



St Andrew's Church, Caversham Heights



March 2009

Admittance of Children to Communion

Dear friends,

As you may know, over the last few months we have been thinking about whether we should go over to a pattern of admitting children to communion before confirmation, as many churches do now. In October the PCC agreed that this is something that we should explore. In November I wrote a paper with some of the background. (Many of you read this: it can be found on the parish website under 'Links'.) In January we had an open meeting to discuss the matter, and opinions raised there were fed back to the PCC.

I am writing now to continue the discussion and to respond to some of the questions and concerns people have raised. I have already made it clear that I am in favour of changing our pattern to one of admitting children to communion (prior to confirmation). It is formally the PCC's decision but we are trying to encourage as wide a discussion as possible.

Going by what people have said to me, most people seem to think it is a good idea. However, some at the open meeting were unsure, or decidedly against the change. It was not until Anne and I were feeding back from the meeting to the PCC that we realised that the strongest objection articulated at the meeting was actually a misunderstanding. Some people were concerned that **this is not the right way to attract children and young people to St. Andrew's**. So the important thing to say here is that the proposal to admit children to communion is for those children and young people who are *already* part of the church family, for example the young people who sing in our choir every week. Attracting more young people to the church is of course hugely important but that's not what this is about!

At January's open meeting a few people said they thought we need to offer a form of church that is accessible to people more on the fringes of the church, in particular a less formal and *non-eucharistic* form of worship. This is something we need to look at, and the new PCC (after the APCM) will be considering the range of services we offer. But this is a separate issue from the 'children and communion' issue.

One worry people have is that **children might not take communion seriously**. So it is important to realise that we are not talking about hordes of cubs and brownies, or occasional visitors. Those who are admitted to communion would be the children/young people who are genuinely part of our church family *and* they have to be asking to receive communion. They would need to complete a course of preparation, demonstrating that it is not just a casual interest, and anyway I would not admit any child to communion if they didn't seem serious. (This always remains the vicar's decision.)

Another issue which has been raised is that of **how well a child can understand holy communion**. My response to that is that we *all* have different levels, and different ways, of understanding communion, and that that is not a problem. However, children certainly *can* engage with symbols, e.g. a sense that at communion we are in some way receiving from God. Theoretically we may admit children to communion from baptism, i.e. when they are still babies. This is the practice of the eastern Orthodox Church and our diocese allows this too. The only reason I would expect no child under about 7 to be admitted is that I believe that they need at least to realise that the consecrated bread and wine is something very special, and that some sense of reverence and respect must be possible. My experience, and that of many others, in churches where children are admitted to communion is that they certainly do take it *seriously*, and often have something to teach us adults about how we receive from God. But *understanding* is not the issue here.

The other matter I would like to address here is the question, **Where does this leave confirmation?** If confirmation is no longer the gateway to receiving communion why would anyone get confirmed?

There are a couple of different scenarios here.

As we know young people often drift away from church in their teens and twenties, perhaps when they first move away from home, but later in life they begin to attend church again.

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In the situation where the person returning to church has *not* previously been admitted to communion or confirmed, then (just as for someone with no church background whatsoever) confirmation remains the rite of passage for them, marking their return to church life *and* admitting them to receiving communion.

In the scenario where the person returning to church *has* already been previously admitted to communion as a youngster (but not confirmed), then confirmation can be a way of marking this important step in their life. This is similar to someone joining the Church of England who has previously been a communicant member of another church. They do not *need* to get confirmed in order to receive communion, but for them confirmation is a rite of passage of Christian commitment in which they can say, as an adult, that they are choosing to identify with this faith and this church.

The other scenario is the one we have now, where many children have been confirmed in their early teens. If they drift away from church and later wish to return we currently have no way of marking what might be a significant life decision for them.

So the argument is: Let's keep confirmation for what it is intended to be- a rite of passage to mark a significant step of faith by an *adult*. For some teenagers confirmation might be the right thing. But there are many children and young people who are not ready to make an adult step of faith, *but they may be ready to make a child's step of faith*. If they are baptised they are full members of the church. Only those who genuinely wish to receive communion would do so, so we return to the question: Why should they be excluded?

The process of reflection will continue. At the APCM on April 26th after church we will be showing a short video made by a church where they have already gone down this route and, if people wish, we can discuss the matter further then.

All good wishes,