eucharist without, apparently, noticing the affront caused within the Church of England by the refusal to admit baptised children to communion. (In fairness, the House of Bishops would be unlikely to comment on this issue in this context but the implications of their position for the

⁴⁵ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 37 § 4.9

⁴⁶ House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency* 37 § 4.10

⁴⁷ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity*

admission of children to communion are clear but remain as yet unacknowledged by the bishops.)

The occasional paper affirms the ‘agreed ecumenical texts’ approved by General Synod and the Lambeth Conference including *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.⁴⁸ It emphasises the central place of the Eucharist in the life and worship of the Church and accepts the theological framework of *koinonia*. It stresses the baptismal basis of *koinonia*:

Vatican II made it possible for the Roman Catholic Church to recognise baptisms performed in Anglican churches... This development has enabled ecumenical theology to make our common baptism pivotal to its understanding of unity.... *It seems to us vital to maintain the coherence and symmetry between the communion created by baptism and the communion expressed through the Eucharist.*⁴⁹

The latent unity of our common baptism needs to be brought to its fuller realisation, not least in the Eucharist.⁵⁰

Surely the same can be said of the unity of the Church of England with its baptised children. The paper acknowledges the communal nature of the Eucharist and affirms that it is ‘the people of God... the worshipping community’ that celebrates the Eucharist.⁵¹ The paper recognises that the Eucharist is formative of *koinonia*, affirming that there is a ‘true real and personal communion of the Christian with Christ’ and that the communion is ‘much wider than the present generation’.⁵²

In expressing reservations about *One Bread, One Body*, the House of Bishops reaffirms the relationship between baptism and Eucharist:

Anglicans hold that there is an integral relationship between the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist within the theology of *koinonia*... They have a proleptic, eschatological nature in relation to the final manifestation of God’s kingdom.⁵³

Anglicans may hold this but the refusal to admit children to communion must surely undermine their assertion. The Kingdom of God portrayed in Anglican Eucharists is just as divided when baptised children are not allowed (by the Church of England) to receive communion as when Roman Catholics are not allowed (by the Church of Rome) to receive. As the paper points out in relation to the latter case, the liturgical action of the peace is not carried through into sacramental communion and this constitutes a theological and pastoral affront.⁵⁴

The house of Bishops is also concerned that:

Too much weight is being placed on the sacramental intention of the communicant (rather than of the Church), and we believe that pastoral and theological difficulties

⁴⁸ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 3 § 5

⁴⁹ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 6 § 12, emphasis added

⁵⁰ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 7 § 13

⁵¹ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 8 § 17

⁵² House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 12 § 26, § 27

⁵³ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 16 § 34

⁵⁴ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 16 § 34

could arise if this approach were generally applied to the recipients of the sacraments.⁵⁵

The Bishops' point is equally relevant to the issue of children and communion. They go on to say:

Anglicans have consistently recognised all those who have been baptised with water in the name of the Holy Trinity as members of the Catholic Church (significantly in the 1920 Lambeth Conference's *Appeal to all Christian People* for the unity of the Church).⁵⁶

Unfortunately, the consequences of that recognition for baptised children have not been acknowledged. Children are encouraged to come forward at the distribution for a blessing – a practice with which the bishops are uneasy in the context of interdenominational Eucharists:

It is suggested that going forward with other actual communicants to receive a blessing may be understood as 'spiritual communion'... However, we do not think that this should too readily be applied to Christians who *desire to receive the elements* that are actually available. We find an uneasy tension between the pastoral economy [recommended in the Catholic report] and the emphasis... on the importance of actually receiving Holy Communion.⁵⁷

The bishops are clear that a blessing is 'not normally appropriate for those who are regarded by their own churches as spiritually prepared to receive Holy Communion'. Here is the problem, many parts of the Church of England including many bishops, obviously do not regard baptised children as suitably prepared, though it is not clear from this paper what that preparation should be. The bishops, though, observe that:

Anglicans would be unwilling to press lay people for an explicit form of doctrinal assent with regard to Eucharistic theology. They would be inclined to say that communicants manifest the Catholic faith concerning the Eucharist when they identify themselves with the faith of the Church by their active participation in the liturgy.⁵⁸

So, by analogy, what children (and those with mental disability) *think* about communion is less important than the fact that they actively *participate*? So why don't we let them participate? The logic of *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity* is compelling, but in making its case the House of Bishops (unwittingly?) also make a strong case for the admission of baptised children to communion.

⁵⁵ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 18 § 38

⁵⁶ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 19 § 39

⁵⁷ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 20 § 44

⁵⁸ House of Bishops, *Sacrament of Unity* 21 § 47

Confirmation

The Prayer-Book tradition of confirmation sees it as combining the ratification of baptismal vows, the bishop's laying on of hands in prayer and blessing, and admission to communion. The Toronto Statement *Walk in Newness of Life*⁵⁹ suggests that the popular notion of confirmation as the completion of baptism has:

... resulted in the exclusion of baptised children from full participation in the Eucharist, with the further effect of forcing the age of confirmation downward, thus diminishing the possibility of a mature response on the part of the candidate.⁶⁰

It suggests an alternative view of confirmation:

Confirmation affords those baptised as infants an opportunity to affirm, as adults, the faith of the Christian Community into which they have been baptised. Given this understanding of the rite, the administration of confirmation at or following adult baptism is unnecessary and misleading, and should be discontinued. This does not, however, preclude the bishop from administering baptism... Confirmation therefore stands as a pastoral office in its own right, and not as part of the initiatory process.⁶¹

There are a number of understandings of confirmation among Anglicans which need to be addressed:

1. at confirmation, after preparation and reflection, the candidates confirm the covenant made at their baptism
2. confirmation ratifies a Christian's belonging to the Church of God
3. confirmation is the last in a sequence of rites of entry to the Church
4. confirmation is sealing by the Holy Spirit
5. confirmation is a form of 'commissioning' by the bishop for the ministry of Christian life
6. confirmation acknowledges entry into adulthood

Following the recommendations of the Toronto Statement the following responses could be made:

1. this understanding would continue, though it would not in any sense represent a completion of baptism
2. Christians belong to the Church from the moment of baptism which represents a complete rite of sacramental initiation
3. Christians belong to the Church from the moment of baptism
4. the Holy Spirit is given in baptism, and may be symbolised by anointing the candidates with the oil of chrism following baptism
5. this view diminishes baptism which is the real commissioning for Christian life, however, confirmation could serve as an appropriation, as an adult, of the commission given at baptism

⁵⁹ Holeton, *Toronto*

⁶⁰ Holeton, *Toronto* 8

⁶¹ Holeton, *Toronto* 8

6. this understanding too would continue, with confirmation being administered at an older age

Such an understanding of confirmation would allow it to be used as a more flexible pastoral rite which would be more consistent with the catechumenate approach to Christian Initiation recommended in *On the Way*. Such a view of confirmation is accommodated by the new initiation rites in *Common Worship*⁶² which emphasise the derivative nature of the rite (from baptism). The rites certainly do not ‘pretend to the role’ of admission to communion or to ‘baptism in the spirit’.⁶³

Objections & Practical Concerns

Opponents to the admission of children to communion often raise a number of objections.⁶⁴

First, they argue that children cannot understand the sacrament. What level of understanding is to be required and how do we justify such a decision? Children cannot understand the Lord’s Prayer either but we include them in that from an early age.⁶⁵ Why should understanding precede receiving communion? Is it not rather the case that for children, and indeed for all of us, understanding of the sacrament grows as we receive it. Being able to recite correct doctrine is not a sign of true understanding. The whole issue of understanding becomes complicated when one considers the position of many adults in the congregation who may have ‘inadequate’ understanding – through mental handicap or simple lack of teaching.

Second, opponents allege that children cannot ‘discern the body’ (1 Cor 11.29). As Buchanan points out⁶⁶, the body in this context is the mystical body of Christ, the Church, and the failure is a moral one not a doctrinal one. The sin of the Corinthians is in disregarding the poor, ‘not recognising their organic unity in the body of Christ with them’.⁶⁷ So far from supporting the exclusion of children from communion this verse is in fact an indictment of the Church’s current failure to recognise the unity of children with the rest of the Church. It is the Church which is failing to ‘discern the body’. The emphasis here is on the communal nature of the Church and of the Eucharist.

Third, children cannot ‘examine themselves’. In the Roman Catholic Church, this objection is acknowledged and confession must precede communion. However, if we accept the communal nature of the Eucharist, the status of individuals in the community is no longer crucial. Self-examination, appropriate to the age of the individual should indeed be encouraged, together with confession and absolution. However, the failure of some members properly to examine themselves before receiving communion does not render the community unworthy to celebrate the Eucharist – at least it is to be hoped it does not as I suspect that the self-examination of many adults is woefully inadequate.

⁶² see Church of England, *Common Worship: Initiation Services* (London: Church House Publishing, 1998), Commentary by the Liturgical Commission 185-205; also Buchanan and Vasey, *New Rites*

⁶³ Buchanan and Vasey, *New Rites* 21

⁶⁴ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 10-14

⁶⁵ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 10

⁶⁶ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 11

⁶⁷ Buchanan, *Children in Communion* 11

Fourth, children shouldn't be given everything, some things should be held back until they are adults. However, we happily baptise children. If so, then we need to justify why they should wait to receive communion. If anything, this objection is more pertinent in relation to baptism, and is of course deployed by those opposed to infant baptism.

Fifth, children may reject the Church after being admitted to communion. Quite so, but this is no argument against children receiving communion – the same risk applies to adults. We already take the risks in relation to baptism. As with the previous objection, this one would be more appropriately directed at infant baptism.

Sixth, baptised children of non-churchgoing families would be entitled to receive communion, church children may want to bring their friends. The House of Bishops' guidelines recommend that children's parents should be involved in preparations for admission. Surely this is a priceless opportunity for mission and a chance to attract families into the Church. I find it inconceivable that we will find our doors being beaten down by hordes of seven year olds demanding communion. Much more likely is that it will be the children of churchgoers that will be admitted to communion. But even if we do find ourselves faced by such a rush of unchurched children surely the benefits and opportunities far outweigh the problems.

Seventh, children will be unruly and disruptive during communion services. In my experience, children are more disruptive if they feel they are not included. In any case, why is our notion of appropriate behaviour so narrow? Jesus welcomed children and sternly warned us to do the same (Matthew 18.5). We may need to alter our services and our expectations so that children can be appropriately involved in communion, but that is surely more of an indictment of the inadequacy of our current services to welcome children than an argument against admission to communion. The church is not just for consenting (and quiet and respectful) adults.

Eighth, children will not have proper respect for the elements, and may drop them or spit them out. Children generally seem to sense important occasions and are often more moved to awe and wonder by ceremony and ritual than many adults. Children could be communicated in a way appropriate to their age – from a spoon, by intinction or in only one kind, for example. We are happy to make allowances for elderly people when taking communion to nursing homes and hospitals – why not for children?

Ninth, confirmation will become redundant. It need not, particularly if it is retained as a rite of personal commitment and admission to Christian adulthood. Certainly bishops may need to adapt their ministry, perhaps becoming more involved in baptism, for example. But then the origin of confirmation by bishops lay in the desire for baptism to be 'confirmed'. If we have abandoned any notion of two-stage baptism then could this be a move in the right direction?

Practical Experience

Donne observes that in the parish of Putney the Revd Jonathan Draper gave two reasons for admitting children to communion⁶⁸:

1. Theological justice.
2. A response to the general worry in churches about how to keep children interested and involved. He expressed the view that ‘if they can take a full part, they are more likely to “own” it and perhaps even stay with it.’

Similar concerns motivated the decision in the parish of Monkwearmouth (Sunderland).

In both parishes the experience of the children was positive and encouraging and the experiences of the congregations were also positive – many objections disappeared once children actually started to receive communion.⁶⁹

In the Parish of Monkwearmouth (Sunderland), after a period of debate and education, there was a substantial majority in favour of admitting children to communion before confirmation. There were however a number of people who remained opposed to the idea in principle. However, once the children actually began to receive communion most of the objections disappeared. The children were not unruly during services and certainly did appear to sense the occasion and ‘respect the sacrament’.

It is, of course, too early to know what the effects of early admission to communion will be on the numbers of children who continue to attend church through their teenage years, or what its impact will be on confirmation. However, these two parishes certainly found the admission of children to communion before confirmation to be an enriching experience both for the children and the parish generally.

Conclusion

The current diocesan policy is the precise opposite of what we should be doing – rather than refusing to admit children to communion and encouraging younger confirmation we should be communicating children and delaying confirmation. I would urge the Archbishop to initiate a programme of informed debate throughout the diocese (perhaps at deanery level) with a view to reversing the existing policy at the earliest opportunity. After all, a policy change would only be permissive – allowing those parishes that wished to pursue communion before confirmation to do so. It would not force the admission of children by parishes that were unconvinced (except that parishes would need to communicate children moving into the parish who had been admitted elsewhere, but then that is in any case the current situation in respect of children from other dioceses.)

⁶⁸ Donne ‘Thesis’ 20

⁶⁹ Donne ‘Thesis’; see also appendix 3

The current policy undermines baptism by denying the completeness of sacramental initiation, undermines confirmation by making it nothing more than a ‘hoop’ to be jumped through before admission to communion and undermines the Eucharist by perpetuating the affront of disunity by denying communion to baptised children.

The current policy is pastorally insensitive, forcing children to jump through ‘hoops’, creating difficulties for those attempting to prepare younger and younger children for confirmation, and by removing any rite of entry to Christian adulthood. The policy is based on an erroneous understanding of the spirituality of children and is inconsistent with a thorough understanding of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The only practical objection which really holds any water is the concern about large numbers of non-churchgoing children suddenly becoming eligible for communion. However, if this is perceived as a problem, it should be a cause to re-examine our baptism policies rather than our communion policy. The House of Bishops’ Guidelines adopt a policy of admission to communion after suitable preparation at an age when ‘they can appreciate the significance of the sacrament’. Whilst this remains theologically incoherent and there are significant questions about levels of understanding, it is surely a better way to address this objection (presumably only churchgoing children are likely to request communion and be deemed to appreciate its significance) than to refuse communion to all children. Actually I personally can see no objection to admitting all the baptised to communion, I do not believe we would be inundated by hordes of non-churchgoing children suddenly demanding communion and if we were what better opportunity could there be for mission? Robert Warren has pointed out the importance for mission of the ‘rediscovery of the baptismal identity of every believer’.⁷⁰

The current policy is theologically incoherent and is inconsistent with the Church of England’s public statements on the theology of baptism and the Eucharist, made in the context of ecumenical discussions. Its internal coherence can be maintained only by holding to a two-stage theory of Christian initiation which is denied by Anglican theologians, and has been abandoned in the Church’s liturgy.

I suspect the recent ecumenical consensus on the completeness of sacramental initiation in water baptism has prompted a crisis of confidence among some Anglicans about infant baptism – are baptised children really members of the church, and do we really have to communicate all those children that we have baptised and not seen since? However, there cannot be any serious argument that baptism is anything but the complete sacrament of Christian initiation and the foundation of membership of Christ’s body. So, we must grasp the nettle: either we should start communicating children or we should stop baptising them!

⁷⁰ Robert Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations: Towards a Post-Modern Way of Being Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995) 24

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Appendix 1

GS Misc 488, March 1997

Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation

- a) 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.
- b) 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.
- c) Before admitting a person to communion, the priest must seek evidence of baptism. Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion.
- d) 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 parent's 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.
- e) 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.
- f) 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.
- g) 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).
- h) 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.
- i) 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.
- j) No baptised 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.
- k) 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 baptised 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.
- l) In using rites of public re-affirmation 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.

Appendix 2

Bishopthorpe Palace
Bishopthorpe

June
2000

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP TO ALL PARISHES

Dear Friends

Communion before Confirmation

You will recall that quite some time ago now, I sent round a number of questions with regard to communion before confirmation. I apologise for not having responded to you with the results of this survey.

Of all the responses submitted practically all had been considered not only by the Incumbent/Priest-in-Charge but also by the Parochial Church Council.

There is no doubt that the response was overwhelmingly against communion before confirmation.

Furthermore, there was a similar overwhelming desire that there should be a clear Diocesan policy on the matter.

A substantial number of parishes believe that it was right that there should be a lower age for confirmation.

I have consulted the Bishops, members of the Staff Meeting and Archbishop's Council, and believe that what the survey has indicated should in fact be the policy of the Diocese, namely that **we shall not be proceeding with communion before confirmation**, but that Bishops will be open to the possibility of children of a younger age (which tends already to happen in some places) being presented for confirmation.

I well understand that some will be disappointed at the outcome of this consultation exercise and hope, therefore, we shall continue further to reflect on and discuss this matter.

With greetings and all good wishes in Christ.

Yours sincerely

Appendix 3

In April a number of children in the parish were admitted to communion for the first time. These are some of the comments from both children and their parents on the weekly experience of receiving the eucharist, with the children's drawings

I like it because it reminds us of Jesus and when he died and was risen (Brigid)

Jesus is in heaven, and I want him to be with me when I am scared (Miles)

I have a suspicion that it may be one of the better ways in which my children will encounter Jesus (parent)

It's important for children to have communion because they are not very different from adults and we have all been baptised. It helps me to remember Jesus more than a blessing (Erin)

It's the look on their faces as they receive communion - they are so pleased to be part of the body of Christ (parent)

I like having it. Even if no one else was, I'd want to earn on because it makes me feel good (Margery)

It makes me feel that (the children are part of) the family - and it helps them to feel that too (parent)

I like having what my mum and dad do (Robert)

I'm one of Jesus' friends just like my mum and dad, so I should have what they have (Jonathan)

I think I can say 'though we are many we are all one body, because we all share one bread' with some integrity now (parent)

It represents God better to have bread and wine - I like being able to have communion anywhere (Matthew)

It makes me feel that the children are included: they have the benefit of communion to help them in their Christian lives just as we do (parent)

St Peter's Sunday School, May 1999

GOD LIVES UNDER THE BED

I envy Kevin. My brother Kevin thinks God lives under his bed. At least that's what I heard him say one night. He was praying out loud in his dark bedroom, and I stopped to listen, "Are you there, God?" he said. "Where are you? Oh, I see. Under the bed..."

I giggled softly and tiptoed off to my own room. Kevin's unique perspectives are often a source of amusement. But that night something else lingered long after the humor. I realized for the first time the very different world Kevin lives in.

He was born 30 years ago, mentally disabled as a result of difficulties during labor. Apart from his size (he's 6-foot-2), there are few ways in which he is an adult.

He reasons and communicates with the capabilities of a 7-year-old, and he always will. He will probably always believe that God lives under his bed, that Santa Claus is the one who fills the space under our tree every Christmas and that airplanes stay up in the sky because angels carry them.

I remember wondering if Kevin realizes he is different.

Is he ever dissatisfied with his monotonous life?

Up before dawn each day, off to work at a workshop for the disabled, home to walk our cocker spaniel, return to eat his favorite macaroni-and-cheese for dinner, and later to bed.

The only variation in the entire scheme is laundry, when he hovers excitedly over the washing machine like a mother with her newborn child. He does not seem dissatisfied.

He lopes out to the bus every morning at 7:05, eager for a day of simple work.

He wrings his hands excitedly while the water boils on the stove before dinner, and he stays up late twice a week to gather our dirty laundry for his next day's laundry chores.

And Saturdays-oh, the bliss of Saturdays! That's the day my Dad takes Kevin to the airport to have a soft drink, watch the planes land, and speculate loudly on the destination of each passenger inside.

"That one's goin' to Chi-car-go!" Kevin shouts as he claps his hands.

His anticipation is so great he can hardly sleep on Friday nights.

And so goes his world of daily rituals and weekend field trips.

He doesn't know what it means to be discontented.
His life is simple.

He will never know the entanglements of wealth or power, and he does not care what brand of clothing he wears or what kind of food he eats. His needs have always been met, and he never worries that one day they may not be.

His hands are diligent. Kevin is never so happy as when he is working. When he unloads the dishwasher or vacuums the carpet, his heart is completely in it.

He does not shrink from a job when it is begun, and he does not leave a job until it is finished. But when his tasks are done, Kevin knows how to relax.

He is not obsessed with his work or the work of others. His heart is pure.

He still believes everyone tells the truth, promises must be kept, and when you are wrong, you apologize instead of argue.

Free from pride and unconcerned with appearances, Kevin is not afraid to cry when he is hurt, angry or sorry. He is always transparent, always sincere. And he trusts God.

Not confined by intellectual reasoning, when he comes to Christ, he comes as a child. Kevin seems to know God - to really be friends with Him in a way that is difficult for an "educated" person to grasp. God seems like his closest companion. In my moments of doubt and frustrations with my Christianity I envy the security Kevin has in his simple faith.

It is then that I am most willing to admit that he has some divine knowledge that rises above my mortal questions.

It is then I realize that perhaps he is not the one with the handicap . . . I am. My obligations, my fear, my pride, my circumstances - they all become disabilities when I do not trust them to God's care.

Who knows if Kevin comprehends things I can never learn? After all, he has spent his whole life in that kind of innocence, praying after dark and soaking up the goodness and love of God.

And one day, when the mysteries of heaven are opened, and we are all amazed at how close God really is to our hearts, I'll realize that God heard the simple prayers of a boy who believed that God lived under his bed.

Kevin won't be surprised at all!