

Consultation on the Admission of Children to Holy Communion

Introduction

The PCC first discussed the possibility of admitting children to Holy Communion before confirmation in July of 2019. At the time there was a mix of views and a desire to think more deeply about the possibility. Since then there was an education session on the sacraments after the service on the 20th October 2019. The Mission Action Plan, as part of the 'Involve young people in our worship' task of the Worshiping God theme of the document, included 'Review church policy on children and the Eucharist'. In the time since then a number of children have asked why they cannot receive alongside the rest of the church family.

In a parish with a significant number of children and young people (often 1/3 of the congregation is under the age of 16), and a desire to increase the number and depth of engagement of children and young people in our worshipping community (whilst not overlooking the needs of the more mature members of the congregation). Children and young people should be fully included and welcomed into the life and worship of our parish and we should value and prioritise their spiritual development and growth in the Faith. It is well documented that positive experiences and memories of church as a child lead to positive engagement with faith in future. This is a question of children's discipleship and rooting that discipleship in the practice of the wider church.

The Consultation Process

Step 1

This document will be proposed as a consultation to the PCC in October 2022, if they are happy to proceed we will move onto the second step.

Step 2

This document will be made available online and in paper to the whole congregation and a date will be set with a couple of weeks notice for a consultation meeting after the Sunday 10am service, during which there will be space for questions and discussion about the proposal to admit children to Holy Communion. Feedback from this discussion will then be taken back to the PCC to consider.

Step 3

The PCC will then consider the feedback from the consultation and vote on whether we should apply to the bishop for permission to admit children to Communion.

Step 4

If the PCC votes to do so we will apply to the Bishop for permission and if granted we will then start a process of preparing children to receive communion before confirmation. Please note, we will still offer confirmation to those in Year 6 and above who would seek to own their faith personally.

Some History

Children were present in the earliest Christian communities and we know that they were initiated into the faith along with adults. There is no mention of any baptised family members being excluded from the celebration of the Eucharist. For children, as for everyone, membership of the Church was obtained by baptism and thereafter depended on continuing participation in the Eucharist. Over the years, however, children lost their place at the Altar in the Western Church. The Eastern Orthodox Churches continue to admit children to communion from infancy, on the day they are baptised.

From the 16th century to the 19th century the majority of Anglican communicants were admitted to communion *not on the basis of confirmation, but of baptism* – having had some minimal instruction from the parish priest. It was only in the 19th century that confirmation developed as the “gateway to communion”. As a result, many of us have grown up believing that confirmation (around the age of 13 or 14) has always been a precondition to receiving communion. So for the overwhelming majority of the existence of the Church of England (and indeed the wider Church), receiving communion *before* confirmation has been the norm. This proposed change would, therefore, mark a return to traditional practice.

Over the last 50 years there has been a growing recognition of the fact that *baptism alone is the mark of full membership of the Church* and that both adults and children should be admitted to communion on that basis. Following the House of Bishop’s 1995 report *On the Way*, parishes were encouraged to review their practice and consider admitting children to communion at an earlier age, reserving confirmation as a rite of mature commitment at a later age.

Guidelines on the admission of children to communion were finally enshrined as Canon Law by the General Synod as the “Admission of Baptised Children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006”. We will need to comply with the requirements of these Regulations if we decide to admit children to communion. Part of these is that once somebody has been admitted to receiving communion they cannot then be denied - which is why some children in our community who have received in another church receive before confirmation.

Why The Change?

The arguments in favour of change are:

- *Our understanding of the nature of baptism* – baptism makes us full members of the body of Christ.
- *The acceptance of children in the Church* – Jesus’ acceptance of children was explicit and the Church is being challenged to be as welcoming and accepting of children as Jesus was. The need of adults to become “as a child” – Jesus challenges us not only to welcome children wholeheartedly into the Church, but also to cherish the way they belong to the Kingdom and to be like them.
- *Children need spiritual nourishment* – after all we feed children before we teach them about the food groups - spiritual nourishment is fed by a regular pattern and encounter with God in prayer and sacrament. In this way it becomes a part of the fabric of their lives in a way that what they are just told about will not.
- *Children need to belong* – research has shown that children in the 6-11 age group enjoy being part of a group, particularly one which contains adults. If they are excluded at this age the church community will suffer from their lack of involvement in their teenage years. Experience of

churches that admit children to communion is that these children are more likely to attend church in their teenage years.

- *The increasing importance of Holy Communion* – the past fifty years has seen a sea change in the way we worship in the Church of England. Holy Communion is now at the centre of our worship.
- *Our church is a Eucharistic community, united around that central act of worship.* This is therefore related into our school services by holding a Eucharist every month, however, many of our own children cannot receive while their classmates attending churches that do admit children to communion receive, reinforcing the sense of being excluded.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **Can children of that age really understand?**

Children don't need to understand. They need to belong and receive God's grace. Most adults don't understand either! Christ does not choose his followers based on their intelligence or cognitive ability. [The age of 7 is the minimum age recommended in the Church's guidelines. Children of this age are also particularly open to and interested in their place and role within the wider society. This provides us with a unique opportunity to work with children of this age. If we find that the age of 7 is not ideal within our parish, we will be free to change this in the future with the consent of the Bishop.]

2. **What age will we admit children to holy communion?**

The age of 7 is recommended in the Church's guidelines. Children of this age are also particularly open to and interested in their place and role within the wider society. That said, there is a strong argument that children could be admitted earlier. If we offered to prepare children at this age we would have a unique opportunity to engage with them. If we decide 7 is not ideal within our parish, we will be free to change this in the future with the consent of the Bishop.

3. **Will the children be serious or reverent enough?**

Experience from churches which already follow this practice shows that this isn't really a problem. The children identify with the importance of the occasion and of what they are receiving and participate in a way which is reverent within their own perception of what is happening. We know from our own experience of children coming forward for a blessing that they do take it seriously.

4. **Won't confirmation disappear?**

The origins of confirmation was in Baptism, when a Baptism wasn't conducted by one of the Apostles (who would typically lay their hands on those being baptised), then when an Apostle was next in town they would lay hands on those who had recently been baptised, confirming the act of baptism. Bishops are the descendants of the Apostles in our church family and so they confirm. Over time confirmation became an act of coming of age and in some places a moment of graduation from Sunday School and even Church. While we have been very fortunate in our experience at All Saints that many who have been confirmed remain active members of our congregation, this is not true for all. Many churches find that confirmation is the moment young people stop attending church. If children are admitted to communion on the basis of their baptism, it is to be hoped that we, as a church, will make more of confirmation as a transition to adulthood and could become less connected to membership and more associated with a personal choice of faith and discipleship. This may mean the age people choose to be confirmed will increase but does not mean that younger people cannot be confirmed. We are all on different

journeys with God and a younger child may be ready to make the mature commitment that confirmation demands of them.

5. **What do the Regulations require?**

The Regulations require a vote from the PCC and permission from the bishop, who has to be satisfied that the parish concerned has made adequate provision for the children's preparation and continuing nurture and will encourage them to be confirmed at the appropriate time. If permission is granted, the incumbent has to be satisfied that the child has been baptised and that the child's parent (or other person having parental responsibility for the child) is content that the child should be so admitted. It then makes sense to issue them with a certificate.

Next Steps

The PCC have reviewed this consultation document on the 27th October and agreed for it to go to consultation with the wider community.

This document is published for information in advance of a consultation on the **27th November 2022** after the 10am service.

The PCC will then consider the feedback in **January 2023** and vote on whether it would like to admit children to holy communion before confirmation. The incumbent would then write to the Bishop requisition permission to proceed.

ASCHC22.15

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