

# *We Welcome You.....*



## *Children and Communion*

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# **We welcome you.**

Every week in parishes across the country, children come to Holy Communion services without receiving the Sacrament. Many of them are regular worshippers. They are baptised. They are part of the family. They are Members of Christ's Church. Yet they are excluded from the central act of Worship and Unity. To small children, this can cause confusion, to older children a sense of separation or even rejection. Sometimes, children who come to the communion will put out their hands as their parents do. Many people find that children ask the question – why can't I receive? And what is the answer?

Then, at festival services, many adults come to receive the sacrament who play no active part in the life of the Church – but who, at some point in their life, went through the ceremony of Confirmation – yet the child who is there week in and week out, worshipping, learning, maturing in faith and with a clear love for their Lord is once more denied a sharing in the spiritual food and drink as though they have no part in the body and blood of Jesus.

**We welcome you?**

# ● **A break with tradition ?**

## ➤ **Parish Communion**

It is traditional – indeed required by canon law – that the Eucharist should be celebrated at least every Sunday within each parish. It is traditional to find this celebration at the heart of the central act of morning worship, yet this ‘tradition’ is still seen by some as a ‘novelty’ because their ‘tradition’ was Mattins and Evensong with the Eucharist only a monthly, or even less frequent event. Children today find themselves at Communion services when children in the past perhaps did not, and so the question of their active involvement is a natural one WITHIN this ‘new tradition’.

## ➤ **The Wider Church**

To Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox congregations, even the question seems absurd. The Eucharist is always central, and children are always active recipients; having been confirmed at the same time as Baptism in the Orthodox – as was the traditional practice in the early church – or having come to First Communion some years before Confirmation for the Roman Catholics. Many branches of Protestantism make no distinction between adults and children when it comes to receiving Bread and Wine – all those who “Love the Lord” are invited to eat at his table. The Church of England put itself out of step with most of Christendom, and has remained so, by linking the reception of Communion with the ceremony of Confirmation.

## ➤ **Confirmation**

To many, Confirmation is a ceremony in search of a theology. It began as part of the Baptism service for both adults and children, when the Bishop prayed for the Holy Spirit’s confirmation that the newly baptised was brought into the faith. That is shown today by the act of confirmation, when the Bishop prays “Confirm O Lord your servant N with your Holy Spirit”. It became a separate ceremony as the church grew and Bishops became more remote from the local congregation. Whereas in the east they delegated the Episcopal role to the priest, in the west the bishops held firm to their task, but

caused a change in the nature of the sacrament. The emphasis changed to what we would normally think of today, that it is the confirmation candidate who is confirming their faith. The Church of England then caused a new problem by linking communion and confirmation. Either, reception is so important that confirmation is brought to an early age when the candidate has little concept of what they are saying as they confirm their faith – or confirmation is so important that reception is delayed until spiritual maturity. Practice shows this as a basic churchmanship issue: high church to the younger end, low church to the older.

### ➤ **Living Tradition**

Tradition is our Servant. Traditions come and go as their purpose and usefulness changes. Static traditions lead to fossilisation. Living traditions lead to abundant life.

# ● The Debate in the “C of E”

## ADMISSION OF CHILDREN TO HOLY COMMUNION BEFORE CONFIRMATION

*A brief theological and historical paper  
by the Right Reverend Colin Bennetts  
Bishop of Buckingham (written in 1997)*

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 16:15, 31-33). 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 (c250 AD) and certainly by Augustine (late fourth century) the practice of infants 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 of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

### ➤ **1971 – Recommended**

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.

### ➤ **1980 - Members together**

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.  
We are members together of the Body of Christ;**

**we are children of the same heavenly Father;  
we are inheritors together of the kingdom of God.  
We welcome you.**

➤ **1982 - Call to “Ponder”**

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”.*

➤ **1985 - Desirable**

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.

## ➤ **1996 - Experiment**

In the intervening decade, both General Synod and the House of Bishops gave 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.

## ➤ **1997 - Guidelines**

The following year, General Synod (GSMisc.488) gave its approval to guidelines which allowed individual parishes, with the permission of the diocesan Bishop, to adopt the policy of admitting children to communion.

## ➤ **2000 - Welcomed**

*An excerpt from the “General Synod Review” Issue 102 reporting on the November 2000 sessions*

“Further business brought forward from a diocese was a motion from Bristol asking for a decision to be taken on whether children might be admitted to communion before confirmation. Synod was told that the change was generally welcomed in those parishes currently authorised to experiment in this way but there were difficulties when families moved to live in other parishes. Those in favour commended the pastoral benefits whilst opponents feared that, if generally adopted, there would be a departure from the Reformed requirement for discernment and a personal faith.”

## ➤ **2006 - Regulations**

*The introduction to the item “Admission of Baptized Children to Holy Communion Regulations (GS 1596A), Regulations for Final Approval” from the transcript of the General Synod February 2006 sessions*

“In November 2000 General Synod requested the House to monitor the implementation in the dioceses of the guidelines and to report back by 2005 on whether a change in canon law was required. At a meeting of the college of bishops in June 2004, Bishop Colin Buchanan suggested that the position should now be normalized through regulations made under Canon B 15A,

thereby activating the change made to the Canons in 1972. The bishops agreed.

Canon B 15A (Of the admission to Holy Communion) envisages in paragraph 1(c) the admission to Holy Communion of ‘any other baptized persons authorized to be admitted under regulations of the General Synod’, so in November 2004 the Board of Education decided to report to the last meeting of the last General Synod in July 2005 on the implementation of the guidelines, and they attached a draft of the proposed regulations. Synod had a full and positive debate, with only two or three members expressing reservations about the practice of admitting children to Holy Communion before confirmation and some helpful discussion about the proposed regulations. There were some really wonderful stories of how the Holy Spirit had transformed the lives of children, the lives of their families, the lives of congregations and even the lives of clergy. It was, we were told by numerous speakers, a real aid to mission in their localities.

**Extract from the  
“ADMISSION OF BAPTISED CHILDREN  
TO HOLY COMMUNION REGULATIONS 2006”**

Children who have been baptised but who have not yet been confirmed and who are not yet ready and desirous to be confirmed as required by paragraph 1 (a) of Canon B 15A may be admitted to Holy Communion provided that the conditions set out in these Regulations are satisfied.

Every diocesan bishop may at any time make a direction to the effect that applications from parishes under these Regulations may be made in his diocese. The bishop's discretion in this respect shall be absolute, and he may at any time revoke such a direction (without prejudice to the validity of any permissions already granted).

## ● A Theological Perspective

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: 3-4). 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 a 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 lost 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.

# ● **Pastoral Practice**

*Extracts from the “Guidelines agreed by the House of Bishops”  
(General Synod paper: GS Misc 488 – March 1997)*

## ➤ **Special Permission**

Since ‘communion before confirmation’ is a departure from our inherited norm, it requires special permission. 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.

## ➤ **Proper Preparation**

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. An appropriate 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.

## ➤ **Continuing nurture**

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.

*In addition to these 1997 guidelines which formed the basis for the more recent 2006 regulations, we now have the chance to benefit from the experiences of the many parishes who have adopted this policy for a number of years.*

## ➤ **Positive results**

Personal experiences of adopting this policy in Lyon in 1998 match those experiences reported by other parishes. A greater sense of belonging, a reverence and joy in receiving, a deepening of faith, a commitment to public worship and a desire to serve.

Mark Perryman writes that, *“I think that taking communion really helped me. Communion services were no longer boring and something to dread, but they had a meaning; I could receive. It also helped me to feel that I could talk to Jesus now.”*

Comments reported from parishes in the Oxford diocese include the following

Children have commented, *“I feel that I am taking part in something that helps me understand about the Church and that Jesus died for us and is always there for me.”*

*“We’re all one together. It’s not Mummy and Daddy and then us and then more grown ups. We’re the same as you when we all kneel together. And that’s special!”*

Parent’s comments include, *“It has helped my own faith because I have seen my son develop a maturity at church.”*

*“I believe it is a good stepping stone, encouraging them to take the next step towards confirmation. Her enjoyment and participation have been improved by this.”*

*“Children have always been present, but taking part fully in the Eucharist confirms and symbolises that we are a family of people who belong to God, not a collection of qualified and part-qualified disciples.*

Others said, *“I had reservations until I saw what the training programme would be and then thought it would be a great help and blessing to those*

*involved. Without an ongoing care and training of the children, then I would still have reservations.”* (Former Churchwarden – no children)

*“It has been a joy to see the serious (yet joyful) way the children have entered into this.”* (Churchwarden)

*“Our children have always been present at the Eucharist, and were given a blessing. I think those admitted come forward with a new confidence, sure that they are part of the Body of Christ.”* (Reader)

### ➤ **Enhance the Sacraments and Confirmation**

Baptism is valued as the sole rite of entry into full membership of Christ’s Covenant People, his Church.

The Eucharist is valued as spiritual nourishment for all disciples.

Confirmation is valued as a true declaration of ‘adult’ faith and commitment, rather than used as a tool to assist entry to Communion – often at an age where such vows can have no real meaning.

### ➤ **Unite the Family**

The Eucharist becomes – as it was always designed to be – a mark of our unity (*communion*) within the Family of God.

## ● **Issues to consider**

- **Who makes decisions?**
- **Who is involved?**
- **What preparation is needed?**

In previous parishes, these questions have been considered and the following notes describe my recommendations in the light of eleven years experience of preparing and admitting children:

Baptism is a pre-requisite for admission to Holy Communion. Baptised young people who regularly attend Sunday Worship and the teaching group appropriate to their age will be considered as potential communicants.

Young people and families likely to be involved will be identified by the Vicar and the youth/children group leaders so that information about the proposals can be shared.

Each individual who would like to receive the sacrament must make a personal request to the Vicar.

At the Vicar's discretion, after consultation with the parent(s) and teaching group leader, the young person will begin a preparation course which will include the following topics:-

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus

Baptism

Prayer

The Bible

Loving God and loving our Neighbour

The Church and the Communion Service.

Such a course, designed by Nicola Perryman, has proved both accessible to and successful with children aged 8 to 12. The story "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" is used to help explain the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.

The teaching will be undertaken by members of the fellowship with a recognised gift of teaching ministry to the young, under the authority of the Vicar.

If, at the end of the preparation, the candidate and their parent(s) wish to proceed and the Vicar in consultation with the course leader is willing to exercise his 'absolute discretion', the young person will begin to receive the sacrament.

It will be stressed that by taking this step the young person is making a declaration of intention to remain a regular worshipper and active participant in the relevant teaching group so that nurturing in discipleship can continue. Eventually young communicants will be expected to present themselves for Confirmation preparation so that they can make an adult commitment to life-long discipleship.

## ● **What are the implications:**

If we were to adopt this policy within the parish, it may have implications for areas of our parish life. In particular the following areas will be likely to be affected in some way.

- **Eucharistic Worship**
- **Baptism/Confirmation policy**
- **Work with families**

Individuals may have questions or concerns about these, or any other aspect of this policy, and these should be brought to members of the PCC or to the Vicar where they will be addressed seriously.

One major question involves the situation when a family whose child has become a pre-confirmation communicant in one parish then moves to a parish who have not adopted such a policy

- **Moving parishes**

The 1997 House of Bishops Guidelines made clear the status of children who move parishes. “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.”

# ● **What are the objections?**

There are, of course, concerns that people have with such a change to the long accepted order within the Church of England. These objections seem to fall into four main categories.

## ➤ **Tradition**

The Church of England has followed this line of Baptism – Confirmation – Communion throughout its history. Why should things change? If it was right before, why should we consider it to be wrong now?

## ➤ **Theology**

Some question whether Infant Baptism is indeed the rite of entry into full membership of the Church. If Confirmation is a necessary step to such membership, then Communion should not be offered to those who have not made their personal declaration of faith.

## ➤ **Sociology**

Is this not just another example of the Church being dragged along by changes in society? Children are expected to have everything too quickly these days rather than learn to aspire to achieve or gain something. Surely the Church should stand against such an attitude and teach that something as valuable as the Sacrament is worth waiting for.

## ➤ **Understanding**

How can a pre-adolescent child begin to understand the mysteries of the Eucharist? Shouldn't reception of communion be delayed until an age when it will be properly understood?

All these are valid concerns and opinions and should not be belittled in any way, but I hope that what has been said before will address some of them and answer others of them.

## ● **Concluding Comment**

Jesus had an attitude towards children that welcomed them with open and loving arms. He taught adults that, to enter the kingdom of God we must become like children. We would all agree that the younger members of our fellowship, along with all of us, belong here and deserve the best opportunities that we can provide to be nurtured in their faith and to fulfil their God-given potential in all aspects of life – not least in their service to the Lord.

Whatever may be the outcome of this debate, may each and every child know and feel that above all else, in the name of Jesus,

**we welcome you!**

**KEY SECTIONS FROM 2006 GENERAL SYNOD REGULATIONS**

Before granting any permission, the bishop must first satisfy himself that the parish concerned has made adequate provision for preparation and continuing nurture in the Christian life and will encourage any child admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations to be confirmed at the appropriate time.

Where a permission granted under paragraph 4 is in force, the incumbent shall not admit any child to Holy Communion unless he or she is satisfied that

- (a) the child has been baptised and
- (b) a person having parental responsibility for the child is content that the child should be so admitted.

Otherwise, subject to any direction of the bishop, it is within the incumbent's absolute discretion to decide whether, and if so when, any child should first be admitted to Holy Communion.

**KEY SECTIONS FROM DIOCESE OF COVENTRY  
“PARISH APPLICATION FORM”**

**Consultation**

Has the PCC discussed this subject in the light of the Regulations?

What was the outcome of these discussions?

How has the wider congregation been involved in the discussion?

What was the outcome?

What other guidance or advice has been sought (if any)?

**Preparation**

How will the preparation of the children for Holy Communion be organised?

Who will lead the preparation, and what training will they be given?

What teaching materials will be used?

How will the children’s nurture towards Confirmation continue after they have been admitted to Holy Communion?

**Pastoral Matters**

How will parents be involved in the preparation of their children for Holy Communion?

What strategy do you have for families who do not wish for their children to be admitted to Holy Communion?

What strategy do you have for children who come to church without their parents?

What provision will be made for the nurture of children with learning difficulties who wish to receive Holy Communion?

How will children be involved and affirmed as members of the Christian community:

within the Eucharist;

in Non-Eucharistic Worship;

in social events?

Appendix 3  
SAMPLE CERTIFICATE

**Full Name**

Born: **BIRTH DATE**

Baptised: **BAPTISM DATE** at: **CHURCH NAME**

Was admitted to the Holy Communion before Confirmation,  
after a course of preparation at  
All Saints Church, Leek Wootton, in the Deanery of Kenilworth,  
in accordance with the regulations\* of the  
General Synod of the Church of England,  
and the regulations of the Church of England Diocese of Coventry.

Date: **ADMISSION DATE** Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

\* (GS 1956 A [2006]) In paragraph 10, these regulations state that: 'a child who presents evidence ... that he or she has been admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations shall be so admitted at any service of Holy Communion conducted according to the rites of the Church of England in any place, regardless of whether or not any permission under paragraph 4 [of these Regulations] is in force in that place.'