

## CHILDREN AND COMMUNION: Stories from churches

(These stories are from URCHIN, the magazine of the Uniting Reformed Church U.K.)

### From North Wales

Communion is given, not simply to call Christ to mind, but to make us open to his continuing presence with us.

#### Children and the presence of Jesus....

With regard to **children** being brought into his presence, Jesus is shown in the Bible insisting that this should happen.

He is very angry with those of his followers who try to stop them.

And some of the very strongest language he ever used was against those who put obstacles in the way of children. [Matthew 18:3-6](#), [Mark 9:42](#), [Luke 17:2](#) give us some idea of his view of those who would keep children - or those who are like children - from his presence: *"If anyone puts a stumbling-block in the way of just one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for them to have a millstone hung around their neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea."*

What are Jesus' followers - of all ages - to make of these words today, and how should they affect the attitude of adult worshippers to younger worshippers?

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Since autumn 1998, many churches have responded to the encouragement to revisit their understanding of CHILDREN AND COMMUNION

An URCHIN reader writes . . . *I thought it might help other churches to share our experiences of "Children in Communion"*

The call to admit children to Holy Communion first came to us in 1988 when a family moved to the village from a Methodist church where the children were present during Communion and went up to the Communion rail with the adults for a blessing. This challenged the church to consider the place of children at the service of Holy Communion.

Our first attempt at including the children was a disaster: the children came into the church and sat with their "teachers". Then, at a point in the service, they were asked to stand at the front and each was given a blessing by the presiding Minister. The children felt they were being patronised and were appalled at being excluded from sharing the bread and wine. The procedure was repeated again after six months - but never again! The issue was then buried as we were soon afterwards without Minister and other issues took the Elders' attention and time.

In our village, the population tends to be transient and the congregation constantly changes. So Children and Communion was off the agenda for a few years. However, more recently, in 1996, the Elders discussed with myself as Children's Work Leader, how we could include the children in Communion again. The Elders believed that we should invite children/young people who have reached a stage in their faith where they have the necessary maturity to join the adults for Communion after a short teaching course on the basics of what we as Christians believe.

The parents' involvement is crucial as they have a much better understanding of where their child is in their walk of faith than their children's group leader. All parents were sent a letter asking for their support and approval and asking for a slip to be returned so the Minister

knows that they are in agreement. This gave a wonderful opportunity to talk with the parents of children who come to church without a parent.

The course we now run on an annual basis and covers:

- Week 1: God the Father and forgiveness
- Week 2: Jesus the son and sacrifice
- Week 3: the Holy Spirit and gifts
- Week 4: the Communion Service

Following the course, there is no compulsion to take the bread and wine. That decision is for the child and their parents, through prayer.

On a Communion Sunday, the Steward goes to the hall where the children's groups are run and calls the children/young people in to Communion at an opportune time assigned by the Minister. The parents are asked to encourage their children to sit with them, but in practice, they usually like to sit together.

The call at Communion is to "all who love the Lord" to share the meal and remember the Lord's death for us. Maybe at some point in the future, the Lord will show the Elders that younger children who are not as mature in many ways have a love for the Lord which we can only marvel at (and praise God for!)

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A boy had received communion elsewhere but the congregation he now attended held that 14 was the proper age to receive communion. This is what he wrote. His mother passed it to the minister who passed it to URCHIN

## **WHEN I WAS SEVEN**

When I was seven, I sat and looked and listened.

*"All who are present, you are invited to join us at God's table and share his meal. We are all friends together." Who, me? But surely not?*

*It's not what is supposed to happen. I just sit back and look and listen. But the man said "All who are present," and that's me too, and God's my best friend so where's the harm?*

## **I may not like the 'blood' - what shall I do?**

*I'm sure it'll just be a sip, and I have wondered what it's like. I'll swallow and accept the outcome, whatever it will be. But, yummy, I like bread, so that's okay.*

*But why, I ask, is this a meal? - no chips, no burger, no toy, no box to put it in, oh here it comes, what shall I do?*

*I've sung the hymns, I've said the prayers. I'm no different to the rest. He smiles at me. "The body of Christ, he says. I take a piece, I pass it on, I chew, I swallow. "The blood of Christ" comes next. I sip, I taste, I see - God's a part of me.*

**CHILDREN AND COMMUNION: A reflection from Stephen Thornton provoked by his travels visiting partner churches in the Council for World Mission. The whole story, with a number of key issues for children's work, in any part of the world, is told in 'LET THE CHILDREN BE'. (URC Bookshop)**

In South Africa there is a saying, 'A kraal without a cub, isn't a kraal at all.' A kraal in this context is a group of animals gathered together for mutual protection and support. Some of the Churches recognize the truth of this statement when they meet around the Lord's Table.

They also observe that, when a family of lions meet to eat, they would never leave the cubs, whilst the adults eat alone. Indeed, the cubs get first choice. Now we are not lions, but we are the friends of Jesus, and we do gather with him around his table for a very important meal. Often children are missing. The debate about whether children should be present, or not, at Communion, has been going on throughout the Church for many years now. Some congregations happily welcome children; others do not, whilst others have never even thought of the idea. Consideration hinges on whether children belong or not; whether they are friends of Jesus; whether they can understand; whether they are committed. My travels introduced me to many children who were very much part of the church and belonged in a real way. To exclude them from the central act of the church seemed cruel and counterproductive.

I hope that the debate will go on in every congregation and I for one will not be content until the cubs eat with the adults and the kraal is complete.

*Stephen Thornton wrote this when Convener of the National Youth and Children's Work Committee.*

A useful and helpful resource for those sharing communion with all ages has been developed by a Methodist congregation in Barnsley. The booklet contains the story of how the church developed and uses its liturgy. The outlines for three communion services are given. Any congregation could be inspired to adapt the material or produce further original ideas. TOGETHER ROUND THE TABLE by Jan Eldred and Alan Saxby (£1 per copy + 40p p&p or £7.50 for 10 copies + 3.90 p&p) from The Circuit Office, The Methodist Church, Pitt Street, Barnsley, S70 1AL. Also see 'Time to Eat' (£2.50 from the URC bookshop), designed for use with younger children