

# Growing Disciples

*Welcoming baptized children to Holy Communion*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Beyond the theological argument that baptism, not confirmation is the entry to communion, the consideration of admitting baptized children to communion before confirmation ('admission') has tended to focus on the effect the practice might have on retaining children in the church. But is this the only issue? What about the effects on the wider church community? There is little published material detailing what such effects might be and so the Education Department of the Diocese of Manchester – a pioneer diocese, involved in the practice for over 30 years – undertook research into this area.

The aim was to explore the possibility that admission might result in a range of positive effects within a parish. If that were the case, then advocacy for the practice could be broadened and strengthened by taking these effects into account. The results would therefore provide **a resource for parish clergy** and other advocates presenting the issue to their congregations, and **diocesan advisers** seeking to support parishes in their discussions. For **churches already adopting the practice**, it would also encourage an exploration of its wider potential for enhancing parish life.

## Research methods

Four parishes were selected to represent varying lengths of involvement and current active engagement with the practice of admission. In each, interviews were conducted with two adult groups – Eucharistic ministers; and representatives of families, children's ministers and the wider congregation – and a more informal discussion was conducted with young people who had been admitted to communion before confirmation. In all, 43 adults and 20 children took part.

## Findings

*Growing Disciples* details the findings of the research project. These were that admission fosters **growth in discipleship for all ages** by strengthening and deepening congregational **fellowship**, and enriching the **teaching** received by adults, as well as children.

### ***Fellowship***

The research provided evidence that the fellowship of churches that admit baptized children to communion can be deepened by the development of:

- ◆ A more inclusive ethos
- ◆ A stronger sense of community
- ◆ Enhanced intergenerational relationships

### **Teaching – adults**

The process of discussing admission, and the on-going reception of communion by children on the strength of their baptism gave adults greater appreciation of:

- ◆ Communion
- ◆ Confirmation
- ◆ On-going faith development

### **Teaching – children**

From their observation of admitted children, adults reported positive experiences of their:

- ◆ Motivation and response
- ◆ Journey of faith

The Children's own responses in research discussions confirmed the adults' observations with regard to the benefits they received.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### ***For parishes considering the practice of admission and those advocating in its favour***

As well as the theological argument that baptism is the rite of entry to communion, extend the consideration of admission to include:

- ◆ The importance of a strong, inclusive fellowship and welcoming ethos for outreach
- ◆ The encouragement admission offers for growth in discipleship across all ages
- ◆ The potential for enhancing ministry in a range of dimensions, as indicated below

### ***For parishes that have already adopted the practice of admission***

- ◆ Seek to realise its full potential by:
- ◆ Extending all-age activities and diverse approaches to worship and learning
- ◆ Making the most of the opportunity to develop ministry with young families
- ◆ Building on children's sense of belonging and responsibility as Christians
- ◆ Encouraging all in the Church to explore their on-going journey of faith

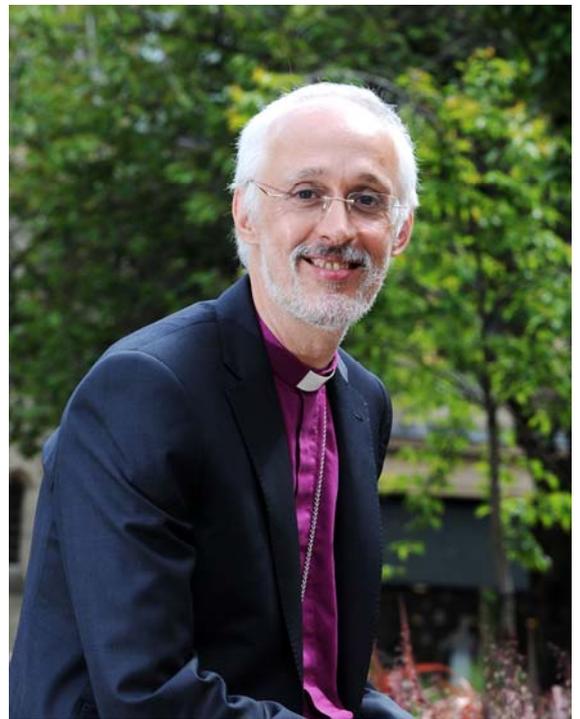
## FOREWARD

The Diocese of Manchester has been involved in the admission of baptized children to Holy Communion before confirmation for 30 years. It is therefore well embedded in the life of many of our parishes, and new applications for my permission to adopt the practice come in every year. It is something that has my wholehearted support as an option that should be as widely available as possible to families that wish to take it up.

Manchester was one of the 'pioneer' dioceses looking at admission in the 1980s and I am delighted that we are taking a lead again, in this report, by broadening the discussion of admission to include the positive effects that the practice has on the whole congregation, not just the children. *Growing Disciples* offers a heartening picture of enthusiasm for admission amongst all ages and will be a valuable resource for the diocese and the Church of England nationally.

It is my hope that *Growing Disciples* will not only add a new dimension to discussions in parishes that are considering the practice, but will also motivate those churches that do admit children to communion on the strength of their baptism to look at ways it might further enrich their all-age work and family ministry. The Recommendations provide specific suggestions for action, and the whole report offers fascinating material for consideration at parish, deanery and diocesan level.

**The Right Reverend Dr David Walker**  
**Bishop of Manchester**



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## INTRODUCTION

*Growing Disciples* is a report on the effects of admitting baptized children to Holy Communion before confirmation arising from research carried out in the Diocese of Manchester by the diocesan Children's Officer.

### 1. The Purpose of the Research

As advocates for the admission of children to Holy Communion on the strength of their baptism rather than their confirmation ('admission'), Diocesan Children's Work Advisers are often asked about the effects of the practice on the children concerned, especially regarding their ongoing participation in the life of the Church and later confirmation. These are important issues, but are they the only ones to be considered when assessing the importance of admission for an individual parish or the Church as a whole? In discussions with colleagues in the national network of Diocesan Children's Work Advisers, and with children's ministry practitioners in the Manchester Diocesan Children's Ministry Task Group, the researcher gathered a much broader range of questions concerning the impact of the practice on a variety of 'constituencies' within a parish: not only the children and young people, but also their families, the children's ministry team, the Eucharistic ministers, and the wider congregation. The research project that is the subject of this report was designed to address some of the issues raised by colleagues and provide a response to the broad question, 'What are the effects within a parish of admitting baptized children to Holy Communion before confirmation?' Existing literature on admission has little to say about the effect of the practice on the wider faith community<sup>1</sup> and this report is offered as an evidence-based contribution to help in meeting the need for data.

A number of positive effects in the life of the parish as a whole were identified by the research and by drawing attention to this wider significance it is hoped that advocacy for admission will be strengthened and the discussion around the topic enriched. Although children remain central to the practice, the findings indicate that admission is not solely 'about' children. This change of emphasis reflects the scriptures<sup>2</sup> in which Jesus instructs his adult disciples to pay attention to children not primarily for their own sake but for the adults' own spiritual wellbeing and in order to address a theological<sup>3</sup> question – the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Although these findings can be used to strengthen the case for adopting admission in a parish, they can also be helpful for parishes that have already taken this step, by indicating the potential that the practice has for enriching parish life. The conclusion to this report highlights some ways that parishes could take steps to realize this potential.

## 2. Research Participants

The Diocese of Manchester was one of the original dioceses permitted to ‘experiment’ with the practice of admission (the others being Peterborough and Southwark)<sup>4</sup> and so offers a wealth of experience on which to draw. Four churches were chosen to take part in the research from the 125 within the diocese that had episcopal permission to admit. Key criteria for selection were that the churches had regularly admitted children to communion in recent years, as shown by the annual reports on the practice required by the diocesan policy an admission;<sup>5</sup> and that the sample should contain one church whose permission to admit dated from each decade between the 1980s and the current decade. To the possible participating churches thus identified, the criterion of geographical diversity was applied and three out of the four archdeaconries that make up the diocese were represented in the final sample. Although not part of the selection criteria, the sample offered a variety of worship styles, parochial settings and congregational demographics. Within each parish, information was sought from the key constituent groups identified above: children and young people who had been admitted to communion before confirmation, their families, the children’s ministry team, the Eucharistic ministers, and the wider congregation. The parish priests issued the invitations to the participants. All Eucharistic ministers, both lay and ordained, were invited in each parish. For the other groupings, the parish priests were asked to use their local knowledge in selecting a representative sample of ‘key players’ and those with significant experience of the practice and of parish life, who could therefore make informed contributions to the discussions. In total 43 adults were involved, together with 19 children (seven from KS2,<sup>6</sup> and 12 from KS3<sup>7</sup>) and one older teenager. In the writing of this report participants and churches have not been referred to by name.

It is important to note that since the churches had all applied for and received the Bishop of Manchester’s permission to admit baptized children to communion, they were all enthusiastic about the practice; and the individuals within those parishes who had agreed to take part in the research were very supportive. Indeed, three adults who were unavailable for their parish interview dates were so keen to convey their support that they took the trouble to email their comments. The research was not intended to produce a balance of voices for and against the practice, but rather to explore the range of its positive effects as identified by those who welcomed it. Negative voices were heard, however, when participants reported on the responses of some members of their congregations who had either initially been, or remained, opposed to the practice. And one group from the most recent parish to have obtained the bishop’s permission contained two adults who were unsure of their views, but became convinced of the value of the practice by listening to the other adults talking about the children’s responses.

### 3. Research Methods and Analysis

The initial proposal for the project was reviewed by the Church of England's Head of Research and Statistics and endorsed on behalf of the Diocese of Manchester by The Chair of the Board of Education, and the Director of Education. The study was principally 'qualitative', using semi-structured group interviews with the adults, and conversation-style, unstructured group interviews with the children<sup>8</sup> employing a variety of techniques such as play to promote discussion.<sup>9</sup> Standard qualitative analysis techniques were used, and comments were invited during the process from members of the Diocesan Children's Ministry Task Group plus a small group of Diocesan Children's Work Advisers. The final report was peer-reviewed in draft form.

### 4. Structure of the Report

The researcher's earlier work, exploring the impact of admission on children's discipleship<sup>10</sup> had used Acts 2:42 to provide a description of discipleship as 'Fellowship, Teaching and the Breaking of Bread'. Analysis of the data provided by the current research project suggested that the effects of admission recorded by the adult participants could best be organised under the headings, drawn from this description, of **Fellowship** and **Teaching** – the latter sub-divided into the teaching received by adults and by children within the congregation.<sup>11</sup> The accounts of the teaching received by children that were given by adults during interviews were necessarily a picture seen through adult eyes. However, the sessions with children enabled them to give their own accounts of the effects they experienced through the **breaking of bread**, and a special section has been provided under this heading. The fact that the recorded effects of admitting baptized children to 'the breaking of bread' fall so naturally into the categories of fellowship and teaching has been interpreted as an indication that the practice makes a significant contribution to 'growing disciples' of all ages in those congregations that adopt it.

The research findings will be described under the headings **Fellowship, Teaching – adults**, and **Teaching – children**; and a final section, **Breaking of Bread** will give children's experiences of receiving communion, providing further evidence to support the claim that the early reception of communion has a significant impact on children's discipleship. The concluding section of the report summarises the findings and explores the implications both for parishes considering the practice and those that have already adopted it. Recommendations are offered for churches that are considering the admission of baptized children to communion, to churches that have already

adopted the practice, to advocates of admission, and for further research in this field. Appendix 1 offers an Action Guide, suggesting ways that congregations might respond to the report. Appendix 2 gives the procedures used for the research interviews with adults and discussions with children. And Appendix 3 provides the Manchester Diocesan Model Policy for Admission, to place the research in the context of diocesan expectations regarding the management of the practice.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 1. Fellowship

A shared meal is an ancient sign of fellowship, and the Christian community to this day gathers round a table representing the most important of all the meals Jesus shared with his closest fellowship group. That meal, shared at Passover, was in its self part of a tradition of fellowship around food that had been and remains a focus for the Jewish community down the generations. When we speak of relations between the different denominations and traditions of the Church, we ask whether they are 'in communion' with each other, meaning, 'Will they share the Lord's Supper together?' This deep-rooted relationship between the sharing of food and the fellowship of a community was evident in the responses of participants in this research project. They regarded the welcome children receive at the Lord's Table as indicative of their overall **church ethos**. That welcome was seen not only as a way of strengthening the bond between children and their church but also of **building community** for all ages. And a key component of that was the opportunity admission to communion gave for developing **inter-generational relations**.

#### Church Ethos

Does the admission of children to communion on the strength of their baptism encourage them to remain part of the Church into their teens and eventually be confirmed? This is a question often asked in congregations considering adopting the practice. However, comments from participants in this study suggested the importance of taking a longer term view. One mother told the story of her son, who had attended church until he was a teenager but had then dropped off. However, some time later, during marriage preparation, he had started to attend again with his wife to be; and following the birth of their child, the couple offered for confirmation. The mother identified the 'grounding' of early experience in church as a significant factor in encouraging adults to return, claiming, 'with this communion you're showing them that they are part of that church family, and that they're always welcome,' something that another contributor pointed out made it 'easier to come back'. These reflections suggest the possibility that if a person has drifted away from church in their youth and in adulthood considers the possibility of re-establishing contact, then having been welcomed into communion as a child might encourage a return. As a participant from another group put it, 'if you do feel that you need somewhere to go at some point in your life then hopefully you think, "Oh, that was my family and I want to go back."' The ethos of unconditional welcome exemplified by admission was something many participants valued. When

asked whether they would recommend the practice to other churches, and if so, how, several showed a pride and pleasure in their inclusive community, suggesting that those considering the practice should 'come and see' their all-age congregation on a Sunday morning. One woman regarded it as a sign of progress for the Church of England as a whole, and another expressed the wish that, for consistency, all of its churches would adopt it.

Rather than starting from a desire to retain children, many participants spoke of the importance of creating an inclusive ethos for their church. Admission was seen as a natural expression of this more general aim and another key motivation can be discerned in this. As one woman put it, 'It's important for everyone in the church to feel valued, especially children' and opening communion to the children was simply one aspect of showing that equal value to all. It was seen by some as a necessary reflection of the greater value that society as a whole has come to place on children, and that children have come, as a consequence to expect. Discussing children's motivation for wanting to receive communion it was suggested that a key factor was simply to participate and be included. The other side of these observations is, of course, that exclusion from the family meal leads to incomprehension among modern children. As one senior parishioner observed, 'Do you want your children to feel welcome and wanted and to play as full a part as possible in your church family? Or do you want to put up a barrier or obstacle which makes them question why?'

The willingness to embrace change, which had enabled their congregations to adopt admission, was also seen by several participants as a factor that made their churches attractive and had contributed to their growth, particularly in relation to young families. And one participant, who had moved to her present church from another area, indicated a further attraction of churches where children are admitted:

Speaking as a parent of children who have been admitted to communion before they came here I was obviously delighted that that was already in place here. If we'd come with the girls into a congregation where children weren't admitted to communion then I'd have felt awkward coming in, even though I know they can still receive ... but I think it would have felt quite difficult so I think as far as a worshipping community and welcoming people in, families in particular, that has been important and I imagine I'm not alone in that.

### **Building Community**

The inclusive and welcoming ethos expressed and strengthened by admission extends not just to its youngest members and their families. Participants also identified a bonding effect within their whole church community. 'It's bonded everyone together,' one observed, and another

member of the interview group explained, 'it's bonded families together with other families, and with the older people in the congregation.' Some took a theological approach to this gathering together, linking it to the Body of Christ, discerned not just in the bread but in the all-age community that shares it.<sup>12</sup>

'Family' was a frequently used word. The service when children are first admitted to communion was noted as a big occasion for the children's families, but interview participants who were not parents of children being admitted said that they too felt included in this family celebration. 'It was a family occasion for our congregation, I think,' said one, 'and it just felt a happy time.' For another, children receiving alongside adults at communion was 'a very visual picture of family ... and of it actually working as church family in a way that when you lose the children out of it, it's not the same.' This extension of the understanding of 'family' in a church context, brought about by the full inclusion of children at the family meal, led the minister of one church to support the sometimes controversial use of the word 'family' in relation to the specific service of communion:

Because [of] the breakdown of family units, some people would suggest that you should shy away from using the word 'family communion', but we use it because we think we're modelling something bigger and better – that we are ... God's family .

And the pleasure that many participants expressed in seeing young baptized children become communicants was very reminiscent of parents' feelings on the occasion. 'It's a feel-good factor for everybody,' was one person's way of expressing it, and another used dramatic language calling the experience of receiving alongside children she had prepared for admission, 'overwhelming,' adding that it was a thrill to see them years later still part of the Church. The question of whether children who become part of the Eucharistic family will stay within it, although not perhaps the primary concern, as noted above, is still of interest to those who consider the practice of admission. The results of this study cannot provide strong evidence on this issue, but the previous comment indicates that some do; and another person from the same parish wrote in an emailed contribution that it was a 'great pleasure' seeing admitted children 'in church over a longish period of time, some of whom are in their early 20s now.'

### **Inter-generational Relations**

The all-age agenda of recent years is an ongoing attempt to bring a greater sense of unity within the diversity of a church community's age profile, and create an ethos within which attempts to promote all-age worship can flourish.<sup>13</sup> Contributions from all the four churches participating in this study indicated that admitting baptized children to communion can help bring

the generations together and so support this work.

### ***Parents and carers and their children***

One of the benefits identified at an early stage in the development of *Messy Church*<sup>14</sup> – a way of ‘doing’ church based on parents and children engaging in faith-based activities together – was that it provided a context, often missing in modern life, for parents and carers to talk with their children, and specifically to talk about the Christian faith. The decision to be involved in admission to communion – a decision for parents and children to make together – and the subsequent preparation of those children who, with their parents’ support, decide to go forward for admission provide rich opportunities for children and their parents to discuss the Christian faith.

The Manchester Diocesan policy for the admission of baptized children to communion requires that ‘Attempts will be made to involve parents/carers in the preparation’, that ‘families will be supported as well as children during this period’, and that ‘if possible, parents/carers will be involved in the ongoing nurture’ of the children after they have been admitted. All of this indicates an overall intentionality in terms of bringing the generations together in a family during the preparation period and beyond. Many of the published resources that are recommended by the diocese and frequently used by participating parishes include ‘homework’ and workbooks to use at home between preparation sessions, and the responses of interview participants in this project indicated that, for those parents who did not already have open conversations with their children about faith, the opportunities that were presented through preparation for admission had been taken and appreciated. One mother recalled that the homework had enabled conversations with her son that she would not have had in other contexts, and that this had helped build inter-generational relationships with the family. Another mother described the way her son, who was being prepared at the time, talked about the preparation lessons when he got home and ‘want[ed] to know why mummy and the others take the bread and the wine’. Even the initial approach to families, asking if they would like to consider the admission of their children to communion can provide the opportunity for conversations that would not otherwise be held. As one priest put it:

“For some parents talking about faith matters may be something that’s perfectly natural and ordinary; but I think for a fair number of the parents it may be quite a difficult thing for them to talk with their children about matters of faith, so I hope that [the letter of invitation] will actually give them a chance to talk.”

### ***Children's group leaders***

Those standing *in loco parentis* in the Church are the children's group leaders and, in the present context, those adults who are involved in the preparation of the children for admission. These adults, too, reported an enhanced relationship with the children thanks to the practice of admitting them to communion. The intensity of the sessions when a small number of children were working with just two adults was remarked on by one participant as a special feature of the preparation, and a mother noted how close her son felt to the leader of the preparation programme he had attended, because they'd 'spent all this time together talking about very special things'. That particular leader was part of the interview group and reciprocated the feeling saying, 'I feel like these are my children'. For another, younger, leader of a weekly children's group there was a distinct shift in the relationship he felt with the children in his group as a result of their communicant status. In the children's group they related to him as their leader, but sitting together in church after having received communion together they would talk as friends.

### ***Pastor to all ages***

An important question arises from the recognition that children are a part of, and may be numerically a significant part of the congregation: does the parish priest know the children and minister to them as well as he or she does to the older members of the flock? The Manchester diocesan policy requires that the parish priest be involved in the preparation of the children for admission, and priests taking part in this project reported that this time spent together helped build relationships with their younger parishioners. Involvement in meaningful discussions with them about their wishes to be admitted was seen as particularly valuable. One parish priest described the pleasure of taking part in the preparation of the children for admission, saying:

"You've got to know them a bit better because usually as the minister you don't have as much contact because although the children probably make up a third of the population of the church you don't spend a third of your time with them, which seems very remiss actually. It's just really good to have that concentrated time."

In churches where the children's group is large, the overall congregation small, or both, children will form a significant proportion of the fellowship, and this minister's comments indicate that there is a justice issue involved not only in spending a proportionately appropriate amount of ministerial time on this section of the congregation, but also in welcoming such a significant

proportion of the community into full fellowship rather than excluding them. He went on to observe that the diocesan policy requirement that ‘it must be clear that the child him/herself wishes to receive’ offered the valuable opportunity for a conversation with each child, free from the influence of parental presence to discern their feelings about communion. Another parish priest also spoke of the benefits, in terms of building up relationships, of meeting with children consistently over a period of weeks – a regularity not usually achieved with them in his normal parish ministry.

### ***The whole community***

As well as involving the parents, the preparation of the children for admission has the potential to involve the wider church community. Work from the preparation sessions can be displayed for the congregation and one interview participant described how the stages of the preparation are marked in church. In addition, ‘homework’ from some published schemes asks the children to speak to members of their congregations, and a participant from another parish described how the workbooks encourage the children to get to know the adults. One child had been delighted to speak to an adult they hardly knew and get a positive response. If such experiences give children a more positive experience of adults, the adults, too, can find stereotypical views of children and young people being challenged by their enthusiastic involvement in receiving communion. One participant explained:

“It’s nice to see young people willing to commit to something. When you hear so many stories about young people not caring, being kind of ruffians or hooligans or whatever you want to call them these days ... there’s a sense of hopefulness, there’s a sense that something good is happening.”

The all-age ethos that is promoted by the relations to which admission can give rise was something frequently alluded to by participants describing the pleasure they experienced in being part of a church that showed its inclusivity by welcoming children to communion. This depiction of the scene when children return from their groups for communion and the informal fellowship at the end of the service expresses a widely held feeling among participants:

“Watching how adults and the children mix together when the children come back in, I think it’s lovely to see the children going up and they could be stood up next to someone who’s not a family member, but they’re still a family member, if that makes sense. It’s nice because the children feel comfortable to go up and I think it brings everyone together and it’s lovely that the children are accepted in that way.”

## 2. Teaching – Adults’ Understanding

The original Last Supper, and the Passover tradition to which it relates are both examples of ‘teaching meals’ and teaching, for both adults and children, was the second major theme of the research findings. In this section, developments in adults’ understanding will be described. As a result of being part of a church that welcomed baptized children to communion, adult participants indicated that they had reappraised the role of **understanding** in relation to faith, gained new insights into **communion** and **confirmation**, and some had taken significant steps in their **faith development**.

### The Question of ‘Understanding’

In any parish discussion of admission to communion, the question of children’s understanding of the sacrament is bound to arise. One interview participant voiced a commonly held caveat regarding criteria for admission when she remarked, ‘I like to think they’re included, but as long as they know what they are doing’. However, another put the contrasting view that ‘if you’re too young, you just won’t understand it properly, would you? But then, should you not be part of it anyway?’ The point was also made that ‘you wouldn’t put kids outside the Christmas lunch because they’re too little to understand. It’s very odd to exclude children on the grounds of intellectual capacity’. And one of the parish priests referred to the double standards revealed by the treatment of adults with learning difficulties, saying he had had experience of a lay assistant who ‘was happy to give [communion] to the adult with learning difficulties, but not to a child’.

The second contribution, cited above, raises an important question: what does ‘understand it properly’ mean? Several participants noted that if *full* understanding of the sacrament were to be regarded as a prerequisite for receiving it, then adults would be ruled out as communicants too. One woman illustrated the limitations of adult understanding by recounting a conversation with a bishop about children’s understanding of communion, during which she had admitted that she didn’t understand it herself. ‘Neither do I,’ the bishop had replied. She had responded with the observation that ‘when we get to think we understand it completely, we’re missing the point, because it’s so awesome’.

Although these contributions indicate a reassessment of the overall importance of understanding in relation to the reception of communion – for adults as well as children – there remained a sense that it played at least some role. However, the assumption that children were likely to lack an appropriate level of understanding was challenged by several participants who reported that children in their churches, even very young children, demonstrated at least a basic

appreciation of the significance of communion within the Christian community. One woman who had prepared children for admission over a number of years wrote that, 'The children say surprising things, ask challenging questions and often amaze us with their knowledge and understanding.' And a number of participants indicated that the children's engagement with the preparation material for admission might enhance adult understanding, suggesting that the children probably understood communion more than some adults and that they, as adults, had learned from the children.

### **Adult Understanding of Communion**

It was not just children's questions and comments – during the preparation or subsequently – that had had an effect on the adult congregation members, however. The very fact of discussing the admission of baptized children to communion before confirmation and being part of a community where this is the practice had proved a catalyst for considering a variety of issues about the sacrament. The research interviews in themselves provided an opportunity for adults to express their feelings about communion in a way that they had not done before – one woman sharing a moving story of a special communion held at home at the time of her mother's death, something she had never previously told anyone about. And one man writing about the effect that giving communion to unconfirmed children had had on his understanding of the Eucharist, said, 'It makes me think, "Why should children be permitted to receive the Lord's Supper? Why should they not?" Anything which causes a Christian to think about the Eucharist and therefore what it means must be great. Jesus left us a meal, not a book, and we need to think what it means for us.'

### ***Who is invited to the feast?***

That participant was considering the meaning of the sacrament, but also the criteria for receiving it, and this was a theme taken up by several others. The theological understanding that underlies the Church of England's approach to admission – that baptism is a full and complete rite of entry into the body of Christ – was widely endorsed, and the link between baptism and belonging was given a new emphasis by comments in which one speaker interpreted a seven year old's request to be baptized as motivated by a desire to belong: she reported that the girl, 'doesn't want a big party for it and everything like that because this is just personal to her'. For one of the mothers, that desire to be part of the fellowship was important in her decision to support her daughters in their wish to be admitted. She explained that for her 'receiving communion is about seeking Jesus ... as a body of people and sharing in that fellowship in receiving communion' and recounted that she felt her girls were ready when 'there was that sense of yearning – of wanting to be part of what everyone else was part of'. But she added the rider that she had also sensed

her daughters 'seemed very much on a journey' rather than motivated by the fact that others were taking the step of being admitted, and she felt children 'need to be showing an interest in that journey actively rather than just passively'. Another criterion for admission to communion offered during the interviews was simply that 'it's for anyone who can say that they love Jesus'; and the inclusive love of Jesus for humanity was often invoked in the phrase 'what would Jesus do?' as participants pointed out the lack of any barriers to sharing in the original last supper – one contributor reminding the group that even Judas was included.

### ***Admission is the natural thing***

For several speakers, admission was or had become for them simply 'the natural thing'. One priest remarked on how natural it felt to give communion to children, and a lay assistant saw it as not only natural but also 'what Jesus would want us to do'. A Eucharistic minister from another parish saw it in terms of what she felt could have been early Christian practice – a moment of remembrance during a shared family meal at which children would naturally be present. Participants from two of the parishes spoke of the practice of parents and grandparents breaking their wafer to share with their children or grandchildren before they had been formally admitted to communion – a sign that these adults felt a natural impulse to share the special thing they had been given with the children in their care, irrespective of theological considerations. But one woman did suggest a theological dimension by explaining, 'It's what Jesus has given to you and you want to give it to them'. 'Give as freely as you have received'<sup>15</sup> is said in the context of healing but the principle of 'doing likewise' in response to God's generosity is generalised in the injunction to love others as God, through sending his Son, has loved humanity.<sup>16</sup>

Parents, expressing their intuitive sense of what was 'right' for their children expressed their pleasure that they were able to be prepared to receive, and it was reported that parents in one parish repeatedly said thank you that their children could take part. And other adults, rather than being concerned that children were receiving at an early age, saw this as a positive, one woman remarking, 'I think we feel sort of joyful, don't we, that there's children that's being introduced to this sort of thing, and so young as well', while another felt that waiting until a later confirmation in the mid teens 'seems a long time to wait until you're allowed to take communion.'

If admitting children seemed 'natural' to many, there were others who put the reverse side of this argument: that to refuse communion to children who wished to receive it felt painfully unnatural. One woman described seeing children crying because they wanted to receive communion – something she felt, 'puts you in a bad position when you have to say no.' And a female Eucharistic minister from another parish explained that,

“From the point of view of doing the chalice, seeing so many tiny children over the years yearning to take part in this and then – “No, you can’t yet,” ... I found that very poignant. So I was thrilled when this change came in the church that they could do that.”

### ***Inclusivity and equality: considerations of justice***

The suggestion that admission was an example of the need to ‘move with the times’ was refuted by one senior contributor: for her the involvement of children in the Eucharist was something that *should* happen – something that was simply the right thing to do. And this sense that children’s inclusion was a justice issue found voice in many comments. Several of these were based on what was identified as Jesus’ inclusive approach. ‘Jesus didn’t turn people away,’ one woman observed, adding that the Church’s inclusivity ‘puts out an important signal’, thus implying that the welcome children receive at the Lord’s Table could play a role in demonstrating the message the Church preaches in Christ’s name. The reverse could also be inferred from her point – that a refusal is a denial of our message to the world: as one woman asked, ‘Does God set up barriers for us or does God open his arms to us, and what do we say as a church if we’re setting up barriers to people?’

One priest conceded that sometimes ‘there are some [children] that are just messing around a bit’ but he asked himself what Jesus would do and maintained his belief that even in such a situation Jesus would ‘take them and welcome them.’ One woman who had helped out with the *Experience Easter* sessions at her church<sup>17</sup> referred to a re-enactment of the Last Supper at one of the stations, noting that ‘Jesus didn’t say, “By the way, if you’ve been confirmed ... then you can have it”’. The enactment she had been part of was, for her, ‘what Jesus did, with no conditions tied to it,’ leading her to conclude, ‘so I would challenge where did the conditions come from?’ There was clearly a wish to bring things ‘back to basics’ and try to strip away what the Church had made of communion over the centuries – ‘looking at it more, what was Jesus saying about it, rather than what we think,’ as one contributor expressed it. And for another participant, the basic core was ‘about love, mainly – it’s about treating people as you want to be treated yourself. God loves you and, you know, you’re loved whatever by God.’ These principles were clearly followed in dealing with adults, as some participants observed, and it would therefore be unjust not to extend the same approach to children. One Eucharistic minister recounted that

“The other week ... one lady says to me ‘I’ve not been confirmed’. So I stopped and I said ‘Would you like communion?’ She says, ‘Yes,’ so I gave it her. So where do I stand? Difficult, isn’t it, for me to say. If you put it to me, would I give it to a child, then I can’t say, ‘No.’”

For some the issue of justice involved in admitting children to communion was linked to the equality that they discerned as a key aspect of Christian teaching and of the symbolism expressed by the gathering of the family of faith for the Eucharist. It was not just that there should be no barriers between children and the Jesus they sought to follow, but also that there should be 'no barrier between adults and children,' as one contributor put it. He went on to add, 'Everyone's the same at the Lord's Table,' and it was not only a matter of justice that this belief be expressed in the equal treatment children receive, but it was also 'good that they know that' – in other words, their acceptance as equals at the Lord's Table was an important part of the children's formation in faith.

Justice issues are often linked to the concept of rights, and for some participants the rights of children were a clear-cut aspect of more general human rights. One woman stated that, in her opinion, 'It's everybody's right ... anybody, any age can have communion.' Others came to an understanding of children's rights as a result of observation, finding that their conduct and understanding demonstrated that they were, as one put it, 'very worthy to receive'. And for one woman, the children's place at the Lord's Table was a reflection of their pre-existent place in the community of faith. 'These children are part of our family,' she explained, and therefore 'just as deserving of taking communion'.

### ***Wider justice issues***

To place the rights of the child in the context of wider human rights, as one contributor did, above, indicates that the admission of children to communion on the strength of their baptism raises wider justice issues for the Church in relation to the reception of communion. The 'what would Jesus do?' approach is just as valid for unconfirmed adults as it is for children, and several participants explained that their church had an open approach to adults who were not confirmed. The open approach had clearly empowered one contributor to extend hospitality on behalf of the Church and the Lord whom it represents. She recounted that:

"There's a lady that comes now, and she said to me, 'I've not been confirmed so I can't go up.' I said, 'Yes you can.' It's not our table. It is not our table. It's the Lord's table, and he doesn't reject anybody from coming up to have communion ... there's nothing in the Bible that says you shouldn't go up."

For several participants, the logic of openness and welcome as a reflection of the inclusiveness of Jesus – adduced in support of admitting baptized children – raised questions about the remaining barriers the Church places between ‘the Lord’s table’ and those who wish to share bread and wine there. Why should preparation and formal admission be required? The requirement for baptism was also questioned by one woman who pointed out that the question, ‘Have you been baptized?’ asked at the communion rail, would be as strange as the question, ‘Have you been confirmed?’ She also noted that the insistence on baptism produced a new exclusivity since baptism in childhood was no longer the commonplace it once was, and combined baptism and confirmation in adulthood was becoming more frequent.

### **Adult Understanding of Confirmation**

The fact that some parishes in the Diocese of Manchester have been admitting children to communion for 30 years means that there are now adults in the diocese who were admitted as children. One was a participant in this study and spoke of ‘having grown up in that tradition’. As a result she regarded it as normal for her own children to be admitted as she had been, and for confirmation to be a later rite, not linked to communion. Confirmation remains important for the Church of England nationally, and in the Diocese of Manchester the model policy for admission requires that ‘It will be made clear to children and their families that there is an expectation that the child be prepared for confirmation in due course.’ However, for those adults in the sample who had not grown up in the ‘tradition’ of admission before confirmation, the fact that confirmation was no longer regarded as the ‘gateway to communion’ invited a reassessment of its significance. As one participant put it, when explaining how communicating children felt appropriate to him, ‘you can’t feel one way without feeling something about confirmation’. This rethinking was evident in several participants’ contributions. Two of them indicated possible confusion and blurring of the distinction between admission and confirmation. One, a mother, was unclear whether her son had become a communicant through admission or confirmation. The other placed great emphasis on the importance of making a clear decision of faith – historically this had been associated with confirmation, but now with admission as an earlier step on the faith journey, he wondered if there was confusion in children’s minds about when the moment of decisive commitment took place. However, the rest of the sample did not identify any confusion in their, or their congregation’s minds about the difference between the two rites. They were seen as distinct, with distinct significances, and the significance of confirmation was open to reassessment.

For some, the questioning of confirmation as a qualification for receiving communion had sent them back to scripture and the common observation, expressed by one woman, that ‘Nowhere in

the Bible does it say you must be confirmed. Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Another contributor redefined the significance of baptism for himself in an unusual way, considering it to be a rite of entry into ‘your part of the church family’ whereas confirmation was seen as entry into the global Christian community. This contrast would not be upheld by standard theology, but perhaps arises from the local administration of baptism, followed by a similarly local service of admission (although admission is to communion anywhere where the rites of the Church of England are followed, and in other denominations that welcome Anglican communicants) whereas confirmation, involving a bishop and candidates from other churches, can seem to have a wider scope. These two approaches indicate the way in which a reconsideration of the significance of confirmation can lead to rich discussions in a parish about the role of scripture and other sources of authority and influence in shaping Christian practice; and the relationship of an individual Christian’s sense of significances and the wider Church’s agreed understandings.

For most contributors, however, the special significance of confirmation, facilitated by the removal of its link with communion, was that it represented ‘an adult decision’. Such a decision was seen as requiring not only the maturity to make a lifetime commitment, but also a deeper understanding, both intellectual and spiritual, of the issues involved in taking on the commitment of a life of faith. Just as participants discussed children’s ‘readiness’ or otherwise to receive communion, so they considered the issue of ‘readiness’ to be confirmed. One woman spoke of the complexities for children of growing up in a multi-faith society and locating the Christian faith in that context. She considered that ‘until you’ve actually unpacked all these things and worked out what you’re actually being confirmed in and that you can actually agree to that and say those promises with integrity then you’re not ready for confirmation.’ Several contributors held the view that faith commitment was the essential issue in confirmation, and that this did not occur ‘to order’, as had been the tacit expectation in the ‘traditional’ model of childhood confirmation followed by communion. A father, speaking of his son who had been admitted and was now preparing for confirmation, explained:

“I think for me personally the really important stage is the confirmation and that happens when they’ve actually made a commitment as a Christian. I think the timing of that for me doesn’t matter when it is, as long as it’s after they’ve made a commitment.”

One woman’s reflections on this topic had enabled her to re-evaluate the significance her own confirmation. For her, ‘You’re confirmed to confirm your decision, your promises, your beliefs. So it’s made me understand more what my confirmation is about.’

Across the eight adult groups, a number of individuals gave the story of their own confirmations, which had taken place at a variety of adult ages from the teens to middle age. There was widespread agreement that there should not be a set age for confirmation, but several contributors made the point that the confirmation of young children was not appropriate. Although the importance of 'understanding' in relation to receiving communion was questioned, and a grasp of basic meanings was deemed sufficient, in the case of confirmation a much deeper and broader understanding was felt to be necessary. One woman, discussing early confirmation, spoke for many in saying, 'I think at 11 you're making promises for things you don't understand.' Those adults who had been confirmed at an early age, following the inherited pattern, were able to give first hand experience of the drawbacks of this practice. One expressed sentiments that have emerged during many consultations discussions in Manchester Diocese with parishes considering the practice of admission:

I think it's hugely important that we've separated confirmation and taking communion actually because I was confirmed when I was 10. The only thing I can remember about it, and I've gone to church all my life, but the only thing I can remember about...Two things I can remember about my confirmation – the dress I wore, which mum made for me, and the fact that the bishop took us all home in his car cos we didn't have one, and that's what I remember about confirmation, and it's ridiculous, isn't it.

Another contributor added the follow-on point that is often made in this connection:

I was confirmed as an adult and I'm not sorry, and I've never heard an adult yet who was confirmed ... as an adult say, "I wish I'd been confirmed younger," but there are so many adults who were confirmed when they were younger who say, "I wish I could do it now." But you can't – once you're confirmed, you're confirmed, and if you didn't really understand it then you can't do it again, when you really do understand what it's all about.<sup>18</sup>

Across the groups, there was no suggestion that anyone wished to do away with confirmation or felt that admission had undermined the importance of confirmation in the Church. The opposite was felt to be the case by one man, who expressed the view of many in saying, 'It takes confirmation much more seriously to actually look at an older age, really. I think there's a risk that it actually devalues confirmation to do it too early'. The key advantage of admission was seen to

be that it opened up freedom of choice and added a stepping stone on the way to a later commitment, as and when appropriate for the individual, which might be in the teens – as one or two contributors attested from their own experience – or later. The point was summed up by this mother’s words:

“I think you’re in a more mature position at 16 to think things through more thoroughly, and that that’s positive – that the admission in Year 6 is a significant invitation to young people to kind of be involved in church life and pursuing the journey and that it gives them time. I mean, I believe that God’s very gentle with us really and gives us time to explore who we are in him, and I think the secondary school children, and probably into young adulthood as well, is a great time of searching. It allows them time, but still feeling a part of things – not feeling excluded.”

### **Opposition and Changing Minds**

In Manchester Diocese, the process for gaining episcopal permission to implement the practice of admission requires a vote at the PCC, and voting figures to be submitted to the bishop. There is no benchmark percentage to determine whether the majority in favour is acceptable, but it has never been an expectation that there should be 100% agreement before a parish can go ahead. And if there were to be unanimous PCC agreement – which often there is – that does not guarantee 100% support across the wider congregation. Within parishes that gain episcopal permission to admit baptized children to communion there remain individuals who are opposed to the practice, and this was reflected in some of the interview discussions. One parish priest told of a Eucharistic minister in his church who ‘just was not happy to give [communion] to children’. However, the minister in question and the majority in the parish who supported the practice ‘never made a fuss’ of their difference: ‘if ever there were children she would step down and let someone else do it’. The division caused by disagreement had, in this case, not been destructive but had enabled the church to model unity in diversity. A further example of a positive approach to a difference of view on the issue was given by another Eucharistic minister – a member of one of the interview groups – who freely admitted that he had not agreed with the practice, but nonetheless he administered communion to children because the PCC had agreed to it and, as a servant of the church, he felt himself bound by the decision of its governing body. Interestingly, when asked whether his feelings had changed as a result of the experience of administering to children he responded, ‘I don’t know where it puts me now. It’s a bit difficult’.

That response may or may not indicate the beginnings of a change of heart, but some hearts and minds certainly are changed by the experience of admission and in the course of the discussions preceding an application to the bishop. One participant in this research project emailed the story of her changed opinion:

“15 years ago, as a member of [the] PCC (and a mother of three confirmed sons) I was rather doubtful about the idea of children as young as seven taking communion. However, I was invited by [the vicar] to go with him and others to the conference at Peterborough. This debate filled me with enthusiasm and I trained immediately to teach the preparation classes, of which I did several per year.”

Another characterised herself as having been ‘from the old school’ where confirmation preceded communion, but during reader training she had been influenced by a session looking at the significance of baptism for equality and membership in the family of the Church and now for her it seemed natural for baptized children to take communion.

Two participants who had had some reservations about the practice and were part of an interview group including parents and children’s ministry team members, subsequently changed their view as a result of hearing the positive experiences recounted during the interview session. Other participants reported their change of view as a result of their own experience in a congregation that welcomes baptized children to communion:

Female: Coming from a church where we didn’t admit children and coming here, it has changed my views, you know, because I do think I was probably one of those that thought they were too young yet, but seeing how involved they are, you know, and especially when you see them with families ... you realise, actually, you are leaving these children out and what right have we got to leave them out?

Male 1: Yeah, I agree with that. I mean, I was sort of here when it was voted that we would actually do it, and I was sort of sceptical at the time – but I’m glad we did. I think it’s been great for the church.

Interviewer: Can you remember at all why you were sceptical, or your reservations at the time?

Male 1: Because of tradition – that’s all. Nothing else. Because that’s the way it’s always been done

Male 2: We’re always frightened of change, aren’t we?

## **Adult Faith Development**

As well as promoting a reassessment of the role of understanding, and views on communion and confirmation, being part of a parish that welcomes baptized children to communion was also found to have had an effect on the overall faith development of adults.

### ***Parents and carers***

As noted, above, the Manchester Diocesan policy encourages the involvement of parents and carers in the preparation of their children for admission, and several commonly used preparation programmes include activities to be completed at home, so at the very least parents or carers will be involved by engaging with material from such schemes. However, a recently produced resource includes a preparation programme that is entirely designed for families to undertake together and many churches ask that parents and carers be present with their children during at least one session of the preparation. One interview participant who is involved in preparing children for admission recalled how parents regularly come to her at the end of such sessions and tell her how they have learned things themselves from the material covered with the children.

For adults already involved with the church, involvement in their children's preparation can enrich their own faith. It can also be a challenge and a reminder of their responsibility to nurture the faith of their children. One priest described how parents and carers are invited to the final session of their child's preparation, where he explains that the faith expressed in the family is part of the children's journey and that the faith of the adults in their family lays a good foundation for the children. He concluded, 'for some [parents and carers] I hope it's a challenge to them and a mission opportunity'. Other interview participants pointed to examples of adults who were not regular church-goers being drawn into greater involvement in the church through the preparation and subsequent admission of their children. And one participant referred to admission to communion as a way of decreasing the instances of families attending church solely to secure entrance to a church school then leaving when this had been achieved. In her experience 'you find there's not as many leaving because they've got [their children] where they want them to go, because they have now become involved in it'.

In discussions about the admission of children to communion, there is always a point at which the question of their subsequent presentation for confirmation will be asked. However, one interview participation pointed out that concentration on children and confirmation meant that another effect of admission in relation to confirmation was being missed – the effect on parents and carers. The example was cited of one parent who had been involved in a preparation

programme and seemed a possible future confirmation candidate. And other interview participants were able to state that in their church parents had offered for confirmation as a result of their child's admission to communion; one contributor claimed that parents being 'prompted' to seek confirmation in this way was a regular occurrence.

### ***Children's ministers and the adult congregation***

It is a commonplace of current good practice models in children's ministry that adults who work with children should see themselves as fellow learners and should expect to learn from them. The context of preparing children for admission to communion was shown to have given supporting evidence of this taking place. Those who had worked with children in the preparation, and in their subsequent nurture after admission spoke of their 'amazing' knowledge, understand and comments; the 'brilliant' and 'challenging' questions they raised; and the fact that preparing the children for communion had indeed taught them a lot, as adults.

One contributor noted that for some adults in the congregation, taking communion can become routine – 'you do it every week, so you don't take it in. You just do it automatically' – which prompted her parish priest to suggest that next time a group of young children was admitted to communion for the first time, a 'refresher for the adults' could be included. This possibility was greeted with enthusiasm. Another participant from the same parish considered that the complex approach taken with adults in preparing them for confirmation might mean that they understood less about communion than the children who had been prepared to receive in a more straightforward way. The implication was that sharing the children's preparation with the whole congregation might help adults who 'repeat the same words week in and week out, but they don't actually understand it'. And in another church which had embraced the admission of children to communion, it was reported that an all-age approach had now been taken to confirmation classes themselves: two young people had questioned the standard model of separate preparation groups and so an all-age group had been formed. The adult assessment was that 'it was great, so it happens now quite naturally, and actually [the young people] get the adults talking'.

### 3. Teaching – Children’s Understanding

From their observation of the children’s **motivation** for and **responses** to receiving communion, and the impact of admission on their **faith journey**, the adult participants expressed views that indicated the children had received significant teaching by taking a full part in communion. The analysis of the children’s learning in this section results from interviews with adults and so represents adult perspectives. Although their assessments are based on the experience of being with the children – either as parents, children’s ministers, licensed ministers, or adult congregation members – they represent views ‘through the eyes of an adult’ rather than ‘through the eyes of a child’. The voices of children themselves will be heard in the next section.

#### **Motivation**

One of the requirements of the Manchester Diocesan policy is that a child’s genuine, personal wish to become a communicant must be clear to the parish priest. This raises the issue of discerning children’s motivation in wishing to be admitted to communion – something that is of concern not just to the priest but to the whole congregation when considering admission to communion. In addition to comments on initial motivations, participants’ comments on children’s subsequent involvement in the preparation process and responses as communicants can also shed light on this issue.

#### ***Emulation***

As with much in children’s early lives, emulation of adults was identified as a significant motivation for wishing to receive communion. That could be emulation of adult congregation members, but as one email correspondent pointed out parents also play a key role in providing a model that their children would naturally wish to follow. Such motivations were seen as the starting point for deeper exploration with the children. Curiosity in the family was described as having provided opportunities for parents to share what communion meant to them, and in the wider church too an interest in following the lead of the adults was seen as an opening for adult leaders or congregation members to share something of their own motivations as communicants.

Emulation of peers was another factor identified by participants. In the particular situation of children who were going to a Church of England high school where some of the children would have been confirmed early it was felt natural that those from churches that admitted unconfirmed children would want to take advantage of the possibility to become communicants in order to have a sense of belonging within a Eucharistic school community. However, one response

indicated that wanting to ‘be like the others’ might have a deeper sense than is commonly attributed to it when she observed ‘they can see the others, and the others are different ... when they come back from receiving, and they want that.’ And a mother noted that the effect of peers, sometimes seen as a negative by adults, could actually have a positive aspect. She described the development of fellowship within the group of children being prepared, explaining

“I was there at quite a lot of the sessions –and I saw a lot of really nice behaviour, a lot of good understanding, a lot of fellowship between the children, and it did make me very proud. I saw a different side to my son – a good different side.”

Another mother noted that her son had initially wanted to receive ‘to be the same as his friends, but now wants to do it for himself’ illustrating that motivation changes and develops with age and growing faith development – something that is true, as one participant pointed out, for communicants of all ages.

### ***Commitment***

In view of the varied demands on children’s time – including, complex family arrangements as well as the wealth of sporting and other leisure activities now on offer – the sense of belonging and inclusion offered by admission to communion was cited as a balancing attraction. It was also noted as significant that children, when asked if they wanted to continue attending preparation sessions, were happy to do so, despite the draw of other activities. One leader reported that on the odd occasions that children were ‘messaging around’ during the sessions, they had been reminded that they did not have to go on with the preparation, but they had expressed the wish to continue and their behaviour had changed. Other children at the same church had been ‘quite upset’ when for some reason they were prevented from attending a session. That particular church had decided to set a normal minimum age for admission – not a requirement nationally, or in the diocese – and this had created a sense of anticipation among the children: one child, described by his priest as ‘one of life’s little enthusiasts’ was reported as ‘literally counting the days’ until he was the required age. Such comments are indicative of the commitment of children to the preparation process and of the seriousness with which they treat it. There were also reports from parents of the enjoyment their children had in the sessions, and their enthusiasm over the ‘homework’ involved – all suggesting that what might be seen as a duty can also be a joy for the children.

## Responses

Despite the common adult concern over children's understanding of communion, a number of participants reported that the children in their churches *do* understand the symbolism of what takes place at communion, the links to Jesus's story, and as one mother put it, describing her son's understanding, that 'receiving communion is a very special, private and important time for each person.' A basic understanding of the significance of communion was reported by one participant even among children as young as Reception year, and others remarked on the way 'they grow through the preparation' and that understanding develops and deepens over time both through teaching in children's groups and through the continual practice of receiving the bread and wine in community. One parish priest, reflecting on having been an observer when children from her congregation were engaging in activities on communion in relation to this project, wrote:

"The children were a revelation – I know that they are well taught but it was good to hear it from their own lips. [The activities] brought forth responses that were far deeper than I would have expected. I am so glad that they have such awe and wonder about what they and we are part of and only wish that the adults could have heard what I heard."

Another adult concern, when considering the admission, is the possibility that children will not treat communion with proper reverence or take the preparation seriously. However, there were very few comments in the interviews giving specific instances of such difficulties, and the picture painted of children's responses was overwhelmingly positive. It was acknowledged that the children's responses varied widely, as did their depth of understanding, but a 'flexible and sensitive' approach was advocated by one leader as an appropriate way of working with such variations. Variety, it was remarked in another parish, was part of the worship experience of church, and an all-age Eucharist helped children understand that there were times to be lively in church and times to be 'serious, quiet and prayerful'.

Receiving communion was identified as an example of a 'serious' time in worship, and many contributions from participants pointed to the reverence with which children received. One woman remarked, 'there's a handful who actually take communion as beautifully as anyone I've ever seen' and another spoke of the warmth of a girl's smile, which was 'beaming', concluding, 'it just goes right through you really.' At another church a change in behaviour as a result of receiving was noted, a congregation member observing that, since they had been admitted to communion, 'The boys do behave incredibly differently at the altar'. Others used the words 'humble', 'solemn'

and ‘with the right heart’ to describe the way children received. There were indications, too, that the children did not simply exhibit appropriate behaviour at communion but also valued it as part of their worshipping lives. One mother reported that her daughter saw it ‘as a valuable part of coming into church’ while a father explained that, at his church, whenever the children’s group comes in late and misses communion his son ‘gets really miffed’. And a parish priest reported a similar reaction from a group of children when they were told that there would be no communion at a particular service. Another priest remarked that it was not always the children that you would expect for whom receiving the sacrament had a significant meaning, describing ‘one particular girl that’s always been quite difficult in the group’ who was ‘very, very touched by the whole thing of being accepted into the communion’.

Eucharistic ministers have a special perspective on the responses of children when receiving communion. One lay assistant who was relatively new to the role said he found it difficult knowing which children received, but he stressed this was an observation rather than a criticism and that ‘the children were more than welcome’; another spoke of the difficulties posed by Brownies’ peaked caps – reminiscent of the issues some women’s wide brimmed hats can present – but this was a subject for amusement rather than serious concern in the group. The overall response of Eucharistic ministers to the experience of administering to children was positive. For some, it had the same specialness as communicating an adult; for others, the children responded in ways that made it even more special and enhanced their ministry. One minister felt privileged to be able to include the children, while for another there was a deepening of the relationship between server and served:

“The way they look at you when you’re serving them is enough to say, you know, that they appreciate what you’re doing, that they’re pleased about it, they’re glad – they’re glad that they’re there, and obviously glad that we’re there as well.”

## Children's Faith Journey

The language of 'journey' has become common in discussing adult discipleship, but the research interviews showed how admission brings it into a consideration of children's faith development and the children's understanding of what it means to lead a life of faith. One participant explained that when discussing confirmation with young people she would build on the language of journey that had been used with the children from a young age. She explained, 'We always say, "You're only on the start of this journey. This journey could go on for your life time." ' Admission to communion has added a new staging post on this journey with its own significance and sense of commitment, which gives the children valuable experience in making a significant decision for themselves. One participant saw this as encouraging to the children as it offers 'that first little step towards commitment without it being too difficult' and another pointed to the preparation programme and the way that it encouraged children not only to think more about the needs of the world, but also to be conscious of their own spiritual journey. The Manchester Diocesan guidance on the content of preparation programmes asks that admission be presented to the children as part of a journey beginning with baptism and leading onward to confirmation, and this is a format to be found in the recommended published material. One parish emphasises the ongoing journey towards confirmation by including a formal endorsement of the children's certificates of admission, each year, as an opportunity to revisit the expectation of future confirmation. And baptism itself has now become a conscious stage on the journey for many children, since increasing numbers of families are abandoning infant baptism in favour of baptism at an age when their children can have some say in the matter. As admission to communion before confirmation requires baptism, this has offered the opportunity for some families to discuss baptism with their children. One mother described her son giving a testimony at his baptism as part of a faith journey that she was happy would include admission as its next milestone. And just as admission has led some parents to offer for confirmation, so the possibility of involvement in admission has caused some children to ask for baptism.

The milestone of admission not only offers the opportunity of marking a step towards mature faith but also of acknowledging a more general increase in maturity. Contributors explained how this had been welcomed by children, and also how it showed the Church took them and their opinions more seriously, supporting them in the steps towards maturity that they would need to take as they moved towards their secondary education. One father spoke of feeling that his son's admission to communion had been like a 'coming of age'. Such contributions indicate the way in which the marker of admission, with the journey towards it from baptism and onwards to a

future confirmation support the natural flow of development and so can help children see the journey of faith as an integral part of life's journey.

### ***The importance of choice***

One important feature of growing maturity is an increasing ability to make significant choices, fostered by more frequent opportunities for them. This is as true for matters of faith as for any other aspect of human development. Many comments from participants indicated the way that admission to communion supports children in offering them the context in which to make important choices. Generally the children known to the participants had wanted to be admitted when the opportunity had arisen, but one instance was given of a young child who had indicated unwillingness to participate in the preparation process and his reluctance had been respected. And a mother, stressing the importance of such respect, explained how her son – now an adult himself – had declined to participate when first invited, but a year or two later had asked to do so of his own accord. When he had initially declined, she had been put under some pressure by her vicar to encourage her son to participate but she had resisted. When her son was eventually admitted, the vicar had conceded that he had been wrong and that she had been right in respecting his choice. Her son, having been supported in his decision over admission to communion, subsequently took the decision to be confirmed at the age of 16.

The opportunities for choice surrounding admission extend beyond the initial decision to join the preparation programme, as indicated by examples given of children who had started the preparation but had decided to withdraw before completion – decisions that had been respected by the adults involved. Respecting children's wishes with regard to admission was connected by one contributor to the issue of owned belief – the last of John Westerhoff's widely used stages of faith development<sup>19</sup>. And other participants drew on personal experience of being confirmed as part of a 'job lot' in their childhood to explain that they considered the choice offered by admission was more meaningful in itself, and allowed confirmation to become a meaningful choice rather than the automatically 'done thing' at a certain age.

### ***The importance of the preparation***

Representatives of all the parishes contributing to the research commented on the quality of the preparation the children received before their admission to communion. Several made a comparison with the preparation for confirmation, regarding the admission preparation as more thorough and age appropriate than the preparation for young confirmation candidates. This led some to suggest that the latter may understand less than the children being admitted to communion. It was pointed out that if a child admitted to communion did not subsequently offer

for confirmation, the preparation they had received for admission would represent a valuable educative experience that they would not otherwise have had. This was felt to be equally true for those who began the preparation course but were not ultimately admitted. One father, citing the example of a friend of his son's who had come with him to preparation classes, observed, 'It was an opportunity for my son to have a little bit of common ground to discuss his faith [with his friend]', and also that although the friend had not remained in the church 'there's a little point where he was drawn into an opportunity to find faith.' In the course of that interview it was noted that seeds were sown in childhood that might grow and flourish later on, and experience in the parish was recounted in support of this:

"There are folks within our church community, as adults now, who went through the early stages of Sunday school and into teaching and youth groups who then drifted away but have come back with their own families sometimes – and for them ... it's another stage on the journey but I think the preparation that was done in those early years is very significant."

### ***The importance of 'practice'***

One participant expressed the view that children receiving communion was 'like putting into practice everything that we're doing in Kids' Church with them.' She explained, 'We're doing it in theory over there and here is where we practice.' Other views on this subject were that children are 'not going to pick up on the subtleties if they just sit and watch adults,' and that receiving communion is a 'hands on' form of learning. During the conversation at another participating church, receiving communion was characterised as 'a means to an end rather than the end in itself,' which clearly indicates that admission to communion is seen as part of the journey of faith – practical learning that will foster faith development. At that particular church, the policy for admitting baptized children to communion follows the original Diocese of Manchester model (superseded in 2006) in stipulating that confirmation should be delayed until the mid teens. Their children are invited to consider confirmation when they reach 16, and one research participant from the church suggested that regular reception of communion from the age of 11 'gives them five years to learn more about what it is they're agreeing to' while another suggested that being a communicant prior to confirmation 'will just be more for a young person to reflect on really, when they are thinking again at 16.' A participant from another church referred to regular reception of communion as a 'habit' but she portrayed this in a positive sense in that it gives children something to reflect on as they grow. She characterised it as 'what we do in the service', and this linked admission to what Westerhoff would call the 'affiliative' stage of faith development.<sup>20</sup>

Admission can thus be seen as contributing to a child's sense of belonging, through participation in a central practice of the Church, while offering support, through the choice involved in deciding to participate or not, for an exploration of the 'questioning' stage that opens the possibility of a subsequent 'owned' faith. Two examples were given by participants of children expanding their ownership of the practice of taking communion. In one, a child who was used to taking communion led another, who was not, to the communion table and showed him what to do. In the other, young communicants had 'voiced a desire to serve at the altar'. The development from one stage of faith to another is not a neat and clearly defined process and such examples are indicative of the role that the practice of receiving can play in establishing a child in an affiliative faith while offering experiences that can lead onward in their faith journey.

### *The post-admission journey*

As noted above, the Manchester Diocese model policy for admission requires that thought be given to faith nurture following admission, and that this should include the expectation of confirmation being considered. Participants recognised the importance of on-going nurture after admission both to revisit and refresh and also, as one woman put it, to help children 'renew that sense of what they're undertaking, what they're saying by participating, and to actually come through that through the lens of increasing maturity.' It was recognised that commitment can waver in young people, and those who seem committed one year may be less so the next. An on-going process that doesn't pressurise children into once-for-all decisions too early can help reflect this and enable young people to grow in the confidence required to make good decisions. As one participant expressed it:

"Being admitted early gives them that chance to grow not only in faith but also to grow into young adults capable of making their own decisions and because we, the Church, are allowing them that time I think it gives them more faith in their own capabilities to make that decision."

All the participating churches gave examples of children who had been admitted to communion and subsequently offered for confirmation in their teens. Of the four churches, the one with the highest rate of teenage confirmations was the one that followed the old Manchester policy by delaying until 16. However, they coupled this with an annual renewal of the admission between the ages of 11 and 16, so that the young people were regularly reminded of the possibility of confirmation. A child's free, personal choice is an essential element of the Manchester policy on admission to communion, and the importance of choice was stressed in many interview responses not only in connection with the decision to be admitted but also the freedom it gave with regard

to confirmation. For those going to a church high school, the pressure to be confirmed so that they could take communion and 'belong' in the school community was removed. One woman spoke of admission opening the possibility of 'a different incentive' for wanting to be confirmed, and a priest spoke with enthusiasm of the opportunity for teenagers to make a positive, personal choice regarding confirmation that is opened up by an earlier admission to communion:

"Through those early teenage years ... they're finding their own identity and I love the thought that confirmation is there for when they've found that – they know who they are, and it's there as this big celebration of, 'Yes, I've been a part of church. I've taken first communion, and I've been a full part of church, and I really, really want this [confirmation] for myself.'"

The freedom of choice offered by admission to communion complicates the issue of numbers presenting for later confirmation, since individuals may offer for confirmation later than their teens. The story of one participant was a reminder not to consider teenage confirmation as an expectation for all. She recalled that:

"I actually went through all my confirmation lessons at 16 and decided not to be confirmed because at the time I just didn't feel that that was the right decision for me. But I was confirmed at 22 and I do think that kind of process had an impact on me, you know. It's part of my journey and part of God putting people around me and putting roots into my life that I did eventually come to that full mature decision to follow Christ but it didn't happen at 16. It was quite tricky really to say to the vicar at the time, 'I've gone through the whole thing but actually there's something not quite right for me yet.' And I think we're all kind of mature at different times and God leads us in different ways."

The complexities of a life and faith journey were exemplified by the story of a mother in one of the churches, told by a participant. The mother had been admitted to communion in the 1980s, had drifted away, married someone with no interest in church, but was now back in the congregation with her own children. She had never been confirmed but continues to take communion, and it was the hope of the participant that 'it makes her feel as though she's still connected ... and hopefully one day she will feel she can make a further commitment.' This story was a reminder that admission to communion before confirmation can be a significant step in the journey of faith throughout a person's life, and not just in their childhood. For children, the choices offered by admission are, as one participant expressed it, 'about helping them to maintain their personal integrity on stages of the journey' – and integrity in a life of faith is a concern for all ages.

## 4. Breaking of Bread – Children’s Experiences of Communion

In the preceding section the children have been viewed through the eyes of adults. As this research project was concerned with the effect of the practice of admission to communion on the whole community, much of the interview time was spent with adults. However, as members of the community, children’s own experiences of ‘the breaking of bread’ were investigated by interview and activity based discussions. The results furnish a picture through children’s own eyes which can provide corroboration of and commentary on some of the adults’ assumptions and interpretations. In the first section of this report, the development of **fellowship** was examined, and material from the children’s interviews and discussions indicates their views on the role that admission to communion plays in developing a sense of community and fostering intergenerational relationships. In the third section, the report explores the contribution that admission to communion makes to the **children’s understanding**. In the interviews and discussions, the children demonstrated their understanding in ways that relate to the adults’ positive experiences of their responses and their views on the importance of journey, choice and practice for their faith journeys.

### Fellowship

The children reported an increased sense of belonging as a result of having become communicants, with the word ‘connected’ being used frequently by one KS3 group in their reflections on the significance of communion for them. As one member expressed it, ‘You feel more connected to the church than before’. But it was something more than simply ‘joining a club’. Another member of the group explained that the feeling of connection experienced after having taken communion was ‘not really a normal kind of feeling that you get every day’. And a member of the KS2 group linked the feeling of being ‘a proper part of the church community’ with feeling ‘closer to Jesus.’

The adults linked the fellowship of the faith community to a sense of family, a view reflected in this KS3 comment: ‘you feel more part of the family with the communion’. And another observation from this group pointed to a sense of common identity with fellow communicants. For this young person it was no longer ‘I don’t know who you are’ but more ‘you’re my family now.’ The adults had also suggested that the bonds within a child’s home family could be strengthened by taking communion together, and one KS3 child affirmed this effect, saying, ‘You feel more connected to your relatives ... your parents or your grandparents.’

The importance for children of being part of the communicant fellowship was indicated by

two KS3 children who experienced negative feelings on being 'passed over' at the communion rail by a priest who did not know that they received. One demonstrated a dramatic sense of rejection, saying, 'It makes you feel a bit like you're not there'; and the other explained, 'Sometimes they do ask, and it's right to ask, but when they just skip you altogether it's a bit like, "You could have at least asked, and the fact that you didn't take me seriously at all."' '

A discussion of some of the words of the Eucharistic Prayer gave one group of K3 children the opportunity to expand their view of the community to which they now belonged as communicants. One identified the reference to joining 'with your whole Church throughout the world'<sup>21</sup> as a meaningful phrase because 'it's not just you on your own – it's everybody else ... it's you with other people that believe the same way as you do.' And another saw the universality of the Church throughout time in the phrase 'to join the eternal song of heaven' since it indicates 'it doesn't stop – it, like, continues today and it never will stop because it's always there.'

### **Teaching – Children's Understanding**

For the adult participants in this study, a significant benefit of admitting baptized children to communion before confirmation was the contribution they considered it made to the teaching offered to children and their consequent appreciation of faith issues. A major indicator of this for the adults was the general response that they saw in the children when being prepared for and eventually receiving communion. The interviews and discussions with the children provided more specific indications of this response from the children's own perspectives.

#### ***Children's responses***

When asked what they thought was the most important part of the communion service several children spoke of the central act of taking bread and wine, but they also linked this with remembering – both the importance of remembering *why* the bread and wine is taken and, following on from that, remembering Jesus when receiving. The children were asked whether there was anything that could be left out of the communion liturgy and one KS3 child firmly linked what was done at the table with the Last Supper, emphasising, 'It's what Jesus would have done so we're not going to change that.' Other children were able to speak of actually receiving Jesus as well as simply remembering him in the bread and wine. According to a KS3 child, 'You feel like you're actually taking part of Jesus himself when you take the bread and the wine' and a K2 child explained, 'When you have [communion] you feel like you're a part of Jesus.'

There was also evidence that the significance of the events being remembered in communion was appreciated. The importance of acknowledging that significance was pointed out by a KS3

child, for whom receiving ‘reminds me of the story, reminds me why we take it and what a big thing [Jesus] did for us and how grateful we should all be – and sometimes we take it for granted.’ And another KS3 participant, considering the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, dug deeper into the meaning by identifying ‘dying you destroyed our death’ as the most important words since ‘it just means a lot and just in a couple of lines it sums up basically what Jesus did for us when he died on the cross for us and then came back to life.’ Another member of that group recognised the human cost of Jesus’s actions, remarking that, ‘It feels like Jesus would have had to have been very brave to do that [share the Last Supper] and say to his friends that he was going to die but he was doing it for us. To actually break the bread as a symbol of his body that must have been very brave to do.’ For one of the KS2 children, the personal effects of Jesus’s sacrifice were felt through taking the bread and wine: it was this child’s experience that ‘[receiving] makes me feel more safe, because your sins are forgiven.’

Some adults are anxious about the *manner* in which children will respond to receiving communion – will they receive with appropriate reverence and seriousness? The adults participating in this project reported that for the most part, in their experience, the children *appeared* to be receiving with the same reverence as the adult communicants. Talking with the child participants enabled information to be gathered about their thoughts and feelings as they took communion, thus giving an insight into what lay behind the demeanour they exhibited. Adults are sometimes concerned that children will be too boisterous and so it was interesting to hear from a KS3 participant from a church with a lively approach to liturgy that sometimes the personal encounter and sharing with God seems obscured by the ritual of the occasion. For another member there was an attraction to the suggestion that one might take communion alone<sup>22</sup> ‘because, in a way, it can be a bit more between you and God.’ This participant went on to explain

“I know it’s good to have a community there and be with people who all have the same belief, but some people, I think, they do find it, when it’s just them and God together there, in a way affirming their faith, I think that can be good for some people.”

Another child added, ‘It’s more private, more you being direct with God.’

A striking feature of the discussion in one group was the recognition by children that a complex of emotions could be involved in receiving communion, requiring sensitivity to others. As one KS3 participant put it:

“I think inside lots of people are smiling but like on the outside people keep a straight face to be respectful to others. If you’re all smiling but some people don’t look at it as a celebration but as something sad that someone died then it’s best just to keep a straight face and be respectful.”

One KS3 participant from another group summed up their own response to the complexity in an arresting phrase, saying, ‘I can’t really explain it – it’s like you feel so many emotions at the same time. It’s a bit dazzling, really!’

The dazzling sense of an encounter with God was very evident when one KS3 group considered the phrases in the Eucharistic Prayer that were particularly important for them. Their choices showed an awareness of the awesome nature of God and the appropriate way to respond. One child chose to highlight ‘Holy, holy, holy.’ Another particularly liked ‘Lift up your hearts! We lift them to the Lord!’ and interpreted this as meaning, ‘Don’t keep your spirit inside us – let it out.’ Finally, one participant stated simply and emphatically, ‘I like ... “It is right to give thanks and praise” because it is right.’

### ***The importance of journey***

Often drawing on their own life experience, the adults saw faith as a journey and felt it important that children appreciated this. They saw the admission of baptized children to communion as a way of emphasising the sense of journey in a life of faith. In their discussion responses the children showed an appreciation of their own development and did not see their admission to communion as an end, but rather as part of a process of growing awareness and understanding. One KS2 child saw taking communion rather than receiving a blessing as part of their own growing maturity, while another from the same age group expressed a sense of progression by observing, ‘Cos you’re actually doing it, you sometimes feel like you can relate to the words like more than you could when you were just getting a blessing.’ A child from KS3 suggested there might also be a relationship between understanding and doing that operated in the opposite direction, saying that a growing appreciation of the significance of Jesus’s sacrifice was ‘a good reason to take part in communion.’ One of the interview groups of young people contained a 17 year old, who was able to look back on a number of years as a child admitted to communion. He expressed the view, supported by younger members in the group, that sometimes insufficient thought was given to the significance of taking the bread and wine. This recognition indicated an awareness that there was always more to learn, and that receiving was not a ‘done deal’ but an ongoing challenge.

### ***The importance of choice***

The adults had valued the choice that children were given by the option of admission to communion before confirmation. One KS3 child felt that being offered this choice was a sign of respect, and was a forerunner of the choice that would eventually be made regarding confirmation. Another child from a different KS3 group had taken the decision to be confirmed and was clear that the choice had been their own, and a valued opportunity to express the strength of their faith. This confident choice can perhaps be seen as arising from the culture of choice and responsibility promoted by admission to communion and its insistence that the children themselves must express a clear wish to receive. That group was from a parish where admission criteria for a Church of England secondary school provided the motivation for many children's involvement in church. One of the children in the interview group saw their personal decision to be admitted to communion as a positive statement that their church life was of a different nature, saying:

“It shows how serious you are about your religion and it shows that you're committed and you don't just go, like your parents want you to. You don't just go to get into a school. You go because you want to and you respect and understand the religion.”

### ***The importance of practice***

The potency of 'practice' in taking communion rather than talking and learning about it in 'theory' was identified by some adults, and the children gave clear indications of the difference that being an active participant in the Eucharist made to their life of faith. When talking about how it might have felt for the first disciples to be present at the Last Supper, the emotional engagement of children who had participated in that supper themselves, through receiving communion, was evident. One KS3 child remarked on the sense of 'being there' that was produced by receiving, explaining:

“It feels like you're actually there with everyone – like the congregation is like the disciples, and Jesus is like the reverend, and when it's shared out to everyone it feels like you're actually there and it's all happening.”

This feeling of involvement produced some remarkable statements indicating a transformed sense of self and of relationship with God from the children. For one child,

“When the person is there with the bread and the wine, standing there in front of you and says, ‘This is the body and blood of Jesus. He died for you and this is yours from him,’ ... it makes you feel special – like you’re looked at by God.”

And a KS3 child in another group expressed the sense of transformation by explaining ‘you feel bigger than you really are ... cos you’re like communicating with God.’ At another point in the discussion with this group a transformation for all ages was discerned when the congregation received together. A child remarked, ‘Sometimes you might feel that you’re the smallest and you can get bossed around but you’re not anymore because God is your Father now and everyone’s a child.’ This group produced a further observation, linking transformation through receiving to a sense of a person’s authentic identity, and also to the power that the connection with God through the sacrament can bring. A child explained that, after receiving,

“You feel like, more capable of being yourself; and obviously you’re able to do more cos you’re more connected to God, which gives you like a whole different view of yourself which is kind of hard to describe really.”

The ability to ‘do more’ as a result of taking the sacrament was developed in a number of ways. For one KS3 child, it helped in discerning right behaviour:

“Taking communion definitely makes it easier to know that you’re doing the right thing. It ... makes it easier to see through what bad stuff is. So it’s like WWJD<sup>23</sup> juice.”

For another it produced a sense of happiness for everyone, as God is affirmed as creator. Strength to pray for others was another effect identified. And the assurance of God’s presence was seen as enabling resistance to peer pressure. When discussing talking about their faith with other, sceptical children, one KS3 communicant explained:

“They can’t stop your belief in God cos if you have a strong belief and your friends don’t then, like, it kind of like, pulls your friendship apart, but then, like, it doesn’t really matter cos God’s still with you.”

The importance of receiving communion for that sense of God's empowering, continuing presence, was expressed clearly in this KS3 child's contribution:

"When I'm outside, after communion, it's like you feel more stronger, but as the weeks go by you get weaker because ... sometimes you think that God's not really there – whereas you take communion, you now know that he's always there and he won't leave."



## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that admitting baptized children to communion has had a variety of beneficial effects on the church communities in which it was conducted. These will be summarised in the first part of this conclusion. The second part will acknowledge the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further research. The effects recorded by the study indicate the potential for significant benefits in parishes adopting the practice. A series of recommendations will be offered as the final part of this conclusion, to guide parishes in realizing the full potential of admitting baptized children to communion for the life of church communities.

### 1. Summary – Effects of Admission on the Church Community

The responses of adults and children who took part in this project give support to the view that the admission of baptized children to Holy Communion before confirmation has beneficial effects for the whole church community in growing discipleship. This is indicated by a strengthening and deepening of **fellowship**, and a broadening of **teaching** through an inclusive **breaking of bread**.

#### **Fellowship**

The fellowship of the participating churches was felt to be strengthened by the promotion of an inclusive **ethos** a deeper sense of **community** and the promotion of **inter-generational relationships**

#### *Ethos*

- ◆ The admission of children to communion was seen as one reflection of the inclusive ethos that the churches wished to promote rather than, primarily, a tactic to retain children in the Church.
- ◆ The love that was shown to children by welcoming them as equals at the Lord's Table was considered to be a part of their foundational experience of church that would stay with them for life and could encourage them to see church as 'home' whenever they needed it.
- ◆ The adult participants were proud of their particular church and the wider Church of England for adopting the practice of admission. They considered that the forward-looking, inclusive ethos thus promoted made their church more attractive and therefore more likely to grow.

## ***Community***

- ◆ The body of Christ was discerned as the community that shares the bread and wine of communion. That sense of community was deepened by the inclusion of children within it, the bonds strengthened, and the pleasure of membership increased.
- ◆ The inclusion of children at the family meal of communion promoted a sense of church as a broader family than that of the domestic unit, while encompassing individual households and enabling the whole community to share the joy of nurturing their children in faith.
- ◆ The significance of children within the community of faith was emphasised, whether they formed a numerically high proportion of it or not. Without children, the body of Christ was felt to be incomplete.

## ***Inter-generational relationships***

- ◆ The decision to be admitted to communion, the preparation for admission, and the subsequent practice of receiving gave opportunities for parents and children to talk about the Christian faith and learn about it together.
- ◆ The dedication of focussed time to the preparation of the children for admission created stronger bonds between the children and their leaders and ministers. Becoming fellow communicants with these adults added a new dimension to their relationships with them.
- ◆ Supporting the children through their preparation enabled other adults to get to know the children and the children to feel valued by the adults. These inter-generational relationships were strengthened by the children's continued reception of the sacrament in community.

## **Teaching – Adults' Understanding**

The teaching of adult members of the congregations was broadened with regard to their understanding of **communion** and of **confirmation**, and more widely in terms of their own on-going **faith development**.

## ***Communion***

- ◆ In considering the appropriateness of giving communion to young children, adults reassessed the significance of 'understanding' in the face of 'the mystery of faith', and acknowledged the deficiency of their own, or any adult's understanding.

- ◆ Considering admission opened a discussion on the basic criteria for giving and receiving communion. It was seen as a natural expression of familial love, and a natural response both to an individual's desire to receive, and to the overflowing generosity of God.
- ◆ The origins of the barriers to receiving were questioned in view of the scriptural accounts of Jesus's inclusivity, and justice issues were identified in the light of humanity's equality before God. Implications of these issues for unconfirmed adults and the unbaptized were noted.

### ***Confirmation***

- ◆ The discussion of admission led to a reassessment of the place and significance of confirmation in the life of the Church and in the lives of individuals, and some adults were led to reflect on the significance of their own confirmation.
- ◆ The value of delayed confirmation in view of the significant decisions involved was recognised, and the freedom of choice offered by admission regarding the timing of confirmation was seen to reflect the variety of individual spiritual experiences.
- ◆ The discussions around 'qualification' for receiving communion led to a deeper engagement with questions of authority in the Church. This engagement, and the experience of being part of an admitting church had changed minds in some who had opposed the practice.

### **Teaching – Children's Understanding**

Adult experiences of children being prepared for admission and receiving communion before confirmation suggested positive effects in teaching the children. These effects were noted in their observed **motivation** for seeking communion, their **response** when receiving it, and their appreciation of the **journey of faith**.

### ***Motivation and response***

- ◆ The fact that children wished to emulate their parents or carers and their peers in receiving was seen to have provided opportunities for exploring and sharing faith between adults and children and also within peer groups.
- ◆ During the course of their preparation and as a result of subsequent, ongoing reception of the sacrament children had demonstrated a growing and deepening understanding of the significance of communion.
- ◆ This understanding was discerned in the way that admitted children received communion;

and the positive effect that receiving had on some children was an indication of a 'learning' beyond the words of instruction.

### ***Journey of faith***

- ◆ The emphasis, during preparation, on locating admission between baptism and confirmation underlined the concept of faith as a journey and the addition of admission provided a helpful, extra, age appropriate step on the way.
- ◆ The quality of the preparation for admission was identified as providing the children with an enduring resource; seeds were sown but might not flourish immediately – even those who were prepared but decided not to be admitted could benefit in this way.
- ◆ The importance of an education in making meaningful faith choices was highlighted. The experience of choosing to be admitted to communion was seen as paving the way for a subsequent choice regarding confirmation.

### **Breaking of Bread**

The reflections of the children on being admitted to and subsequently receiving communion gave support to the adult's assessment of the benefits they had received. This was evident in the sense of increased **fellowship** that they exhibited; in an understanding of the sacrament, arising from the experiential **teaching** they received as communicants; and in the **empowerment** they experienced as part of the body of Christ.

### ***Fellowship***

- ◆ The children indicated an enhanced sense of belonging, both to their own church community and to the universal Church.
- ◆ Their sense of fellowship within their families was also deepened through sharing communion together.
- ◆ Their status as fellow communicants alongside the adults gave an appreciation of the community of faith as a community of equals before God.

### ***Teaching***

- ◆ The significance of communion was seen not only as an act of remembrance but also in terms of being 'incorporated' in to Jesus. It also led to a greater appreciation of Jesus's sacrifice.

- ◆ A depth of spiritual engagement was demonstrated through an appreciation of the inexpressible nature of their experience in communion, of their relationship with God, and of the varied needs and responses of others.
- ◆ The children appreciated that faith is a journey, on which receiving communion was an important step; and they valued the choices they were offered regarding admission and confirmation.

### ***Empowerment***

- ◆ There was a personal sense of transformation in being part of the table fellowship rather than learning about it, and a sense that the children were part of a community that had been transformed into the fellowship of the original Last Supper.
- ◆ Strength and guidance for a life of faith in a sometimes hostile world were also benefits of receiving communion recorded by the children.

## **2. Limitations of the Study and Further Research**

Due to limitations of time and resources, only four of the 125 churches in the Diocese of Manchester that had episcopal permission to admit children to communion on the strength of their baptism could be involved in the study. Although these churches were represent some of the variety within the diocese, a larger sample would have given strength to the finding that similar effects were experienced in contrasting parish situations.

A future, more extensive study, drawing on a much wider sample, including several churches representing each of the possible variables, could show whether there are subtle variations in the effects experienced depending on such factors as the church tradition or demographic of a parish.

Within the parishes participating in the current study, it would have been possible to delve deeper into findings with regard to the effect on the faith development of parents whose children are being prepared for admission by identifying volunteer families to be interviewed on the subject.

The limited number of churches involved in this study, and the fact that it has been carried out in only one diocese indicate the necessity for caution in the claims made for its results. Although a number of positive effects of admission for a whole church community have been identified, this cannot be taken as evidence that such effects will always be experienced. Rather, the results of the study are indicative of the potential that the practice has for enhancing discipleship for all

ages.

A questionnaire to establish how widely the effects noted in this study were experienced across the diocese would help indicate whether the potential of admission to enhance parish life was being fully realised and could help give new directions for future work in promoting an all-age culture.

This study provides a model that could be used or adapted in other dioceses across the country. In this way a much broader evidence base could be established, and a nationally coordinated analysis of this data could produce richer results and stronger indications of the benefits of the practice of admission.

Because of the limitations noted above it was not possible to make comparisons with churches outside the selection criteria of being enthusiastic about admission, and in which the practice was well established. It would be helpful to have information from churches that have permission to admit, but where the practice has lapsed and from those that did not reapply for permission in 2006, when General Synod Guidelines became Regulations and all parishes with permission were obliged to revisit the issue. There would also be value in investigating the effect that nurturing children has on all ages in congregations where communion takes place after confirmation, especially those with a positive all-age ethos and where children are confirmed at a young age. In the case of young confirmations, it may be that similar benefits to those associated with admission in this study may be experienced, but not from such a young age.<sup>24</sup> The freedom to delay confirmation until such time as an individual is 'old enough to make a thoughtful commitment to adult responsibility in the Church of Christ' and 'a mature commitment to Christian discipleship'<sup>25</sup> would also be absent in churches that confirm early.

### 3. Recommendations – Realizing the Potential

One priest, reflecting on the participation of her church in the research wrote, of the group interview with Eucharistic Ministers:

The Lay Assistants spoke openly about their 'feelings' whilst administering Holy Communion and that's not easy to do. Their response to the children and their sense of privilege in being involved was helpful to me as their parish priest and I will make sure that I involve them in similar discussions in the future.

This is a reminder that the potential for growing the discipleship indicated by the findings of this project requires a proactive response in order to be realised. The following recommendations indicate possible ways that parishes could make the most of the rich possibilities for fellowship and teaching offered by an inclusive breaking of bread.

***For parishes considering admission:***

- ◆ Look beyond retention of children as an insurance for the future and consider the benefits of admission to communion for the whole church community of today
- ◆ Explore the effects on the sense of fellowship in the church when children are welcomed at communion
- ◆ Ask what image a church presents to the world when it includes children at communion, and when it doesn't
- ◆ Consider the opportunities, listed below, that can flow from admission to communion

***For parishes that have adopted admission:***

- ◆ Publicise the fact that baptized children are admitted to communion on the parish website as it may be a positive factor in choosing a church for those with or without children
- ◆ Build on the inclusivity at the Lord's Table by seeking other opportunities for all ages to 'do' their faith together, such as interactive worship, all-age study groups and inclusive parish weekends
- ◆ Use the preparation of children for admission as an opportunity for a regular 'refresher' on the significance of communion with the whole congregation.
- ◆ Encourage the church family to enjoy the positive value of its youngest members, and appreciate the contribution they can make in all areas of church life
- ◆ Highlight the corporate responsibility for the nurture of children in a community: 'It takes a village to raise a child'<sup>26</sup>
- ◆ Encourage families to receive together, and create other opportunities for parents and children to explore their faith together, such as writing prayers for use in worship or taking part in all-age activities following the model of *Messy Church*

- ◆ Be intentional in supporting families whose children are being prepared or have begun to receive, perhaps drawing such families together to discuss their children's nurture and their own faith
- ◆ Use the ongoing nurture of children after their admission as a prompt for discussing the significance of confirmation with families and stimulating reflection among adults who are not confirmed
- ◆ Provide opportunities for children to reflect on, discuss and share their experience of receiving communion, in their own groups and in wider, all-age contexts
- ◆ Arrange visits to receive communion at other churches and the cathedral so that children can build on their theoretical understanding that they take communion with the 'whole Church throughout the world'.
- ◆ Foster opportunities for children to make meaningful choices in other areas of their faith life within the church community such as worship and study group themes, church giving or mission priorities, and their children's or youth programmes
- ◆ Encourage adults as well as children to see their faith life as a dynamic journey and encourage reflective practices within the whole community that would enable adults and children to share the ongoing challenges of a life of faith
- ◆ Address the over-emphasis on a word-based, cognitive approach to faith by promoting more worship and study that draws on other spiritual styles such as emotion, symbol and action<sup>27</sup>

***For those advocating the practice***

- ◆ Include the broader perspectives indicated by this report in any presentation on admission of baptized children to communion, alongside the foundational argument that baptism is a complete rite of entry into the body of Christ, and membership of that body is marked by the sharing of bread and wine.

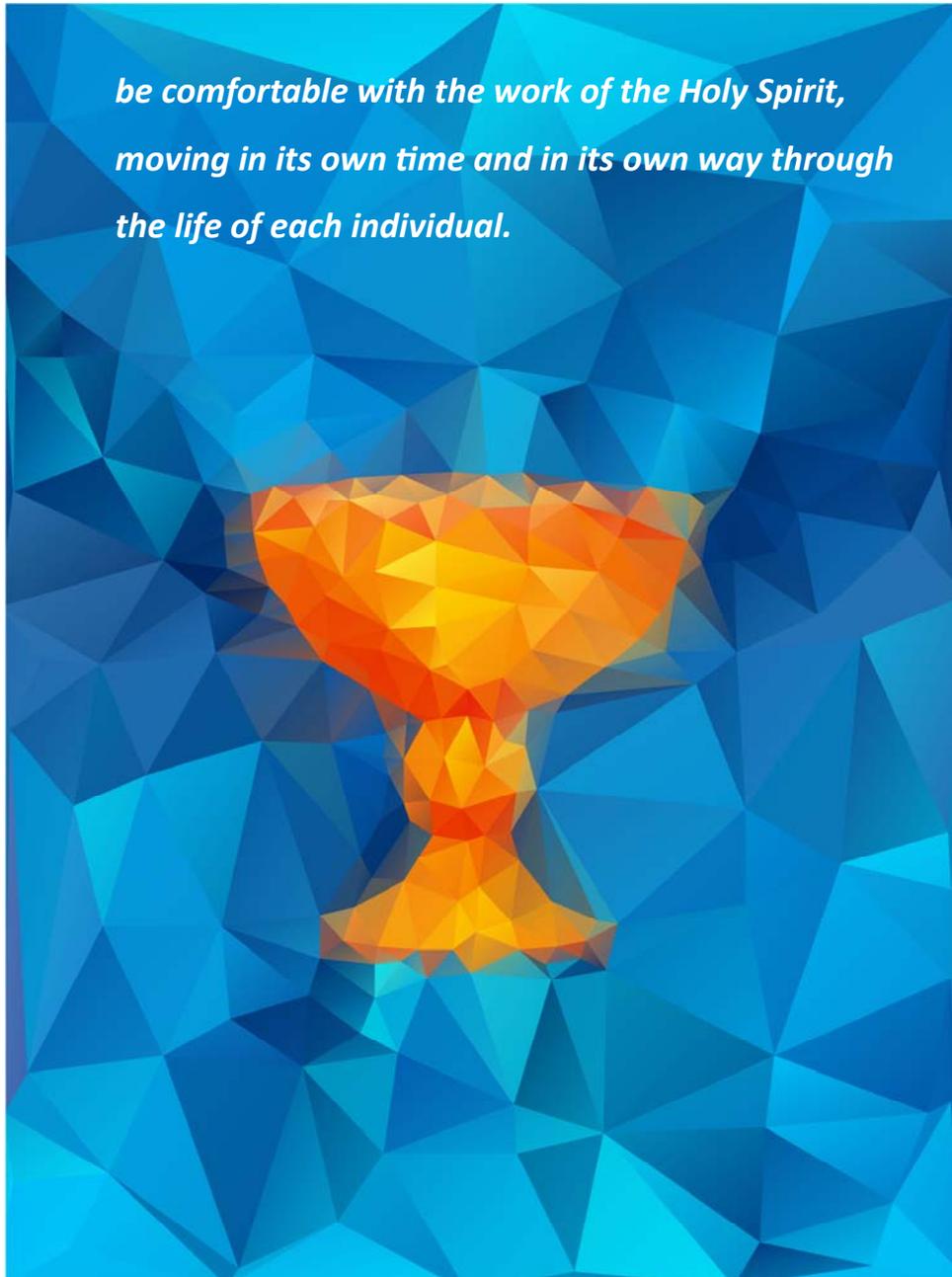
**Envoi**

A mother, whose children were going through the process of being admitted, spoke of her own experience, saying:

I became a Christian on a Pathfinder camp. I went through being admitted and then went through confirmation lessons at 16, wasn't confirmed, and then was confirmed later on as an adult – but I think I understand that process well and I haven't got a problem with that process because God's been with me throughout that journey, so for me there's lots of positives there because it drew me into a church and ... into the faith, and I'm comfortable with that.

A final, overarching recommendation, reflecting a thread woven throughout this study, is that parishes should

*be comfortable with the work of the Holy Spirit,  
moving in its own time and in its own way through  
the life of each individual.*



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A rare exception is provided by Nick Harding's case-study based chapter in Harding, N and Millar, S. (2015). *Ready to Share One Bread: Preparing children for Holy Communion*. London: SPCK. Pages 89-91. Peter Reiss also briefly discusses 'parish responses to the practice' in a section of his 2015 Grove Booklet *Infants and Children: Baptism and Communion*. Cambridge: Grove Books.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 9: 33-37 (cf Matthew 18: 1-5; Luke 9: 46-48) and Mark 10: 14, 15 (cf Matthew 19: 14; Luke 18: 16, 17).

<sup>3</sup> The Child Theology Movement highlights this interpretation of these passages. See White, K. J. and Willmer, H. (2006). *An Introduction to Child Theology*. London: Child Theology Movement.

<sup>4</sup> Lake, S. (2006). *Let the Children Come to Communion*. London: SPCK. Page 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 3 for the Model Policy supplied to churches seeking permission to admit.

<sup>6</sup> Key Stage 2 – children in the junior school years.

<sup>7</sup> Key Stage 3 – children in the first three years of secondary schooling.

<sup>8</sup> Diocesan Good Practice guidelines and Safeguarding requirements were observed whenever children were involved.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 2 for details of the procedures for interviews with adults and discussions with children.

<sup>10</sup> Dixon, S. 'Teaching, Fellowship and the Breaking of Bread' in *Ready to Share One Bread*. Pages 81-88.

<sup>11</sup> Responses to a recent questionnaire distributed to admitting parishes in Manchester Diocese showed that reasons for seeking permission to admit involved ethos (fellowship), theological issues (teaching – adults), and children's nurture (teaching – children). Reiss, P. *Infants and Children: Baptism and Communion*.

<sup>12</sup> A point made by Bishop Michael Perham in his chapter 'Why it matters: a brief theology of children and the Eucharist' in *Ready to Share One Bread*. Page 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Mounstephen, P. and Martin, K. (2004). *Body Beautiful? Recapturing a vision for all-age Church*. Cambridge: Grove.

<sup>14</sup> See Moore, L (2006). *Messy Church: Fresh ideas for building a Christ-centred community*. Oxford: BRF and [www.messychurch.org.uk](http://www.messychurch.org.uk)

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 10: 8 – New Living Translation.

<sup>16</sup> 1 John 4: 10

<sup>17</sup> Vickery, S, Coster, C and Lunt, J. (2008). *Experience Easter: An interactive way to explore the Easter story with children*. Gloucester: Diocese of Gloucester.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, one of the participants in another interview *did* express the wish that she had been ‘confirmed younger’. However, this seemed to be because she had wanted the depth of teaching associated with confirmation classes during her childhood – a need that would perhaps have been fulfilled by preparation for admission.

<sup>19</sup> For Westerhoff, ‘owned faith’ could only come about after a period of ‘searching’ during which an individual asks questions, and makes up their own mind about their beliefs. See, Westerhoff, J. H. III. (1976, 2000, 2012). *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Harrisburgh PA: Morehouse Publishing.

<sup>20</sup> A stage at which an individual takes on the common practices of their faith community as an expression of belonging. See Westerhoff, J. H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

<sup>21</sup> Their church uses Eucharistic Prayer H – *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*. (2000). London: Church House Publishing.

<sup>22</sup> One question asked if this was possible. In Canon Law, it is not.

<sup>23</sup> What Would Jesus Do?

<sup>24</sup> The Regulations currently in force in the Diocese of Manchester set an indicative minimum age of 11 for confirmation, but allow for younger confirmations at the discretion of the confirming bishop.

<sup>25</sup> Diocese of Manchester *Admission of Children to Holy Communion: Revised Regulations* (1988, 2006, 2012)

<sup>26</sup> Reputedly an African proverb – the phrase gained wide currency through Hillary Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village: And other lessons children teach us*. (1996). New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>27</sup> See Csinos, D. M. (2011). *Children’s Ministry that Fits: Beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to nurturing children’s spirituality*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.

<sup>28</sup> With thanks to Mary Hawes for suggestions regarding the questions.

<sup>29</sup> With thanks to Angela Cooper for help in shaping the outline.

<sup>30</sup> See Berryman, J. W. (2009). *Teaching Godly Play: How to mentor the spiritual development of children*. Denver (USA): Morehouse Educational Resources and [www.godlyplay.org](http://www.godlyplay.org)

# Appendix 1 – Action Guide<sup>28</sup>

How might a parish use the *Growing Disciples* report?

- ◆ Read and study it
- ◆ Respond to the questions below
- ◆ Form an action plan

The Guide follows the headings of the Research Findings and uses quotations from participants – adults in the first two sections and children in the last. Each section has two questions. The first explores the issue – churches that have not yet applied for permission to admit baptized children to communion would find this helpful in their discussions. The second suggests actions parishes that have adopted the practice might take to make the most of its potential for growth in discipleship.

## 1. Fellowship

### Church ethos

*Speaking as a parent of children who have been admitted to communion before they came here I was obviously delighted that that was already in place here. If we'd come with the girls into a congregation where children weren't admitted to communion then I'd have felt awkward (page 13).*

- ◆ What effect does the admission of baptized children to communion have on the image of a church?
- ◆ What will you do to publicise the fact that your church welcomes baptized children to communion?

### Building community

*Because [of] the breakdown of family units, some people would suggest that you should shy away from using the word 'family communion', but we use it because we think we're modelling something bigger and better – that we are ... God's family (page 14).*

- ◆ How is the word 'family' used and understood by your congregation and society?
- ◆ What will you do to demonstrate 'something bigger and better – that we are God's family'?

## Inter-generational relations

*It's nice to see young people willing to commit to something. When you hear so many stories about young people not caring, being kind of ruffians or hooligans or whatever you want to call them these days ... there's a sense of hopefulness, there's a sense that something good is happening (page 17).*

- ◆ Where are the opportunities, in and beyond worship, for generations to be together in your church?
- ◆ What will you do to create places where young and old can listen to and learn from each other?

## 2. Teaching – Adults' Understanding

### Communion

*When we get to think we understand [communion] completely, we're missing the point, because it's so awesome (page 18).*

*Jesus left us a meal, not a book (page 19).*

- ◆ In what different ways can we 'understand' communion?
- ◆ What will you do to help the whole congregation think and learn more about Holy Communion?

### Confirmation

*It takes confirmation much more seriously to actually look at an older age, really. I think there's a risk that it actually devalues confirmation to do it too early (page 25).*

- ◆ How might confirmation be 'devalued' by doing it too early in someone's life?
- ◆ What will you do to help the whole congregation think and learn more about Christian commitment and confirmation?

### Faith development

*If [parent and carers] help their children to discover more about faith by their own faith then that*

*lays a really good foundation and for some I hope it's a challenge to them and a mission opportunity (cf page 25).*

Where are there possibilities in your congregation for parents and children to talk about faith together?

What will you do to make preparation for admission a 'mission opportunity' among families?

### **3. Teaching – Children's Understanding**

#### **Motivation**

*[Being admitted] shows how serious you are about your religion and it shows that you're committed and you don't just go, like your parents want you to. You don't just go to get into a school. You go because you want to and you respect and understand the religion (page 41).*

- ◆ How do members of your church demonstrate their commitment?
- ◆ What will you do to involve children more in the everyday life and decision making of your church?

#### **Responses**

*When the person is there with the bread and the wine, standing there in front of you and says, 'This is the body and blood of Jesus. He died for you and this is yours from him,' ... it makes you feel special – like you're looked at by God (page 42).*

- ◆ When are congregation members able to share how they feel about communion?
- ◆ What will you do to help communicants of all ages share their experiences of receiving communion?

#### **Faith journey**

*Cos you're actually doing it [receiving communion], you sometimes feel like you can relate to the words like more than you could when you were just getting a blessing (page 41).*

- ◆ In what ways does your church encourage its members to recognise faith as a journey?
- ◆ What will you do to help people make the connections between baptism, communion, confirmation and living out their faith in everyday life?

## Note

The importance and benefits of including all ages are themes throughout the research findings. In the light of this, consider how you could involve the young members of your congregation in forming your action plan. The Church of England's *Learn to Listen* website offers a wealth of suggestions to help with children's participation: [www.learn-to-listen.org.uk](http://www.learn-to-listen.org.uk)

## Appendix 2 – Research Procedures

This appendix gives the two interview schedules used with the adults groups, and the session plan used with the children's interview groups. The interview schedules were not used as scripts, and the questions were put in a more conversational style which differed on each occasion.

### ADULT GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 1

#### Eucharistic Ministers

- ◆ How does your church mark the occasion of children's admission to communion? How do you feel on such occasions?
- ◆ How do you feel when you give communion to 'admitted' children? What, if any, has been the effect of their admission on your relationship with these children in general?
- ◆ What, if any, has been the effect of children being admitted to communion before confirmation on your feelings about and understanding of the Eucharist?
- ◆ How does your church approach the issue of establishing children's personal wish to be admitted? What have you discerned as the kinds of motivation the children have for wanting to receive?
- ◆ If you were involved in the preparation process, what was your experience of that?
- ◆ What next – what continuing nurture is in place for 'admitted' children? Has there been any discernible effect on their relationship with church?
- ◆ Have any 'admitted' children been presented for confirmation, or indicated an interest in it for the future?
- ◆ What effect, if any, do you feel the children's admission to communion has had on congregational life?
- ◆ Do you detect any confusion in the minds of the congregation regarding the distinction between admission and confirmation?
- ◆ Would you recommend the practice of admitting baptized children to communion before confirmation to other ministers? Why or why not?

- ◆ Are there any other comments you would like to make on the practice and the effect it has had on you and your church?

## ADULT GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE 2

### Combined Adult Group: Children's Ministry Team, Families, Congregation

- ◆ Do you remember the last time that a group of children was admitted to communion at your church? How did you feel? How have you felt on such occasions in the past? How did you feel when your child was admitted?
- ◆ What effect, if any, do you feel children's admission to communion has had on them generally, on their faith, and on their relationship with church?
- ◆ What, if any, do you think has been the effect of children being admitted to communion before confirmation on your own faith journey?
- ◆ How do you feel when you receive communion alongside 'admitted' children? What, if any, has been the effect of their admission on your relationship with 'admitted' children? Has it had an impact on discussions in your family about faith matters?
- ◆ What, if any, has been the effect of children being admitted to communion before confirmation on your feelings about and understanding of the Eucharist?
- ◆ How does your church and/or family approach the issue of establishing children's personal wish to be admitted? What have you discerned as the kinds of motivation the children have for wanting to receive?
- ◆ Have any children ever chosen not to be admitted? If so, at what stage in the process and why?
- ◆ Have there been any families that have chosen not to participate? If so, what reasons did they give? Did that cause any disagreement between parents and children?
- ◆ Were you involved in the preparation of the children for admission? If so, what was your experience of that?
- ◆ What next – what continuing nurture is in place for 'admitted' children? Has there been any discernible effect on their relationship with church? What do the children feel about confirmation? What do you feel about it?

- ◆ What effect, if any, do you feel the children’s admission to communion has had on congregational life as a whole? Do you detect any confusion in the minds of the congregation regarding the distinction between admission and confirmation?
- ◆ Do you remember the process of deciding whether to ask for the bishop’s permission to admit baptized children to communion? What were your views at the time? Have they changed in the light of experience? If so, how and why?
- ◆ Would you recommend the practice of admitting baptized children to communion before confirmation to other churches? To other families? Why or why not?
- ◆ Are there any other comments you would like to make on the practice and the effect it has had on you, your family, or your church?

## CHILDREN’S ACTIVITY SCHEDULE

### Session Outline<sup>29</sup>

A Godly Play<sup>30</sup> style presentation of the communion service is given by the interviewer, reflecting the practice the children are used to at their church (see script below).

- ◆ The presentation is followed by open ‘wondering’ questions on the communion service (see script below).
- ◆ The children are asked to describe the sequence of events involved in receiving communion at their church.
- ◆ The children are asked to talk about how they feel at each point in the sequence they have outlined, using a sheet of ‘emoticons’ (stylised faces showing different emotions) as an aid if required.
- ◆ The children are invited to sequence some key sections from the Eucharistic prayer used at their church and asked if there are any words or phrases – in the sections they have sequenced, or elsewhere in the communion service – that they particularly like or feel are important.

In one, smaller group of KS3 children, the discussion prompts above were used without the activities as this seemed more appropriate to the ethos of the group.

## Godly Play Presentation and 'Wondering' Questions

The presenter's actions are given in italics and script in plain type. The script was adhered to. Where the liturgy is quoted, the words used in the children's church were used.

*Spread out a corporal, as a 'story cloth' on which all the other artefacts will be placed*

Sometimes at church we have a special service called communion. At a communion service, after we have listened to a reading from the Bible and heard someone talk about it;

*Place a Bible on one edge of the cloth. (The edge nearest the presenter is left free, throughout)*

after we've all said together that we believe in God and said some prayers;

*Place a prayer book on a second edge of the cloth*

After we've sung some songs;

*Place a hymn book on the third edge of the cloth*

After we've shaken hands to share The Peace of the Lord – then the priest goes to the special table.

On the table the priest spreads a special white cloth, then puts a special cup and a special plate on the cloth.

*Place a chalice and paten on the story cloth*

The priest puts some bread on the plate – enough for everyone.

*Count those present, then count out enough wafers onto the plate*

Then the priest pours out enough wine for everyone, and mixes a little water with it.

*Pour red juice and water into the chalice*

The priest holds up the bread and wine, and says to God, 'All things come from you and of your own do we give you.'

*Hold up the vessels*

The priest tells the story of a night, long ago, when Jesus had supper with his friends, telling how he broke bread and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body which is given for you.' And how he gave them wine to drink saying, 'this is my blood which is shed for you.' And how Jesus said to his friends, as they ate and drank, 'Do this in remembrance of me.'

When this story has been told, the priest breaks the bread and says, 'We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.' Then the bread and wine are shared with the people.

*Break the bread*

When the people have been to the special table more songs are sung and prayers are said. The priest blesses the people then says, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' And everyone replies, 'In the name of Christ. Amen.'

Now I wonder –

I wonder what part of the communion service you like best

I wonder what part is the most important part

I wonder if we could leave anything out and still have everything we need

I wonder how eating the bread and drinking the wine makes you feel

I wonder if a person can have communion on their own

I wonder why Jesus said, 'this is my body' and 'this is my blood'

I wonder what the disciples thought when Jesus talked about giving his body and blood for them

I wonder what you think when you hear the story of the Last Supper

## Appendix 3

# Manchester Diocesan Model Parish Policy for Admission of Baptized Children to Communion before Confirmation

### THE CHILD

The incumbent must be satisfied that the child has been baptized.

The incumbent must be satisfied that a person having parental responsibility for the child is content that the child be admitted to Communion before Confirmation. A sponsor(s) for the child will be appointed if no adult with parental responsibility attends church. The requirements of the Parish Child Protection Policy will apply in the selection of sponsors.

It must be clear that the child him/herself wishes to receive.

The age for admission will depend on the child's appreciation of the significance of the sacrament. The Bishop has directed that the age for admission should be at the discretion of the parish priest, but advises that in the case of particularly young children, guidance should be sought from the Diocesan Children's Work Officer.

### THE PREPARATION

Clear information about the preparation process and the implications of children's admission to Communion will be made available to the child and family before the preparation is entered into.

It will be made clear how many sessions there will be, how long they will be, and where they will be held.

The preparation programme will be *[insert programme title or details]*.

The incumbent will be involved, together with *[insert details]*. The Parish Child Protection Policy procedure will be followed in selecting those who work with children and the conduct of sessions.

Attempts will be made to involve parents/carers in the preparation, and families will be supported as well as children during this period.

The preparation will usually be separate from any other groups or work with children.

## ADMISSION TO COMMUNION

The admission to Communion will be marked by *[insert details]*. Where possible the family will be involved.

A register of all children admitted to Communion will be kept and will be made available to the archdeacon in the course of the quinquennial inspection. Children admitted to Communion will be given certificates recording the date and place of their first admission, and if possible have their Baptism Certificates endorsed with the same information.

During Communion services, child communicants will be expected to be present for at least the Eucharistic prayer before they receive.

Families and children will be made aware that they might experience difficulties if they move to another area where children are not admitted to Communion before Confirmation. The incumbent will provide a letter of commendation to the incumbent of a parish to which a family is moving, or is going on holiday asking for the child to be admitted to Communion in accordance with General Synod Regulations (2006).

## CONTINUING NURTURE

Continuing nurture and support will be provided for children and families after admission to Communion by *[insert details]*.

If possible, parents/carers will be involved in the ongoing nurture.

It will be made clear to children and their families that there is an expectation that the child be prepared for Confirmation in due course.

## THE POLICY

This policy was approved by the PCC at its meeting on *[insert date]*.

There will be an annual review of the policy and the materials used, and a report will be made to the appropriate Suffragan Bishop by the incumbent.

## WITHDRAWAL

If at any time the parish wishes formally to cease participation in the admission of children to Communion before Confirmation, permission to withdraw from the scheme will be sought from

the Diocesan Bishop. The request for this permission will be in the form of a PCC resolution, accompanied by voting figures, and will have been preceded by consultation involving incumbent, PCC, children's leaders, the wider church community, and the Diocesan Children's Officer.

Arrangements will be made for the pastoral support and continuing nurture of any young people who, at the time of withdrawal, have already been admitted to Communion but have not yet been presented for Confirmation.

*The above model embodies the requirements of the Diocese of Manchester Regulations (1988, amended 2006 and 2012) and the General Synod Regulations (2006). Its provisions therefore represent a minimum requirement. Parishes may add to or re-express the points in the model policy, but to remove any of them would mean that the parish policy was not in accordance with Diocesan and/or General Synod Regulations.*

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## Further Reading

Colin Buchanan (1990). *Children in Communion*. Cambridge: Grove Books.

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