



**DIOCESE OF CANTERBURY**  
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S MINISTRY

## **Children & Holy Communion; the Background**

### **A Brief History**

The practice of children having to be confirmed before receiving Holy Communion dates from the late thirteenth century<sup>1</sup>. Teaching in the form of a Q and A Catechism was added in the Book of Common Prayer. It also included the term, 'desirous of being confirmed'<sup>2</sup>. After the Reformation, Baptism became a simple and private service. A bishop always administered Confirmation, so, with the ceremony attached to his visit, it became seen to be a more important event than baptism.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the centrality of Eucharistic worship and re-thinking about the nature of baptism as well as images of the Church as being people on pilgrimage together, has led to demands for baptised and believing children to be admitted to Holy Communion.

### **The Present Situation**

The last thirty years has been a time of debate, exploration and experiment. The Dioceses of Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark started admitting children to Holy Communion twenty years ago. Children are admitted to Holy Communion by Anglican Churches in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the USA. It is common practice in the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox traditions. Methodist and URC Congregations have been encouraged to give Holy Communion to children for some years and the Methodist Church is currently debating whether this should become a policy rather than an option.

In November 1996, the General Synod voted to allow children to be admitted to Holy Communion before Confirmation in certain circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Three quarters of the Diocesan Bishops of the Church of England have agreed in principle to admitting children to Holy Communion. In Canterbury Diocese about twenty parishes have received the bishop's permission to admit children and more than thirty others have the matter under review. In February 2006 the guidelines were reviewed, under GS 1596A, and new regulations under paragraph 1(c) of Canon B15A were introduced which come into effect on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

---

<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Peckham noted that, because Confirmation did not take place regularly or frequently, many parents were not having their children confirmed. The age for Confirmation was expected to be about seven years though, as bishops might only visit a parish once in several years this was often delayed.

<sup>2</sup> This allowed people to receive Holy Communion before Confirmation, rather than possibly waiting for several years. For further information about the Reformation model, see 'On the Way' GS Misc 444 pp 81-83.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Children and Holy Communion' by Steve Pearce and Diana Murrie, Guidelines agreed by the House of Bishops, GS Misc 488, and the Bishop of Rochester's Summary of Good Practice.

## **Common Questions.**

### **1 Why change at all?**

The pattern produced by the reformers of Confirmation before Holy Communion dates from a time when everyone went to church and religion was a part of daily life. This experience of belonging was the basis upon which the faith was taught. This is no longer the case. Practice of religion is now largely an individual matter.

During the last thirty years, the Eucharist has become the central Sunday service in many Anglican churches. Believing and baptised children regularly join in the service but their exclusion from receiving Holy Communion can be seen to be unwelcoming, and a denial of their membership of the Body of Christ.

A significant number of children are already receiving Holy Communion in Anglican churches. Either they belong to other denominations or part of the Anglican Communion, or have been part of experiments in their dioceses. In some cases their parents choose to share it with them.

### **2 How will children be accepted and who decides whether they are suitable?**

The request to be prepared for admission to Holy Communion should initially come from the child and his or her parents. Parental support and involvement is key to the process.

The calendar age of the child is not the main issue. Many young children have a vivid faith and can learn what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, being prepared with friends of the same age or nurture group are forms of selection that children can understand.

Baptism is a pre-requisite. Children who have not been baptised may use this opportunity to ask for baptism for themselves, which can be part of the whole process.

This is about grace, God's generosity to us and our response to him. It cannot be earned and is not a prize for being good. 'Difficult' children may be those who are in most need of this expression of God's love.

### **3 Will they understand what they are doing?**

This is part of a continuous programme. Leaders and parents should help their children to grow in understanding the significance of Holy Communion as part of their teaching and ongoing nurture.

It is discernment of the sacrament that is important. This need not be a cognitive understanding or ability to articulate one's faith, but should include a sense of reverence and of meeting Jesus through the sacrament.

The parish should emphasise the importance of Holy Communion, through example, teaching, by valuing its children, and by providing high quality resources for their nurture.

## 4 What will happen to Confirmation?

Hopefully, Confirmation will come to be seen as a sacrament in its own right rather than a procedure to be got through in order to receive Holy Communion.

The House of Bishops expects communicant children to be confirmed at a later time, many by the time they are eighteen. This can be seen as an adult affirmation of faith as well as definitive reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Laying-on of hands was often linked with 'sending out' in the early Church so Confirmation is very appropriate for youngsters who are leaving school, starting their first jobs or going to university.

### Notes for Discussion and Reflection.

All children's care and nurture should be of the highest quality. This may include admitting them to Holy Communion but that should not be seen as the definitive and only way of demonstrating that they are equal and valued members of the Christian family.

Welcome and acceptance of children as fellow pilgrims by the whole congregation is vital. Parishes should see that their children are truly valued and have good quality nurture before even considering preparing them to receive Holy Communion.

The Principal effect on the congregation will be that children will become visible 'as of right' at the Eucharist. Parishes should use this opportunity to review the way the service operates, and to take into account the full age range being present.

Being admitted to Holy Communion is a stage on the life-long Christian journey. Children will need preparation and continuing nurture after the event. This includes the prayers and friendship of the whole congregation, and encouragement to develop a relationship with God through experience, nurture, and involvement in church life. This involves human and financial resources.

### Further Assistance

Please contact:

Murray Wilkinson - *ChYP's Ministry Adviser*  
Diocesan House  
Lady Wootton's Green, Canterbury, CT1 1NQ  
o 01227 459401,  
m 07872 986501  
e [mwilkinson@diocant.org](mailto:mwilkinson@diocant.org)

**Murray Wilkinson, Children & Young People's [ChYP's] Ministry Adviser**

*Documents compiled by Ted Hurst*