

Admitting Children to Communion before Confirmation

A Paper for Consideration by St Barbara's Church

Introduction

Why Children and Communion Matters

The place of *children* in the life of our church is of critical importance. Jesus spoke of the central place of children. Children form not only the future of our church, but a very important part of the present of our church, too. They often express a depth of faith that can be humbling to us adults.

Communion is a central part of our worship as a church. For many of us, it is the most significant act we do together each week. From participating in communion, our faith is strengthened and our hope restored.

Therefore, the relationship between children and communion is a crucial one for us as a church, and one that this paper begins to explore.

Why this Paper

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it had been the policy of the Church of England that children could only receive communion once they had been confirmed.

However, in the last 18 years, the Church of England has been encouraging Anglican churches to return to the original church practice of allowing all baptized children to receive communion prior to confirmation.

This is a decision that can only be taken in each parish, however, with the agreement and commitment of the incumbent and PCC.

This paper:

- outlines the history of baptism and communion within the Church (page 2);
- gives reasons why admitting children to communion before confirmation may be a good thing (pages 3-5);
- explores ten commonly raised concerns about children receiving communion before confirmation (pages 6-8);
- highlights important questions that will need to be considered (pages 8-9); and
- outlines the next steps in the process (page 10).

It is a lengthy paper, but I hope one that you will find helpful in thinking through the issues.

This is an edited version of the paper that was originally written for the PCC in May 2015..

The History of Baptism and Communion within the Church

A Quick Overview of 1800 years of Church History!

From the earliest times, it appears baptized infants and children received communion. This was the pattern throughout the church for the first 1000 years, and has always remained so in the Eastern Church.

When in the West the bishops became overstretched and the rites of baptism and confirmation became separated (the local priest doing the baptizing; the bishop doing the confirming), the receiving of communion followed the act of baptism, rather than having to wait for the bishop's laying on of hands.

Only in medieval times did this change. As a theology developed about the "real nature" of the elements, only priests came to take the wine, for fear that the laity might spill "the blood of Jesus". As infants were only receiving wine (the bread being difficult for babies to eat), almost by default this led to infants and children being denied communion altogether. It took several centuries for a theology to emerge to justify this change in practice.

Recent Anglican Practice

The formal linking of receiving communion to confirmation only happened within the Anglican church in the 19th century, and by the mid-20th century this began to be reviewed, with the Church of England formally endorsing a return to the early Christian approach in 1997.

By 2006, 11% of Anglican parishes were admitting children to communion, and this number is increasing steadily. For example, the number of parishes in our own diocese who do so is now over 60, nearly 30% of all parishes.

The Practice in Other Parts of the World and Amongst Other Denominations

In other parts of the world and amongst other denominations, the policy of allowing children to receive communion has been widely followed. The Eastern Orthodox Churches have always encouraged children to receive communion from baptism onwards. Other parts of the Anglican Communion – in Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa – have been admitting children to communion before confirmation for many years. The same is true of Methodist and URC churches, and it has been standard practice in the Roman Catholic church for many years to admit children to communion from age 7.

10 Reasons for Admitting Children to Communion before Confirmation

1. Baptism (not confirmation) is the way we enter into the family of the church; communion is the family meal to which all baptized are invited.

The Church of England, along with the World Council of Churches and other denominations, has reaffirmed the central Christian doctrine that *baptism* is what makes us all full members of the Body of Christ. Our membership of the church is not dependent on confirmation.

And *communion* is the celebration of the baptized community. It is one of the key ways in which we express our membership, our oneness in the body of Christ.

Therefore, when we exclude children from receiving communion, we are at risk of questioning the legitimacy of their baptism.

2. Jesus accepted and included children

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

We are challenged to welcome children as fully as Jesus did. Allowing them to participate in communion is an important way of ensuring they are welcomed as full members in the life of the church.

3. We grow in faith through experience as well as through understanding

Growing in the Christian faith isn't just about understanding a set of doctrines or being able to articulate faith in a rational way. It is also about experiencing faith, growing up as members of a church community, assimilating the values and habits of the adults around us as well as our peer group. For most of us, adults and children alike, we are more influenced by our experience of the Christian people around us than we are by what we are told. We learn by seeing, experiencing, doing and participating, as much as by hearing.

Communion is one of the most important ways in which we all experience what it means to be the family of God and what it means to be accepted and loved by God. None of us can claim to fully "understand" communion, but we know the experience of it makes a difference.

Therefore denying communion to children on the grounds that they cannot understand, when such an important part of communion is about participating and experiencing, seems unfair.

4. Feeling a sense of belonging is essential to encouraging children to staying in church

It is true for all of us that we are unlikely to want to stay somewhere if we feel excluded or feel as if we don't belong. This is particularly true of children. Children between 7-11 years old tend to have a great enjoyment of being part of a group, particularly one containing adults. But they are also very sensitive to actions which they feel exclude them.

As receiving communion is such a central part of our worship, children can feel alienated and excluded when they can't fully participate, and this can have significant impact on whether they choose to continue in church once they reach the age where they can choose for themselves.

Recent national statistics are sobering. Only 30% of people in their 20s today, who attended church from 0-9 years of age are still attending church. It is predicted that by 2020 churches will have less than half the numbers of 0-15 year olds they had in 2010. We need to be doing everything we can to making sure that children feel full and included members of our church.

5. Children often have an innate sense of spirituality from which adults can learn

Jesus said: "Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). Jesus encourages us to cherish the way that children belong to the kingdom and to be like them. Children can often show a sincerity and depth of faith that we adults would do well to learn from, even though the way such faith is expressed may be appropriately child-like. Therefore, to deny children communion on the grounds of immaturity of faith alone seems ungrounded.

6. If understanding is the criteria for receiving communion, then where does this leave people with learning difficulties?

People who are unable to articulate their understanding of communion should still be given the opportunity to experience the sacramental signs of God's love. We wouldn't exclude people with learning difficulties or cognitive impairment on grounds of limited understanding, so why should we do so with children?

7. We would be formalizing something that St Barbara's already does

St Barbara's already does allow children to receive communion prior to confirmation, on Maundy Thursday each year. As it currently stand, this tradition which has been followed for many years, falls outside of official Church of England practice, which requires both PCC and episcopal (the Bishop's) formal consent.

By taking a decision to allow children to receive communion before confirmation, and by gaining the Bishop's consent, we will be bringing ourselves into line with appropriate Anglican practice, and will enable this Maundy Thursday practice, which has been special to many, to continue and be repeated more regularly throughout the year.

8. It will help children who have grown up in St Barbara's not to feel disadvantaged when children coming to us or visiting us from other churches receive communion.

Anglican policy is that a child who moves from a church where they have been allowed to receive communion can continue to receive communion in their new church, even if this is not the agreed policy for that church. This is on the grounds that once a child begins to receive communion, it is not right to withdraw that right from them.

With the practice becoming more and more common within the Anglican church, and families more and more mobile, it is likely that this situation, which does already occur in St Barbara's, will happen more frequently.

Children who have only ever attended St Barbara's, and who may still be some way off getting confirmed, may perceive this as an unfair situation, especially when children receiving may be considerably younger than they are.

9. Experience from other churches who have introduced communion before confirmation has shown that many children feel more a part of the church family, and it encourages them in their journey of faith.

Research carried out into the policy of allowing children to receive communion before confirmation has shown very positive outcomes for children.

- "Children feel part of the church family, sharing in a common meal."
- "The children begin to feel they are valuable within the congregation. It gives them a great confidence boost."
- "It encourages their journey of faith."
- "It is their opportunity to express their faith publicly."

(All quotes from: *Children and Holy Communion*, 1997)

10. Experience from other churches who have introduced communion before confirmation has shown that adults also greatly gain from the new practice.

Many adults speak of how receiving communion alongside children has had a profound impact on their own faith. It has:

- reminded them of their own need to come as children before God;
- it has helped them to fully appreciate the importance of communion as a meal of fellowship and unity as one family; and
- they have been touched by the simplicity but also sincerity of the children's faith in receiving.

10 Commonly Raised Concerns About Children Receiving Communion Before Confirmation

1. “Shouldn’t communion only be taken once you can understand it?”

Understanding is an important part of our Christian journey, but who of us can say that we as adults fully understand all that communion means? It is a mystery that we experience. We come to communion not because of what we know, but because we are invited.

And as we have already said, if understanding is essential for the receiving of communion, does that rule out adults with learning difficulties or cognitive impairment too?

2. “The children won’t be serious or reverent enough”

This is rarely in practice an issue at the moment. Most children show remarkable reverence and thoughtfulness when receiving their blessing. Any occasional disruption seems to be entirely age appropriate, in the same manner as an elderly person who takes a long time to make it up to the communion rail is entirely appropriate too. We wouldn’t consider not allowing *them* to receive communion.

It is also true that there are times when we as adults may take communion with our minds on other things, or with unresolved anger in our hearts. Children may be simply more transparent in their behavior.

3. “Don’t we need some kind of evidence that those receiving communion will always receive worthily and remain faithful for the rest of their lives?”

While we should take reception of communion seriously, it is important that we do not put up barriers that many adults too may fall short of. After all, maybe it is the most vulnerable Christians that most need the channel of God’s grace that we receive in communion. God’s grace is poured out freely, and it is not for us to look at motives or calculate end results. After all, Jesus healed ten lepers, even though only one returned to thank him (Luke 17:12-19).

4. “Won’t it mean that children have no incentive to get confirmed?”

By allowing children to receive communion before confirmation, it takes some of the pressure off children to get confirmed at an age when they may not yet be ready. Often children get confirmed because they want the sense of belonging and being fully included that receiving communion gives. They may not be ready for the adult appropriation of their baptismal promises and the personal commitment that is called for in a confirmation service. By allowing communion earlier, confirmation, which is when children choose to affirm the baptism promises for themselves, can be done at an age when they are more likely to be able to make independent choices for themselves, as they approach adulthood.

It is worth noting that a pattern has begun to emerge amongst churches who admit children to communion before confirmation, of confirmation taking place during the late teens. This is being seen as an adult affirmation of faith. In the early Church, the laying on of hands and the reception of the Holy Spirit were often linked with commissioning or “sending out” (apostleship), and so this fits well with those in their later teens who are beginning to take responsibility in the Christian community, starting their first jobs or going to university.

Of course, moving to a policy of admitting children to communion before confirmation does not mean that children *have* to wait until their late teens to get confirmed. If they are ready and want to do so at a younger age, there is still that opportunity.

5. “What about children who are not baptized? Won’t they feel excluded?”

It is important to say that baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion. This is the position of almost all mainline church denominations. Communion is the meal of the family of God. Baptism is the entry-point into that family. Therefore non-baptized children will not be able to take communion.

If a non-baptized child shows a desire to receive communion then this provides the opportunity to explore baptism with that child and their parents, and their baptism could be a pre-cursor to them receiving communion.

Such an approach helps to give tangible value and meaning to the sacrament of baptism as the point of entry into the body of Christ.

6. “What if children do not want to receive communion before confirmation?”

That is fine. No child will be forced to receive communion. It will be up to the child and their parents, alongside the vicar and the children’s workers, to think through whether this is the right step for them. The consent of child and parents is essential.

7. “I didn’t receive communion before confirmation, and it didn’t put me off going to church. Why should it be different for children today?”

There have been two significant changes in recent years that have changed the situation.

- Firstly, the main Sunday service in recent years in most churches has moved from Morning Prayer to Holy Communion. Whilst this change is to be warmly welcomed, it has left children unable to fully participate in the main church service of the week.
- Secondly, the statistics of decline in church-going amongst children are very serious, and suggest we need to do all we can to help children re-engage and feel included in church once more. This is one important way that we can do this.

8. How will we know which children are allowed to receive communion and who aren’t?

Children will be expected to undergo age-appropriate preparation, their parents will have given their consent, and their names will have been recorded in a register. Thus it will be clear to those distributing communion who can receive and who can’t.

9. The Bible does not say anywhere explicitly that children could receive communion?

Although this is true, it may have been because it was such common practice there was no need to mention it. Acts 2:42-47 describes how the early believers shared fellowship meals together “and broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” It seems unlikely that children were excluded, and given Jesus’ attitude to children, one would expect a specific injunction for children not to receive, if this was the case.

Also, the Bible makes no reference to women receiving communion either, and yet no one today in a mainstream church would argue that women should be excluded from communion.

10. Is this yet another erosion of childhood, forcing children to grow up faster than they need to?

Communion is not essentially an adult activity that we are suddenly getting children to engage with. It is rather an open-handed, trusting acceptance of God’s grace, and that is something that all can receive, no matter their age.

It is also true that no child is free from the stresses of living in the world, and participation in communion can help them cope too.

Important Questions to Consider

In deliberating on whether children should be allowed to receive communion before confirmation, three further questions need to be considered:

1. Should the church set an age at which communion can first be received?

The House of Bishops purposefully left age out of their report as it was felt the setting of any arbitrary limit could be contradicted:

“In general, the time of first receiving should be determined not so much by the child’s chronological age as by his appreciation of the significance of the sacrament.” (*Guidelines from the House of Bishops, 1997*)

Some churches choose to set an age. For example, the Catholic Church sets the age for first communion at 7.

Other churches choose to set an age as a guideline, but assess a child’s readiness on an individual basis to whether it may be appropriate for them to receive sooner.

And other churches, including the Orthodox Church and St Mary Magdalene’s, have chosen not to set an age at all, allowing all baptized children to receive communion.

It is important to note that having an age limit of whatever age does run into the same difficulties as not allowing communion before confirmation. It still implies that baptism is not sufficient to be a full member of the church, and that understanding is more important than experience and participation in our journey of faith.

My personal experience of leading services for pre-school children over the last few years has been that even children as young as two or three can have a very real sense of something being special, important and holy. For example, as I have told and acted out the story of the Road to Emmaus with children of such an age, it is remarkable the sense of awe and delight they have in being able to share in the broken bread.

If a child can have an age-appropriate experience and understanding of communion being a special meal that brings them closer to God and one another, then that may well constitute the appreciation of the significance of the sacrament the Bishops were looking for, no matter their age. Their understanding will grow as they grow, just as is true for us adults too.

2. What would be the nature of the preparation that children would receive before receiving communion?

This partly depends on whether there is a specific age set.

If there is, then preparation may involve 5-6 sessions on a week-day after school, or in a separate group during Hive.

If there is no age limit, then Hive sessions could be focused on this for a four week period every six or twelve months. Some of the learning would be done together. Other learning would be done in age groups. Tulo would be involved in at least one of these sessions. This preparation would be repeated on an annual (or six-monthly basis) so that new children could be prepared, but also so that existing children could continue to grow in their experience and understanding.

There are a number of excellent preparation courses that we can draw on including:

- Children and Holy Communion
- Welcome to the Lord's Table

3. How much of the communion service should children be present for, if they are receiving communion?

The House of Bishops suggested that even if there is a separate "Ministry of the Word" for children, they should be present in the main assembly for the Eucharistic prayer. This may be something we want to encourage.

The church may also want to invest in CHP's "*My Communion Book: A Child's Guide to Holy Communion*" – a very simple book that a child can use during a communion service to guide them through what is happening.

Next Steps

1. All church members are invited to discussion meetings on this paper on **Wednesday 1st July** and **Thursday 2nd July** (both at St Barbara's Vicarage at 7.30pm) and after the 10am Service on **Sunday 5th July** (in the meeting room), and to feed back their comments and recommendations to the PCC.

2. On **14th July** the PCC will then make a final decision.

If the decision is to adopt a policy of allowing children to receive communion before confirmation, then the following steps will be taken:

3. A letter will be written to the Bishop seeking his permission.

4. A programme of adequate preparation will be developed by the children's workers, working alongside the vicar.

5. The preparation course will aim to take place in September 2015.

6. A date will be set for when children can receive their first communion. (A potential date could be our Patronal Festival on 27th September).

Conclusion

Whether to allow children to receive communion before confirmation is an important matter that we need God's wisdom to think through and reach a decision upon.

Please do pray about all the issues contained and seek to discern God's leading for us as church.

May He guide us and show us the way ahead.

Tulo Raistrick
18th June, 2015