

# Children and Communion - SJB

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## Belong, Believe, Build with Christ at the Centre

Around 30 years ago, the Church of England decided to return to the historic norm of encouraging children to participate fully in the sacrament of Holy Communion prior to confirmation. The then Bishop of Oxford described this as “a matter of good pastoral practice and sound theological principle” and asked all parishes to consider it. He saw the reestablishment of the two sacraments—Baptism and Holy Communion—as the heart of the life of the church.

In our church we have a growing number of families attending our services – including our all-age Communion services. Among these families are those who have asked if they can receive Communion. One individual, in particular, has been reading about the importance of participation in the sacrament; he has made a significant commitment to faith in Jesus and to our church.

In addition, with a few major exceptions, I have found that we are struggling to help our enthusiastic primary-age children transition into enthusiastic teen members of our church. Confirmation is often seen as a graduation service rather than a new beginning. I have been praying and thinking about how we might make that transition easier. I believe we can achieve this if children are fully involved in worship, prayer, and mission. This includes learning through Explorers—which is vital—but also participating in the worshipping life of our church as children and, possibly, in the sacrament.

We seek to empower our children to participate in the full life of our church—not as future members, but as current members of the Body of Christ.

This approach is in line with the Diocese of Oxford, which has called for five cultural shifts in all our churches:

### **1. Viewing children and young people as active participants and pilgrims**

A shift from viewing children and young people as a problem/deficit/challenge to children and young people as active participants and pilgrims.

### **2. Engaging with children, young people and families intergenerationally**

A shift from running separate programmes to living intergenerationally.

### **3. Being intentional disciple makers**

A shift from ‘vague influencers’ to intentional disciple makers.

### **4. Enabling those engaging with children and young people to be ‘called’, ‘formed’ and ‘equipped’ ministers**

A shift from pressed volunteers and workers to called and formed ministers.

### **5. Being the change we want to see**

A shift from an ‘adults-only’ Church to an ‘all-age community of grace’.

## What are we proposing?

Holy Communion is:

- Holy – it is dedicated and set aside, something that is not entered into lightly
- Communion – it brings us together with Christ and with one another.

Participation demands some level of understanding: it is a service of remembering, but it also is a mystery that takes us beyond the logical into relationship with God and one another. This is the point of sacrament.

## **Who?**

The option would be for children who are baptised and who are regularly worshipping with their parents in our community.

They would learn, along with their parents, the significance of the sacraments – both the significance of their baptism and the significance of Holy Communion.

## **What age would we begin with?**

We can never fully comprehend the depth of love in both sacraments, but we need the beginning of an understanding that grows as we participate. Typically, this age is set at around 7 — though only when a child is deemed ready by their parents.

## **How would they participate?**

They would receive Communion only in services where they are present for the significant points of the liturgy—for example, the confession and the Eucharistic Prayer. This would normally be in our all-age Communion services, where the liturgy, and especially the Eucharistic Prayer, is child-friendly.

They would be encouraged to serve as ministers.

- They would be trained and accompanied as servers.
- They can shape our intercessory prayers – not just reading prayers, but suggesting subjects and writing their own prayers.
- Helping with welcome and doing jobs like helping with the sound.

## **Would we have an elaborate First Communion service?**

Roman Catholic practice places a high emphasis on First Communion, but I believe we should downplay the drama and view participation in Holy Communion as something that becomes part of a natural spiritual life.

## **What are the key arguments against such a change?**

- Some will be concerned that the sacrament is not taken seriously.
- Perhaps, some worry that confirmation will be downgraded – or even lost.
- You may have other concerns

## **Will these concerns be taken seriously?**

They will. We want everyone to be able to speak and listen. This is a significant step for us.

Our aim is to build a community of faith where all belong. It is important to discuss these matters—if you have concerns, please speak to me as your vicar, to our churchwardens, or to the families in our church. Communication requires both speaking and listening, and we all need to do both.

## **In order to proceed:**

- We need the enthusiastic support of a significant number of our congregation, especially those families who regularly worship with us. There is no point in pursuing this initiative if the children and parents do not wish to embark on this journey.
- We would like the consent of those who are concerned, but are willing to see if it builds up our community of faith.
- We will need the consent of the SJB committee, the PCC and our Bishop.

## **Next step**

I will speak about the change at our services on March 2.

We will then be looking at feedback and if we need a church meeting.

We will consider all responses at our next SJB meeting in March (date to be confirmed). We would welcome participation, and we are always open to new membership.

Thank you, Canon Phil Groves