1407 Diocese of Rochester

*Children and Holy Communion; the Background*

### A short History…..

**The early Christians** called their faith, ‘The Way’ as an expression of living in a new way and being on a journey of faith. That journey was for everyone. Families and households were baptised together (Acts 16.15) so, for children as well as adults, membership of the Church was through Baptism and continued through participation in the Eucharist.

There is no explicit mention of children at the Eucharist in the New Testament because they would automatically have been present but it is implied in Ephesians 6 when Paul addresses children directly. Moreover, the Jewish Passover meal gave children a place of honour which would have continued into the sharing of the Eucharist. The practice of infant Baptism, including Chrismation /Confirmation and Communion was well established and documented by the 3rd century. It is still the practice in the Eastern Church[[1]](#footnote-1).

**In the West** however, Baptism and Confirmation became separated, and with an increased emphasis on reverence and careful preparation before receiving Holy Communion, the laity came to receive it less frequently, children were often excluded altogether and many parents neglected to present their children for confirmation. In 1281 Archbishop Peckham attempted to rectify this situation by ordering that nobody should receive Holy Communion before they had been confirmed.

**After the Reformation** teaching through a Q and A Catechism was added to the Book of Common Prayer. Confirmation was usually at an early age; Queen Elizabeth I was confirmed at the age of 7 years. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer included the term ‘desirous of being confirmed’ to allow children to receive Holy Communion rather than waiting, possibly for several years, for the bishop’s next visit to the parish.

**19th and early 20th centuries** were a time of wide variation in practice. Baptism was a brief private service so was seen to be less important than Confirmation. Holy Communion was usually celebrated early in the morning so only attended by communicants. Many children went to Sunday School rather than church. Those who attended church services went to Matins and Evensong. Lack of experience of the service of Holy Communion and having to memorise a long catechism combined to discourage children from being confirmed.

**In the last 50 years**, the Eucharist has gradually become the principal service in most Anglican and some Reformed churches. Images of the Church as the people of God on pilgrimage, and the greater involvement of children in services led to demands for baptised and believing children to be admitted to Holy Communion.

**In November 1996,** after 30 years of debate, the General Synod of the Church of England voted for baptised children to be admitted to Holy Communion with the permission of the diocesan bishop.[[2]](#footnote-2) NB. The historic order of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion remains: this is a departure from the norm.

**In July 2005**, General Synod reviewed the implementation of these Guidelines. It found:

1. About 12% of churches were admitting children to Holy Communion in 39/43 dioceses.

2. Growth was slow but steady. It was across all traditions and size of congregation.

3. Confirmation numbers had remained stable but the age of communicant children being confirmed had increased to 15-16 years.

**Question Time**

1. **Why change at all?**
2. The pattern produced by the Reformers dates from a time when everyone was baptised and went to church so religion was part of daily life. Belonging was the basis upon which the faith was taught. This is not the case in today’s society and secular culture.
3. When the main Sunday service is the Eucharist, a common pattern is for ‘Sunday school’ to be during the Ministry of the Word with the children joining the congregation at the Offertory. This means that believing and baptised children regularly join in the service but are excluded from receiving Holy Communion solely on grounds of age. This is felt to be inappropriate and unwelcoming.

**2. What are the criteria for children being admitted to Holy Communion?**

1. All children’s nurture is important. There are many ways besides admitting them to Holy Communion to show that they are equal, valued members of the community.
2. Children will often ask parents or clergy if they may receive Holy Communion. Being prepared for Holy Communion requires parental permission. They are expected to support their children and help with their preparation if necessary.
3. Many young children have a vivid faith and can learn what it means to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ. A child’s age is not the main issue, but being prepared with friends of similar age is best practice and one that children can accept.
4. Baptism is a pre-requisite. Children who have not been baptised already can be baptised and admitted at the same service.
5. This is about Grace: God’s generosity to us and our response to him. It is not a prize for ‘being good’. Children who suffer deprivation or abuse, or who have learning or emotional difficulties may be the most deeply in need of this expression of God’s love.

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

1. This is part of continuous nurture. The children will grow in their understanding of the significance of Holy Communion through experience as well as teaching.
2. It is discernment of the sacrament that is important. This is not necessarily a cognitive understanding or an ability to articulate one’s faith, but a sense of reverence and of meeting Jesus through the sacrament.

# 4. How does this affect the congregation?

1. Welcome and acceptance of children as fellow pilgrims by the whole congregation is vital. Valuing the children and offering good quality nurture comes before even considering preparing them to receive Holy Communion.
2. Being admitted to Holy Communion is a stage on the life-long Christian journey. This includes the prayers and friendship of the congregation with encouragement to develop a relationship with God through experience, nurture, and involvement in church life.
3. Children taking part on equal terms at the Eucharist gives a new dimension to the congregation. Several speakers at the GS debate in 2005 spoke of the transforming effect that the children’s faith and devotion had had on the whole community.
4. Admitting children to Holy Communion could give a parish an excellent opportunity to review the way their Eucharistic worship functions, especially when people of all ages are present.

# How can we help you?

The bishop’s advisory group is happy to provide advice in any way that might help you. This may include visiting your parish or having a meeting with the clergy and lay leaders.   
To arrange a conversation or meeting, please contact Bishopscourt: T: 01634 842721, s  
E-mail (preferred): bishopscourt@rochester.anglican.org

**Produced on behalf of the**

**Bishop’s Advisory Group for Children and Holy Communion   
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1. Stephen Lake, ‘Let the Children come to Communion’ SPCK 2006 gives further information on pp4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Margaret Withers, ‘Welcome to the Lord’s Table’ Barnabas rev 2013 has full information on pp7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)