

REPORT OF THE DOCTRINE COMMISSION ON THE BILL FOR HOLY COMMUNION (PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN) CANON

Introduction

1. At the 2004 General Synod the Children's Network sponsored a private member's bill for "A Holy Communion (participation of children) Canon." Due to the pressures of time, the bill was not considered by the Synod, but the General Synod Standing Committee subsequently requested the Doctrine Commission to review the bill and advise accordingly.

The Current Situation

2. The admission of children to Holy Communion is already permitted by a General Synod Canon, which has been adopted by every diocese in Australia. Candidates for admission to the Lord's Supper are required to exercise 'faith and repentance' and give evidence of 'appropriate understanding of the nature and meaning of the Holy Communion.'
3. The canon allows a diocesan synod to regulate by ordinance the practice and procedure in relation to the admission of children to Holy Communion and the diocesan bishop may make regulations concerning practice and procedure, not inconsistent with any such ordinance.
4. Not all diocesan synods have made regulations concerning the canon, though many diocesan bishops have made regulations, some of which require a minimum age for admission. For example, a number of dioceses stipulate a minimum age limit of seven years.

The Bill

5. The bill seeks to remove the concept of admissibility to the Lord's Supper and replace it with the more generous concept of 'participation'. The reason for this change is expressed in the bill's accompanying memorandum, which states that 'admissibility' suggests a time of 'inadmissibility'.
6. The bill removes the requirement that the child express faith and repentance before being admitted to the Holy Communion, and also removes the necessity that the child give evidence of an adequate understanding of the nature and meaning of the sacrament.
7. The bill also seeks to remove any discretion whereby the diocesan synod or the bishop might make regulations concerning the practice or procedure relating to children's participation. While it may still be competent for a bishop to make regulations, it would no longer be possible for the bishop to determine a minimum age limit for a child's participation in Holy Communion. Thus in the opinion of the Doctrine Commission, the effect of the proposed canon would be to legislate for infant communion, rather than child communion.

Evaluation of the Bill

8. The Doctrine Commission recognises that there are different opinions among Anglicans as to the nature of the fullness of one's incorporation into Christ through the sacrament of baptism. Some consider that baptism guarantees one's full communion with the body of Christ, while others consider that the participation of an infant differs from that of a child. The array of differing diocesan regulations within the Anglican Church of Australia illustrates this diversity of viewpoint, especially with respect to the age of the communicant. Furthermore, although all dioceses have adopted the current canon allowing for the admission of children to

the Holy Communion, not all parishes have made provision for its implementation. For example, in the Diocese of Sydney a resolution of the whole parish (by way of vestry meeting) is required before children can be admitted to the Lord's Supper in that parish.

9. Issues of contention within the bill include the concept of inadmissibility for the baptised, the effect of sacramental exclusion of some baptised members upon the congregation as a whole, the nature of an infant's participation in Christ in the Lord's Supper, and the need for repentance and faith, as expressed in the Catechism.
10. Nonetheless, the Doctrine Commission is aware that there may be practical problems in the regulations concerning the admission of children to communion in those dioceses where the bishop has determined a minimum age for participation. The Report to General Synod from the Children's Network makes specific reference to the obstacle of a seven-year minimum age limit. However, under the present Canon for the Admission to Holy Communion (1985), it is well within the competency of a diocesan synod to pass an ordinance, which declares that the local minister may determine when the requirements of the canon have been met, irrespective of the age of the child. Such an ordinance would then prevent a bishop from stipulating a minimum age requirement. While it may be argued that a bishop may not give his assent to such an ordinance, it is equally likely that such a bishop would not give his assent to the proposed canon even if it were adopted by his diocesan synod.
11. In the opinion of the Doctrine Commission, the provisions of the current canon are capable of achieving the admission of very young children, as opposed to infants, to the Lord's Supper. Indeed, a number of dioceses have no minimum age limit for children's participation in the Holy Communion. If a diocesan synod were of a mind to stipulate, by ordinance, that there be no age limit, then it would not be possible for a bishop to impose one. The only difficulty, as noted above, might be obtaining the diocesan's assent to such an ordinance. If he failed to give his assent, appeal may need to be made to the provincial synod, depending upon the constitution of the diocese.
12. The only remaining concern about the current legislation is the lack of uniformity across dioceses: a child may be eligible in one diocese but not another. While it may be possible to invoke the confirmation rubric in such cases, they may be grounds for encouraging a more uniform practice across the Anglican Church of Australia in the admission of children to Holy Communion.

Recommendation

13. That the bill not be brought to the General Synod in its present form and that the Children's Network be encouraged to discuss with the Doctrine Commission any future proposals for extending the provisions of the current General Synod Canon for the Admission of Children to Holy Communion.

For and on behalf of the Doctrine Commission

Glenn N Davies
14 June 2005