

8.2 Frequently Asked Questions

Will the children understand what they are doing when they take Communion?

Children are certainly able to understand the origin and specialness of sharing the bread and wine. A deeper understanding of the mystery of the sacrament is a lifetime's work for *all* of us, and one that will never be complete however old we are. The important point to consider is whether we ought to view taking Communion as a 'prize' which we win by reaching an arbitrary "level" of understanding or whether we should see it as a free, gracious and unconditional gift from God.

Will they take it seriously?

Children respond to the mood and atmosphere around them. The vast majority of children will take their lead from the way the adult members of the congregation behave as they receive the bread and wine. Receiving Communion is a very powerful moment, and the power is certainly not lost on children – in fact they have openness to the Holy which many adults find it hard to recapture.

How will the vicar know who can receive?

A record must be kept of all the children who have been admitted to Communion before Confirmation, and the parish clergy will have been involved in preparing the children for admission. There should not, therefore, be a difficulty in knowing which children should receive. Children should be encouraged to give a clear signal, such as raising their hands, to show that they receive Communion.

What happens if a family moves to a parish which doesn't admit?

When the admission of children to Communion before Confirmation began to be introduced, a major concern was that there would be problems if a child who had been admitted moved to a parish that didn't admit. In practice, this has not proved to be a difficulty: the incumbent of the parish in which the child has been admitted simply provides a letter to their new incumbent requesting that they continue to receive Communion. The principle, supported by the House of Bishops, is that no one who has been admitted to receiving the sacrament should ever subsequently be denied it.

What about Confirmation?

Confirmation has traditionally been given two meanings: as a 'gateway' to receiving Communion; and as an act of adult commitment to the faith. For those confirmed at 11, 12 or 13, the second of these meanings has rarely worked. After all, there are no other 'adult' responsibilities, such as voting, driving, getting married, which can be taken up at such an early age. But if it is no longer linked to receiving Communion, Confirmation can take place much later, at a time which is far more appropriate for an adult act of commitment.

What about children who are not baptised?

No one who is not baptised can be admitted to receive Holy Communion. If an unbaptised child wishes to be prepared for admission then they must be baptised before they are admitted. Their

Baptism could form part of the preparation programme. However, it is important to consult fully with the family beforehand to make sure that they are willing for the Baptism to take place.

What if children do not want to be admitted to Communion before they are confirmed?

Consent is vital at all levels in admitting children to Communion. No one must feel that they are being forced into the practice. The parish as a whole must be supportive, and so must any family whose children are going to be involved. But most important, the individual children must make a free choice to be admitted. It may well be that some children in a particular church ask to be prepared for admission, and some do not.

What happens if everyone doesn't agree to the change?

It is rare to have complete agreement on any development in the Church – or any other large organisation for that matter. It is not necessary to have 100% agreement in the parish for admission to go ahead; however, there should be substantial support. Admission should not be a practice that disappears from the life of a parish if the vicar or a few enthusiastic families move elsewhere. For this reason the Bishop will want to see the voting figures when a PCC agrees to go forward with admission, and will want to see a reasonable majority in favour before granting permission

Historical development in the Church of England

Issues surrounding the admission of children to Communion before Confirmation are not new! Here is a quick flick through the past....

The Early Church

There is no explicit mention of any special approach to baptism in the New Testament. Children were included with the family and household and initiated into the faith with the adults. Nor is there any mention of any baptised members being excluded from the celebration of the Eucharist. The image we have of the early church enjoying Holy Communion together is that the sharing of bread and wine was part of a family meal open to all members of the church and their families of all ages.

For children, as for anyone else, membership of the church was by baptism and depended on participation in the Eucharist.

The Medieval Period

During this period, baptism, confirmation and communion came to be seen as separate events for a variety of reasons.

Augustine's doctrine of "original sin" encouraged the early baptism of infants to secure their future in heaven. Up until this period the bishop was the minister of baptism and the rite included the laying on of hands. As dioceses grew in size, visits from the bishop became infrequent, so local ministers performed the baptism with water and the signing of the cross. The laying on of hands at confirmation came later with the bishop's visit. Admission to communion was still through baptism.

In the eleventh century controversy arose about Eucharistic presence. A by-product of this was that the Church withheld the bread from children. Later it decided to withhold the cup from all lay people, so children had no way of receiving communion at all.

1281 Archbishop Peckham at the Council of Lambeth issued a regulation that those not confirmed (without good reason) should be barred from communion.

The Reformation

Cranmer's Prayer Book of 1549 stated that "there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he can say the catechism and be confirmed". This emphasised instruction and understanding the faith with personal salvation and commitment. Catechism classes before confirmation were not offered to small children. Thus Anglicans inherited the belief that children could not be admitted to communion until they had been instructed and confirmed.

The Twentieth Century

1969 Ely Commission was asked to reconsider questions of initiation. Its report "Christian Initiation: Birth and Growth in the Christian Society" (CIO 1971) concluded that baptism is complete sacramental initiation and that adults and children should be admitted to Holy Communion on that basis. This report was referred to dioceses.

1976 General Synod decided not to proceed to a change in the admission of Children to communion with a 60:40 majority.

1983 a working party was commissioned, resulting in the Knaresborough Report "Children and Communion" (CIO 1983). It recommended the drawing up and approval of regulations for the admission of baptised people to Holy Communion. This was not endorsed by General Synod.

1993 Culham College Institute report "Communion before Confirmation" in three 'experimental' dioceses of Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark found a substantial majority of the parishes were "convinced of the positive value of admitting children before confirmation".

1995 On the Way report encouraged parishes to review their patterns of initiation. One of the options was admission of children to communion at an earlier age, whilst reserving confirmation as a rite of adult commitment.

1996 House of Bishops Guidelines welcomed by Synod. Since 1997 parishes in the Diocese of Southwell have been encouraged to look at the issue, and to date (05/06) 56 churches admit children to Communion before Confirmation.

2005 House of Bishops debate a proposed change to Canon Law in order to normalise the current process of 'Admission of Baptised Children to Communion before Confirmation'.

February 2006. New Regulations, very similar to the previous Guidelines were approved by General Synod which came into effect on 15 June 2006. These form Canon B15A (see p 8-10)

July 2011. New Eucharistic Liturgies, *particularly suitable where many children are present*, were approved by General Synod having been submitted by the Liturgical Commission, after 2 years of work and review by the House of Bishops.