



Children and Communion: thinking things through

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Matthew chapter 19 verse 14

Background

As far as we can tell, the first Christians included children fully in the church family, as the book of Acts records on more than one occasion that whole households were Baptised. For hundreds of years (and always in the Orthodox church) baptism was the only requirement for taking confirmation, so children were automatically included once they had been baptised. In 1281 the Archbishop of Canterbury decreed that Communion could not be received until after confirmation and that tradition was inherited by the Church of England when it broke from the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1996 the House of Bishops of the Church of England produced guidelines on the subject of children and communion, giving permission for parishes to adopt a policy of admitting children to communion prior to confirmation with the Bishop’s permission. This guidance acknowledges the value of Holy Communion in nurturing Christian discipleship and the desire that this nurture should not be denied to children who may not yet be ready to affirm their faith for themselves. It is also mindful of the importance of adequate preparation and the need to ensure no one receives Holy Communion without an awareness of its significance.

St Andrew’s has never adopted a policy admitting children to Communion prior to confirmation, but it is not too late to do so now. All congregations are encouraged to explore, discuss and pray through the issues carefully before the PCC makes a final decision on whether a policy should be adopted. This information sheet is to help us do that.

Once you have read it through and considered your response talk to Sally or bring your thoughts and questions to the APCM at 11.15am on 28th April.

Accessed from <https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/worship/children-and-holy-communion/> 09/02/2024 and edited 08/03/2024

The significance of receiving Communion

Receiving Communion is part of our discipleship journey. This journey is marked early on by Baptism and is expected to include Confirmation at the appropriate time. Each member of the congregation at St Andrew's is on a journey of faith, moving at their own speed but with the encouragement of worship services, including Holy Communion, fellowship with other members of the congregation and opportunities for prayer, discussion of Bible teaching and loving service of our community.

Holy Communion is one of the 2 sacraments Protestants believe were instituted by Jesus (the other being Baptism). In Luke 22 verse 19 we read 'And Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me". So, we celebrate Holy Communion in obedience to Jesus' command and as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Receiving Communion connects us with God in a way that demonstrates his love and grace while ultimately remaining beyond our understanding.

You may like to reflect on the significance of receiving Holy Communion to you and consider how this helps you to follow Jesus.

Children and their spirituality

We know that learning takes place from birth, and that early experiences of love or rejection can colour the rest of our lives. If children are excluded from the Christian community's ordinary life, including Holy Communion, then later on they are less likely to find it a community to which they want to belong.

We can no longer think of our ministry with children as a funnel, pouring knowledge into little empty vessels. Fostering faith and spiritual growth is not simply a matter of us teaching and children learning. We need to recognise the potential that already exists. A better symbol would be a magnifying glass – let the sun's rays shine through the glass and the flame of faith flares into life.

A Charter for children

The URC Children's Work Committee drew up a ten-point Children's Charter which has been reproduced by most denominations in this country and widely accepted round the world. Each of its ten sharp statements needs unpacking; each raises further questions.

- Children are equal partners with adults in the life of the church
- The full diet of Christian worship is for children as well as adults
- Learning is for the whole church, adults and children
- Fellowship is for all, each belonging meaningfully to the rest
- Service is for children, as well as adults, to give
- The call to evangelism comes to all God's people, of whatever age
- The Holy Spirit speaks powerfully through children as well as adults
- The discovery and development of gifts in children and adults is a key function of the church
- As a church community, we must learn to do in separate age groups only those things which we cannot in conscience do together
- The concept of "the priesthood" of all believers includes children

Is this how you see children in our church family?

Having thought through the significance of receiving Communion and the place of children within the life of the church you will be forming your own conclusions and questions about allowing children to receive communion before confirmation. *We would love to hear them, so jot them down here then see which of the pros and cons overleaf resonate with your thinking.*

Some thoughts which might be in favour of admitting children to Communion:

- The whole family of the church worship and receive together, with children learning to behave appropriately.
- Children are welcomed and valued equally, not excluded from a key element of worship on the basis of age.
- Many children, even those of a very young age, have a genuine faith. It is unreasonable to exclude them on the basis of a lack of understanding, when we do not question adult members of the church about their faith.
- Children from other churches are welcomed, and children from the church would fit in elsewhere.
- There is evidence to suggest that in the early church children were included in communion.
- Confirmation becomes a real declaration of an adult's decision to follow Christ. The teaching is based on discipleship, rather than the meaning of Communion.

Some thoughts which might be against...

A number of common and valid concerns are raised in PCC and congregational meetings when the issue of admitting children to communion is discussed. These are comments which have been made elsewhere, and an attempt to address them.

- **'Children can't understand'**
Some are anxious about Paul's words in Corinthians (1 Cor 11:29) where the Corinthians are warned about eating and drinking without recognising the body and therefore eating and drinking judgement on themselves. But this verse is in the context of Paul criticizing the Corinthians for taking Communion before everyone has arrived. His desire is for them to be "one body". No human has a complete understanding of Jesus's death for us – of course children do not have a full understanding, but neither do adults. Can we legitimately draw a line across levels of understanding?

- **‘Children don’t want or need this change’**

Have they been asked? And how has it been discussed with them? There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of a negative impact of exclusion from Communion of children who have a faith in Jesus. We need to be careful that young people’s feelings and ideas are not consistently ignored or devalued by adults.

- **‘Confirmation will lose its importance’**

This is an important issue. There is a growing sense that as children are admitted to communion, confirmation regains its rightful place as the time when a young person (or adult) makes a public confession of commitment to Christ and His church and receives the confirmation of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of the Bishop.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that children who have been admitted to communion before confirmation, are likely to stay in the church after the move from primary to secondary education (when the church currently loses 70% of its children) and are more ready to treat confirmation seriously.

- **‘Children should wait until they are older’**

It is true that in some areas, children are encouraged to grow up too soon. Maybe in the types of clothes they wear or the TV they watch, too much too young isn’t good. But is Communion one of these issues? If we believe that Communion is one way in which we can receive from God and can celebrate our trust in Him, then surely this isn’t something we should have to wait for?!

- **‘I had to wait – today’s children should too’**

This is an understandable statement, one often raised by older members of the congregation. We should step back and ask what part has the church’s attitude to children in the past play in the loss of generations over the last half century and more.

- **‘If we are going to admit children, why do we need a course of preparation’**

This is an understandable reaction from those who think we should follow the Orthodox pattern of welcoming all, whatever their age. The preparation course is a means of reinforcing the importance of the elements and helps children think through their own faith at their own level. In reality it may mean that children who receive at the Eucharist have a better knowledge than many adults – which might in itself point to a need for basic teaching for everyone in the church.

- **‘A child may be turned away when in another church’**

The regulations state that if a child received at their own church they should not be excluded from communion at a church where they are a visitor, whether that church allows its own children to receive or not.

- **‘We don’t have many children in our church....’**

The important thing is to be prepared for that moment when, perhaps unexpectedly, a new family walks through the door expecting their children to share Communion or one of our existing families asks. A church that is ready and welcoming is far more likely to keep that family than one which is not. Considering the question of admitting children to communion is part of the process of being welcoming.

- **‘This could be divisive’**

This is one of a number of pastoral issues that may be raised. The bottom line for the Church of England is that ‘Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion’ (House of Bishops Guidelines 1997). In such situations, great sensitivity will be needed for the church to move forward together, whichever way the decision on admitting children to communion goes. There will need to be time for honest discussion, for empathy, and for much prayer. The experience of other parishes that have faced similar issues may be helpful. Many of these issues appear when members of the congregation are from other church traditions, and have not fully understood the meaning of baptism and communion within the Church of England.

- **‘Parents/carers may not understand what the children are doing’**
This is a pastoral issue, and each case may need careful consideration. In many cases the ‘responsible adult’ in church is Grandparent or friend’s parents, and their role could be vital in helping the child develop in their faith. Many of the courses of preparation for communion include at least one session for parents or other responsible adults who will be supporting the child through this process.

So now it’s over to you. *What thoughts or questions do you still have about whether St Andrew’s should admit children to Holy Communion before confirmation?*

If our discussions at the APCM and during May 2024 suggest now would be the right time, PCC will consider and adopt a policy for admitting Children to Holy Communion before Confirmation, ensuring any outstanding concerns are addressed as necessary.