

Children and Holy Communion



*An Ecumenical Consideration
amongst Churches in
Britain and Ireland*

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British Council of Churches Consultative Group
on Ministry among Children

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Contents

Introduction

1	Why is 'Children and Holy Communion' an important question now?	1
2	Some issues raised.	5
3	Some discoveries (in the form of stories).	13
4	Implications for worship.	22
5	How to prepare your church and your children for Holy Communion.	26
6	Conclusion.	28
7	Resources available.	32
	Appendix: What have the churches said?	36
	Members of the Working Party.	49
	List of Bodies Affiliated to the CGMC.	51

Introduction

Many churches and individual Christians today are considering the question of whether and how children might participate more fully in what is for many the central act of the Church's worship, holy communion.

For some there is no issue here. On the one hand are those whose tradition has always assumed that baptised children are part of the eucharistic community. On the other are those who link the reception of bread and wine at communion with a person's faith commitment, made in mature years. Somewhere in between are those whose tradition has suggested that receiving communion should be dependent on one's ability to understand, but who also see communion as a sign of God's undeserved grace, available to all who are open to accept it.

How you react to the suggestion of children receiving communion depends on what you believe about communion, about baptism, about the nature of faith, about the church, about children . . .

It is a theological matter and an educational one. It is also one in which prejudice may well play a part.

The aim of this book and its accompanying leaflets is to show how different churches in Britain and Ireland respond to the question of the participation of children at communion. What do the churches think? What have they said or written? What is their practice?

We hope that bringing together this material into one place will help churches in their ongoing thought, discussion and action.

Foreword

'How can children participate more fully in Holy Communion?' is not a simple question. In recent years it has become a live issue in many churches for a number of reasons: the central place of holy communion in the life of many local churches; fresh discussion of the patterns of Christian initiation; our understanding of how faith develops; the experience of the Church as a community; our understanding of how people learn; requests from both children and parents; and our awareness of different practices within and between denominations.

The Consultative Group on Ministry among Children has found that the question of children's participation in holy communion quite properly raises a large number of other questions. It has taken account of the long experience of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches in this area. It has shown that theological, pastoral and educational factors need to be considered carefully in order to promote the case for children receiving communion.

I warmly commend this ecumenical consideration of *Children and Holy Communion* as a helpful and informative starting-point for further discussion, particularly among those who need to make pastoral decisions locally or nationally in denominational or ecumenical settings.

Revd Dr Philip Morgan

1 Why is 'Children and Holy Communion' an Important Issue Now?

Within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches it is long established practice for children to receive holy communion. By contrast, the tradition in most Protestant churches has been, on the whole, that holy communion is for those who have shown they understand its significance and have made some act of Christian commitment (through confirmation, reception into membership or adult baptism). If children have been present at communion services they have not shared the bread and wine. In practice, in many churches it has been rare for children to be present – so the issue may not even have been raised.

However, in recent years the suggestion that children should participate more fully at holy communion has been discussed as a matter of priority by many denominations and local churches.

There is a variety of reasons, not least that children are more likely nowadays to be present when holy communion is celebrated. In addition, understanding of the child's place in the Church has developed in a way which makes it appropriate to ask whether children who are present at holy communion should be onlookers only or participants. This needs to be considered both theologically and from an educational standpoint.

A number of significant trends and developments can be noted, all of which have contributed to the growth of interest in the place of children at holy communion.

1. **Communion in the life of the church.** As the result of a revived interest in liturgy, holy communion has become a more central part of the worshipping life of many congregations. It happens more frequently and, when it does happen, it is likely to be the major service of the day (rather than an early morning 'extra' or something 'tacked on at the end' of a preaching service.

Modern communion liturgies include greater congregational participation (sharing the Peace, reading Bible passages, leading prayers, etc.) When people are more actively involved, questions are raised when certain members of the community are excluded at the climax of the service.

All this is set within the context of a general move towards fuller participation by children in the Church's worship. They are not merely observers

of an adult activity. When children are present, many churches seek to ensure that worship is meaningful to and involves all ages. A common pattern is for some of the time to be spent with all ages together and some in separate age groups. Where this is the practice, many churches also provide regular occasions when young and old share together all of the time (e.g. family services, parades, festivals). There is also a growing number of churches experimenting with their use of Sunday and developing new patterns of all age worship and learning.

2. **The debate on Christian initiation.** In recent years there has been much discussion on questions relating to Christian initiation. This has been given added weight by the publication of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission's Lima Report, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, and the responses of churches to that document. Much of the discussion has centred around the question of what makes a person a member of the Christian community. What is the significance of baptism, chrismation, confirmation, thanksgiving, dedication and other rites? If baptism makes a person a member of the Christian community, then what additional qualification is needed to participate in communion?

3. **Faith development.** Our understanding of how faith develops has led us to see that children do not have to wait until a certain age or educational level before they can have a meaningful faith.

When an invitation at holy communion is made to 'draw near with faith', a child may well feel able to respond. In some churches the invitation is to 'those who love the Lord Jesus Christ'. A child is just as capable of loving Jesus as is an adult. Who is to say the communion invitation is not for such a child?

In the Free Churches, which have traditionally had an 'open table', full membership of the Church is not always a precondition for receiving the elements at holy communion. How is the practice of the 'open table' to be interpreted when children are present?

4. **The Church as community.** In recent years there has been a renewed emphasis on the nature of the Church as a community. Christian faith is not individualistic. How Christians treat each other and relate to each other in the church community is vitally important. The idea that some members of the community should be excluded from its central activity is not easy to accept.

One way in which the church is experienced as community is in church family days, residential conferences, etc. Such occasions often end with a

celebration of holy communion in which all those attending, whatever their age, fully participate. This creates an added tension when the children are not able to participate in holy communion when it occurs as part of the church's normal Sunday worship.

5. **How we learn.** Developments in our understanding of how people learn have had their repercussions within the life of the church. Christian faith is not just a body of knowledge to be received, but involves the experience of being part of the community of faith. Learning about holy communion happens best as a child shares with the rest of the Christian community as it celebrates the sacrament.
6. **Demand from children.** At one time, children were to be 'seen and not heard', but today they play a more 'vocal' and less subservient role in society at large. This is reflected in church life. When children are present at holy communion but excluded from receiving the elements, they are likely to ask why. If they are invited to receive a 'blessing', this may increase their involvement but make the distinction between themselves and adults even more obvious. If mother and father receive bread and wine but the child only receives a 'pat on the head', there are some children who will ask 'why?'

Many churches find they start to 'lose' children at around the age of ten. There may be many reasons for this. It can be argued that it is less likely to occur where children are fully involved in the life and worship of the church community.

The major reason for taking seriously what children have to say in church life is not the fear of losing them, but our understanding of their rightful place within the Christian community. The studies of Hans-Ruedi Weber and others have helped give expression to a new 'theology of childhood' in which children are regarded and respected in their own right, for what and who they are now, rather than as 'the church of tomorrow'.

7. **Demand from parents.** Some parents are quite happy to explain to their children the traditional reasons why reception of bread and wine at holy communion has been reserved until the attainment of a certain age or status. Others (an increasing number) are not. When their child asks 'why?' such parents respect and echo the question.

As churches increasingly invite families to share in worship together, more parents have reflected on the experience of being present when their children either receive a blessing or sit and observe whilst only adults receive bread and wine.

Some parents say this whole question is too important for them to be left to make up their own minds. 'I need my church to help me!'

8. **A need for common practice.** In some churches, children do receive the bread and wine. When such children attend a different church (on holiday, or when their family moves home) they may find they are refused the elements. This creates its own problems – and argues for a more common understanding and practice throughout the churches.

Linked with this is the experience where there are American or Canadian Service personnel living nearby. Here again, there is often the expectation that children will be welcome to receive bread and wine.

9. **The Ecumenical scene.** In Local Ecumenical Projects, where one tradition encourages children to receive communion and another doesn't, the question of children and holy communion has an added poignancy.

As well as practical questions arising in local churches, the wider ecumenical scene means that Christians have become more aware of the beliefs, practices and traditions of others. For some Protestants it has come as a revelation to discover that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches administer communion to children.

2 Some Issues Raised

There is no clear and unequivocal Biblical statement as to whether or not children should receive holy communion. The issue arose in the later development of the Church and the response to it has differed at different times and from one place to another.

In the early Church it was not uncommon to administer the wine to babies by putting a drop on the tongue or by letting the baby suck a piece of bread soaked in wine. When in the Western Medieval Church the wine came to be denied worshippers and reserved for the priest only, this had the effect of excluding very young children, who were not able to eat the bread anyway.

The (still current) Orthodox practice of initiating a child into full communicant membership of the Christian community gave way in the West to an emphasis on 'understanding' and the requirement that a person should have attained an 'age of reason' (thought by some to be seven years). One element of Reformation thought and practice stressed a normative pattern of conversion (i.e. that a Christian is one who first hears the Gospel, then makes a mature and personal response to it in repentance and faith, is baptised, admitted to membership of the Church and receives communion.) This meant children were denied the sacrament because they were not seen as ready to hear the Gospel and make a mature response to it.

Mainstream churches of the Reformation (Lutheran, Calvinist...) tended to separate baptism and confirmation. Communion was normally to follow admission into membership after confirmation.

Amongst all the Reformers, 'discerning the body' (1 Corinthians 11) was held to be important. The capacity to 'judge' was seen to be beyond the capability of children. (It is interesting that no such stipulation was laid down about baptism, except among the Baptists.) The growing emphasis on 'hearing for oneself', on 'understanding', the stress on a biblically based religion, the printing of the Bible in the language of the people, the emergence of adult responsibility and the not infrequent social demands made on believers with the consequent separation from the State Church and the State itself, placed children beyond the recognised bounds of the faith until they had reached the age of understanding.

The rise of the Sunday School movement served to confirm the view that children are outside the scope of membership of the Church and therefore its full life until they are old enough to become 'Christian' later on. The Sunday School was seen as a preparation ground where children would be taught the faith until they reached the age of understanding, when they would embrace

it for themselves. Then, after becoming full members of the church and/or confirming their baptismal vows, they would begin to participate in holy communion.

1. Patterns in Church History – the link between baptism and communion

Initiation into most church communities is by baptism. However, there are differences of doctrine and practice over when this should occur in a person's life and what the consequences of baptism are.

- (a) Some churches maintain the unity of baptism and communion in time. Here, the two 'extremes' of the spectrum of Church attitudes to children are reflected. For the Orthodox, baptism (followed by Chrismation) and communion are part of the one act of initiation for a child. For Baptists, the pattern is similar: the two are inseparable as a norm but delayed until the age of understanding. The unity of the two sacraments or ordinances is maintained.
- (b) For some, baptism is necessary for admission to communion, but there is delay between the two acts. This has been the common practice for Anglicans, Roman Catholics and most of the Free Churches. Infants would be baptised and then not admitted to communion until preparation for first communion, confirmation of baptismal vows or reception into membership had taken place. Some delay was necessary because of the importance of 'discerning the Body' and the need for personal renewal with a certain moral responsibility. In some traditions, penance was a vital and necessary element in the admission to communion and another reason why baptism and communion were separated in time.

There was great stress on preparation as a vital element in the process between baptism and admission to communion. It is interesting how the stages in the process (baptism at birth, confirmation at development of age of reason, need for understanding, ability to confess and repent, and the admission to the membership life of the Church) have not only a clear theological progression, but also a cultural, 'rites of passage' significance.

- (c) In some churches, particularly in the Free Church tradition, baptism and communion were sometimes separated both in time and in practice. Persons sometimes participated in communion without having been baptised. Some would be baptised without being admitted to Church membership. Further, some saw little or no significance in communion and did not attend. The practice of disciplining and seeing attendance at communion as a condition for continuing membership of the Church which was common among the early dissenters and separatists has dropped out in the modern period.

2. Some Basic Questions

It may be helpful merely to list some of the questions which emerge in discussions on children and holy communion.

(a) What is the status of the child in the FAITH, GOSPEL and the CHURCH?

What are the basic differences between children and adults?

How do people grow towards maturity of faith?

What is a child, and when is a child not a child?

What is the theological justification for distinguishing between child and adult in terms of faith and sacrament?

What is the role of sponsors and god-parents? How do they relate to parents and to the rest of the Church community?

Is there a distinction between the children of believers and those of non-believers?

(b) What is the nature of the relationship between FAITH, BAPTISM, CHURCH MEMBERSHIP and COMMUNION within the spirituality of each church?

Do they necessarily come in a particular order?

If the connection between them is only desirable, rather than necessary, thus resulting in exceptions, then what is the nature of the exception?

Are there grounds for permitting the unbaptised and non-member to take communion?

Does participation depend on the personal faith of the individual?

Is holy communion primarily about God's grace or an individual's response?

(c) What is the place of COMMUNION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?

Note the variety of emphases:

- the elements of bread and wine as the major focus on 'real presence'.
- the status of the believer in his/her relationship with God as important focus
- the act of eating and drinking
- the role of communion in nurturing and developing faith and commitment
- the appropriateness of alternatives for bread and wine, e.g. a blessing (What is a blessing? There is need to do some theological work on the content of blessing.)

- memorial (anamnesis) of the sacrifice of Christ – the real presence demonstrated in the believing community
- what images are being conveyed in communion? i.e. body, blood, eat, drink, eternal life, receive, fellowship.

(d) What is the appropriate INVITATION to communion?

In some churches words like ‘all who love the Lord Jesus Christ’, ‘in love and charity with neighbour’, etc. are used. Most liturgies have some words of invitation. Is the door open for children to respond to these?

Do all adult communicants fulfil the requirements of the words of invitation, or is it left to the individual?

3. Towards some answers – lines of enquiry and theological concern

Answering these questions means taking seriously five areas of theological concern: doctrine, worship, education and nurture, commitment, and childhood.

It must be said quite categorically that reasons for possible admission of children to holy communion must be clearly theological, true to the nature of the Gospel, sin, grace, faith and salvation, and not merely pragmatic and sentimental. Insights into the nature of childhood and the reality of a child’s faith must not be allowed to slip uncritically into an idealisation of childhood. There may be differences among churches about the nature of sin, both ‘original’ and ‘actual’, and some may not consider children to be sinners at all until the age when potential sin becomes active in sinning, yet there must not be any glamorising, sentimentalising or idealising of childhood.

Further, theological exposition must be true to Scripture and at the same time be critical of, and brought into dialogue with, the insights of education, sociology, psychology and the social sciences. This is a task for both systematic and applied theology.

(a) Doctrine

It is important to give a doctrinal basis for the admission or non-admission of children to communion.

First, the notion of belonging to the Church. Is communion a means of belonging, a symbol of the Body of Christ, in which age is not a determining factor? If baptism is the way of becoming a member of the church, is it a full qualification for receiving communion, or is something else needed?

Second, the nature of the sacrament of communion itself. For some the sacrament is a sign of conversion, the seal after the event, the outward sign of the inward change. For others it is a means of grace and continuing growth

in Christ and can be a converting ordinance. Others see the sacrament as central to their understanding of the faith and a major meeting point with God in our own experience. If the faith and commitment of the believer is seen to be the dominant motif, then children will probably not be admitted, but if the emphasis is on the possibility of growth or conversion, then who can deny them?

Third, Grace. The Reformers differed about whether baptism and communion were ordinances or sacraments. However, in recent years more have come to an understanding of 'sacrament', rather than merely ordinance, though there is still a wide variety of interpretation within different traditions. The Reformation stressed the unconditional nature of Grace, 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. Thus the sacrament leads to the growth of the Christian life. Although serious note is taken of the warning of ignoring the obligations of Grace, yet the sacrament is not conditioned and is for all a means of Grace.

Should children be denied the grace of God operative through the communion sacrament?

(b) Worship

The liturgical revival of the 1950s and 1960s and, more-recently, the Charismatic Movement, embraced important insights both ancient and modern. Since the second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics have used the vernacular language to celebrate mass and specific rites for children have been prepared. The view that communion is central to the worship of the people of God is now held by many Christians of all traditions. This has led to an integration of word and sacrament in a service with 'no breaks' for many Free Churches, and parish communion for Anglicans. For many it has led to the weekly celebration of communion as the main service. This emphasises the corporate nature of the liturgy, where the people are constituted as a community and not just a group of individuals. This insight into the Church as a worshipping community and the continued examination of the meaning of the Church as 'community' has led some to include children in the liturgy and the communion.

Of course, if children are to be present there are practical considerations to do with seating, noise, or fidgeting. There are also weightier matters such as which parts and how much of the liturgy shall children be exposed to. These matters duly considered, many would want to affirm that the liturgy of the sacrament is a unifying activity in which all, including children, can be involved, whereas, on educational grounds, the ministry of the word may sometimes be carried out through instruction in separate groups of various kinds. In the liturgy the responses are those appropriate to the state of faith and personal development of all and each.

(c) Education and Nurture

Careful and important distinctions have been made recently between education, instruction, training, indoctrination, socialisation and nurture. Nurture or upbringing (popularly 'Christian education') has been seen as a distinctive process with its own norms and means. A useful shorthand definition of nurture might be: 'The means and processes of Christian upbringing'. The stress is not so much on teaching the faith, as if the child came from no faith to faith by learning and understanding. It is rather on growth from faith to faith as a continual lifelong process, beginning with birth and first association with Christians in the Church in its worship and fellowship, and then continuing throughout life.

Thus the birth of the child of Christian parents and her association with the Church by family allegiance and attendance at worship place her 'in Christ' with potential continual growth in Christ. The communion service becomes an important influence in that process of growth. Such growth does not rule out in any the importance of decision making nor commitment to Christ and the Church. It has a place for personal decision-making. Yet it also recognises the many decisions that will be taken throughout the lifelong process. It places a special stress on the willingness to become a church member and the responsibilities of membership and duties within the organisation and mission of the Church.

The family is important in this nurture process. This has always been stressed in services of infant blessing, thanksgiving and dedication, and in infant baptism. Prominent in these services is the dedication of the parents to their task of bringing up their children, where Christian nurture is part and parcel of the general nurture within the family and home. Many parents see attendance at communion as part of their family identity and a source of faith renewal and growth. For some it is a means of growing with their children in the faith. Sponsors or god-parents have a role (traditionally) in this upbringing, as does the church community. Indeed, the place of the church community in this process is crucial as the congregation plays its part in supporting the family.

Finally, the stress on nurture challenges the uncritical assumption that the way to bring up children in the faith is in classes, with teachers and syllabuses and the faith as a subject to be taught like Mathematics, French or History. 'Faith is caught, not taught', requiring for its implementation and reception a community of faith, in which it is shared and lived and not reduced to a 'subject', or 'theme'. Thus nurture requires that children be present with adults in the worshipping, learning and fellowship life of the church community and this means in communion as a means of mutual growth in Grace. God is the Nurturer and all are growing in him, with his help.

(d) **Commitment**

Some in all churches have always given prominence to commitment as an essential element in the process of Christian growth. Some would see the faith as 'discipleship', with repentance, a personal and freely chosen mature response to the Gospel, and a continuing commitment in that process as all important. Traditionally, commitment is seen in terms of understanding and might be 'to Christ', 'to the process of growing up in faith', and to 'the community'.

Some traditions place less value on this notion by emphasising the institutionalization of Christianity, simply 'joining the Church'. Others see the process of initiation and incorporation as a process of religious socialisation into that which is fixed and unchanging. Some would challenge these views, stressing the importance of change, conversion, the active contribution of believers to the life and mission of the Church and the Gospel itself. However, distinctions may be made between faith and commitment, between belief in God and trusting Christ, between membership and mature, active discipling with a willingness to take the consequences of that discipleship in personal and corporate terms.

Some Christians take the view that faith and commitment are related yet distinct, and failure to recognise this will result in misunderstanding both. Children can have faith, as their prayers reveal. In some instances, children show commitment, appropriate to their understanding and status in life. There is need to distinguish forms of faith and forms of commitment. If the communion is a sacrament of commitment, then we need to state quite clearly what form that commitment must take. If the communion is a sacrament of faith, then a similar statement needs to be made. In both instances we cannot ignore the faith of a child or the commitments appropriate to childhood.

(e) **Childhood**

The 20th Century has discovered childhood, largely as a consequence of schooling as the institutionalization of learning and the separation of children from adults for that process. Social conventions and legal and public requirements have divided even childhood itself into other components and thus made life a matter of stages to pass through. Passing from one stage to another has depended largely on age and reason, with a dose of convention. Thus we have babyhood, infancy, early childhood, later childhood, adolescence (itself divided into early and late), 'teenage', young adulthood, early twenties, etc. Mostly after adolescence comes adulthood, which includes everyone over eighteen years.

Research has now challenged that way of thinking and suggests the importance of continual growth. Stages of adulthood are being looked at seriously.

Regrettably, the consequence of separating childhood from adulthood, immaturity from maturity, learning from work, schooling from life has been to down-grade childhood, making it something to grow out of and leave behind. The psychology of Freud and Jung challenges this quite severely, as does Jesus with his stress on the importance of childhood, the challenge to become like children and the use of the idea of 'child' to characterise believers.

A better insight may be that of 'personhood' in which all, irrespective of age, are in the process of becoming and developing. All persons are complete and yet always becoming. Thus a three year old is not deficient because he is only three. He makes responses to life and to God appropriate to his status as a three year old person. Thus teachers, parents and pastors are challenged not to expect the wrong and inappropriate responses from three year-olds and equally to expect the appropriate responses from older persons. Faith develops, and three year old persons can be 'in Christ' and can have faith.

Jesus sees children as models of his Kingdom. As a human being in the image of God, the child has special dignity, characterised by dependency, helpfulness, openness to the future, questioning, searching and discovering. He is a person with his own spirituality. This is not to sentimentalise childhood, nor to misconceive it in ideas of innocence or simplicity. But it does encourage adults to think of what children can give, and what children can teach about life and faith. This questions the way in which adults celebrate their faith, and ways in which God is conceived in the images which are shared and embodied in worship. If the faith and its celebration is an adult matter then that is a serious conclusion. It would mean that a whole section of human life and growth, namely the 'non-adult' is outside its scope. Children bring their own qualities and insights to faith and worship, as do the poor, the blacks, the hungry, the marginalised, the oppressed and the outcast. These insights into the nature of childhood lead many to believe that children have much to give, and participation in holy communion will enlarge the meaning of communion by the faith of children from which adults can learn.

3 Some Discoveries (In the Form of Stories)

The following stories and personal reflections show how a variety of churches have begun to resolve their questions about children and communion.

.....

‘Part of the family’

The first example comes from a Local Ecumenical Project, in which the Anglican, Methodist and United Reformed Church have joined together, with an Anglican priest and a URC minister. It is set on a large estate, and the congregation worships in a local school. The style is participative. At communion people stand in a circle (or concentric circles when numbers are large), and administer to each other round the circle. So the presence of children presented a challenge, since it was ‘I’ who had to refuse them, not just a minister on the other side of an altar rail. And because children in this church feel free to speak and are listened to, the issue became real.

So there was an initial meeting followed by two Sunday worship sessions at which the congregation talked about the issue. Some of the things said are enlightening. By no means all of the comments favoured children participating fully.

‘Who can say ‘no’ to children, for surely God in his vastness accepts all?’

‘The awe is taken away when the children join us for communion.’

‘Maybe we need to talk to them – ask them why they come to communion, especially without parents . . . We need to talk to all the children about what communion is.’

‘Surely it is not right before confirmation . . .’

‘Confirmation is no guarantee of worthiness.’

‘When I looked into her eyes I couldn’t refuse.’

At the second service, the congregation asked the question ‘What is the most important thing about the holy communion to me?’ Among the responses was this, from a mother:-

‘I have recently been challenged to think deeply about communion and what it means to me, by my children. Particularly Sarah. I have been brought up in the tradition that you don’t take communion until you have been confirmed,

and when children began to receive communion in our church I stopped my girls, wanting to continue in the tradition I was used to, and wanting confirmation to be as special and important to them as it was to me. I was asked by Sarah why I was not allowing her to take communion, and my answer was 'You do not understand'. She asked me to tell her so that she could 'understand'. I then realised that I do not understand. I feel that communion is a strengthening, from Christ, and from my fellow Christians in the communion circle. I also feel it is a personal thing, different for each person.

We pray 'I am not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table'. Was I saying to my children 'You are not worthy'? By what authority do I judge? Where do I stop judging? Do I stop at my children, or shall I judge other members of the congregation? Is my faith stronger than my daughter's because I am an adult? Thinking on these questions I have allowed my children to make their own decisions, as I ought to allow any member of our congregation to make their own decision.'

Her eleven year old daughter said:

'I wanted to take communion when Mam didn't want me to because I felt I understood. I know that the bread and wine represent his body and blood. When we take communion it helps us to understand how the disciples felt when they ate the Last Supper.

I know Mam did not want me to take communion until I was confirmed, but just because I'm not confirmed doesn't mean I'm not part of the circle. At York Minster and Holy Island it was different because I didn't take it, I felt left out. When I do take it I feel part of the family.'

.....

Asking questions

The minister of a Baptist church provides us with our second example. The discussions and study of the members, and of the worship committee in particular, led them to draw up an order of service for the Family Communion which provides for ample participation by all age groups, and which gives the children and young people a choice between receiving bread and wine and receiving a blessing. The young people had said that they did not feel ready to receive the elements, but would like to be given the choice. The minister says:

'We believe that we have combined a regular ritual, which is important to all in worship, with variety of detail and involvement of different people of all ages each time within the worship. This involvement of the lay people is very important to us now. The Praise and Adoration is led by a small group with guitar and organ. Here we are able to introduce some more modern

hymns and songs. The Old Testament reading can on some occasions be sung by a soloist with congregational responses. Whilst the offering is being taken two of the very youngest members of the congregation (3-5 years) will bring the cloth and assist the minister in laying it on the table. Along with the offering a family (mother, father and children) will bring forward the elements and three children (5-12 years) will stand at the table and ask the questions.'

The questions to which he refers are central to the order of service, and were included as a result of their study of the Jewish Passover. They are as follows:

Question: What is the purpose of this meal?

Answer: To remind us that Jesus died and rose from death that we might be freed from sin and share in God's everlasting love.

All: We remember and rejoice.

Question: Why do we eat bread?

Answer: Bread reminds us of the bread Jesus ate in the upper room with his disciples. Broken it is a sign of Jesus' suffering. We share and Jesus makes us whole.

All: We remember and rejoice.

Question: Why do we drink wine together?

Answer: The wine reminds us of the wine Jesus drank in the upper room with his disciples. Poured out it shows how Jesus gave his life for us. Drinking together shows our oneness in Jesus. We drink and Jesus makes us glad.

All: We remember and rejoice.

Minister: On the night Jesus was betrayed he took bread, he gave thanks; he broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying: 'Take eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' He also took the cup, he gave thanks and gave it to them saying: 'Drink of it all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

All: We remember his death, we live by his presence; we wait for his coming.

Two deacons and the minister administer the sacrament, the minister serving the bread and blessing those who do not receive the elements. Family Communion is celebrated at least every three months and always at a Christian Festival.

The minister comments 'As with all new things there was some apprehension within the church. Over the twelve months that we have used this order of service it has become more and more loved by the church members and many

find it more meaningful than the traditional Baptist service and would prefer it every month.'

.....

Milk and honey

The practice of blessing children who do not receive the elements is more usually found in Anglican churches, and would not be used very comfortably in some churches. The Baptist Church in the following account chose a different way of involving the children.

'On the great feasts of the Christian Church and on local high days (Church Anniversary and the like) we invite our children to join us at the Eucharist. We talk about the nature of the covenant actualised in the Eucharist, and we talk about other covenants in the Old Testament which are preparatory to and symbolic of the Christ-event. Most specifically we talk of the pilgrimage covenant of the Exodus Passover and the journey to the land of milk and honey. We talk of the Promised Land as a land of promise whose signs were milk and honey, of the promise of the Old fulfilled in the New. All this presupposes a theology of children and adults in terms of growing. It requires a belief that faith is a journey. It depends upon an understanding of sacrament as sign and seal of the Kingdom into which we all journey: a land of promise.

When therefore the eucharistic prayer is offered, milk and honey are blessed too. At the administration of bread and wine, milk and honey are taken to the children as the sacrament of promise. It is a solemn yet gladsome moment.

When first we suggested the idea, there was great interest and overwhelming support in the Church Meeting, and we proceeded at our first Christmas in Burnley to administer milk and honey. I do not believe that we would now go back to excluding our children.

Practical problems do arise, and we list them. New children need careful introduction to what is happening. It's not just a beanfeast! Honey is sticky, so it comes in sandwich form. Some children don't like honey, others don't like milk. It remains to be seen what happens when we meet our first child who dislikes both! The idea of being in the eucharistic celebration as participants is proving valuable when our children get to the secondary school stage. It provokes sooner or later the question 'Why can't I have the bread and wine?' or 'When can I have the bread and wine?' or the comment 'I'm too old for milk and honey'. At this stage we are at the catechumenate, and new opportunities await.'

.....

‘We lift them up to the Lord’

The decisions reached in the United Reformed Church in the next story were very different. Their reappraisal resulted in the invitation to children of all ages to receive communion. The minister writes:

‘Some years ago it was agreed that it was time for radical reappraisal of what was meant by the Church Family; how we nurture children and adults in the faith, and how we share in the worship of the Church.

The decision was taken to hold a Church Family Service each Sunday at 9.30 am and to continue alongside this the traditional pattern of morning and evening services – each one having a distinctive contribution to make to the worshipping life of the church. The 9.30 am service would be a celebration of holy communion. To this service people of all age groups were invited and all were invited to communicate. Today the number of those taking part has grown considerably and it is the service to which an increasing number of young families comes, along with the middle-ages and elderly (from 6 months to 95 is not unusual). This is the growth point of the church. Coffee is served after the service and this is a meeting place for those who have worshipped at 9.30 am with others who are coming to the 10.45 am Morning Service.

How it works: The Liturgy used is Rite A from the *Alternative Service Book*. This provides a framework of ordered prayers and responses into which can be easily fitted the ‘Sharing of the Word’, the point at which we do our learning by talking, drama, activity or whatever is the best method for the theme of the day. The Christian Year forms the basic pattern of the themes explored, using *Partners in Learning* as a major resource (often greatly adapted).

We find a formal liturgy is important for both adults and children. The children quickly know the pattern of the worship and can join vocally in the prayers. Equally they know where they are in the worship even when they appear to be doing something else (children can do four things at once!). One three year old girl was busy crayoning whilst the service was progressing. Her mother said afterwards she was quite sure she was taking little notice of what was going on. But when we came to the beginning of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, her response to the words ‘Lift up your hearts’, was as clear as every other, ‘We lift them up to the Lord’. The three year old knew exactly where we were and what was going on!

To enable everyone to respond with heart and voice many parts of the Liturgy are sung, with the choir robed to give a sense of occasion; in addition to leading the congregation in hymns and responses they sing and play instruments during the distribution, the Taizé Responses and Chorales being favourites. Each Sunday one young person lights the candles on the Holy Table as the service begins; two others act as Stewards to receive the Offertory and, together

with the Serving Elder, bring the gifts of Bread and Wine in the Offertory Procession, led by a third who acts as Cross Bearer.

The whole service is one of movement and action with all the 'audio-visual' effects the Sacrament makes possible. This is not to be gimmicky but making full use of light, colour, music and drama to which both children and adults respond when given the chance. The climax comes when all are invited to receive from the common loaf and chalice, some kneeling, some standing, old and young, children and babies in arms.

All the children are offered the bread and wine. Even babies in arms receive the bread, sometimes given to them by mother or father. Some young children prefer not to receive the wine and prayer of blessing is said over them. Parents are encouraged to talk with their children at home about the sacrament and to share its meaning for them. We have found that children take from this service what they can cope with according to their age and experience, and go on growing into its deeper meanings. One six year old boy said, 'I don't know what it all means but I know that Jesus is here, and I'm glad about that!'

What have we learned as a Church by inviting children to share the holy communion in this way? More and more the church has become a family of the People of God. We all feel a new sense of belonging, and this is made even clearer when we see the children so obviously feeling 'at home' within the church. We have recaptured the 'wonder' of worship, and with children around there is a sense of excitement and occasion within the worship.

In many ways we are led by our children: many parents have found their own faith challenged and deepened by the children. We have discovered that there are deeper meanings in the sacrament than can ever be explained, or learned, and which can only be known by experience and by regularly sharing this sacrament together.'

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Hand in hand

An example of the way in which small children can take the initiative is described in this incident which took place at another United Reformed Church where children are invited to receive communion.

'Such is our church family that when they come forward to receive the elements families are not necessarily together. Elsie, an elderly childless widow came forward, and alongside her came little two year old Bernadette. Elsie was looking somewhat sad, but Bernadette, so naturally, slipped her hand into that of the elderly woman. The transformation in that woman's face was incredible. She's a very shy retiring person who isn't one of the people who draws children around her. So Bernadette didn't know her. But in the child's eye we're all a

family, and that was a natural gesture. My eyes were very wet when I served them the wine.'

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Memories of a first communion

Of course, in some traditions it is no new thing for children to receive holy communion. A Roman Catholic adult looks back to his first communion . . .

'You're very special and you must be on your best behaviour!' This was the message received by the class preparing to make its first communion. We must behave well because Jesus was going to visit our soul and we had to be ready.

It was like Christmas Eve for about six months. We received hours of instruction from teachers and priests and spent many afternoons rehearsing our first confession and communion. The teachers warned us not to smile or wave at our friends or families, not to push or shove on the way to or from the altar rails, not to talk and, above all, not to let the host (the bread) fall on the floor. An altar boy held a paten under our chin at the moment of communion in order to prevent such a disaster. Chewing or letting the host touch your teeth was forbidden – otherwise it wouldn't go straight to your soul. We all worried about it sticking to the roofs of our mouths. What with one thing or another, making your first communion was fraught with disasters waiting to happen. This was in the days before Catholics were allowed to receive the host in their hands or drink from the chalice.

We went to church to make our first confession the day before. This was a dark, private, hole-in-the-corner affair from which you were to emerge with a whiter than white soul ready to be a tabernacle for Our Lord. The teachers drilled the formula into us, 'Bless me father for I have sinned, this is my first confession.' Our 'crimes' consisted of offences such as: talking in church or class; fighting with brothers or sisters; not helping at home; spitting; swearing; stealing; being uncharitable or disobedient (trusty standbys!)

The really tricky part was making an Act of Perfect Contrition. 'O my God, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you . . .' This perfect act of remorse seemed so unattainable that one was left unsure whether one had been sorry enough to have been truly forgiven.

The first communion day itself was a joyful occasion. The boys in their white shirts and sashes, the girls in their white dresses and veils like miniature brides, were the focus of much adult sentimentality. As the old familiar hymns were sung, 'Sweet Sacrament Divine, Dear home of every heart . . .', a lump came to the throats of many adults recalling their lost innocence and remembering that their first communion was also their last.

When the mass finished we processed out of the church and were much

photographed by proud parents. We received presents of missals, prayer books, rosary beads and holy pictures. Leaving our parents, we marched over to the school classroom for breakfast (this in the days of fasting from the previous evening), which consisted of sandwiches, plates of cakes and drinks of orange squash. It was an eventful day, but as perhaps on other big occasions in people's lives, such as their wedding day, it was something of a blur, with precious little spiritual content.'

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An Orthodox parish

An Orthodox priest describes what happens in his parish:-

'At the eucharistic liturgy we have the mothers with their babies and the father and mother with their small children and older children. They are there very naturally. First of all, they bring the babies to Holy Communion. If the baby does not want Holy Communion and cries, we do not insist. The mother goes back into the assembly and perhaps towards the end of the liturgy she will try again . . . Other children are never afraid at all and immediately smile and open their mouths. There is something very mysterious there. One has the impression that from earliest childhood there are some children who want the Lord, and some who refuse him.

. . . the(se) little children are free to run about the church as long as they do not shout. They are not kept by their mother's side. That would make the liturgy unpleasant for them. They must be at home and natural in the eucharistic assembly so long as they do not disturb others, they are quite free to run about . . . When the moment comes for Holy Communion children from four years onward come up alone; I have seen children from four or five pushing their parents away when they have wanted to take them by the hand. They want to feel they are quite capable of going up to the altar alone, and they receive the gifts very joyfully.'

(From . . . *And do not hinder them*. World Council of Churches, 1982).

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Happy reunion!

Finally, we have a story from an Anglican church in which children receive communion, a situation which apparently does not meet with the full approval of all the congregation.

'In our Anglican parish the children are admitted to communion at six or seven years old. On a normal Sunday they work in the church hall for the first

part of the communion service, exploring 'the Word' at their own level. They join the adults in time to share in the Peace. At times, some of the adult members of the congregation appeared to resent the presence of the children and mutters have been heard about 'being disturbed' by them.

However, in a period of six weeks leading up to Christmas last year the children remained in the church hall for the whole of the service time. They were busy preparing tableaux to be shared with the whole congregation. During those weeks communion was taken to them in the church hall. They stopped their activities, prepared the table, lit the Advent Candles and received communion – for practical purposes the bread only for this period – which had been brought in processions from the altar in church to them. The children enjoyed this experience, and many of them wanted to continue with this pattern indefinitely. I felt that it was important that they resumed their normal practice, joining the adults and making their contribution to the whole worshipping congregation. The adult leaders valued the opportunity to worship with the rest of the congregation also. So the children and the leaders discussed the matter and agreed that it would be proper to go back to their normal practice.

On the Sunday before Christmas, therefore, the children went into the church at the Peace. The vicar welcomed them back. And the adult congregation spontaneously clapped them as they came in. It seems that they had missed the children, and wanted them back. The children were delighted at their welcome, and all thoughts of 'staying in the hall' were forgotten.'

4 Implications for Worship

If children are to be present and to participate in communion, then there are various implications for worship.

1. The Communion itself

- (a) Children are used to being active and to making use of all their senses. For this reason, they will feel much more at home if they are able to participate as much as possible, and if there are a number of interesting things to see, to hear and to touch.
- (b) Some communion services rely heavily on long passages of words to create the images of the Last Supper. Children may well find these difficult to understand and too long for their span of attention. Therefore the more visual symbols that can be used, and the more the service can be broken down, the easier children will find it.
- (c) Many churches may wish to use their traditional communion service. There is much to be said for this. It would be a pity if the traditions of the church which have emerged over centuries were dispensed with for the sake of children.

On the other hand, there has been an increasing demand for special communion services to be written for use when children are present.

It is important that the traditional eucharistic services should not be watered down to juvenile versions for the benefit of the children. After all, the adults present need to be fed too, and there is much to be said for children growing in to understanding of liturgies which they may find difficult at first. Even so, if the liturgy is too wordy and too static, the children and adults may find this too alien from their culture to be helpful.

- (d) Whilst some variation in the service is often useful, children find a basic familiarity helpful. They are more likely to giggle or feel uncomfortable if too many surprises happen.

2. Choice of Hymns and Music

- (a) It is helpful if hymns and music reflect the varying tastes of different groups, using both traditional and modern materials. There is an increasing number of modern communion hymns which are suitable for all ages. It is also possible to use hymns written by children themselves.

- (b) Some churches use instruments other than the organ alone to accompany hymns and songs. Many children and young people (as well as adults) are talented players of various instruments which, in combination, can bring new life to well known tunes or help with the introduction of new ones. The youngest children can participate, playing simple percussion instruments.

3. Bible Readings

- (a) The selection of Bible passages is important, as they need to be accessible to children. Some of the more complex, abstract passages from, for example, some of the Epistles, might not be helpful for use when the youngest children are present. Modern translations of the Bible can be of great assistance, particularly with more difficult passages.
- (b) Some people argue that Bible readings should be set in context and explained; others say that the Word speaks for itself, and that it doesn't need embellishment. Perhaps there is need for a flexible approach.
- (c) In some churches, the sermon begins from a passage in Scripture; others start from experience and use the Bible as illustration and a source of learning.
- (d) Whichever way the Bible is used, it is helpful if children and adults can participate in reading it and, where appropriate, to have dramatic readings, drama, dance, or mime based on the Bible.

4. The use of language

The use of language where children are present needs to be thought about carefully. It is possible to be straightforward and direct without being banal. At the same time it is important to remember that the imagination of both children and adults can be stimulated by richness of imagery and poetic language.

Some churches have asked children to write and share their own prayers during the service, or to write their own hymns.

5. Practical Implications

The way in which bread and wine are given and received when children are present needs to be considered, as do the needs of children (or adults) who will not be receiving communion for any reasons.

- (a) In some churches, children who do not wish, or who are not able to receive communion are given a blessing; but there are differences of opinion about what is happening when a blessing is given, and in some churches there

are practical difficulties about giving a blessing. Other churches deal with the problem of what to do with non-communicant children by giving alternatives to the bread and wine, such as blackcurrant juice and a biscuit or milk and honey. Careful thought needs to be given about the theological implications of any alternatives provided.

- (b) Many churches ask those participating to come to the communion rail or altar. In this case it is relatively easy for the person officiating to either offer bread or wine or a blessing as the case may be. In other churches the congregation remains seated, and the communion is brought round by deacons or elders. In these cases it may be difficult to determine who should or should not receive, and giving a blessing might be practically awkward. Furthermore, some visiting children who are used to receiving communion in their own churches might be left out.
- (c) Sometimes children have been invited to prepare the bread and wine beforehand, although this practice creates theological difficulties for those churches who believe that the elements should only be handled by a priest. Other churches have invited children to bring the bread and wine to the altar and/or to share in the distribution of the bread and wine. Children may be able to cope with chalcules (little glasses) but there is some skill needed in the handling of chalices, which children may find difficult, unless it is the practice to hand the chalice to the person receiving communion.
- (d) In some churches it is normal practice for lay people to share in the reading of the liturgy. A few churches have involved children in this as well. This, of course, depends on what the church believes is happening at each stage, and whether certain words are reserved for the priest or minister.

Many churches include responsive prayers for the congregation during the service, which enables them to take part.

6. How often should children attend Communion and for how much of the service should they be present?

A great variety of practice operates in different churches, often within the same denomination, on the frequency of communion. Some churches hold daily or weekly communion services, some monthly, some only once or twice a year, and some even less frequently than this.

In some churches, children are normally out of church worshipping in their own groups when communion takes place, having attended the first twenty minutes or so at the beginning of the service. In other churches, children worship and learn with their own age groups and then come into the communion at the climax of the service.

Some churches run education programmes for the whole church in groups,

followed by coffee and then a communion service for everyone. Still others meet for worship and communion and then follow this by education work in groups for the entire church. There are churches which, in theory, accept children for communion but, in practice, make it difficult for them to attend since they are out in groups when communion is celebrated.

7. Understanding the Communion Service

Some denominations have published very useful books which explain to children beforehand what is going on in the communion service. These cover such topics as the significance of coming in the right spirit, being sorry, thinking of others, etc, and there is an increasing number of books which show the eucharistic liturgy and illustrate or explain this with pictures.

It is well worth looking to see what is available both within your own and in other denominations. (See chapter 7. Resources Available).

5 How to Prepare Your Church and Your Children for Holy Communion

Particularly when a change is being suggested in the life and worship pattern of the church, it is important to make sure that as many people as possible are (and feel) involved throughout the process. Proper consultation is essential at each stage.

Who decides whether or not any particular child should receive communion? At the end of the day, this will depend very much on the practice of each denomination, but there are some general issues to bear in mind:

1. What does your denomination say?

Is it your denomination's policy to include or not include children in communion, or is the decision left to each local church or bishop?

2. Who makes decisions of principle at your church?

The minister? Deacons? Elders? Church Council or Church Meeting?

It is helpful if a policy decision about whether or not children should be admitted to communion is made by this person or body, following discussion with as many people as possible.

Whoever makes the decision, it is also important to consult with the minister, leaders, church members, Junior Church or Sunday School leaders, parents, children . . .

Decide whether communion is to be restricted to baptised children or not. If so, how will you care pastorally for unbaptised children? How will you care pastorally for children (and adults) who do not wish to receive communion? What kind of preparation do you think is appropriate? Consider any potential difficulties there might be.

3. Provide some way in which communion may be explored.

This might include a teaching programme (e.g. Partners in Learning October/November 1988), or some other means by which communion can be experienced and discussed. It is helpful if this preparation can be an on-going experience and not just one short course.

4. The Individual Child

- a) Does he or she wish to receive communion?
- b) Are they baptised?

i) If so, it may be felt appropriate that somebody responsible, (such as a parent, Junior Church leader or minister), should be satisfied that they have a faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, appropriate to their age and an idea of how God works in their lives.

ii) If the child is not baptised, decide whether early believers' baptism is appropriate, or whether the child should be included in receiving communion because they are part of the community of faith.

5. What are the parents' views about their child receiving communion?

If possible, involve the parent(s) in the learning process, and in sharing communion with their child. Where the child belongs to a family involved in the life of the church, the parents will more easily be part of the process. Even where the child's parents have no church involvement, it may be possible to let them know about children's participation in holy communion and what it means to their child.

6 Conclusion

This report set out to inform churches in Britain and Ireland of recent developments in thinking and practice regarding the admission of children to holy communion. The writers hope that you will have found the information given here useful, but recognise that they are not wholly unbiased in their approach. They wish to promote and publicise the case for children receiving communion.

The responses of different churches to the question of children and holy communion are contained in the appendix to this book and repay careful study. There is a wide variety of practice. The Orthodox have always included children in communion. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) do not use bread and wine or a eucharistic liturgy in their worship, for either adults or children, but say that every meal is in memory of Christ's last supper. For churches in the middle of the spectrum, there has been a move in recent years towards including children in communion, at least from the age of 7 or 8 upwards.

Members of the Orthodox Churches have never questioned the right of children to receive communion. The communion of infants and children has been practised since the days of the ancient church. The first references to the communion of children are contemporaneous with references to infant baptism in the apostolic times. The communion of infants is therefore understood in Orthodox theology as an apostolic tradition which was never at any time interrupted or its legitimacy questioned.

Unlike the Orthodox Churches, infant communion is not practised in the Roman Catholic Church. As a general rule, children are admitted to first communion in age groups in the second year of primary education (usually around the age of seven), on what is called 'White Sunday', although a marked tendency toward early first communion is evident in many countries. In Germany (both FRG and GDR) and Argentina, children as young as five, and in the USA even as young as three, are admitted to private first communion, after suitable preparation.

Some Roman Catholic churches in Britain, however, are beginning to question whether children should be older than seven before they receive communion.

Over the last 200 years, the Sunday School movement in many Protestant churches has encouraged the tradition that children are not present during communion and that communion should only be administered to adults, especially those who have been confirmed, received into church membership or otherwise made a public, mature statement of faith. This has not usually taken place until the age of at least thirteen to eighteen years. In recent years,

a change has begun to take place in this tradition. Increasingly, children are present during communion and are asking to receive bread and wine; and at the other end of the scale, many adults are taking advantage of the free invitation offered in many churches to 'all those who love the Lord Jesus', to receive without having been baptised, confirmed or having made a profession of faith. Some might say that such 'slack' practice should not be used as an argument for allowing children to receive; but there has, nevertheless, been a shift in the theological thought on the subject.

In general, the tradition of the Church has been that baptism is a pre-requisite for receiving communion. Recently, many Protestant churches who practice infant baptism (such as the Methodist Church, the Church of Scotland, the Anglican Church) have reconsidered the meaning of baptism. They have looked at the meaning of baptism as entry into the faith community and are beginning to question whether anyone who has been baptised can be refused communion as this is one of the major privileges of members of the community of faith.

For denominations who practice believers' baptism, such as the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom (which predominately practices the baptism of infants) the issue of children receiving communion is more complex. Some local churches are beginning to ask whether baptism is a pre-requisite for communion, or whether it is sufficient for a child to be part of the faith community, by an act of dedication or thanksgiving or merely because the child is a regular member of the community.

The question is where first communion comes in the process of Christian nurture.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Notes on Chap.2 in *Seven Studies* by John Matthews) states that:

'All churches agree that our initiation into the Church is a process. It starts with God's grace active for us from the moment we were formed; it continues in our growth and development towards faith; it finds expression when we turn to Christ in response to all his love for us; it is given its outward sign in our baptism; it is nurtured as our faith is joined to the faith of the church; it continues to develop as the Holy Spirit works in our lives.'

In some churches, baptism is at the beginning of this process, in others it comes at a later stage. At what stage should communion come in this process? In the Orthodox Churches, as we have seen, baptism and communion are given first, and nurture comes later. In Baptist churches, children are dedicated first and nurtured, and then baptism and communion come later.

Some Christians argue that faith is gained through participation in communion, and therefore that there is no necessary priority of baptism before

communion. Others believe that a mature faith and statement of commitment and baptism are necessary pre-requisites.

On the whole, it has previously been thought that believers' baptism should take place as late as 17-18 years, at least when the 'young person knows their own mind and understands what they are doing', but there has been some acceptance by a few believers' baptists that baptism could be as early as 7-8 years, followed by communion. The amount and type of preparation seen necessary for communion depends on the theological view held of communion and nurture. Many Christians believe that it is essential for a course of preparation to be held before someone receives communion for the first time, to explain the significance of the actions. Other Christians believe that communion can only be fully understood by participating in the mystery. In reality, it is probably true that both are needed; and children constantly need opportunities to discuss the experience of receiving communion.

There are a number of practical difficulties to be considered by churches who are considering including children in communion for the first time. In many churches, it has not been the custom to have children present during communion, and some adults appreciate a time of quiet reflection during communion. Orthodox and Roman Catholic congregations have become used to having some slight noise of movement during the receiving of the elements; but this has not always been true for some Protestant churches, where adults have sat quietly waiting to be served. We have seen that Orthodox churches are used to toddlers running about as long as they don't shout. Other denominations might like to consider whether they wish toddlers to be present. Children from 6-7 years upwards have shown that they do understand the need for quiet, and can behave quietly and reverently themselves, provided that they want to be there at communion.

Of course, it needs to be recognised that not all children wish to take communion, so consideration needs to be given to what pastoral provision is to be made for those children.

In some churches, the children will come forward themselves for communion. In others where communion is brought round by the elders or deacons, it can be difficult to tell which child should be offered communion, unless there is a policy that all children are offered the bread and wine, and can choose whether or not to receive. Consideration also needs to be given to what pastoral provision is to be made for unbaptised children, if baptism is the pre-requisite for receiving. Might they feel excluded, or at the opposite extreme, pressurised to take part?

Churches in mobile societies need to consider what they will do if new families come to the area who have been accustomed to receive communion in their previous church.

Other pastoral considerations might include any changes in the liturgy or conduct of worship that might have to be made if children are to be present. One danger is to make the liturgy too child-centred and not suitable for all ages. The tradition of the church should be borne in mind, so that the liturgy is not so watered-down that it becomes meaningless for adults. Children can be helped to appreciate time-honoured prayers and orders of service by participation in the liturgy, in sharing, in reading and music, in preparing and serving the eucharist.

Communion for many Christians is at the centre of their faith, and so it is right to consider whether it is appropriate for children to participate.

7 Resources Available

(A few of the following titles are out of print, or difficult to obtain, but may be available from libraries.)

. . . And do not hinder them. World Council of Churches, 1982.

Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC): An Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine. Published jointly by the Catholic Truth Society and SPCK, 1971; the final report CTS/SPCK, 1982

Aries, P. Centuries of Childhood. Penguin, 1973.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: the agreed text. World Council of Churches, 1982.

British and Irish Churches respond to BEM. BCC. 1988.

The Child in the Church. British Council of Churches. 2nd rev.ed. British Council of Churches, 1984.

Children at Holy Communion: Guidelines. Methodist Church Division of Education and Youth, 1987.

Children at Holy Communion: Keeping the Feast. Three Service Outlines. Methodist Church Division of Education and Youth, 1988.

Children at Holy Communion: One Body with Him. Peter Sulston and Leigh Pope. Methodist Church Division of Education and Youth, 1989.

Children at the Table. Hamilton, D.G. and MacDonald, F. (editors). Church of Scotland, 1982.

Children in Communion? URC Discussion Document. United Reformed Church, 1988.

Children in the Way. Church of England General Synod Board of Education. National Society, 1988.

Christian Initiation and Church Membership: Report of BCC Working Party. BCC. 1988.

Christian Initiation: Birth and Growth in the Christian Society (The Ely Report). Church House Publishing, 1971.

Churches respond to BEM, vols I-VI. WCC. 1986-1988.

Coming In. Church of England General Synod, Board of Education. Church House Publishing, 1977.

Communion before Confirmation? Church of England General Synod. Church House Publishing, 1985.

Cornwell, R.P. Christian Initiation. Church House Publishing.

Dulles, S.J. Avery. *Models of the Church*. Gill and MacMillan, 1976.

Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Theological Essays. Thurian, Max (editor). World Council of Churches, 1983.

Fisher, J.D.C. *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Mediaeval West*. SPCK, 1965.

Fisher, J.D.C. *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period*. SPCK, 1970.

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Appendix.

What Have the Churches Said?

1. The Baptist Union of Great Britain

The structure of the Baptist Union, and the Baptist doctrine of the Church is such that although this has been on the agenda of the Education Committee for over twenty years, yet no policies can be imposed on local congregations. It has been the custom in recent years for the Education Committee, with full approval of the Baptist Union Council, to hold Education Consultations in order to major on matters of (educational) interest in the churches. These consultations bring together appointed representatives from the regions (associations).

In 1981 an Education Consultation considered 'Understanding Christian Nurture'. Out of that came a request for urgent consideration of children and communion.

In 1984 an Education Consultation was devoted specifically to children and communion. The discussion was based on three papers prepared for the occasion: *Admission to Communion* (Who may receive bread and wine) – Brian Haymes.

Children and Communion (The case for and background considerations) – David Tennant.

The Child and Communion – A minister's view (The views of a working minister within the frame of Family Church . . .) – Tony Turner.

During 1986/7 a major survey was held around the country to determine the practices and views of churches and ministers, by the Education Committee. This was collated into a report received by the Committee at its January 1987 meeting. The report was received by the Baptist Union Council in November 1987 and is now part of the debate on Baptist identity.

Each local church, under the leadership of its ministers and deacons, is free to decide its own policy.

In its response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Baptist Union expressed its reservations at the document's dealing with baptism. It suggests there is a basic unanswered question: 'What is a Christian?' The BEM document may be seen as suggesting the yardstick is baptism. But is a baptized infant necessarily a Christian? And are unbaptized believers (e.g. within the Society of Friends or the Salvation Army) not Christian?

The Baptist Union's starting point with regard to the question of who should receive communion is that it is for Christians, those who have made a personal

commitment and profession of faith. Such commitment is expressed in believers' baptism, which normally takes place in teenage or adulthood. It is uncommon for children to receive communion in Baptist churches.

2. The Church of England

Publications include *Children and Communion* (an international Anglican Consultation held in Boston 1985), *Infant Communion – Then and Now* (Grove booklet No.27, by David Holeton 1961), and *Communion before Confirmation?* (1985 published by General Synod Board of Education, being a report on Christian initiation and participation in the eucharist).

The background in the Church of England is as follows:

In 1971, *Christian initiation, birth and growth in the Christian society* (the so-called Ely Report), concluded that baptism was a complete sacrament of initiation and was 'sufficient' basis for admitting children to communion prior to confirmation.

In 1974 and 1976 Synod affirmed the practice of baptism for infants whose parents were willing and able to make the required promises, but the 1976 meeting asked for re-examination of the conditions on which infants would be received for baptism. The 1974 Synod accepted that full participation in the Sacrament could precede a mature profession of faith 'in principle'. The responses from the Dioceses were 'lukewarm' so no change was brought about.

In 1981, Synod was asked by the Winchester Diocese to look again at the matter and the outcome was the report *Communion before Confirmation?*, published in 1985. The Report concluded that Baptism with water, in the name of the Holy Trinity, is a complete sacrament of Initiation into the Body of Christ. Confirmation is not an absolutely necessary prerequisite for the admission of persons to holy communion. Indeed, it is desirable to permit the admission of baptised persons to holy communion before confirmation. The Report also included the following draft regulation:-

- A. Baptised children who have not yet come to 'years of discretion' and thus are not eligible for confirmation (Canon B. 27, para.23) may be admitted to Holy Communion under the following conditions:
 - (1) That the Bishop of the Diocese has been consulted.
 - (2) That the incumbent and the PCC of the parish have recommended to a meeting of those on the electoral roll specially convened for that purpose, and that meeting has accepted by a two-thirds majority of those present and voting, that the parish and its ministers could admit children to communion under the provision of this regulation.

- (3) That the incumbent is satisfied that Christian education appropriate to the age of the children concerned is being provided for them.
 - (4) That the incumbent enters the names of the children who are to be admitted to communion in a register kept for that purpose.
 - (5) That when such children come to years of discretion, and after due instruction as required by Canon B 27, the incumbent shall present them to the Bishop for confirmation.
- B. The Diocesan Synod may, but need not, pass a resolution concerning a minimum age for admission to communion under paragraph A. above.
 - C. The PCC may by resolution provide for a minimum age in the parish which may be different from that contained in any resolution of the Diocesan Synod.
 - D. A child whose name has been entered in to a parish register under paragraph A (iv) above, shall be given a Certificate of his Communicant status in the Church of England and no such Communicant child may be excluded from communion in any other parish of the Church of England, notwithstanding the fact that this age may be lower than the minimum age permitted by that diocese or parish.
 - E. A decision to admit a child to communion under paragraph A. (2) above, shall be reversed only by a two-thirds majority of those present, and voting at an Annual Parochial Church Meeting of the parish.' (Page 49.50)

The matter rests for the moment with the House of Bishops, who are considering it further in the light of the Children in the Way debate at General Synod in February 1988 and the Lambeth Conference in July of the same year.

3. The Church of Ireland

In January 1987 a Committee was appointed by the House of Bishops to examine the area of Christian initiation and nurture and to make recommendations as to how existing structures could be improved. This work is almost complete.

Following Lambeth '88, the Committee will consider the question of children, confirmation and holy communion.

4. The Church of Scotland

Two publications are important for the Church of Scotland together with Assembly deliberations: *Children at the Table* Ed. David Hamilton and Finlay MacDonald (1982) and *Children and Holy Communion, time to say 'Yes'* (report to General Assembly 1982).

In 1979, the Department of Education, Proposed Deliverance to Assembly was tabled, then sent to Presbyteries for comment. A small document *The Lord's Supper and the Children of the Church* was circulated for popular use. Note was taken in this Assembly Report that the matter 'will come as a surprise and represents such radical shift in policy as to warrant wide-spread preliminary discussion' (page 416, para. 2.5.2.)

In 1982 the General Assembly approved the proposal presented by the Board of Education advocating admission of baptised children to the sacrament of holy communion. These proposals were referred to Presbyteries under the terms of the Barrier Act and received final verdicts of Assembly 1983.

The Guidelines (page 14/15) include references to consultation with the minister, parents and the child. The minister if persuaded shall recommend to the Kirk Session that the child be admitted to holy communion. District elders are to be kept informed. Children shall be accompanied by parents or supporting adults. Membership shall be offered after instruction.

The conclusion is (page 15):

'Our consideration has been comprehensive and it has led us to the conclusion that participation of baptised children in the Lord's Supper would be entirely consistent with the doctrinal standards of the Church of Scotland.

Of course we recognise that this would involve an important change in practice and procedure in that admission to first communion would no longer be tied to admission to voting and other rights within a congregation. However, we can find no theological necessity for such a link. Indeed we believe that the breaking of the tie would bring into sharper focus the theological relationship between the Sacraments and establish them firmly within the realm of grace rather than law. At the same time it would enable Profession of Faith to be more clearly seen as a personal response to faith, a response expressed in the affirmation of faith itself, and in the taking of vows of commitment. Good order would suggest that it is those who make such a commitment who should exercise various voting and other rights within a congregation, but theological entitlement to communion is implicit in baptism itself. Furthermore we are persuaded that were we to allow the Lord's Supper to become a means of grace for the children of the Church we would greatly enhance the quality of their Christian nurture. This would enable the Church more effectively to minister to children as those who already belong, while at the same time preparing them for the duties and responsibilities of adult membership in the future. Their participation in the Lord's Supper would still seek the response of public profession of faith.'

The response from the Presbyteries was insufficient to enable the Church to make a decision on this matter.

5. The Church in Wales

This church has produced the following documents: *Members of One Body* (a set of questions at various levels aimed at discovering from the parishes and congregations their views and practices regarding initiation, 1984); *Beginning with People* (USPG, John Davies, 1984) a programme for study; *Mission, Initiation and Nurture*. The most important document is *Christian Initiation* (a report of the Doctrinal Commission of the Church in Wales 1971).

Like the Church of England, this church concludes that the initiation rite has an 'inherent unity' and separation of . . . elements involves grave theological confusion' (page 22). When faced with the question of children and communion the report states (page 25):

'(62) Accordingly, it becomes possible to meet the legitimate desire of some of the clergy to introduce baptised children to the communicant life at a pastorally appropriate age. No question arises as to their qualification to receive the Sacrament. Such children are recognised as members of the church in a formal sense (see 39) though their relationship to Christ is of the character described as indirect (see 38) or at least partially so, depending upon the degree of individual response to which each has become capable. Obviously the practice of admitting children to the Holy Communion calls for appropriate safeguards (see later). The essential point is that the status of the baptised child as potentially a child communicant is not made to depend upon the 'completion' of his initiation by the administration of episcopal 'confirmation'. This qualification to receive the Holy Communion is not called in question.'

6. The Lutheran Church in Great Britain – United Synod

The Annual Assembly debated the issue in September 1981. Taking into account the traditions of the European Lutheran Churches and the new approach to this issue in the American Church, the Assembly decided to keep with the predominant tradition of the European churches and allow only confirmed people to take part in the holy communion. The normal age of confirmation is twelve to fourteen, though this may vary according to circumstances and the child's religious awareness.

Due to changes in the practice of communion in the world wide Lutheran Church the matter will be reviewed, possibly in the next three years.

7. The Methodist Church (Great Britain)

Publications include *Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion* (1979 revised 1985) which contains earlier statements presented to the Methodist Conference. In addition there is a booklet called *Peter and Paula at a Communion Service* (1985 by Wilfred Tooley and Michael Prowting). *The Sunday*

Service (Illustrated) (1986). *Children and Holy Communion – Guidelines* (1987). *Children and Holy Communion – Keeping the Feast* (1988). *Children and Holy Communion – One Body With Him* (1989).

Conference statements are summarized as follows.

The 1974 Conference recommended 'flexibility' but no constitutional or liturgical change, but stressed the following (a) Exercise pastoral care over all the baptised children within the church and the home; (b) Underlined the centrality of holy communion; (c) Recognised the developing nature of commitment; (d) Do nothing to diminish the goal of all Christians, namely to grow to mature manhood measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ; (e) Recognise the importance of continuing discussion at all levels of church life.

In 1975, the Faith and Order Committee 'advised the Conference on some of the implications, theology and practice of adopting the policy suggested (above)'.

1978 saw a Conference report: *Blessing Children at Holy Communion*, a recommendation as to the place in the service and practice of a blessing and that whatever is involved should be appropriate.

In 1986 a report on Children and Holy Communion was presented to Conference but referred back to the Division of Education and Youth and the Faith and Order Committee.

In 1987 an amended report was presented to Conference. The resolution passed was that the Conference 'commends the report to the Church and invites local churches to use the Guidelines actively to encourage the fuller participation of children in the Lord's Supper.'

The Guidelines are as follows:-

- (a) It is expected as a theological principle that a child to be admitted to communicant participation in the Lord's Supper will have been baptised.
- (b) If, from time to time, it is judged appropriate for unbaptised children to be admitted to the Lord's Supper, it is expected that, after due consideration, baptism will follow.
- (c) The Church Council should satisfy itself that the child shows an awareness of the significance of the Lord's Supper, and the faith response appropriate to the child's age and experience.
- (d) The Church has a responsibility to discriminate and test, but this must not become an opportunity for adults to deprive children of the means of grace simply because they are children.
- (e) Children should be encouraged to express their spiritual awareness but they should not be forced to do so.

- (f) It is essential that there should be sufficient explanation and preparation, in relation to age and experience, before the child first communicates.
- (g) Children participating in the Lord's Supper should have the support of the regular worshipping community.
- (h) All who receive the bread and wine should be encouraged to grow in a fuller and deeper commitment to Christ and his Church.
- (j) When a policy has been decided and acted upon in the local church, it is important to keep it under review, and to take account of new children and families joining the church.

8. The Methodist Church in Ireland

Two publications, *Children and Holy Communion* and *Order of Service* are discussion materials for use with parents, teachers and children's workers.

9. The Moravian Church in Great Britain and Ireland

(From the response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.)

The Moravian Church practices infant baptism, with an emphasis on the importance of faith and commitment on the part of those who bring the child to be baptised and of the congregation who receive the child. Infant baptism is followed by confirmation, and it is this which is the point of admission to holy communion.

The question of whether baptised children should be admitted to communion is currently under discussion.

10. The Orthodox Churches

In the Orthodox Church, the practice of infants and children receiving communion has existed since the days of the apostolic Fathers. It is part of uninterrupted and unquestioned apostolic tradition. The Orthodox Church offers full Christian initiation to young infants, after which they may receive communion. Baptism (incorporation in the Body of Christ) is immediately followed by chrismation (the bestowal of the Holy Spirit) and then communion.

In later years (at around the age of eight) the child may learn to prepare for communion by fasting and with confession. Communion is received in both kinds, the bread being dipped in wine (an ancient practice which originated very early on in Christian history). Thus children grow up in the sacramental practice and learn it within it. A Greek Orthodox priest who studied in England wrote in 1623: 'quite simply, we use about the Lord's supper the same arguments that everyone else, except the Annabaptists, uses about baptism' (Colin Davey, *Pioneer for Unity*, BCC, 1987 page 130).

Note must be taken that there is no specifically 'adult rite' in the Orthodox Church (the same service of baptism, Chrismation and communion is used for adult converts to Christianity) and no provision for the recognition of mature commitment at a later stage in life.

11. Presbyterian Church of Ireland

This Church has consulted widely by examining reports and papers from around the world, both within the reformed traditions and elsewhere.

In 1983 the Christian Education Committee tabled an Appendix to the Report to General Assembly which included a set of questions for information and discussion and concluded: 'The Committee realises that this discussion raises many questions of a fundamental nature for doctrine, worship and practice in the Church and will, in due course, require to consult with other Boards in the Church.'

In 1985 the Christian Education Committee tabled an Appendix to the Report to General Assembly for study and comment. There was further discussion in 1986.

Some recommendations:

- (a) That children should receive instruction at an early age about the meaning and significance of the Sacraments.
- (b) That children, and especially teenagers, should be given opportunity to be present at services in which the Sacraments are celebrated and to join in the worship as far as possible. Their presence should be recognised in some way.
- (c) That Kirk Sessions should exercise flexibility about the age at which children and young people are admitted to the Lord's Table.
- (d) That Presbytery urge the Education Board and other interested parties to continue their deliberations in this area . . . particularly in the area of the formation of faith . . .
- (e) That the Education Board examine and report back through the General Assembly on the experience of those churches which have permitted children to take communion. The Doctrine Committee believes that further consideration should be given to the place of the child in the church and at Communion in particular and that there be continued exploration and questioning of our current practice.

The Report was received, comments noted but NOT sent to Kirk Sessions for their consideration. (The comments were largely practical).

12. Presbyterian Church of Wales

This has not been an issue in this Church at all.

13. The Religious Society of Friends

However valid and vital outward sacraments are for others, they are not, in our experience, necessary for the operation of God's grace. We believe we hold this witness in trust for the whole church.

Neither the elements of bread and wine nor any eucharistic liturgy is used in Quaker worship.

14. The Roman Catholic Church

In the Roman Catholic Church the practice is clear, yet one detects a state of flux. Baptism is the first of the sacraments of initiation; Confirmation and Eucharist the succeeding two. Admission to first holy communion follows at the discretion of the parish priest after first confession and normally in childhood. There are differences of view about what age is appropriate, but it is seldom before seven years. The general practice which is followed in England and Wales at the present time is to prepare children for their first reception of Holy Communion round about the age of seven.

the preparatory work, with the top infants or the first junior class being prepared together. The actual reception of Holy Communion may be done either as a school group with their parents and families also present, or it may be done at a time chosen by the family, in consultation with the priest, when the preparation is completed.

Recent History of this Pastoral Practice The practice of bringing children to receive Holy Communion, to share fully in the Eucharist, that exists in England and Wales at the present time is that guided by the decree of Pope Pius X, August 8, 1910. For a variety of reasons during the nineteenth century, not least because of the influence of Jansenism, the practice of receiving Holy Communion had become infrequent among adults and inevitably delayed for children.

Pius X both encouraged frequent reception of Holy Communion and, with his decree *Quam Singulari*, encouraged the practice of children being introduced to Holy Communion when they had reached the age of reason and been given basic instruction.

The Canon Law of the Church The practice proposed by Pope Pius X was put into the Code of Canon Law of 1918, and re-iterated when the Code of Canon Law was revised in 1983, following the Second Vatican Council.

Canon 913 i For Holy Communion to be administered to children, it is required that they have sufficient knowledge and be accurately prepared so that according to their capacity they understand what the mystery of Christ means and are able to receive the Body of the Lord with faith and devotion.

Canon 914 It is primarily the duty of parents and of those who take their place, as it is the duty of the parish priests, to ensure that children who have reached the use of reason are properly prepared and having made their sacramental confession are nourished by this divine food as soon as possible. It is also the duty of the parish priest to see that children who have not reached the use of reason, or whom he has judged to be insufficiently disposed, do not come to Holy Communion.

In practice this has meant that children have been prepared to receive Holy Communion for the first time at about the age of seven or eight.

The Second Vatican Council reviewed the whole pastoral practice of the Church as well as its sacramental life.

In particular the Council Fathers asked for a rite of Christian initiation as celebrated in the early centuries of the Church to be restored to the life of the Church today. This meant, of course, that the relationship of the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist had to be fully appreciated, as well as the role of the whole community in the process of initiation.

From the beginning of the Church, the sacraments of initiation led immediately to common prayer with the community of the baptised and the celebration to the Eucharist. Even infants and small children were admitted to Holy Communion after Baptism, especially if their Baptism occurred in the course of the paschal vigil. The tenderness of the children's age was no more thought to be a reason for postponing Holy Communion than it was for postponing Baptism.

When infant Communion finally died out in the twelfth century as a universal practice, it was due less to any fear of irreverence or misunderstanding than to the fact that the laity rarely received Holy Communion anyway.

During the later years of the last century and during this present one, even the traditional order of administering the Sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and first Communion, was abandoned when the emphasis on children making an early first Communion led to Communion before Confirmation more as a general practice than an exception.

The revised rite of Christian initiation makes clear the essential unity of the Sacraments of initiation. So now it is the policy of the Church that whenever adults or children who have reached the age of discretion come to the Church for Baptism, they will be baptised, confirmed and make their first Holy Communion in the course of a single liturgy. No provision is made for infants

baptised in infancy, other than so far as possible the order of the Sacraments be respected, and the process of initiation be seen to culminate in the admission to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Positive Developments and Creative Tensions The rite of Christian initiation not only offered an order of sacraments whereby new members are fully incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church, but also a process in which ritual celebrations and sponsorship from the community play a significant part. It offers us an image of faith journey, and challenges us with an understanding of 'conversion' being a life-long process.

In many dioceses throughout England and Wales this model which the Rite offers to us has been introduced for Holy Communion preparation. While the Catholic school still plays its important part, the parish community, through its catechists and sponsors, plays an active role in the preparation. There are highlights in the course of the preparation, with specific liturgies prepared to focus on particular aspects of the initiation process.

This process has enabled children and their families to be accepted as they are, and 'walked with' in their own faith journey. It has given parents an opportunity to review their own faith commitment and become more aware of what it means to share in the Eucharist.

It has also made the community far more aware of the number of children and families whose contact with the Church is 'tribal' and for whom the first Communion day is more of sociological interest than of faith.

Sacrament of Confirmation and Holy Communion In recent years the practice of confirming children has declined and the age moved into the teens in many dioceses. From the age of 11 up to the late teens would be a fair description of practice in the country, with one significant exception.

As an experiment, the Diocese of Salford, with Bishop Patrick Kelly, has introduced a pastoral process which means returning to the order of the Sacraments of the early Church. Every parish has been directed to participate in the process, with schools again playing their part, and parish catechists trained for theirs.

Parents are to be invited to have their children confirmed at the age of seven, when previously they would have made their first Communion. This is preceded by preparation in school and parish, for both parents and children, and celebrated on Pentecost Sunday.

The following Easter, after a similar process, children are to be invited to the table of the Eucharist for the first time. This will be a return to the original order of the Sacraments, and also a direct involvement of the whole community in the preparation of the children for the Sacraments.

It is too early to pass any judgement on this particular process, but it represents the tension experienced by those who are aware of the guidelines offered by the Church and the historical process of Christian initiation, along with the present pastoral practice of inviting young people to see the Sacrament of Confirmation as an opportunity to experience the commitment of the community to them, by their being confirmed, and also their commitment of themselves to Christ in the community.

(The CGMC Working Party is grateful to Father Harry Stratton for this contribution.)

15. The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army holds a non-sacramental stance to worship, though it regards with great respect the worship patterns of denominations which include sacramental observances.

Infants are not baptised, but dedicated in a ceremony which takes place within congregational worship and which is a commitment by the parents and the local congregation to bring up the child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The hope is that a child will share its parents' faith with growing perception. Salvationists believe that a child of even tender years of understanding can accept Jesus Christ as Saviour, friend and guide. After a period of instruction such a child may become a junior soldier in the Salvation Army. Holy communion plays no part in the worship of the Salvation Army, so the question of children's participation does not arise.

16. The Scottish Episcopal Church

(From that church's response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.)

The Episcopal Church is monitoring the extent to which admission to Holy Communion prior to Confirmation is precluding or encouraging coming forward later for Confirmation. Confirmation, providing both an opportunity for personal confession of faith and commitment, and a special gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be strengthened in our Christian life, remains the norm in Episcopalian practice, and is to be desired for its own sake though no longer a pre-requisite for admission to Holy Communion.

17. The Union of Welsh Independents

In their response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, they make clear that they see it as a mistake to apply the doctrine of adult baptism to infants. Infant baptism is practised to set God's seal upon them as heirs of his promises. But infants do not inherit salvation, they inherit the promises.

Communion is administered on the basis of personal faith, and children are not admitted.

18. The United Reformed Church

In the mid 1970s the United Reformed Church published two leaflets as part of their *Together* pack. One was called *Together for Communion* and the other *Communion – What children say*. Through these leaflets churches were challenged to look carefully at their worship and to see whether, including children more closely within the fellowship of the church, they could also be present and receive communion with adults.

Many churches did do this, and some had already been including children in communion services on a regular basis. Others have been setting aside one or two Sundays a year for children to take part in communion. Still more churches either have not considered the matter or have decided against allowing children at communion. The matter rests in the hands of the local church through its ministers and Elders and church meeting.

In 1986, the URC conducted an enquiry amongst its churches, *Children and Communion Enquiry* (1986). This asked for responses, statistics on children attending with parents, numbers baptised and some indication as to how many children are receiving communion regularly. The results reflected the pattern described above. The Children's Work Committee has published a document giving guidelines to churches, *Children in Communion?* but as yet no decision has been taken by the URC Assembly. Churches are free to decide for themselves.

Since 1980, the date of the union between the URC and the reformed association of the Churches of Christ, the URC in the UK has practised both infant and believers' baptism. There is a wide variety of viewpoints as to whether children should or should not receive communion.

Members of the Working Party

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David Gamble Children's Work Secretary, Methodist Church Division of Education and Youth.

Lesley Husselbee Convenor of the Children's Work Committee of the United Reformed Church.

Hugh James Provincial Officer for Youth and Children's Work for the Church in Wales' Board of Mission.

David Tennant Baptist Minister, Head of the Church Education Department of Westhill College, Selly Oak.

List of Bodies Affiliated to the CGMC

Baptist Union of Great Britain
British Council of Churches
Christian Education Movement
Church of Ireland Board of Education
Church of England Board of Education
Church of Scotland
Church in Wales
Conference for World Mission
Council for Sunday Schools & Christian Education in Wales
Irish Methodist Youth Department
The Methodist Church
National Christian Education Council
Presbyterian Church in Ireland
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Welsh National Centre for Religious Education
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