



## St Andrew's Church, Caversham Heights



November 2008

### Admittance of Children to Communion

Dear friends,

The Church of England is in the process of changing its pattern of admitting children to communion. The traditional pattern is that only those who have been confirmed may receive communion. This is now thought by many to be wrong, since unconfirmed children are just as much part of the church as the confirmed, and should not be excluded from this central part of our life together as Christians. But there are, of course, arguments for and against changing the existing pattern, and it is up to each parish whether or not to change its practice.

At a recent meeting of the PCC it was agreed that we should look at this as a parish. I am writing this letter now, with some background information, in order to help us begin to think the matter through, and to invite you to attend an open meeting.

Formally the decision of whether to change our pattern of children and communion rests with the Church Council, but it would be good to have as wide a discussion as possible, with any who may have opinions or feelings on the matter, and this will affect the decision on whether or not we should go over to the new pattern. Therefore the next stage in this process will be an open meeting, which you are invited to attend, which will take place in the church hall on: **January 11<sup>th</sup> at 3.30pm.**

### Background information

The General Synod and the House of Bishops have debated the question of children receiving holy communion before confirmation over many years. In 1996 the House of Bishops agreed a position and a set of guidelines were issued. Many parishes have made this important step and are seeing the benefits to the children's nurture, and the enriching of worship for the whole church. The Bishop of Oxford writes, "I am personally convinced of the pastoral, missional and theological value of this move in the Church's practice."

I too am personally in favour of making this change- as the bishop says, for "pastoral, missional and theological" reasons: *theological*, because it is simply right that baptised children are part of the family of God and Holy Communion is a means of God's grace which we do not earn; *pastoral*, because it is good to encourage families and children that they belong to the church family; and *missional*, because to receive communion can be a step on the way towards greater Christian commitment.

People today may think that what is being proposed is a break from ancient tradition. However, historically there has been a variety of practices with respect to baptism, confirmation and receiving communion. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that confirmation became the gateway to receiving communion, familiar to us today.

### So what's changed?

There are a number of reasons why the Church of England is now changing its practice:

- the reaffirmation of the centrality of baptism, i.e. that baptism is a full and complete rite of Christian initiation, and a definite rejection of the idea that baptism and confirmation somehow represent two different levels of membership;



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- the Parish Communion movement- Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century the parish Eucharist has become the main weekly act of worship, with Sunday School running in parallel. Gradually the practice has developed of bringing children to the altar rail- for a blessing.
- We have realised that most people come to faith gradually. Confirmation can be a very significant step for someone at the point of wanting to make a serious, adult commitment. Children are full members of the church family before they are in a position to take such a step and they should not be pressurised to get confirmed. But why should they be excluded from receiving communion?

If you would like to know more about the background and theology of this matter, our bishop, the Bishop of Reading, has produced a paper, which is available at the back of church or on the diocesan website at: [www.oxford.anglican.org/page/3299/](http://www.oxford.anglican.org/page/3299/).

### **What next?**

The way this would work, if we do decide to change our pattern, is that a (baptised) child must express a desire to receive communion, and undergo some form of preparation so that they have an understanding of what the Eucharist means. Unlike some, our diocese does not stipulate a minimum age at which children may be admitted, but our PCC thought that perhaps a minimum age of 7 would be a good idea. This would be one of many matters we would have to consider.

One question that often arises is the ongoing significance of confirmation. It would seem from parishes that have gone down this road that there is indeed a change to confirmation and that it is a positive one. Confirmation becomes what it should be- a rite for adults wanting to make a definite step forward in their journey of faith, and a cause for great celebration in the church.

Other issues we will look at include: what will we teach children prior to their first communion?; how will they be admitted to communion?; how much of the service would they be expected to attend?; how would that affect their participation in Sunday School?; and any other issues people want to raise.

I do hope that you will be able to come to the meeting. Whatever decision we eventually make on this question, I am sure that we shall all be seeking to hear God's voice and be a living sign of his presence in the world.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,