

J: Guidance concerning Presidency at the Sacraments

Presidency at the Sacraments

The General Assembly received statements on this subject in 1980, 1991 and 1995. For the guidance of local churches and synods, the last two of these are reprinted below. These documents refer to district councils, which no longer exist within the structure of the United Reformed Church. Please note that the responsibility for authorising people to preside at the sacraments now rests with the synods.

1991 Assembly report (pages 36-41)

1. Introduction

At the last Assembly [1990] the doctrine and worship committee was asked to think further and more deeply about lay presidency and indeed, presidency itself. There were three reasons.

- The guidelines and explanation provided for the Assembly were found to be unclear and inadequate by several speakers.
- The basis of presidency and its relation to ordination needed exploring.
- A promise as made to the West Midland Province to consider the resolution they had brought which would have allowed students on internships to preside at the sacraments. In this paper no distinction is made between stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministers.

2. The Basis of Union

Readers may find it helpful to have before them the parts of the Basis which are relevant:

21. Some are called to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. After approved preparation and training, they may be called to be ministers of local churches or missionaries overseas, or to some special or approved ministry, and are then ordained and inducted to their office. They are commissioned to conduct public worship, to preach the Word and to administer the Sacraments, to exercise pastoral care and oversight, and to give leadership to the Church in its mission to the world. Others serve as non-stipendiary minister, continuing in other occupations and earning their livelihood within them.
25. The worship of the local church is an expression of the worship of the whole people of God. In order that this may be clearly seen, the United Reformed Church shall

- (a) take steps to ensure that as far as possible ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church;
- (b) provide for the training of suitable men and women of the United Reformed Church, to be accredited by District Councils as lay preachers;
- (c) make provision through District Councils in full consultation with the local churches concerned, for the recognition of certain members of the United Reformed Church, normally deaconesses, elders or accredited lay preachers, who may be invited by local churches to preside at baptismal and communion services where pastoral necessity so requires. The pastoral needs of each situation shall be reviewed periodically by the District Council in Consultation with the local church. Apart from ordained ministers of the United Reformed Church and of other Churches, only such recognised persons may be invited.

3. Traditions brought together

- 3.1 The Presbyterians normally had a minister for each church who presided at the sacraments. Communion services were usually quarterly so that even if a minister's charge was more than one congregation it was not difficult to preside in every case. During vacancies the Interim Moderator would preside. There were some places where elders were authorised to function.
- 3.2 In Congregational churches there were monthly or twice monthly communion services. Again, where a minister looked after a single church it was not difficult for him or her to preside. Where the minister had a group of churches or where the church was too small to have its own minister, it was agreed that lay persons, especially lay preachers, would preside. Officially church meetings were responsible for authorising lay people to preside but this largely went by default. It was not unknown for the preacher to arrive at the church and discover there was communion or even a baptism in store.
- 3.3 In 1981 the United Reformed Church united with a large part of the Churches of Christ and their tradition, though of less antiquity, was different again. In early times local leaders, elders, would preside. There were also peripatetic evangelists. In time, most churches ordained elders to preside, while the full-time ordained ministers concentrated on preaching and teaching.
- 3.4 Those who drafted the Basis of Union endeavoured to make a suitable compromise which would continue to allow sufficient flexibility to ensure congregations enjoyed the sacraments while maintaining control in the hands of the Districts. Considering our diverse backgrounds, what they devised has not worked out badly for getting on for twenty years. But the West Midlands

resolution and remarks made at the Assembly, not to mention elsewhere, show that re-examination is necessary again.

4. Three views

There are three views one hears expressed.

- (a) 4.1. The position held by the greater part of the Church universal is that ordination places the care of the Sacraments firmly in the hands of the minister, who is therefore the proper person to preside and administer them. It is a most ancient view. It recognises that it is the responsibility of the wider church, not the local one, to supervise both ministry and Sacraments. Those who hold this view, nevertheless, have to be pragmatic and so provision has to be made for lay people to preside where ordained people are not available.
- (b) 4.2. Another view frequently heard is that the preaching of the word and the conduct of the Sacraments are so closely related to those recognised as lay preachers should also have authority to preside at the Sacraments.
- (c) 4.3. A third view has been growing of late. There are a number of places with collegiate ministries and others where there is a need for local lay leaders and these could well be authorised. It is felt that it is more important to have someone presiding who is recognised as a leader in the local church than someone who is not of the family. Which way are we to go? Or do we go off in different directions?

5. Looking back

- 5.1 We were asked to explore the past, so we turned to John Calvin, who did not give us as much help as we hoped. It seems that no one in his day questioned the rightful place of the ordained minister at the Lord's Table. If anyone imagines the Reformers had an easy time they should know that Calvin faced considerable opposition from lay people who refused to accept the elements from elders. The idea of a layman presiding would have caused rebellion! In principle any believers might preach or preside, but in practice there had to be order. Thus Calvin in his Genevan Catechism of 1545 says: 'Does the administration both of baptism and the Lord's Supper belong indiscriminately to all? By no means; but these duties you speak of are the peculiar functions of those to whom the public office of teaching has been committed.'

That this view was widespread among the Reformed Churches is substantiated by instances of congregations going without the Lord's Supper for long periods because they had no pastor. Perhaps the best known is that of the Pilgrim Fathers.

- 5.2 It should be noticed that the emphasis in those times was disciplinary. The pastor was both the teacher and head of the household, responsible with the elders for the witness and good behaviour of the flock. The troops were expected to be on parade on sacramental days especially, as part of the church militant. No doubt, some will rightly ask why the Reformers believed the teacher/pastor should preside at the sacraments? They appear to have accepted the practice of Christians all down the centuries, going back to the early church and to our Lord himself at the Last Supper. It is Richard Baxter who expresses what many of us would recognise and for which we would be thankful: 'Look upon the minister as the agent or officer of Christ who is commissioned by Him to seal and deliver to you the covenant and its benefits; and take the bread and wine, as if you heard Christ himself saying to you, "Take my body and blood.'" Moreover, Jesus was carrying on the old Jewish Passover custom when he, as head of the band of disciples, a 'household'; presided.
- 5.3 It was inevitable that, cast into a pagan environment, sacrificial, priestly notes became dominant. That was what Gentiles understood and wanted. So there arose a divide between those with power to absolve sin and the mass of people. The Reformation brought us back to the old and paramount role of the minister, that of teacher in the local church, just as Jesus was rabbi among his followers. Not, of course, like a modern school teacher, but as the shepherd who leads and feeds the flock.
- 5.4 Presbyterian and Independent/Congregational churches appear to have maintained the Reformed tradition until the early part of the last century. Then the impact of the evangelical revival became noticeable; many small churches were planted which had no ordained minister readily to hand. By the mid-fifties the old discipline, with the minister and elders/deacons guarding the table, was rapidly crumbling away. Furthermore, in reaction against the Oxford Movement, respect for symbols and sacraments withered away. By the twentieth century the sacraments did not seem vitally important to many people. Attendances were often poor and many people were never baptised. Communion rolls were less often kept and the use of tokens often fell into disuse. In such a climate the question of presidency was of little consequence.
- 6.1 In our time great changes have come about. Today the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is no longer an appendage of the main preaching service, nor is baptism a family affair on Sunday afternoon. Communion is regarded as the most significant act of the Church family. The biggest congregations gather for it at the festivals. More and more churches want children involved in it.
- 6.2 The notion of the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of the whole people of God is beginning to take hold of both ministers' and lay people's thinking. When baptism is celebrated the whole congregation is involved and the

renewal of baptismal promises may be taken by everyone. When the Lord's Supper is celebrated everyone is a celebrant, though one has to preside and speak for all present.

- 6.3 An unwelcome change is the smaller congregations of our day and the proliferation groups of churches, served mostly by one stipendiary minister. In places people seem to go to extraordinary lengths to have the Sacraments administered by the minister, no matter that it binds that person to a tight schedule and entails driving miles on busy roads between services. The minister is thus always with an eye on the clock rather than the congregation, and constantly saying, 'I must fly!' It is a shame when pastoral work is reduced to this state when there are probably good lay people in the congregations who would make good presidents.

7.1 Concluding remarks: Lay Presidency and Ordination

The objection is raised that if lay presidency became common, it would diminish the significance of ordination and ministry. If we held a sacerdotal doctrine of the ministry this might be so, but as we do not, there is no cause for concern. Ordination or commissioning (as for lay preachers) is for the good order of the church. Ministers, elders and lay preachers each have their different calls to different responsibilities for the building up and the mission of the Church. An elder who has authority from the District to preside over a specific congregation for a specified time is in a different position from a minister ordained to the word and sacrament. In any case questions about the status or rights of various officers are hard to sustain in the light of the gospels.

7.2 The linkage of the Word and the Sacraments

The insistence that the two be joined was, for the Reformers, the guarantee that the medieval practice of holding mass without preaching the faith would not happen in their churches, and thus superstitious ideas would be eradicated. We all know that the Reformers placed great emphasis on people having an intelligent faith. The earliest Congregationalists tried to resurrect the New Testament prophets as distinct from pastors and teachers. In puritan times lots of towns had lecturers, preachers in fact; they had no pastoral duties. There has always been room for the preacher who was not tied to a congregation. Lay preachers with a roving commission came to the force in the wake of the evangelical revival. Just a few of them felt called to become local pastors. What we are saying is that in our tradition holding either sacrament without attending to God's word is open to abuse; but not all preachers are necessarily the proper people to preside at what is a pastoral celebration.

7.3 Lay presidents

The good character and standing must be the first consideration of the District in seeking lay presidents. It is also of cardinal importance that they know what they are doing. It is obvious that for anyone to be authorised to preside at baptism, that person must be competent to undertake the necessary pastoral work with the candidate or the parents, in some cases both, should the believer be of tender years. Moreover, the elder must be fully aware of the policy of the United Reformed Church on baptism and be able to discuss it. There seems to be no reason why a District should not authorise someone to preside at the Lord's Supper but not at baptism, if it saw fit to do so. It is perhaps less obvious that to preside at the Lord's Supper it is not good enough simply to say the words and go through the motions like an actor. The president should have a sound understanding of what is happening and believe in it to command respect. He or she should be able to talk with anyone about membership of the body of Christ. People who come to the sacrament again and again, who are not on the church roll, need to be approached sensitively and spiritually about their stage in the Christian pilgrimage. Districts should see that all those it appoints to preside have a spiritual awareness of the importance of the role and a good grasp of its responsibilities. They may also need someone to consult if there are problems. One hesitates about laying down formal training because circumstances vary so much. If a scheme of formal training were to be set out, while it would be excellent for some elders in larger congregations, it might well result in elders in small congregations of ten or fifteen people, refusing to accept the responsibility.

7.4 Order and variety

Many Districts have used the 1980 guidelines without much trouble. Several Districts seem not to have known of them. There have been Districts which took a strict line, expecting to authorise individual services, and others which went to the opposite extreme and authorised every lay preacher. Those who drew up the guidelines desired to keep Districts away from such diverse interpretations of the Basis of Union. The objective must be to work out adequate cover for the churches, which considers the variety of needs and styles of ministry different churches may have today. The 1980 guidelines anticipated such developments and spoke of new patterns of ministry. Districts should be prepared for this. There are churches developing a collegiate style of ministry, resembling somewhat that which the Churches of Christ brought to the URC. There are groups with a pool of authorised persons and other groups where it may be desirable for each church to have one or two elders who can preside. There are churches with a minister which may want a presiding elder to help during a sabbatical or holidays. One or two presiding elders will be valuable during an interregnum. Some churches may like one or two to preside at

communion services in rest homes for the elderly and for sick and housebound people. But in all our dealing we must all endeavour to keep away from the city of legality while not falling into the morass of disorder.

7.5 The Moderators

One way of acting with hope of greater consistency is to implement the instruction to be found in the Structures, under the functions of District Councils (3.vi) where the District is to consult not only with the local churches about authorising appropriate persons to preside at the sacraments, but also with the Moderator of the Synod. We do not suppose it would be a good use of Moderators' time for them to become involved in each individual case but if they have an opportunity to see what a District plans and offer advice this would help to iron out gross differences of practice between Districts. Moderators should also be brought into the picture when the regular review comes around. In our relationships with other churches, in which the Moderators play a major role, it is important we can affirm what our policy is over presidency and be able to defend it.

In Proportion

Presidency is something that matters, of importance to us. Yet, when seen in the light of history or over against the great issues facing the Church and the world, it is seen in its true stature, a minor domestic issue, which it would be wrong to spend too much time and energy upon. Nor is presiding something any Christian can feel worthy to do, taking the place of him who went straight from there to Gethsemane and then Golgotha.

1995 Assembly report (pages 124-125)

5.1 Presidency

5.1.1 Each local church needs someone who is able to preside at the celebration of the Sacraments. (In passing we note that although most comment on this matter refers to presidency at the Lord's Supper, the same need also applies to the administration of baptism.) Many of the responses we have received have been on this topic, and this has reminded us of the significance of the commitments made by Congregationalists and Presbyterians in 1972, and by Churches of Christ in 1981. Entry into a united church has not removed differences of conviction on this issue. Some have told us that lay presidency is as important to them as the ordination of women. Others tell us they would rather not celebrate the Sacraments than have a non-ordained president. The continuing practice of weekly communion among former Churches of Christ reminds us that different congregations have different

understandings of what constitutes pastoral necessity. The comments which follow attempt to enable us to continue to live a common life together.

- 5.1.2 The Basis of Union provided a framework which enabled two smaller churches (Presbyterian and Churches of Christ) and a larger church (Congregational) to come together without hurting one another's consciences. We believe that it is of the utmost importance that the spirit of that union be observed in this matter, for in the nature of the case it cannot be resolved by a simple majority vote. Paragraph 24 of the Basis of Union provides for lay presidency in cases of pastoral necessity, and for the periodic review of each local situation. There is wide variation in practice across the Church. Some district councils treat each authorisation individually; others give a general authorisation to all lay preachers. Such regional variations cause unnecessary hurt, particularly when people move from one part of the country to another. We believe therefore that there should be an agreed pattern for the whole of the United Reformed Church.
- 5.1.3 As a Church we are committed to the ever-deepening unity of all God's people. We have a particular responsibility therefore to be sensitive to the ecumenical dimensions of presidency at the Sacraments. More than 10% of our congregations are joint United Reformed-Methodist churches, and we are involved in many wider Local Ecumenical Partnerships and ecumenical projects throughout the United Kingdom. We need to be ourselves, but as we do so we must bear in mind the comments of our ecumenical partners about the difficulties that some views of presidency create for existing LEP's and future developments.
- 5.1.4 With this in mind we reiterate what we said in the Interim Report. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are Christ's gifts to the Church. Each in a unique way signifies and re-enacts the appropriation of Christ's saving work for his people. Those who preside when these sacraments are celebrated link congregations together in a common intention. That means that those who are baptised and admitted to communion in one place are gladly received in other places also. Thus two principles should guide us in this perplexing and sensitive area. First, the sacraments belong to the whole Church as Christ's gift. Secondly, we must be sensitive to the ecumenical dimension of the way in which we order our sacramental life. The first principle means that no congregation should ever be deprived of the sacraments, and that there must always be someone available and authorised to preside. The second principle implies that those normally authorised to preside should be Ministers of Word and Sacraments.

Decisions of General Assembly 2016

General Assembly agreed (2016, resolution 14) that the of presidency at the sacraments if the minister in pastoral charge is not available should be as follows:

- (a) the Church meeting may invite another Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed a willingness to do so);
- (b) if such a minister is not available, the Church meeting may invite an elder (or accredited Lay Preacher) authorised by the synod, in accordance the provisions of paragraph 25 of the Basis of Union: elders of the local church and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship there should be considered first;
- (c) authorisation for such presidency by the synod, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three-five years (according to synod judgment), 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.

Person responsible for editing document: Clerk of the General Assembly

Date of last revision: May 2017