

## GENERAL SYNOD

### CHILDREN AND HOLY COMMUNION: A REVIEW

#### **Brief Summary**

In March 1997, the House of Bishops issued the Guidelines on the Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation, **GS Misc 488**, which had previously been approved by General Synod in November 1996

In November 2000 General Synod debated a motion from the Diocese of Bristol requesting the House to initiate a change in Canon Law so that Synod could decide whether Communion before Confirmation should be the nationally agreed common practice (rather than leaving the decision to individual dioceses and parishes). The motion was amended to read:

“That this Synod request the House of Bishops to continue to monitor the implementation in dioceses of its 1997 guidelines on Communion before Confirmation and *to report back to the Synod by 2005*, with a recommendation as to whether any changes in canon law are required as a result of developing practice and understanding in the Church.”

#### **Background information**

Since the 1950s, there has been a growing theological awareness of baptism as the one complete rite of initiation. Baptised children are wholly, not conditionally, in the Body of Christ. There has been a growing sense that they are part of the sacramental community and should, with appropriate nurture and support, be welcomed at the communion rail with adults. The process of the consideration of this issue began some 60

years ago, with the growth of Parish Communion as the main service in many churches. The key dates include:

- 1967            National Evangelical Congress (Keele) states '*Some... would like the children of Christian families to be admitted as communicants at an early age*'. *Ely Commission asked to consider questions about initiation*
- 1971            Ely Commission Report is published, 'Christian Initiation: Birth and Growth in Christian Society'. It concluded that Baptism is the complete sacramental initiation rite, therefore children should be admitted to Holy Communion on that basis. General Synod received the Ely Report
- 1974            General Synod referred the Report to the dioceses for consultation. Three dioceses given permission to admit children – Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark
- 1976            General Synod formally decides not to admit children to Holy Communion. However, Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark continue to admit. 'The Child in the Church' published by British Council of Churches
- 1978            The Scottish Episcopal Church agrees to admit to Holy Communion before Confirmation
- 1979            The new Episcopal Church of USA Prayer Book offers an ambiguous reading of provisions.

- Children and infants are admitted to Holy Communion as a result
- 1980 New Zealand and South Africa make provision to admit children  
Alcuin Club Annual Lecture ‘Infant Communion – then and now’ given by David Horelton published as Grove Liturgical Study 27
- 1981 ‘Understanding Christian Nurture’ pub British Council of Churches  
Australia approves provisional canons
- 1984 Most Australian dioceses have adopted the canons
- 1985 ‘Nurturing Children in Communion’ Boston Mass. Consultation pub Grove Liturgical Study 44. ‘Communion before Confirmation?’ The Knaresborough Report, prepared for General Synod  
General Synod takes note of the Report (Nov). Manchester, Peterborough and Southwark are deemed ‘experimental’ dioceses
- 1986 Joint Board of Education in Australia publishes ‘Helping Children to participate in Holy Communion’
- 1988 ‘Children in the Way’ report published and debated in General Synod, which accepts it, including the recommendation ‘A resolution of the issue of Communion before Confirmation is

required as a matter of urgency.’ The matter is passed to the House of Bishops

- 1989 ‘Children and Holy Communion’ an ecumenical report published by British Council of Churches
- 1993 ‘Communion before Confirmation’. Culham College Institute commissioned to do a survey of the three experimental dioceses. A survey conducted by the Children’s Advisers finds experimentation is happening in all dioceses
- 1994 ‘On the Way – Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation’, a report of General Synod, asking churches to explore initiation policies. One of the options for consideration is Communion before Confirmation
- 1996 House of Bishops’ produces Guidelines for Admission of Baptised Persons to Holy Communion before Confirmation (July)
- General Synod accepts the Guidelines (Nov)
- 1997 The House of Bishops’ Guidelines are published in March, with minor amendments

Before 1996 only the dioceses of Peterborough, Southwark and Manchester were officially admitting the unconfirmed to Holy Communion. They had been given permission as an experiment in 1991 and the practice was still very much alive and growing. The recognition of a need for Guidelines came about for three reasons:

1. The pastoral dilemma for clergy with the arrival in parishes of families for whom children receiving communion was normal. This was similar to that encountered in LEPs, where Free Churches were admitting children to communion.
2. The Church of England being seen as out of step with other parts of the Anglican Communion, European Churches, and the Orthodox.
3. Unity and order - a survey in 1993 by the then National Children's Advisers' Panel discovered that unconfirmed children were receiving Holy Communion in every diocese, either from their parents or officiating clergy. Also a growing recognition that children who were not receiving were sometimes given 'alternatives' - Smarties or other sweets or white sliced bread squares. One church's practice was to give children their Sunday School stamp at the altar rail instead of a wafer - a visiting child consumed his.

The Guidelines permitted and encouraged churches to explore the nature of the sacrament and the question of who should receive, including children. Just as with adults, the spiritual life of baptised children is enriched by the receiving of Holy Communion and their sense of belonging is affirmed and encouraged. This has required churches to engage with the sacrament in new and different ways, to the enrichment of both children and adults alike, as they journey in faith together.

## **The Current House of Bishops' Guidelines**

### **ADMISSION OF BAPTISED PERSONS TO COMMUNION BEFORE CONFIRMATION: Guidelines agreed by the House of Bishops (GS Misc 488)**

- A. Since 'Communion before Confirmation' is a departure from our inherited norm, it requires special permission. After consultation, every diocesan bishop will have the discretion to make a general policy whether or not to entertain new applications for 'Communion before Confirmation' to take place in his diocese. If he decides to do so, individual parishes must seek his agreement before introducing it. The bishop should satisfy himself that both the incumbent and the Parochial Church Council support any application and that where appropriate, ecumenical partners have been consulted. If the parties cannot agree, the bishop's direction shall be followed.
- B. The incumbent must ensure that the policy adopted for his/her parish is clearly and widely understood. The policy should be considered within the general context both of the ministry that is carried out in the parish through initiation, and also of the continuing nurture of people in the Christian faith. The bishop should be satisfied that the programme of continuing Christian nurture is in place leading to confirmation in due course.
- C. Before admitting a person to Communion, the priest must seek evidence of baptism. Baptism always precedes admission to Holy Communion.
- D. There is a question regarding the age at which children may be admitted to Holy Communion. In general, the

time of the first receiving should be determined not so much by the child's chronological age, as by his or her appreciation of the significance of the sacrament. Subject to the bishop's direction, it is appropriate for the decision to be made by the parish priest after consultation with the parents or those who are responsible for the child's formation, with the parents' goodwill. An appropriate and serious pattern of preparation should be followed. The priest and parents share in continuing to educate the child in the significance of Holy Communion so that (s)he gains in understanding with increasing maturity.

- E. The Church needs to encourage awareness of many different levels of understanding, and support the inclusion of those with learning difficulties, including children. The incumbent should consult with those concerned in their care, education and support regarding questions of their discernment of the sacrament, their admission to Holy Communion, and their preparation for Confirmation.
- F. Before a person is first brought to Holy Communion, the significance of the occasion should be explained to him/her and to his/her parents, and marked in some suitable way before the whole congregation. Whenever possible, the persons family should be involved in the service.
- G. A register should be kept of every person admitted to Holy Communion before Confirmation, and each should be given a certificate (or, better, the baptismal certificate should be endorsed).

- H. Whether or not a parish practises 'Communion before Confirmation', the incumbent should take care regarding the quality of teaching material, especially that used with children and young people. The material should be reviewed regularly and the advice of diocesan officers and other professional advisers taken into account.
- I. The priest must decide exactly how much of the liturgy communicant children will attend. Even if there is a separate 'Ministry of the Word' for children, anyone who is to receive Holy Communion should be present in the main assembly at least for the eucharistic prayer.
- J. No baptised person, child or adult, who has once been admitted to Holy Communion and remains in good standing with the Church, should be anywhere deprived of it. When, for example, a family moves to another area, the incumbent of the parish they are leaving should contact their new incumbent to ensure there is no confusion about the communicant status of children. It is the responsibility of the new incumbent to discuss with the children and parents concerned when the children should be presented for Confirmation. Such children should normally be presented by at least the age of 18.
- K. Since baptism is at the heart of initiation, it is important for the bishop regularly to be the minister of holy baptism, and particularly at services where candidates will be both baptised and confirmed. It is generally inappropriate for candidates who are preparing for initiation into Christian life in baptism and Confirmation to receive baptism at a service other than the one in which they are to be confirmed.



- L. In using rites of public re-affirmation of faith other than baptism and Confirmation, care should be taken to avoid the impression that they are identical with Confirmation. In the case of people who have not been confirmed, it will be more appropriate for the incumbent to propose that they be confirmed.

### **The Review Process**

1. In preparation for this Report, diocesan practice has been actively monitored over the Quinquennium. Because the diocese of London decided the issue as five episcopal areas and no information is available for Europe at present, the global figure for the percentages and other figures presented will be **47** areas and dioceses, instead of **44**.
2. Three Questionnaires - **Q1, Q2, and Q3** - were sent out in 2001, 2002 and 2004 respectively. There was a **100%** response to all three.

### **The Review**

3. **Q1** asked if the diocese was admitting children, what date implementation had begun, how many churches were admitting children and how many children, approximately or otherwise, were receiving. Those who were not admitting were asked how far the process had gone and what were the future plans, if any. The responses showed that in **2001**, the number of dioceses admitting was **37** and the number of churches was **1064**. It became apparent that while there was clarity in the dioceses about the number of churches (not benefices), which had been given permission, not all were recording the number of children. Of the **36** dioceses admitting (excluding London), **15** were

keeping no records of numbers of children; **nine** estimated **2510** children and **12** recorded specifically **1379** children, a total of **3889** children. Across the five London episcopal areas, **two** were admitting and keeping no records, **two** were admitting and recorded **200** children and **one** was not admitting at all. This gave an overall total of **4089**.

4. **Q2** omitted the children question altogether and concentrated on church permissions. This was as much to facilitate the process for the dioceses, as to elicit as prompt a return as possible. **Q2** quite simply reminded each diocese of their **Q1** figure and asked them to record any change. Again, there was a **100%** response. In **2002**, **1226** churches in **41** out of **47** areas and dioceses had been given permission. This was approximately **8%** of the total number of churches nationally.
5. **Q3** was sent out early in **2004** requesting the number of church permissions and numbers of children. The return rate was again **100%** and showed that **1539** churches had been given permission. From those which were recording, either as an exact number or as a 'guesstimate', the number of **5515** children were receiving See **Annex 1** and **2** for most recent data.
6. It would not be possible to report on the implementation in every diocese in detail. However, to discover how the process was begun, developed and sustained, Manchester, Chichester, Salisbury, Bath and Wells, and Truro have been looked at in some depth

7. Of particular interest was how information was produced, how children and congregations were prepared, the impact of the process on clergy, laity, children, congregational life and liturgy, the role of Confirmation and the handling of difference. The Guidelines were not age-specific, but many dioceses settled for somewhere around seven, with Oxford designating a lowest age of four.
8. The initial tasks for the dioceses included awareness-raising exercises, many producing information/discussion packs for clergy and their congregations. The rationale was that all should debate this issue, that none should feel pressurised, that the traditional pattern of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion was still normative, but that decisions about any future action should be made from an informed, educated basis. Churches which arrived at a 'no, not for us' decision would be encouraged to revisit this issue at some future time, not least because the Guidelines stated quite explicitly that children who had been given permission in one church should not be refused anywhere else.
9. It has become apparent that most of the perceived problems did not materialise, or sorted themselves out and that where children have been given the opportunity to receive, the whole worshipping life of the congregation has changed and blossomed.
10. One of the most frequently asked questions has been '...but what will happen to Confirmation?' It is early days, but a pattern of better practice seems to be emerging. Some bishops are using the permission-granting process to engage with individual parishes in

new and creative ways, especially where commitment to eventual Confirmation is set explicitly at the heart of the permission. The mandate is firmly placed on clergy and congregation to support and sustain contact with the children and their parents.

11. The evidence of this review of the Guidelines has shown that although the number of churches admitting is proportionately quite small, it is growing steadily. Updates on admission figures offered voluntarily by dioceses, subsequent to the review process, show that the number of churches given permission has increased to **1650**. For further in-depth information, see **Annex 1 and 2**
12. The Bishops' Meeting in June 2004 received this report on implementation. In discussion, the Bishops expressed a desire to firm up the Guidelines into Regulations. Bishop Colin Buchanan recommended strongly that the position should now be normalised through regulations made under Canon B 15A. There was general assent for his proposal.
13. Canon B 15A (Of admission to Holy Communion) envisages in paragraph 1(c) the admission to Holy Communion of "any other baptised persons authorized to be admitted under regulations of the General Synod".
14. The Board of Education at its meeting in November 2004 agreed to the recommendation that draft regulations should be laid before General Synod for approval, and considered a first draft of regulations.
15. At its December 2004 meeting, the House of Bishops Standing Committee gave further consideration to the

question whether regulations were necessary. It was suggested that the existing guidelines might suffice. The Church Legal Adviser agreed to prepare advice.

16. His legal advice was unequivocal. The existing guidelines, issued under paragraph 1(a) of Canon B 15A, “were, at least in part, intended to facilitate something which paragraph 1(a) of the Canon did not permit – i.e. the admission to Holy Communion of persons not yet ‘*ready and desirous*’ to be confirmed”. Stephen Slack indicated that “there must be a real risk that, if the guidelines were subjected to legal challenge, the House would be held to have acted unlawfully”.
17. The advice was that no legal objection could in his view be made to regulations made by the General Synod under paragraph 1(c) of Canon B 15A which allowed the admission to Holy Communion of baptized children who were not yet ‘*ready and desirous*’ to be confirmed.

**Draft Regulations – to be considered for general approval in November 2005**  
**ADMISSION OF BAPTISED CHILDREN TO COMMUNION DRAFT REGULATIONS 200-**

The General Synod hereby makes the following Regulations:-

1. These Regulations may be cited as the Admission of Baptised Children to Communion Regulations 200- and shall come into force on [] 200-.

2. Children who have been baptised but who have not yet been confirmed and who are not yet ready or desirous to be confirmed as required by paragraph 1(a) of Canon B 15A may be admitted to Holy Communion provided that the conditions set out in these Regulations are satisfied.
3. Every diocesan bishop may at any time make a direction to the effect that applications from parishes under these Regulations may be made in his diocese. The bishop's discretion in this respect shall be absolute, and he may at any time revoke such a direction (without prejudice to the validity of any permissions already granted thereunder).
4. Where a direction under paragraph 3 is in force in a diocese, an incumbent may apply to the bishop for permission that children falling within the definition in paragraph 2 may be admitted to Holy Communion in one or more of the parishes in the incumbent's charge. Such application must be made in writing and must be accompanied by a copy of a resolution in support of the application passed by the parochial church council of each parish in respect of which the application is made.
5. Before granting any permission under paragraph 4, the bishop must first satisfy himself (a) that the parish concerned has made adequate provision for preparation and continuing nurture in the Christian life and will encourage any child admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations to be confirmed at the appropriate time and (b) where the parish concerned is within the area of a local ecumenical project established

under Canon B 44, that the other participating Churches have been consulted.

6. The bishop's decision in relation to any application under paragraph 4 shall be final, but a refusal shall not prevent a further application being made on behalf of the parish concerned, provided that at least one year has elapsed since the most recent previous application was refused.
7. Any permission granted under paragraph 4 shall remain in force unless and until revoked by the bishop. The bishop must revoke such permission upon receipt of an application for the purpose made by the incumbent. Such application must be made in writing and accompanied by a copy of a resolution in support of the application passed by the parochial church council of each parish in respect of which the application is made.
8. Where a permission granted under paragraph 4 is in force, the incumbent shall not admit any child to Holy Communion unless he or she is satisfied that (a) the child has been baptised and (b) the persons having parental responsibility for the child are content that the child should be so admitted. Otherwise, subject to any direction of the bishop, it is within the incumbent's absolute discretion to decide whether, and if so when, any child should be admitted to Holy Communion.
9. The incumbent shall maintain a register of all children admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations, and where practicable will record on the child's baptismal certificate the date and place of the child's admission. If the baptismal certificate is not available,

the incumbent shall present the child with a separate certificate recording the same details.

10. A child who presents evidence in the form stipulated in paragraph 9 that he or she has been admitted to Holy Communion under these Regulations shall be so admitted at any service of Holy Communion conducted according to the rites of the Church of England in any place, regardless of whether or not any permission under paragraph 4 is in force in that place or was in force in that place until revoked.
11. These Regulations shall apply to a cathedral as if it were a parish, with the modifications that:
  - (a) any application under paragraphs 3 or 7 must be made by the dean of the cathedral concerned, accompanied by a copy of a resolution in support of the application passed by the chapter of the cathedral concerned;
  - (b) the obligations imposed on the incumbent under paragraphs 8 and 9 shall be imposed on the dean of the cathedral concerned.
12. A diocesan bishop may delegate any of his functions under these Regulations (except his functions under paragraph 3) to a person appointed by him for the purpose, being a suffragan or assistant bishop or archdeacon of the diocese.
13. In these Regulations:
  - (a) ‘incumbent’, in relation to a parish, includes:



(i) in a case where the benefice concerned is vacant (and paragraph (ii) below does not apply), the rural dean;

(ii) in a case where a suspension period (within the meaning of the Pastoral Measure 1983) applies to the benefice concerned, the priest-in-charge; and

(iii) in a case where a special cure of souls in respect of the parish has been assigned to a vicar in a team ministry by a Scheme under the Pastoral Measure 1983 or by licence from the bishop, that vicar; and

(b) references to paragraph numbers are to the relevant paragraph or paragraphs in these Regulations.

The Board of Education at its meeting in May 2005 considered the draft regulations, prepared by the Legal Office on the basis of the Board's discussion, and agreed that they should be laid before General Synod for general discussion. Subject to formal House approval in January 2006, final Synodical approval would be sought in February 2006

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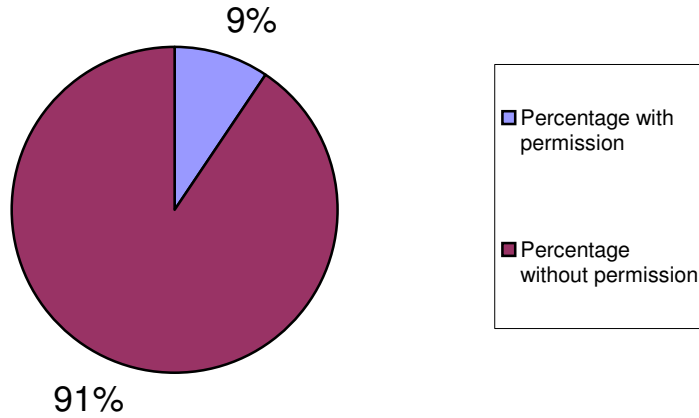
June 2005

## CURRENT DIOCESAN INFORMATION

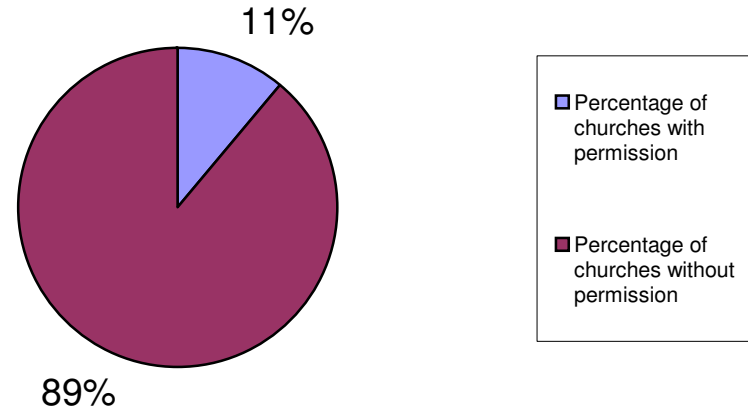
<b>Diocese</b>	<b>Admitting</b>	<b>No of Churches with Permission</b>
Bath and Wells	Yes	79
Birmingham	Yes	14
Blackburn	Yes	15
Bradford	Yes	131
Bristol	Yes	no figs available yet
Canterbury	Yes	14
Chelmsford	Yes	52
Chester	Yes	42
Chichester	Yes	57
Coventry	Yes	23
Derby	Yes	46
Durham	Yes	54
Ely	Yes	63
Exeter	Yes	3
Gloucester	Yes	53
Guildford	Yes	37
Leicester	Yes	60
Lichfield	Yes	Pilot
Lincoln	Yes	15
Liverpool	Yes	24
London (Edmonton)	Yes	1
London (Kensington Area)	Yes	26
London (Stepney)	Yes	4
London (Two Cities)	Yes	6
London (Willesden Area)	Yes	35
Manchester	Yes	110
Newcastle	Yes	8
Norwich	Yes	100
Oxford	Yes	42
Peterborough	Yes	46
Portsmouth	Yes	7
Ripon and Leeds	Yes	12
Rochester	Yes	32
Salisbury	Yes	80
Sheffield	Yes	16
Southwark	Yes	133
Southwell	Yes	54
St Albans	Yes	34
St Edmundsbury and Ipswich	Yes	33
Truro	Yes	3
Wakefield	Yes	24
Winchester	Yes	27
Worcester	Yes	<u>35</u>
	Total:	1650
Carlisle	Consultation planned to set policy	
Hereford	Held consultation, no vote yet	
Sodor and Man	No	
York	Under discussion	



Number of churches that have requested permission to admit as a percentage of the total number of churches in all Dioceses.



Number of Churches that have requested permission to admit as a percentage of the total number of churches within Dioceses implementing the guidelines



**Diocesan Joining History**  
London Diocese is counted as separate Episcopal areas

