

CHILDREN AND COMMUNION

Belonging to a country kirk is full of surprises. For a start, it is informally ecumenical. Because it's the only kirk in the parish, you will find Episcopalians, Quakers and even Roman Catholics among the worshippers. At least, that was true in the parish of Traprain.

When one Roman Catholic mother came to the manse at the turn of the year and asked, 'My son is now ten, what am I going to do about his first communion?' I realised that our country kirk was going to be led in a completely new direction. We didn't exactly follow Alice down the rabbit hole nor CS Lewis through the wardrobe into Narnia but through further discussions with the Kirk Session, we realised that something was missing from our tradition.

Before the General Assembly made it possible for baptised children to receive the Sacrament, young people didn't receive the bread and the wine until they were confirmed and, as we used to say, '*admitted to the Lord's Table*'.

This was our first discovery. In the new legislation something significant had been lost. This was our opportunity to recover it. And we did - in what became known as 'A Welcome to the Lord's Table'.

It was clear that we weren't going to have a 'First Communion' service as in the Roman Catholic Church. In our tradition, baptised children receive the Sacrament when the time is right for them. We encourage parents to explore this with their children and together discern the right time. It's not the same for everyone.

Those who participated in this Ceremony were self-selecting. One family signed up to participate but didn't come to the workshops. One child in another family, came to the first workshop but not the second. In the end, five children participated and, as it happened, they had already received the Sacrament at one of our Family Communions.

In preparation for the 'Welcome to the Lord's Table' Ceremony, two workshops were held not just for the children but their parents. This was important because in the Sacrament of Baptism parents promise to nurture their children in the

faith. This was an enrichment of their work. It was something which we all did together. And the parents benefitted too.

We baked bread together. We ate lots of it with favourite fillings – egg, ham and jam! We watched a DVD about the Last Supper and explored the kirk and its furnishings. And as we prepared for the Ceremony, we thought about Jesus, the Bread of Life and the church as Living Stones.

On the day of the Ceremony, the children read the gospel, led prayers, carried the elements to the Table and were given certificates. No formal questions were asked in the service. It was primarily a ceremony of grace. At the end, candles were given. They had been made out of the left over wax from those which had decorated the kirk at Christmas.

The Session Clerk lit the taper and gave it to the first mother. She lit her child's candle and passed the taper on to the second mother and so on. In this way, the older generation passed on the light of Christ to a new generation, holding newly created candles made out of old wax.

This emerged spontaneously as a means of including the mothers in the event. I didn't expect it to have such a powerful effect not only on them but many members of the congregation. They were deeply moved by this simple but inclusive ceremony. Why?

There was the fragility of the child and the tiny candle and the mother's longing to kindle faith's fragile flame within her growing child. There was the trust which silently held them together as they celebrated the hospitality of God's House so tenderly and so intimately in that public place.

There was the mystery of what lay ahead for mother and child for their obvious vulnerability hid a future which couldn't be predicted but only entered by faith.

It was Mary who prefigured the event and Simeon who unfolded its meaning. For when Mary brought the Christchild into the Temple, Simeon blessed him and then said to Mary, *'Sorrow like a sharp sword shall pierce your own soul also.'*

For me, the beauty of this event was its origin in the heart of one of our mothers. If she hadn't raised the question, we wouldn't have pursued the answer. In the end, we surmised that four important things were highlighted in this Ceremony:

1. The child's right to be at the Table, to receive the Sacrament and to benefit from this means of grace was affirmed.
2. The ministry of children was celebrated visibly within the worshipping community. It was Christ who called the children to him and confirmed their ministry. It was the prophet who saw that in the peaceable kingdom 'a little child shall lead them'.
3. The ministry of parenthood, and the ministry of all those who nurture children, was highlighted by the participation of the mothers. The heart-ache and the joy of it all was movingly evident.
4. The cross-fertilisation which took place between the traditions of the Kirk and the Roman Catholic Church led us into something new. Our former tradition of 'Admission to the Lord's Table' was restored albeit in a completely different way.

The beauty of this 'Welcome to the Lord's Table' is that it leads us all into the heart not only of our worship and our faith but the very heart of God. It is an area which would benefit from more reflection and the opportunity for others to contribute to this from their own experience and practice.

When I heard the question from that Roman Catholic mother in my manse about her child's first communion, I didn't know the answer. Who could have worked out the path we would travel together? A lot of people were involved – mother, minister, Kirk Session, staff at the Church Offices, my colleague, Joanne, the parents, the children and, of course, the congregation.

But when her child went to bed that night, he reflected on the day's events and said to his mother, 'I am feeling more of God in my heart.' She cried. There is no doubt in my mind that this was the peculiar work of the Bread of Life who, in a mysterious way, strengthens us and nourishes our souls unto everlasting life!

David D Scott

spent forty years working for the Church of Scotland mostly as a parish minister in Forth:St. Paul's, Logie Kirk, Stirling, New Kilpatrick, Bearsden and Traprain, East Lothian. After graduating in Pure Mathematics, he spent a year teaching mathematics as a commissioned missionary of the Church of Scotland in Ghana. He was an assessor and director at National Assessment Conference and has recently been appointed editor of 'The Record'.