

Advisory Opinions: Note 12

Who May Preside at the Celebration of the Sacraments?

“Who may preside at the celebration of the Sacraments?” So begins a phone conversation about once a month coming into the Department of Constitutional Services.

A. Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Lay Pastors

The starting points are located at W-2.3011a (baptism) and W-2.4012c (Lord’s Supper) where we find virtually identical language: the Sacraments “...shall be administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament or commissioned lay pastor when invited by the session and authorized by the presbytery.” The permissive language regarding commissioned lay pastors is relatively recent (1996-97). It is now very clear that commissioned lay pastors may be permitted to preside at both PCUSA Sacraments, but within the restrictions described in G-14.0562.

B. Non-PCUSA Ministers

With regard to ministers, the situation at first appears a bit more murky. Clearly other PCUSA ministers of the Word and Sacrament may be invited to preside. However, nowhere in the *Book of Order* is the phrase "minister of the Word and Sacrament" defined. Ministers who are members of one of the Formula of Agreement denominations (G-11.0405b) are particularly suitable to preside, for the Sacramental theology of each is substantially similar to our own and the Formula of Agreement specifically affirms that we “recognize each other's Baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among their members.” We also use the identical term when referring to ministers who are members of denominations with whom the PCUSA is in correspondence. Such ministers who have been received as temporary members of the presbytery (G-11.0405a) may surely be granted such authority while in the service of the presbytery.

It is ministers of other Christian denominations, or non-denominational churches that present the greatest challenges to sessions and presbyteries. Since both Sacraments are authorized by the session of a local congregation (W-2.3012 [Baptism] & W-2.4012a [Lord's Supper]), a session may invite ministers from other denominations to preside at the celebration of either of the Sacraments (G-15.0202).

It is incumbent upon the session to examine the theology of non-PCUSA ministers prior to inviting them to preside. In many presbyteries, the Committee on Ministry provides guidance and assistance in making such an examination. A wise session will seek such assistance.

C. Elders

One of the Presbyterian Church’s greatest gifts to Christianity is the ordination of lay persons. Under certain circumstances they may be authorized to preside at the Lord’s Supper. In G-6.0304a we find that elders “...may be authorized to supply places which are without the regular ministry of the Word and Sacrament. In specific circumstances and with proper instruction,

specific elders may be authorized by the presbytery to administer the Lord's Supper in accord with G-11.0103z. It is the presbytery that must determine whether "... to authorize specific elders...to administer or preside at the Lord's Supper in specific circumstances and with proper instruction by presbytery in the doctrine and administration of the Lord's Supper, when it deems it necessary to meet the needs for the administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper that cannot otherwise be met." If a presbytery has made such a determination, if the presbytery has provided the instruction, and if the presbytery has authorized the session to invite a particular elder to preside, the elder may preside in that time and place. The presbytery must review the need each year. (G-11.0103z)

The Constitution provides no provision for elders to administer Baptism, except when commissioned as commissioned lay pastors. (G-14.0562b.)

D. Candidates

Candidates for ministry present a particular challenge. Only candidates who are elders and who have been specifically authorized by the presbytery (G-11.0103z) and/or who have been previously commissioned as commissioned lay pastors (G-14.0562) may be permitted to preside at either Sacrament. (G-14.0420) Presumably a previously commissioned lay pastor could be authorized to preside at either (with permission of the presbytery). A candidate/elder could clearly only be authorized to preside at the Lord's Supper.

The *Book of Order* is actually quite permissive in favor of the session on this subject. That fact seems to surprise many sessions and committees on ministry. Care must be exercised, but both the session (G-10.0102d) and the presbytery (G-11.0103k, z) have an affirmative duty to see that the faithful receive both Sacraments.

E. Chaplains

A particular situation often occurs for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament serving in validated ministries in hospitals, hospices and the military. Often such ministers are called upon to celebrate either or both Sacraments. These present pastoral as well as theological challenges. The Directory for Worship provides, at W-2.3011b (Baptism) and W-2.04012b (Lord's Supper), that a governing body may authorize the Sacrament by Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who are serving as chaplains. The minister is instructed to make arrangement for enrolling the baptism on the roll of a particular church, even if in absentia. A minister serving as a full time chaplain should have a relationship with the session of a particular church and arrange to have the baptized person's name enrolled on the register of that session. A commissioned lay pastor in such a validated ministry would be subject to the same requirements.

The Directory for Worship is likewise quite clear that a minister (or CLP) may celebrate the Lord's Supper "in connection with the visitation of the sick" (W-2.4010). Such celebrations should not be done in sacramental isolation but should include "one or more members" of a congregation.

Issued April 2004
Updated April 2009