

## METHODIST CHURCH REPORTS

### *Special Report*

# Children and Holy Communion

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The 1987 Guidelines

The Methodist Conference has for many years been concerned with the issue of Children and Communion. Two interim reports were considered in the 1970s. The Conference of 1987 adopted the report *Children in Communion*. Its central recommendations were presented in the form of Guidelines for the use of local churches. These Guidelines remain in place. Whilst acknowledging that the final responsibility for what happens in the local church remains with the Church Council, the adopted Report expressed the conviction that 'the time has come to move forward and encourage children to participate fully in the Lord's Supper.'

### 1.2 Practice in other churches

Children and Communion is not an issue for the Methodist Church alone. The recent report *Baptism and Church Membership (Churches Together in England)* highlights other ways in which the issues have been addressed. Due account should be taken of this, especially bearing in mind the large number of Local Ecumenical Partnerships [LEPs] in which Methodism shares, in particular with the United Reformed Church and with the Church of England. Alongside this it should be noted that in churches which are not LEPs there will also be people from different denominations and backgrounds (see Section 4).

### 1.3 Remit of the Working Group

Ten years after *Children in Communion*, a Working Party was given a remit from the then Division of Education and Youth to look at the practice of Methodist churches in the matter of admitting children to Holy Communion. The remit noted that 'there is inconsistency in the interpretation of the guidelines in the 1987 Report and therefore the practice of churches. There is also development in the practice of other churches, with some of whom Methodism has inter-Communion and shared life in LEPs.' The task of the Working Party was 'to discover what is happening, particularly in the Methodist Church in Britain, and to help the church to address this issue.'

### 1.4 What the Group did

The Working Group decided to discover present practice in Methodist churches (including LEPs in which Methodists share) by a direct approach rather than by anecdotal evidence and commissioned a survey to gather this information. The main findings are presented in this Report. In the light of this information and other developments which have occurred within both the Methodist church and other traditions a number of issues have been identified. It is recommended that the 1987 Guidelines be replaced by the policy set out at the end of this Report.

## 2 THE SURVEY

### 2.1 Research Method

In the summer of 1997 a fully structured self-completion postal questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of ministers in pastoral charge of churches across the connexion. The sample was drawn from the annual statistical data returned through circuits and districts. In order to minimize enquiries of churches with no children those returning five or fewer present in Junior Church were excluded from the sampling frame - reducing its size by 46%. Ministers were asked to complete the questionnaire only with the specified church in their section in mind, thereby ensuring that smaller churches as well as larger ones featured in the research. Where necessary, a reminder letter was sent to encourage ministers to complete the questionnaire. 324 out of 390 ministers replied to the survey - an excellent response rate of 83%. It transpired that some 18% of the churches covered by the survey indicated that they had five children or fewer in their Junior Church when the time came to complete the questionnaire which means that the experience of churches with a small number of children was represented in the survey.

### 2.2 Results

#### 2.2.1 Introducing the Policy

##### 2.2.1.1 Is there a Children in Communion policy in place?

69% of Church Councils which were sampled had discussed children in Communion and 56% had agreed a formal policy. Where a policy had not been agreed a further 21% of churches had an informal policy which had not been the subject of Church Council discussion. If this figure is added to the 56% of Church Councils with an agreed policy then 77% of the churches sampled claim to have a policy of some kind.

##### 2.2.1.2 What policy is in place?

83% of churches with a policy for children in Communion are offering children the elements either conditionally [43%] or unconditionally [40%].

##### 2.2.1.3 Who took the initiative for setting the policy?

- Minister 73%
- Junior Church Staff 38%
- Church Council 11%
- Parents 11%

*Base: churches with a policy - more than one answer possible*

##### 2.2.1.4 What reservations did churches have about the introduction of the Policy?

Just over a third of churches had reservations about introducing a policy. In order of importance those identified from a given list were:

- Children would not know what is going on
- Children would lack proper reverence
- We had to wait until we were Church Members to receive Communion and so should the children
- The children would disrupt the atmosphere

*Base: churches with a policy where reservations were expressed.*

2.2.1.5 How was the policy received initially within the church?

- Broad acceptance 70%
- Significant reservations which were resolved 10%
- Significant reservations which persist 5%
- Don't know 15% \*

*Base: churches where children can receive elements either conditionally or unconditionally.*

*\* High because minister may not have been in pastoral charge at time of decision.*

2.2.1.6 What impact did the introduction of the policy have on the congregation?

In order of importance the following benefits were noted from a list provided in the questionnaire:

- Encouraged people to think more deeply about matters relating to children in the church 51%
- Brought the church family closer together 47%
- Children have been made more welcome at worship 45%
- Encouraged wider participation in worship 37%
- It's as if we have always been doing it 35%
- Adults have been helped to think more deeply about the place of Holy Communion in their own life 29%
- Sharpened divisions between those for and against 1%

*Base: churches where children can receive elements either conditionally or unconditionally.*

2.2.1.7 What measures were thought to be important in the introduction of the policy?

The percentage of ministers identifying the following measures as important or very important from a given list was as follows:

- Preparation of children in Junior Church groups 67%
- Church Council decided on a policy to allow children to receive the elements 60%
- Minister talking to the children by themselves 42%
- Pastoral preaching to explain the reasons for the decision 40%
- Discussion at Worship Consultation 35%
- Letter to parents to explain policy 32%

*Base: churches where children can receive elements either conditionally or unconditionally - more than one answer possible.*

## 2.2.2 Church Practice

### 2.2.2.1 When are children present at some point during the service of Holy Communion?

- Every time Communion is celebrated 43%
- Most times when Communion is celebrated 21%)
- Family Communion only 23%
- Never 13%

*Base: all churches sampled.*

### 2.2.2.2 Which parts of the service are children present for?

#### **'Normal' Communion Service/Family Communion**

- All of it including the distribution of elements **13%/85%**
- Only present at the end of worship when the elements are distributed **30%/9%**
- All except for the middle of the service **21%/ 6%**
- Start of worship but not for distribution of elements **36%/nil**

*Base: where children are present*

### 2.2.2.3 Where a family Communion is celebrated which service books are used?

- Sunday Service - adult book 61%

- Sunday Service - children's book 31%
- Other published material 34%
- Own liturgy 45%

*More than one answer possible.*

2.2.2.4 At what age do children share in different aspects of the service?

***Under 5/6-7/8-11/12-14***

- Present but do not come forward **nil nil nil nil**
- Receive a blessing **55% 35% 22% 10%**
- Receive elements subject to conditions **15% 32% 43% 42%**
- Receive unconditionally **14% 20% 22% 25%**
- Not stated **16% 13% 13% 23%**

*Base: where children are present when the elements are distributed.*

2.2.2.5 Where conditions are specified before the elements are offered - what are they?

***All/LEPs***

- Child must be baptized **17% 46%**
- Parents must have given consent/not objected **67% 69%**
- Child must have indicated a desire to receive **80% 77%**
- Child must have received teaching **63% 54%**

*Base: Where conditions are applied - more than one answer possible.*

2.2.2.6 What is the practice for administering the elements?

- Receive with their parents 67%
- When parents are not present children receive with adult(s) 53%
- Junior Church including staff receive together 55%
- Children without parents present receive together 14%

*Base: where children may receive the elements.*

*More than one answer possible.*

### 3 DISCUSSION OF ISSUES ARISING FROM THE SURVEY AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The major findings of the survey were reported to the Methodist Council and to the Faith and Order Committee in 1998. Members were invited to reflect upon the implications of the results. In the light of that consultation process and other developments that have occurred since the Guidelines were introduced thirteen years ago, the following issues were identified.

#### **3.1 Diversity - connexionalism or congregationalism**

The survey reports a very wide diversity of policy and practice. The 1987 Guidelines place the final responsibility for what happens in the local church with the Church Council. However, nearly a quarter of churches with six or more children present in church on a Sunday morning have not even discussed the policy issue of children in Communion. It must also be recognised that this approach has made possible a diversity of practice that the church now has to address. The 1987 Guidelines have encouraged a congregational rather than connexional approach to what is an important theological and pastoral matter. Some churches do not have children present at any time during the service of Holy Communion whilst others allow children under the age of five to receive the elements without any condition. This wide variation causes difficulties for families and local churches and is clearly at odds with our connexional ethos.

#### **3.2 The importance of uniform practice across the connexion**

Only just over half of those churches with six or more children in their Junior Church have a Children in Communion policy which has been agreed by the Church Council. A further quarter of churches claim to have a de facto policy, arising usually out of the particular stance of their current minister. The absence of a formal policy places children in a situation of uncertainty, especially when pastoral oversight changes or when they themselves are visitors in another Methodist church. The 1987 Report expressed the conviction that the time had come to move forward and encourage children to participate fully in the Lord's Supper. The evidence of the survey is that in the thirteen years since then, this has happened to a large extent. The consequences of the diversity of practice in relation to the 1987 guidelines, however, make it necessary to take seriously one of the three possible ways forward:

1. that the Methodist Church abandon any attempt to offer connexional guidelines;
2. that the present policies be left in place [with or without minor changes];
3. that the Conference agree a policy in relation to children and Holy Communion which applies to the whole connexion.

#### **3.3 The positive experience of introducing Children in Communion**

The vast majority of churches report positive experiences from the introduction of the policy. The table at 2.2.1.6 shows that the life of the local church will be enriched and adults helped to think more deeply

about the place of Holy Communion in their own spirituality. This should encourage churches across the connexion to include children in Holy Communion and to adopt a positive attitude with regard to their inclusion.

### **3.4 Conditions to receiving Holy Communion**

#### **3.4.1 Open Table ?**

Many Methodist churches consider themselves to have 'an open Table' and welcome 'all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ', offering bread and wine to those who come with hands outstretched. God's blessing is proclaimed to those who come but do not wish, for whatever reason, to receive the elements [see para 3.6 below]. God's love for both adults and children, for every human being, is demonstrated by the inclusive act of laying hands upon their head, accompanied by appropriate words. It must be acknowledged that the invitation "to all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ" is not historic Methodist practice. At the same time it is very widespread in the modern Church and also has the intention of being inclusive. It might be proper to ask whether or not it is an acceptable development within the life of the Methodist Church. The rightness of it should not be argued solely on the grounds that its practice is widespread. It might be argued out of a desire to be appropriately inclusive. Nevertheless, the invitation is not all-inclusive and unconditional. It offers a criterion by which women and men may judge whether or not they may or may not present themselves at the Lord's Table. 'Love of the Lord Jesus Christ' would permit the participation of people of other denominational traditions with the additional assumption that they are in good standing in their own Church. It would permit the participation and inclusion of those whose mental powers do not allow them to make any rational decision about it for themselves, a decision on their behalf being taken by those who know and love them.

It is undoubtedly true that children are as capable as adults of being included among 'those who love the Lord Jesus Christ'. But other criteria - age, understanding, preparation and parental consent - are regarded by some as prerequisites before children may receive bread and wine. These are discussed below. First, however, it must be asked whether, for children and adults alike, baptism is a precondition for receiving Communion.

#### **3.4.2 Baptism**

The 1987 Guidelines state, as a theological principle, that for a child to be admitted to communicant participation in the Lord's Supper he or she will have been baptized. Where it is discovered that a child has not been baptized, it is expected that after due preparation, baptism will follow. The survey shows that only a small minority of churches make baptism a pre-condition of receiving the elements. Local Ecumenical Partnerships are more likely to impose baptism as a condition. Current practice is at odds with the existing 1987 Guidelines. Baptism remains the rite of entry into the Church and where a child has not been baptized but receives Communion, then baptism should follow as a proper corollary. At present the Church sets out a pattern of Christian initiation that begins with baptism and leads to admission to Holy Communion. In Methodist practice confirmation and reception into membership may take place before or after first Communion. Because in this whole area we are dealing with a whole process of initiation, which includes several separable elements, some would argue that provided that

the person benefits from both baptism and Holy Communion it does not matter which comes first. The weight of the argument below is, however, that baptism should be required before a person receives Holy Communion.

3.4.2.a Holy Communion is by many considered to be a converting ordinance, so that, for some children and adults, the initial reception of Communion in an unbaptized state might well include the desire to be baptized also. If someone were to present himself or herself at the Lord's Table with hands outstretched, the presiding minister knowing this person not to be baptized, this would not be the moment to withhold bread and wine, but it ought immediately to occasion a pastoral conversation to discuss the significance and the consequences of what has happened. This scenario is more likely to apply to adults than to children, but would apply equally well if children, known not to be baptized, were to present themselves with open hands. In the case of children the pastoral conversation would need also to include their parents, whatever the parents' relationship with the Church might be [see below, para 3.4.4].

3.4.2.b It should be noted that when people claim that Holy Communion is a converting ordinance they often believe that this idea derives, in the form in which they express it, from the teaching of John Wesley, i.e that it is a proclamation of the Gospel and can elicit a response. However, Wesley's use of the phrase 'a converting ordinance' denoted his belief that someone 'seeking salvation' might find it in Communion. Baptism was none the less for him the condition for presenting oneself at Holy Communion.

3.4.2.c The many documents produced in bilateral conversations involving Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Anglicans attest that baptism should always be a precondition for the reception of Holy Communion. The practice in these and other Churches is described below [4.1 - 4.6].

### 3.4.3 Preparation

It is often objected that children should not be admitted to Holy Communion because they do not understand what they are doing. Adults, however, do not understand in any ultimate sense what happens at the Lord's Table, but such a realisation does not mean that no attempt should be made to understand. All ought to seek understanding in the measure that is possible. Preparation to receive Communion can only be a benefit. [See the Survey 2.2.1.7.] There is some evidence in the Survey that the discussion of the possibility of children participating in Holy Communion has raised the level of adult awareness of dimensions of sacramental theology previously neglected. There is a need for regular preaching about the Sacraments as well as for opportunity to discuss their significance in fellowship groups. Children in common with everyone else can only be enriched by being taught the significance of the Sacraments of the Gospel. The chance to speak of baptism as well as Holy Communion should be seized. Learning opportunities might appropriately be created by the minister in pastoral charge, by local preachers, and by leaders of the Junior Church, who themselves may feel the need for help in this task. This cannot be considered a one-off duty which enables children to participate in Holy Communion. It ought to become a considered part of the learning programme of the whole Church, in which understanding is honed or enlarged. Nevertheless, whilst a high level of preparation is desirable for



those participating in Holy Communion, understanding should not in itself be considered a pre-condition.

#### 3.4.4 Parental agreement

The Survey indicates that before children are allowed to participate in Holy Communion, more than two thirds of churches insist that the parents must either have given their consent or not objected. This raises two separate but related issues. Firstly, there are problems in the case where children come to church without their parents. Often the parents have little or no contact with the church and do not know what happens there. It may be considered unreasonable to ask them to express a view as to whether their child should receive Communion. The attempt to explain why they are being asked for permission may in itself be an evangelistic opportunity, giving access, for a focused reason, to a home which might otherwise remain unvisited. However, their rights as parents must be respected, whatever the outcome of the conversation. Secondly, there are problems of cutting across parental authority, where parents, who are present at and themselves receive Holy Communion, do not want their children to receive. Their views too must be respected. They should be encouraged to allow their children to accompany them to the communion rail to be offered a blessing. Nevertheless parents should always be encouraged to take seriously the rights and opinions of the child in reaching their own conclusions.

#### 3.4.5 Age

The table at 2.2.2.4 shows that the likelihood of a child being offered the bread and wine increases with the child's age. Guideline D [1987 Report] states that the Church has a responsibility to discriminate and test but this must not become the opportunity for adults to deprive children of 'the means of grace simply because they are children.'

### **3.5 Practice**

#### 3.5.1 How widespread is the practice of children being present during the service of Holy Communion?

The table at 2.2.2.1 shows that the vast majority (87%) of churches surveyed allow children to be present at some point during the service of Holy Communion.

#### 3.5.2 For which parts of the service are they present?

The table at 2.2.2.2 shows that where children are present at some point in the normal Communion service, just under two thirds of them witness the sharing of bread and wine. A third are not present for the prayer of thanksgiving and the distribution of the elements. They do not experience the climax of the liturgy. Whether children receive a blessing or the bread and wine, it is vital to a child's spiritual development that s/he should experience the moment when, receiving the Body of Christ, the Body of Christ is built up in faith and unity. Family Communion Services are relatively infrequent. Additional opportunities should be given for children to be present at the climax of the service.

#### 3.5.3 Use of local liturgy

The table at 2.2.2.3 shows that whilst the Sunday Service was being widely used at Family Communion, other books or the local church's own liturgy are also being used quite extensively. This variety reflects a tension within the whole Church between on the one hand ensuring consistency of theology in our liturgy and not wishing on the other to stifle the creativity of those who wish to use their own words. There could be a proliferation of liturgies that could be theologically inadequate. The Conference guidelines on the creation of local liturgies will be helpful here and the advent of the Methodist Worship Book may change the situation radically.

#### 3.5.4 Provision of support material

The Methodist Worship Book contains a number of services of Holy Communion, at all of which it is hoped that children will at some time be present. With such variety it is not possible to produce a single illustrated order of service of the kind previously available. Other ways of providing support material for children are being developed.

### **3.6 The place of the blessing in Holy Communion**

Although the survey conducted supports the conclusion that it is time to move forward and encourage children to participate fully in the Lord's Supper, it still remains an option that anyone, young or old, may come and seek a blessing when he or she is not able or does not wish, for whatever reason, to receive the elements. Blessing itself is a many-layered concept with rich tones which needs to be rescued from trivialisation. It is a celebration of the presence of God in and with his world, which in essence includes all people. There is no single, finished definition of blessing in the Scriptures but it is best understood in terms of gift, building as it does on categories of relationship, presence and community solidarity. It is available to all, however tentative their faith in God, including, in our secular society, those whose belief is a mere residual trace. It would make no sense for someone who categorically refuses belief in God to offer himself or herself for blessing, i.e. ask God to make actual that potential which lies within them. It is, however, entirely appropriate for a person of faith to say words of blessing to others as an expression of the fact that God is with them even if the person receiving the blessing does not reciprocate God's offer of relationship. Blessing is a declaration of God's purpose for his children. It is the assertion that God is favourably disposed towards all, that nobody is excluded from God's intention. God wants everyone and everything he has made to flourish, grow and prosper. To bless someone in the name of God, for it is always God who blesses, is to declare to those addressed that they share an inheritance which is offered to all.

## **4 PRACTICE IN OTHER CHURCHES**

Baptism and Church Membership with particular reference to Local Ecumenical Partnerships (CTE 1997) explores issues of Baptism, membership and admission to Communion among those churches which are frequent partners in LEPs. At least four different patterns of initiation are noted. All these patterns involve a process of initiation which includes different elements (God's call to faith, preparation, nurture, prayer for the gift of the Spirit, profession of faith, baptism, reception into membership of the church, admission to Communion) but in varying sequence.

#### **4.1 The Orthodox Churches**

In the Orthodox churches, baptism and chrismation [anointing with oil consecrated by a bishop] is immediately followed by admission to Communion, at whatever age a person is baptized. Infant baptism, with chrismation and first Communion, is the norm. The importance of the link between baptism, chrismation and Communion is shown by the fact that, when baptism does not take place at a time when Holy Communion is being celebrated, those who have been baptized and anointed are given the elements from the reserved sacrament. The Orthodox practice is close to that of the early Church, in which baptism, anointing [and/or laying on of hands] and admission to Communion were part of a unified rite of Christian initiation.

#### **4.2 The Roman Catholic Church**

One Bread, One Body [1998], a teaching document on the Eucharist in the life of the Church, issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland, urges Catholics 'to refresh and renew their belief in the Eucharist, their understanding of Catholic teaching, and their reverence for this great mystery of faith.' The document describes Baptism as 'the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. It is a point of departure, a sacred beginning to membership of the Pilgrim Church... Receiving Holy Communion is the climax of the process of initiation begun by Baptism.' [18]

'At nearly every Catholic celebration of Mass there are people in differing degrees of spiritual and visible communion with the community gathered there... who know that they are taking part in a real way even though they may not receive Communion. There are unbaptized people being prepared to be initiated into the Church, as well as baptized Christians on the way towards Reception into Full Communion with the Catholic Church. There are young children who are not yet ready to receive their first Holy Communion.' [42]

'When young children make their first Holy Communion, they too are brought into a new and deepened communion with the Catholic Church.' [54]

In the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales it is usual for baptized children to be prepared to receive their 'First Communion' at the age of 7 or 8. Confirmation normally follows after further specific teaching and preparation in the early teens. In the Salford diocese, however, there is a practice of confirming at about the age of seven children who are only then admitted to Communion for the first time.

#### **4.3 The Church of England**

The House of Bishops of the Church of England has issued guidelines on the admission of baptized persons to Holy Communion before confirmation (GS 1212). Guideline C states, "Before admitting a person to Communion, the priest must seek evidence of Baptism. Baptism always precedes admission to Communion." This absolute requirement of Baptism carries weight in Local Ecumenical Partnerships

involving Anglicans. The issue is highlighted in LEPs where eucharistic forms of worship may be held as the main Sunday morning service on two or three weeks out of four.

#### **4.4 Baptist Churches**

In Baptist churches there is little evidence of the desire for or expectation that children will be admitted to Communion prior to Believers' Baptism. Services of Holy Communion are normally held roughly once a month. Whether to offer bread and wine to those not baptized is a matter for congregational decision.

#### **4.5 The Church of Scotland**

In the Church of Scotland a growing number of local congregations are deciding to admit baptized children to Communion prior to their being received into membership. This trend is accompanied by a move towards more frequent eucharistic celebration.

#### **4.6 The United Reformed Church**

The United Reformed Church offers two routes to full membership of the church: by infant baptism and later confirmation, or by believers' baptism incorporating confirmation. Local congregations are encouraged to consider the admission of baptized children to Communion before confirmation and to determine local policy. A significant number of congregations are doing so, though local practice varies. This is a live issue within the United Reformed Church.

#### **4.7 Recommendations of report of Churches Together in England - Baptism and Church Membership**

The ecumenical working party recommended inter alia:

##### **4.7.1 The child in the church**

We recommend that this renewed concern about the place of the child in the church, with the Christian nurture of children and the whole catechetical process, should be tackled by the churches working together [Recommendation 39].

##### **4.7.2 The admission of children to Communion**

We invite all churches to take the situation of LEPs into account as they come to a mind on the admission of young children to Communion [Recommendation 90].

It is also recommended that clear agreements should be established on admission of children to Communion before LEP constitutions are drawn up or when they are reviewed [Recommendation 65 (a) and ( b)].

The need for pastoral sensitivity and a degree of flexibility in difficult cases was recognised [Recommendation 65 (c)].

#### **5 FUTURE METHODIST POLICY**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 that it be considered normal practice for baptized children, as members of the whole Body of Christ, to participate in Holy Communion by receiving bread and wine, irrespective of age.**

The 1987 Guidelines encouraged Church Councils to allow children to participate fully in the Lord's Supper. Many churches have adopted this practice but others have not. As a result we have a diversity of practice across the connexion leading to pastoral anomalies which cause misunderstanding and distress. Also for good theological and pastoral reasons once a child has been admitted to Holy Communion the decision ought not to be reversed, except for matters of discipline. Where children have been fully admitted to Communion there have been widespread spiritual benefits for the whole congregation. The time has come for these benefits to be experienced across the whole connexion. The worthiness of anyone to receive the Body and Blood of Christ is based solely on the grace of God. A baptized person has by the grace of God been incorporated into the Body of Christ, his Church. It is appropriate therefore that any baptized member of the Body be fed. Conditions relating to age and level of understanding should be set aside.

### **5.2 that children and adults who receive Holy Communion, if not already baptized, be encouraged to be baptized**

'Baptism marks entry into the One Catholic and Apostolic Church' (The Methodist Worship Book, page 60). The 1987 Guidelines 'expected as a theological principle that a child to be admitted to communicant participation in the Lord's Supper will have been baptized'. That principle should be maintained and should be applied, of course, to adults as well as to children. The 1987 Guidelines also stated that 'if, from time to time, it is judged appropriate for unbaptized children to be admitted to the Lord's Supper, it is expected that, after due consideration, baptism will follow'. That expectation should also remain, and again should apply both to children and to adults. It is inconceivable that a person holding out her/his hands would, at that moment, be refused bread and wine. If it is subsequently discovered that an unbaptized person, of whatever age, has presented himself/herself at Holy Communion, a pastoral conversation should follow without undue delay.

The survey reveals that only a small number of Methodist churches have followed the 1987 Guidelines in recognizing the connection between entry into the Church through baptism and receiving Holy Communion, though the figure is substantially higher in LEPs (see 2.2.2.5). The publication of this report provides an opportunity for all churches to ensure that their practice accords with the connexional policy set out in the above recommendation.

### **5.3 that opportunities for learning about the significance of the Sacraments be a considered and integrated part of the Church's life**

The consideration of the meaning of baptism as well as the significance of the Lord's Supper would help local congregations to take seriously the relationship between the two. Adequate preparation of both children and adults to receive baptism and to participate regularly in the celebration of Holy Communion requires the use of appropriate study material.

#### **5.4 that the consent of a child's parents be sought before that child is allowed to receive the elements**

The responsibilities of parents must be maintained even when they come to a decision which the members of the local congregation regret. The possibility of causing strife in the home by the mere raising of the question has to be recognized and handled sensitively. How the consent of the parents is sought will also need careful thought locally. The opportunity of visiting the home with the possibility of serious conversation about a central Christian issue should not be neglected. Yet it is also very important to acknowledge that children, too, have a legitimate point of view. Their voice should be heard and given due weight in conversations which relate to them.

#### **5.5 that Methodist members of Local Ecumenical Partnerships be asked to exercise 'Ecumenical Restraint' rather than cause undue difficulties for sisters and brothers in another denominational tradition by insisting on their freedom in this matter**

There are many documents emerging in many Churches nowadays seeking the admission of children to Holy Communion. Some have not yet come to a conclusion. Methodists might hope that the production and adoption of this report will lead to a wider ecumenical agreement, but for the moment accept the constraints which our relationships with other Churches impose.

#### **5.6 that more opportunities be provided for adults and children to share together in the whole service of Holy Communion.**

Holy Communion is the focal act of Christian worship, where the Body of Christ is gathered. Adults and children should be able to receive Holy Communion together whenever it is celebrated. Children need to experience the service in its wholeness.

### **RESOLUTION**

**42/1.** The Conference adopts the report and directs the Methodist Council to arrange for the production of "appropriate study material", identified as necessary in Recommendation 5:3, paying particular attention to the needs of the increasing number of those people who, in our contemporary "post Christian" society, come to "belong" before they "believe".