

Communion of Baptized Adults Background Paper to Bradford Diocesan Synod Motion

“That this Synod ask the House of Bishops to bring forward regulations under
Canon B15A to authorise the admission to the Holy Communion
of adults who have not yet been confirmed
And who are not yet ready and desirous to be confirmed.”

1. Dent with Cowgill is one of the parishes within Bradford Diocese which participates in an episcopal experiment of giving Holy Communion to baptized children before Confirmation following General Synod’s 2006 agreement to experimentation. The PCC, considering this practice helpful but too restrictive, sought permission from the Diocesan Bishop to give Communion before Confirmation to *any* baptized Christian but received the reply that this would necessitate a change in Canon Law and was not within his gift.
2. The PCC regarded the exclusiveness of the present position as sufficiently important to start a synodical process to bring forward a motion for the necessary change in Canon Law. At its meeting in November 2007, the Ewecross Deanery Synod gave its support to Dent’s proposal for a desire to be welcoming in worship and the specific mission imperative for this desire became clearer and difficult to challenge. The Bradford Diocesan Synod discussed the motion on two occasions: an initial wide-ranging debate and then, after refinement of the text, a vote gained a substantial majority, though there were admittedly several speeches of concern as to the implications for Confirmation if the proposal became law. This process now arrives at General Synod for debate this July 2011 Session.
3. The Church of England has for centuries required Confirmation as the normal gateway for persons already baptized to be admitted to Communion. This appears to have started as a result of an archiepiscopal decree in 1281 designed to bolster Confirmation by giving parents a need to have their children confirmed! Even then, Anglican history from 1662 to 1870 continues to reveal widespread exceptions from this in practice.
4. Then from 1870 for 100 years, as the ready availability of Confirmation grew, one school of thought gained primacy and taught that Confirmation is the ‘second half’ of sacramental initiation and those who have not been confirmed are (presumably) not theologically qualified to receive Communion – thus the Anglican outlook tightened.
5. The situation started to ease again when General Synod adopted a new Canon on “admission to Communion” in 1972 (see Appendix). The Canon greatly modified the seeming exclusiveness of the rubric in the BCP Confirmation Service. The underlying theological principle of this Canon was that Baptism was the crucial qualification for receiving Communion, and Confirmation, though still normal in practice, could in fact be waived in various cases – *viz*, the ‘ready and desirous’, the members of other denominations, anyone in danger of death, and any category beyond these for which General Synod saw fit to regulate. (As an aside, it should perhaps be noted that the Canon does not directly address nor even mention any issues of Membership of the Church of England.) In 2006, Synod made Regulations under the provisions of 1(c) to provide for children to be admitted prior to the age for Confirmation and the Bradford motion is simply asking General Synod to extend this provision to include adults as well as children.

6. Parallel with these changes, there has been a growing sense that Christian initiation is an unfolding process – some describe it as a journey - with key milestones. That does not reject the view largely embodied in the teaching of the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Prayer Book Catechism ie that there are but two sacraments of the gospel: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This process of initiation is consistent with the principle that Baptism is a one-off, unrepeatable event bringing followers within the Body of Christ, but it does take the view that those baptized continue to be sustained in Christ’s Body through regular sacramental and confessional life. The reception of Holy Communion and public profession of faith are part of this spiritual journey; if a baptized adult goes to receive Holy Communion, they are making a public statement of faith in Christ.
7. Centuries of actual practice have, however, posed the practical question as to the level of understanding of the faith which is to be required prior to admission to Communion. This question, has helped institutionalize the gap in time between Baptism in infancy and later Confirmation, but has in fact been answered in such a variety of ways as to make it difficult now to insist that one particular level of understanding or that one particular provision for reaching that level should constitute a non-negotiable doorway to becoming a communicant eg the sacrament would not be withheld from people with learning difficulties or dementia.
8. As with many other matters where the efficacy of a sacrament and the works of God’s Spirit are concerned, it is perhaps unwise, even unhelpful, to continue to institutionalize access. If someone is desirous to receive because of the Holy Spirit moving within them, then why should the Church prevent them responding there and then, provided they do not dishonour the Sacrament?
9. It is obviously right that if they avail themselves of this opportunity with some frequency, then their Parish Priest as part of his/her developing pastoral care should come alongside and guide their “journey” and endeavour to bring them into fuller membership of the Church through Confirmation.; however the Sacrament of Holy Communion should not continue to be made a “reward” for a formalized profession of faith, but offered as a sustaining provision of God’s grace, through active participation in which the recipient will discover the mystery of receiving more than simple bread and wine.
10. Bradford Diocesan Synod submits that not only is it desirable that the Church of England should accustom to, and retain at, its worship a much higher proportion of baptized children than at present, but that it is also desirable that it should make its worship more attractive to baptized but unconfirmed adults. Most of these no longer attend and when they do, perhaps in support of a family event such as a Baptism within the main (and often only) Sunday worship, find themselves unable to fully participate even if they wish. By keeping to the rule that everyone must have been confirmed, or at least “be ready and desirous to be confirmed”, before they may receive Communion, the Church has unintentionally helped to dissuade many baptized but, unconfirmed adults attending any of its services.
11. General Synod has already agreed that the rule be experimentally set aside in respect of children - but what about baptized adults too? By offering them the Sacrament of bread and wine, the Church would stand a better chance of attracting stay-away, baptized, unconfirmed adult parishioners to its services, since they would be offered the opportunity of full participation.
12. The case for abandoning the present position becomes even stronger when one considers that most, if not all children, first begin coming to church not of their own volition but because adults bring them there. The more parents and godparents who are regular churchgoers, the more children there will be who will become regular churchgoers; and vice versa.

13. Baptized but unconfirmed adults who wish to receive Communion in Anglican churches can do so by being 'ready and desirous' to be confirmed, *or* by describing themselves as guests from another denomination, *or* by simply presenting themselves, confident (with good reason) that they will not be refused: how many clergy interrogate adults at the rail before giving them communion? There are also some churches where Confirmation is in effect regarded as unimportant, and where clergy are reluctant to encourage people to be confirmed where they think it is unnecessary, thereby contravening current Cof E Canons.
14. However there is a category of unconfirmed worshippers (and perhaps of would-be worshippers) who would be unhappy in conscience to employ any of these three routes, and yet may wish to receive Communion, or who would be more willing to come to church if the service held is one in which they can fully participate. The issue is whether it is appropriate and desirable to open a canonical route for them. At present an "open altar" is something which, though illegal, many parishes or celebrating priests do practise' but the randomness of this creates uncertainty on the part of an occasional worshipper, especially when moving around the country or at major festival times when s/he perhaps attends alongside more "practising" friends and family.
15. If the proposed change were made, the status and pastoral/mission opportunity of Confirmation would clearly need to be addressed as part of the Church of England's pastoral and evangelistic strategy, but that would be no bad thing and it is understood that a set of essays is about to be published by the Faith and Order Commission designed to focus discussion on this. Confirmation would continue to provide a major milestone on a spiritual journey for those willing to receive; it would provide the opportunity for adults to reaffirm their faith and the promises made at their Baptism; and to receive grace through prayer and the laying-on of hands from the Bishop on behalf of the Universal Church. It would be optional and not mandatory for reception of the sustaining sacrament of Holy Communion.
16. The Bradford Diocesan Synod believes that, if given effect, the changes it proposes would help the Church of England to begin growing again by taking risks and making sure that it does not lose sight of what it is here for in the first place: to open the gate to God's presence where his love, mercy and generosity can be experienced within a community which has experienced this itself. This growth could occur not just through the retention, or attraction back, of people who have been baptized in the Church of England, but through the welcome that the proposed change would extend to all baptized Christians.

Debbie Child
Secretary
Bradford Diocesan Synod
June 2011

Canon B 15A Of the admission to Holy Communion

1. There shall be admitted to the Holy Communion:
 - (a) members of the Church of England who have been confirmed in accordance with the rites of that Church or are ready and desirous to be so confirmed or who have been otherwise episcopally confirmed with unction or with the laying on of hands except as provided by the next following Canon;
 - (b) baptized persons who are communicant members of other Churches which subscribe to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and who are in good standing in their own Church;
 - (c) any other baptized persons authorized to be admitted under regulations of the General Synod; and
 - (d) any baptized person in immediate danger of death.
2. If any person by virtue of sub-paragraph (b) above regularly receive the Holy Communion over a long period which appears likely to continue indefinitely, the minister shall set before him the normal requirements of the Church of England for communicant status in that Church.
3. Where any minister is in doubt as to the application of this Canon, he shall refer the matter to the bishop of the diocese or other Ordinary and follow his guidance thereon.

Note: The General Synod made the Admission of baptized children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006 on 8 February 2006 and these Regulations came into force on 15 June 2006.

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