

GENERAL SYNOD

**THE SOUTHWELL AND NOTTINGHAM DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION:
AMENDMENT TO CANON B 12 AND REGULATIONS**

Background note from the Secretary General

The existing legal position

1. The distribution of Communion is governed by Canon B 12.3 and the Regulations on the administration of Holy Communion made under that Canon.
2. Canon B 12.3 reads as follows:

No person shall distribute the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the people unless he shall have been ordained in accordance with the provisions of Canon C 1, or is otherwise authorized by Canon or unless he has been specially authorized to do so by the bishop acting under such regulations as the General Synod may make from time to time.
3. The relevant regulations, which were made by the Church Assembly in November 1969 under s.2(1) of the Prayer Book (Further Provisions) Measure 1968 but still take effect for the purposes of the Canon, read as follows:
 1. (1) An application to the bishop to authorize under [what is now Canon B 12.3] a baptized and confirmed person to distribute the Holy Sacrament in any parish shall be made in writing by the incumbent or priest-in-charge of the parish and supported by the churchwardens, and shall specify the name and give relevant particulars of the person to whom the application relates.
 - (2) Where the cure is vacant and no priest-in-charge is appointed, an application under the preceding paragraph may be made by the rural dean and supported by the churchwardens.
 2. It shall be at the discretion of the bishop to grant or refuse the application and to specify the circumstances or conditions in or on which the authority is to be available.
 3. In these Regulations 'the Bishop' means the bishop of the diocese or a person appointed by him for the purpose, being a suffragan or assistant bishop or archdeacon of the diocese.
4. Under the terms of the Canon and the regulations the elements at Holy Communion may be administered by (a) someone who has been ordained bishop, priest or deacon under the terms of Canon C 1 or (b) a baptised and confirmed person whose name has been approved either by the diocesan bishop or by a suffragan or assistant bishop or an archdeacon appointed by him for this purpose.

The proposed changes

5. If the Southwell and Nottingham motion is passed and the legislation that it requests is subsequently approved by the Synod, the existing rules concerning the distribution of Holy Communion will be changed in two ways.
6. First, the requirement that a person needs to be confirmed in order to distribute Holy Communion would be abolished. Instead, a child who is a 'regular communicant' could distribute Holy Communion even if he or she were not confirmed. (Under the Admission of baptized children to Holy Communion Regulations 2006 children who have been baptised may be admitted to the Holy Communion in certain circumstances, even if not confirmed.)
7. Secondly, with the agreement of the diocesan bishop, the decision as to who could distribute Holy Communion could be made by an incumbent or priest in charge (or by a rural dean during a vacancy) rather than by a bishop or an archdeacon.

Children and Holy Communion

8. The proposal would send out a clear message that children are fully included within the body of Christ. It has been suggested that allowing children to distribute the sacrament would be particularly appropriate in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist in Church Schools.
9. Under the 2006 regulations any unconfirmed child admitted to Holy Communion should have been adequately prepared. It should therefore not be the case that a child asked to distribute the Sacrament would not understand the significance of Holy Communion. Furthermore, given the variation of the age of confirmation, it is already possible for a child to distribute the Sacrament under the current regulations.

Comments from the Faith and Order Commission

10. The motion has been considered by the Faith and Order Commission, which identified a number of questions that members of the Synod are invited to consider.

(1) Is it appropriate for those who are not yet confirmed to distribute Holy Communion?

11. The proposal raises two issues in this connection:
 - Whether someone needs to be a full member of the Church to act on behalf of the Church in the distribution of the Eucharist, and
 - Whether confirmation is required to be a full member of the Church.
12. Concern was expressed by members of the Commission that in practice, if not in intention, removing the current requirement that a person distributing Holy Communion should be confirmed as well as baptised would undermine the importance of confirmation within the process of Christian initiation.

13. The importance of confirmation was re-affirmed in the recent collection of essays published by the Faith and Order Commission under the title *The Journey of Christian Initiation* (Church House Publishing, 2011). Last year, the Synod declined to pass a motion from the Diocese of Bradford to ‘authorise the admission to the Holy Communion of adults who have been baptised but who have not yet been confirmed and who are not yet ready and desirous to be confirmed’.

(2) Is it appropriate for children to distribute Holy Communion?

14. Two issues were identified in this connection:
- How do we judge at what age someone is intellectually and spiritually ready for the serious responsibility of distributing the elements at Communion with appropriate understanding and reverence?
 - Is the proposal part of a larger problem of not leaving children things to aspire to as adults? If children are given the message that distributing Holy Communion is something you could do as a child, is there not a danger that they would see it as an activity which they would grow out of when they ceased to be children?

(3) Does the decision about who may distribute Holy Communion need to be made at the episcopal or archidiaconal level as at present, or could it appropriately be devolved to the parochial level?

15. The issue here is the application of the principle of subsidiarity, the principle that matters should be decided at the lowest appropriate level. Given that the diocesan bishop is the principal minister of the Eucharist in his diocese, to what level may he rightly devolve the responsibility for deciding who qualifies as a fit and proper person to distribute the sacrament? Some members of the Commission would be content for the decision to be devolved to the parochial level, but others feel that it could be useful for the final decision to be made by someone outside the parish, in order to allow an outside perspective to be brought to bear when problems about appointment arise at the parochial level.

Comments from the Liturgical Commission

16. The motion has also been considered by the Liturgical Commission. The Commission supports the *admission* of children to communion before confirmation, but several (though not all) members are uneasy about the proposed canonical change whereby children of pre-confirmation age would be permitted to *administer* Communion. Three reasons were advanced for such unease:
- Children often lack the skills of co-ordination required to go through the tricky tasks of administering a chalice and this could lead to spillages and vessels being dropped.
 - The view that children are somehow ‘excluded’ if every possible ministry is not opened up to them is a simplistic approach to ministry amongst children. In worship as in life, there are roles that children are able to perform and others for which they are not ready, and part of the joy of growing up is over time to

be opened up to privileges and new experiences for which one was previously adjudged too young.

- Schools are, unfortunately, places where children can experience bullying or ridicule. Allowing some children to administer Communion could expose them to greater risk of this.

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