

Lay Presidency at the Sacraments policy

In 2016 General Assembly amended the previous guidance in The Manual regarding Presidency at the Sacraments, stating that if the minister in pastoral charge is not available then the Church Meeting may invite another Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed willingness to do so) to preside. If such a minister is not available, General Assembly agreed that the Church Meeting may invite an elder or accredited lay preacher authorised by the synod, and that that in such a circumstance, elders of the local church and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship there, should be considered first. This reminds us that the pastoral relationship between the congregation and the one presiding is a significant factor in who is asked to preside. However, these provisions also establish the principle that worship should be led by representative persons recognised by the wider church as well as by the local church.

To support the sharing of resources across Mission Partnerships, Eastern Synod will enable the authorisation of Lay presidents for Communion and Baptism across Mission Partnerships, in accordance with 2016 General Assembly Resolutions. In order to do this, we will:

- a. Contact all those who are currently authorised to preside to ask if they sense a call for their authorisation to be extended to cover other congregations in an existing or proposed Mission Partnership. If this is the case, Synod will extend their authorisation accordingly.
- b. Encourage those seeking authorisation in the future to consider whether they feel called to be authorised for the whole the Mission Partnership of which they belong¹.
- c. Emphasise that the pastoral relationship with a church is a key aspect of presiding at communion. Because we are aware that some lay preachers have historic pastoral links to churches where they are authorised to preside that are not part of a current or proposed Mission Partnership, these authorisations will be allowed to continue. However, when the time comes for review consideration will be given as to whether such authorisations are still pastorally appropriate or whether the needs of such congregations are now being met within their Mission Partnership.
- d. Offer Synod Authorised initial training to those who are preparing to be authorised to preside at the Sacraments.
- e. Offer ongoing support and Synod Authorised refresher training every three years.
- f. Agree the means by which those authorised to preside will be reviewed, particularly in the light of Resolution 14c² and ensure that we are complying with resolution 14c in terms of length of service (between 3 – 5 years) and renewal.

¹ This is an enabling authorisation and does not mean that being authorised to preside at the Sacraments across a whole Mission Partnership implies an expectation for a lay president to do more than they sense they have capacity to do.

² Resolution 14.c states: "authorisation for such presidency by the synod, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three to five years (according to synod judgement), including a probationary year on first appointment, with the possibility of renewal. Before renewal there should be consultation by the synod with the congregation, and a review of its needs."

Pastoral Committee reminds congregations in the Synod that:

- a. Presiding at Communion is a serious call and needs to entail training and recording of those who preside to give good governance.
- b. Training and authorisation for presidency at Communion and Baptism are distinct. Authorisation to preside at one does not automatically mean authorisation to preside at the other.
- c. The URC does not practice communion by reserved sacrament. Those wishing to take communion to people outside a public worship setting need to be authorised to preside at communion. For those who sense a calling to preside such communions there will no expectation that they will have to preside in a public act of worship.³
- d. It is possible to offer one-off authorisation for those who are trained and authorised elsewhere. Application needs to be made in advance to the Convenor of Pastoral Committee.
- e. Advice needs to be sought from Pastoral Committee regarding ecumenical settings where someone not ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacraments is being considered to preside at communion.
- f. Some congregations may find it helpful to change the Sunday on which they celebrate communion to ensure that they are able to invite an appropriately authorised person to preside.
- g. These provisions do not prevent the congregation assembled for baptismal or communion service from themselves appointing, as a church meeting, a suitable person to preside at the celebration of the Sacrament in a case of emergency, for example if the expected president is taken ill or held up in travel. The provisions do not require such an action rather than a postponement of the baptismal or communion service if that seems preferable.'

³ There is currently discussion going on as to whether “communion by extension” might be acceptable within the URC – that is when the elements from a communion service are taken out after the service to someone at home by an elder of the congregation who is not authorised to preside.