

Children , Young People and Communion – Survey Findings Report 2017

Executive Summary

Church of Scotland statistics reveal that only 6% of the under 18s who are associated with our congregations are receiving communion.

The Mission and Discipleship Council was instructed by the 2017 General Assembly to consult with Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions in order to determine the extent to which the Church is finding Act XV (1992) Act anent Admission of Children to Communion, subsequently consolidated into Act V (2000) Consolidating Act Anent the Sacraments, to be pastorally helpful in the discipleship of children and young people.

The following conclusions have been drawn from the findings arising out of the Council's 'Children & Communion' survey:

- A small percentage of the under 18s who are present in our congregations are receiving communion.
- There is a need to develop congregations' understanding of the theological relationship between baptism and communion.
- Congregations need support towards developing an improved understanding and practice of communion.
- Further guidance on the discretion allowed within the permissive nature of Act V (2000) Consolidating Act Anent the Sacraments is needed to give guidance to Kirk Sessions who experience being caught between keeping within Church law while facing the practical and pastoral challenges associated with restricting access to communion to those who are baptised.
- There is a lack of Church of Scotland specific resources to help children and young people understand communion and appropriate liturgy to use in services with children and young people present.

Background

Since 1992 congregations have been able to include baptised children and young people in receiving the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, when Act XV (1992) Act anent Admission of Children to Communion was passed by the General Assembly.

For a number of years the Church of Scotland annual statistical returns have identified that only small numbers of under 18s receive communion. Furthermore, the following examples of anecdotal feedback have been received from congregations, locally based workers, volunteers and ministers:

- some congregations actively decide not to include under 18s because they do not believe it is right to do so
- some congregations do not include under 18s because it is judged better to not include any, rather than separate out the baptised from the unbaptised, as they understand the Act requires
- some congregations do not include under 18s, not because they disagree with the concept but because church practice isn't adjusted to allow it, e.g. young people leave the main worship service for separate groups and aren't there when communion occurs
- some congregations admit all under 18s and for practical and pastoral reasons choose not to determine whether individuals are baptised or not, thereby including all but contravening their understanding of the Act

At the General Assembly of 2017 the following deliverance section was passed:

'Affirming the importance of including children and young people in the community of faith'(10.1.2), and noting the Council's intention to focus on the question 'How and when are children and young people to be fully involved in the Sacrament of Holy Communion:

Instruct the Mission and Discipleship Council to consult with Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions in order to determine the extent to which the Church is finding Act V 2000, Consolidating Act Anent the Sacraments, to be pastorally helpful in the discipleship of children and young people.'

In response to this deliverance, the Mission and Discipleship Council sent out a survey in October 2017, to the 700 congregations that had recorded they have under 18s involved in their life and worship, to explore the extent that children and young people are included in Holy Communion, and how this is helpful in children and young peoples' faith development and discipleship.

Summary of Act XV (1992)

Act XV (1992) Act anent Admission of Children to Communion was passed in 1992 and then, subsequently, consolidated into Act V (2000). Key points stipulated in the Act are that:

- communion should only be offered to those who are baptised, no matter what their age is
- Kirk Sessions are responsible for testing faith before admission to communion
- any children and young people admitted need to be being nurtured within the life and worship of the church and love the Lord and respond in faith to the invitation to 'take and eat'
- It is recognised that Kirk Sessions have free discretion as to how they respond in this matter.

Findings from the Church of Scotland Annual Statistical Returns

The Church of Scotland annual statistical returns for 2016 reveal that:

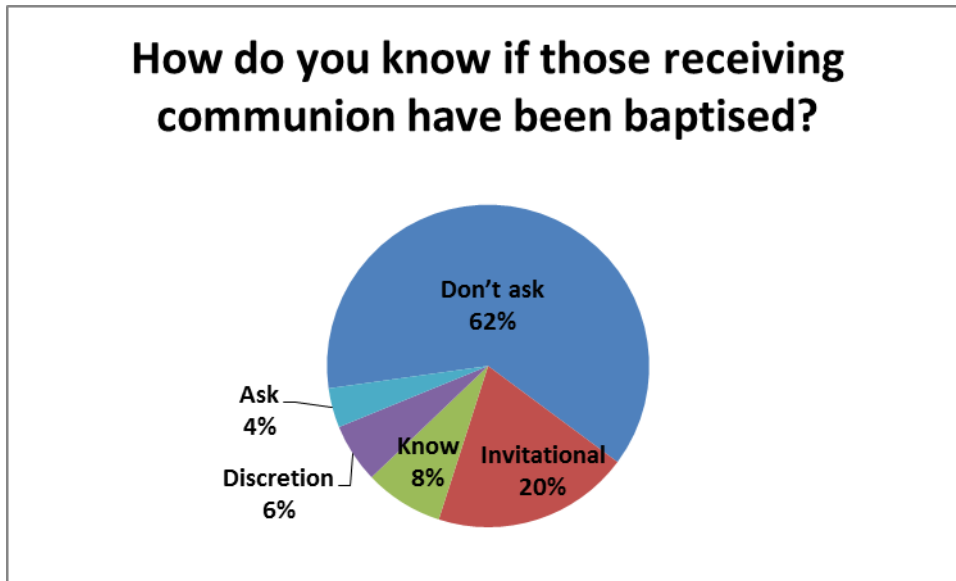
- only 6% of under 18s associated with congregations received communion
- 747 congregations with under 18s had no under 18's receiving communion

Findings from the Mission & Discipleship Council 'Children & Communion' Survey

The findings from the survey that the Mission and Discipleship Council sent out in October 2017 to the 700 congregations that had recorded that they had under 18s, is summarised below.

- i. 11% will not admit under 18s to communion. The reasons given include:
 - lack of understanding of both the theology and the Act regarding children and communion
 - negative attitudes amongst Kirk Sessions, elders and previous ministers
 - children should not receive as 'they do not understand'
 - tradition and carrying on doing things the same way they have always done
 - a legacy of 'worthiness', with a number of adults not taking communion
- ii. 40% have no under 11s receiving communion while 47% have no 12 – 18s receiving communion. Practice that is preventing under 18s receiving communion includes:
 - congregations have a mix of baptised and unbaptised children
 - communion services are not child friendly or accessible
 - churches don't want to lose the formality of the sacrament
 - confusion over who authorises admission to communion (the minister, Kirk Session or parents?)
 - lack of Church of Scotland specific resources and opportunities to prepare people suitably
 - the feeling of being prevented by the stipulations of the Act and not wanting to segregate the few under 18s who are present
- iii. There is a significant gulf between what the Act stipulates and what is happening on the ground, including:
 - there is a notable difference in practice expected between adults and under 18s in relation to confirming if they have been baptised prior to receiving communion
 - it is practically and pastorally very difficult to prevent admission to communion based on whether someone is baptised or not, hence the table is often made open to all, whatever their baptismal status

- 63% of congregations responding to the survey don't ask if those receiving communion have been baptised



- iv. Responses were received about the impact of under 18s being included in communion, which included:
- 'Children and young people feel from the outset that they fully belong to the family of God, they feel that it is their church and they belong. They feel very much part of the community of faith as a result of being included.'
 - 'Understanding the meaning of communion contributes to the development of the understanding of faith. It is a family meal. It reflects Jewish Passover (and therefore the Last Supper). It reminds us that no one truly understands the mystery in sacraments. It keeps it simple and relaxed. It becomes a converting ordinance.'
 - 'Children have probably the best sense of understanding what mystery is when it comes to communion, which frankly some adults are never going to appreciate.'
 - 'It avoids the young person thinking that there is something odd or magical or secret going on.'
 - 'What is the impact of excluding them? As leader of the youth in the church, we asked to bring the teenagers into communion. We were 'permitted' to sit at the back with nearly 30 teenagers, but they were not to be served. All of my leaders and I refused to take communion that day. The damage of being treated like 'second class citizens' was one which we had not anticipated. We had hoped to encourage young people further in their faith, but many of them were [rightly] critical of being judged.'

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn from the findings arising out of the 2017 Mission & Discipleship Council's Children, Young People and Communion survey:

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- There is a need to develop congregations' understanding of the theological relationship between baptism and communion.
- Congregations need support towards developing an improved understanding and practice of communion.
- Further guidance on the discretion allowed within the permissive nature of Act V (2000) Consolidating Act Anent the Sacraments is needed to give guidance to Kirk Sessions who experience being caught

between keeping within Church law while facing the practical and pastoral challenges associated with restricting access to communion to those who are baptised.

- There is a lack of Church of Scotland specific resources to help children and young people understand communion and appropriate liturgy to use in services with children and young people present.