

## Preparing Elders to Officiate at the Lord's Table in the Presbytery of South Alabama

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Acts 2:42

*Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.* John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9.

*The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate, feed upon his body and blood to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body.* Book of Confessions 7.278

*[The presbytery's responsibilities] shall include authorizing the celebration of the Lord's Supper at its meetings at least annually and for fellowship groups, new church developments, and other non-congregational entities meeting within its bounds; authorizing and training specific ruling elders to administer or preside at the Lord's Supper when it deems it necessary to meet the needs for the administration of the Sacrament.* Book of Order PCUSA G-3.0301b

*The Lord's Supper shall be authorized by the session and administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament. It is appropriate that a presbytery authorize and train ruling elders to administer the Lord's Supper in the absence of pastors.* Book of Order PCUSA W-3.0410.

It is commonly understood that Christian worship, from the earliest days of the community of Christ's followers, has regularly included the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The frequency with which the Lord's Supper has been celebrated has varied. In the earliest days of the community, worshippers gathered on the first day of the week and in their worship, they shared a common meal. This weekly meal included the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup.

In some traditions, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is included on every occasion when the community gathers for corporate worship. (This was the preference of John Calvin in Geneva, but his view did not prevail)

Frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper has been encouraged through recent liturgical renewal efforts in the Presbyterian Church USA. This encouragement addresses the mistaken impression in some congregations that the requirement to celebrate the Lord's Supper at least quarterly was instead limiting congregations to no more than four celebrations annually.

Because of this change, some congregations have adopted the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper on a specified Sunday of each month (first, second, third, etc.). Some have adopted the practice of celebrating on festival days (Christ the King Sunday, First Sunday of a season, Ash Wednesday, Christmas, etc.). And some blend those two approaches, making adjustments in schedule as necessary and appropriate. In all cases, the schedule for the celebration of the Lord's Supper has been set by the Session of each particular congregation in accordance with the congregation's needs and rhythms.

The Covid-19 pandemic and its accompanying precautions posed challenges to practices associated with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. When indoor gatherings were either prohibited or discouraged, churches, by necessity, were forced to consider how to adapt sacramental practices for dispersed congregations. Some, because of our understanding of what does and does not take place in a sacrament, suspended the celebration of the Lord's Supper until it was deemed safe for the congregation to gather once more. Others moved their celebration to outdoor venues where worshippers could gather at recommended distances

from one another. Some congregations live streamed their worship services on the internet and devised liturgy by means of which worshippers taking part in the service would provide elements for themselves in their own homes and the “virtually gathered” community celebrated according to its customs.

Clearly, then, our practices associated with the Lord’s Supper are not set eternally in stone and may be adapted to meet changing needs and circumstances.

For much of our history as a denomination, a Minister of Word and Sacrament has presided at the table when the sacrament is celebrated. As one who is ordained and called to the ministry, it is understood that the minister presides at the table as Christ’s representative but it is Christ who is the host. This practice has been followed for purposes of church order, and not because of hierarchical assumptions or matters of power or privilege.

When a particular church finds itself without an installed Minister of Word and Sacrament, and its Session desires to include the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in its worship, it should consult with the presbytery to determine whether it is possible to secure the services of a Minister of Word and Sacrament or a Ruling Elder (previously commissioned to service in a congregation of the presbytery and whose training and authorization includes the celebration of the Sacrament) to preside at the table.

In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for a congregation to request the presbytery’s Committee on Ministry train and authorize an elder of the congregation to preside at the table. That request may be communicated through the Chair of the Committee on Ministry, the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery, the offices or staff of the Presbytery (including the Administrative Assistant and/or Regional Presbyter), or members of the Committee on Ministry. When such a request is made, the Committee on Ministry will review it to determine which method of providing an officiant for the Sacrament is most appropriate.

(In other circumstances, a Session may request that one or more of its elders be trained to be available should its Minister of Word and Sacrament or Commissioned Ruling Elder be unexpectedly absent (illness or some other personal emergency). In such cases, should a trained elder need to step in on behalf of the ministerial leader who normally presides, it should only be done at the invitation of that ministerial leader (when possible). In circumstances when that leader is unable to make the invitation, the clerk of Session in consultation with two or more elders currently on Session shall make it. Should it be necessary for such action to be taken, it will be communicated to the Committee on Ministry as soon as possible afterwards and it shall be recorded in the minutes of the Session at its next regular meeting.)

If the Committee on Ministry determines it is appropriate to train an elder to officiate at the Lord’s Table for the congregation in whose midst that elder serves, the Committee will, in consultation with the congregation’s Session, select one or more elders for that task and provide adequate training so that they may undertake the responsibilities of the task in a manner appropriate to the practices, polity, traditions, and theology of the Presbyterian Church USA.

Sessions should always bear in mind our tradition’s historical understanding that the Sacrament is “a sign and a seal” of God’s gracious disposition and that God’s grace is not in any way dependent upon the administration or reception of the Sacrament. Therefore, it is always possible and may be appropriate to delay the celebration of the Sacrament until such time as the services of an appropriate officiant may be secured.