***GROWING DISCIPLES:***

*Welcoming baptized children to Holy Communion*

**SUMMARY OF REPORT**

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*Growing Disciples* is a report on the effects of admitting baptized children to Holy Communion before confirmation on the whole congregation. It arises from research carried out in the Diocese of Manchester by the diocesan Children’s Officer. This introductory booklet gives the **background** to the research, a **summary of findings**, a list of **recommendations** and an **action guide**.

The full research report is available from the Diocese of Manchester, Department of Education and online at [www.manchester.anglican.org/education/children](http://www.manchester.anglican.org/education/children)

**BACKGROUND**

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

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

Four parishes were selected to take part in the research. In each, interviews were conducted with two adult groups – Eucharistic ministers; and representatives of families, children’s ministers and the wider congregation – and a more informal discussion was conducted with young people who had been admitted to communion before confirmation.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

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

**Fellowship**

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

***Ethos***

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

***Community***

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

***Inter-generational relationships***

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

**Teaching – Adults’ Understanding**

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

***Communion***

* In considering the appropriateness of giving communion to young children, adults reassessed the significance of ‘understanding’ in the face of ‘the mystery of faith’, and acknowledged the deficiency of their own, or any adult’s understanding.
* Considering admission opened a discussion on the basic criteria for giving and receiving communion. It was seen as a natural expression of familial love, and a natural response both to an individual’s desire to receive, and to the overflowing generosity of God.
* The origins of the barriers to receiving were questioned in view of the scriptural accounts of Jesus’s inclusivity, and justice issues were identified in the light of humanity’s equality before

God. Implications of these issues for unconfirmed adults and the unbaptized were noted.

***Confirmation***

* The discussion of admission led to a reassessment of the place and significance of confirmation in the life of the Church and in the lives of individuals, and some adults were led to reflect on the significance of their own confirmation.
* The value of delayed confirmation in view of the significant decisions involved was recognised, and the freedom of choice offered by admission regarding the timing of confirmation was seen to reflect the variety of individual spiritual experiences.
* The discussions around ‘qualification’ for receiving communion led to a deeper engagement

with questions of authority in the Church. This engagement, and the experience of being part of an admitting church had changed minds in some who had opposed the practice.

***Faith development***

* The preparation of their children for admission to communion had drawn in parents and carers who were on the fringe of the church community and had given them material and a context that had enabled them to explore faith.
* Parents and carers who were already involved in the life of the Church found their faith enriched as they supported their children through preparation for admission and some adults were prompted to seek confirmation for themselves.
* The focus on communion created by a preparation programme taking place in a congregation had provided a ‘refresher course’ for all, and had provided a welcome revisiting of practices that had been taken for granted.

**Teaching – Children’s Understanding**

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

***Motivation and response***

* The fact that children wished to emulate their parents or carers and their peers in receiving was seen to have provided opportunities for exploring and sharing faith between adults and children and also within peer groups.
* During the course of their preparation and as a result of subsequent, ongoing reception of the sacrament children had demonstrated a growing and deepening understanding of the significance of communion.
* This understanding was discerned in the way that admitted children received communion; and the positive effect that receiving had on some children was an indication of a ‘learning’ beyond the words of instruction.

***Journey of faith***

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

**Children’s Experience of Communion**

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

***Fellowship***

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

***Teaching***

* The significance of communion was seen not only as an act of remembrance but also in terms of being ‘incorporated’ in to Jesus. It also led to a greater appreciation of Jesus’s sacrifice.
* A depth of spiritual engagement was demonstrated through an appreciation of the inexpressible nature of their experience in communion, of their relationship with God, and of the varied needs and responses of others.
* The children appreciated that faith is a journey, on which receiving communion was an important step; and they valued the choices they were offered regarding admission and confirmation.

***Empowerment***

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

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The effects recorded by the study indicate the potential for significant benefits in parishes adopting the practice. These recommendations are offered to guide parishes in realizing the full potential of admitting baptized children to communion for the life of church communities.

***For parishes considering admission:***

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

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

* Publicise the fact that baptized children are admitted to communion on the parish website as it may be a positive factor in choosing a church for those with or without children
* Build on the inclusivity at the Lord’s Table by seeking other opportunities for all ages to ‘do’ their faith together, such as interactive worship, all-age study groups and inclusive parish weekends
* Use the preparation of children for admission as an opportunity for a regular ‘refresher’ on the significance of communion with the whole congregation.
* Encourage the church family to enjoy the positive value of its youngest members, and appreciate the contribution they can make in all areas of church life
* Highlight the corporate responsibility for the nurture of children in a community: ‘It takes a village to raise a child’[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Encourage families to receive together, and create other opportunities for parents and children to explore their faith together, such as writing prayers for use in worship or taking part in all-age activities following the model of *Messy Church*
* Be intentional in supporting families whose children are being prepared or have begun to receive, perhaps drawing such families together to discuss their children’s nurture and their own faith
* Use the ongoing nurture of children after their admission as a prompt for discussing the significance of confirmation with families and stimulating reflection among adults who are not confirmed
* Provide opportunities for children to reflect on, discuss and share their experience of receiving communion, in their own groups and in wider, all-age contexts
* Arrange visits to receive communion at other churches and the cathedral so that children can build on their theoretical understanding that they take communion with the ‘whole Church throughout the world’.
* Foster opportunities for children to make meaningful choices in other areas of their faith life within the church community such as worship and study group themes, church giving or mission priorities, and their children’s or youth programmes
* Encourage adults as well as children to see their faith life as a dynamic journey and encourage reflective practices within the whole community that would enable adults and children to share the ongoing challenges of a life of faith
* Address the over-emphasis on a word-based, cognitive approach to faith by promoting more worship and study that draws on other spiritual styles such as emotion, symbol and action[[2]](#footnote-2)

***For those advocating the practice***

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

**ACTION GUIDE**

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

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

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

1. **Fellowship**

**Church ethos**

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

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

**Building community**

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

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

**Inter-generational relations**

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

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

1. **Teaching – Adults’ Understanding**

**Communion**

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

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

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

**Confirmation**

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

* How might confirmation be ‘devalued’ by doing it too early in someone’s life?

* What will you do to help the whole congregation think and learn more about Christian commitment and confirmation?

**Faith development**

*If [parent and carers] help their children to discover more about faith by their own faith then that lays a really good foundation and for some I hope it’s a challenge to them and a mission opportunity ( page 27).*

* Where are there possibilities in your congregation for parents and children to talk about faith together?
* What will you do to make preparation for admission a ‘mission opportunity’ among families?

1. **Teaching – Children’s Understanding**

**Motivation**

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

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

**Responses**

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

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

**Faith journey**

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

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

**Note**

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

1. Reputedly an African proverb – the phrase gained wide currency through Hillary Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village: And other lessons children teach us.* (1996). New York: Simon and Schuster. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Csinos, D. M. (2011). *Children’s Ministry that Fits: Beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to nurturing children’s spirituality.* Eugene: Wipf and Stock. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)