

CHILDREN AND THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION (1973)

By the sacrament of Baptism we receive children 'into the congregation of Christ's flock', yet the relation of children to the Sacrament of Holy Communion has not always been so clear. With the growth of the practice of Family Worship within which the Sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated, the question has arisen as to how children of varying ages should share in that service. The practice of 'blessing' young children who accompany their parents to the communion rail has been adopted in some churches and this seems wholly appropriate. However, as children mature this practice seems childish to them which may be an indication that they are ready for fuller participation. There is also some evidence that parents would like their children to receive the bread and wine at an age earlier than that at which we have customarily received young people into full membership*. Even more important, our new insights into the processes by which a child learns and grows into maturity have led us to reconsider the place of the child within the Body of Christ.

The normal procedure of baptism followed by Church membership, or confirmation, and first communion may need re-examination. Two possibilities are open to us:

- (a) that children should be received into full membership* at an earlier age, or
- (b) that they should be admitted to Holy Communion at an earlier age and received into full membership* later.

There is much force in the view that where a child has expressed a desire to receive the bread and wine and has received appropriate instruction he has fulfilled the requirements of full membership* (Deed of Union Clause 33(a)); equally it may be argued that commitment to full membership* ought always to be connected with the duties and responsibilities of adult life, especially as it carries with it voting rights. We, therefore, hesitate to recommend that young people should be received as full members† at an earlier age though we recognize that some ministers and Leaders Meetings may wish to take such a course. Those who do not take this course nevertheless affirm that the child has a status in the Church by reason of his baptism. That this is a developing status has been recognized in the past by the establishment of Junior membership and latterly in the status of Members in Training. Members in Training are those who 'sincerely desire to serve Jesus Christ, and are receiving regular instruction in the Bible and the Faith'. (S.O. 288). We have thus already recognized that Christian commitment is a progression towards the fullness of Christ. For some young people their first Communion may mark an important stage in their developing commitment towards full membership*. Such young communicants might indeed be recognized as Members in Training. Flexibility and experiment are to be encouraged and we would not wish to question the action of any minister who, in conjunction with his Leaders Meeting and with the consent of parents, encourages baptized children who sincerely desire it to receive Holy Communion after brief instruction at an earlier age than has been customary, whether or not this involves full membership*.

Early Communion without full membership* may give the impression that full membership* is an optional extra for those who are already communicants. We, therefore, urge that where this course is taken ministers and Leaders should stress the importance of full membership* and give the same pastoral oversight to young communicants as is required for members in Training (S.O. 288).

While we recommend flexibility we would draw attention to difficulties that may arise where, for example, a child who has been accustomed to receive Communion in his home church presents himself at another church where this is not the practice, and we urge that pastoral considerations should be regarded as paramount in such situations.

We do not wish to recommend any constitutional or liturgical changes at this time but to stress the importance of (a) exercising imaginative pastoral care over all our baptized children within the church and within the home, (b) underlining the centrality of Holy Communion, (c) recognizing the developing nature of commitment, (d) doing nothing to diminish the goal of all Christians which is 'mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ', and (e) recognising the importance of continuing the discussion at every level of Church life.

* or Confirmation

† or Confirmed

(Minutes 1973, pp. 50f)

This report was presented to the Conference by the Youth Department after consultation with the Faith and Order Committee. The Conference resolved that this Report be printed in the Minutes of the Conference and directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on this matter to the Conference of 1974.