

Paper P5

Clarifying the term “pastoral necessity” for lay presidency at the Sacraments

West Midlands Synod

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Steve Faber moderator@urcwestmidlands.org.uk
Action required	Instruction to relevant committees to provide guidance on the meaning of the term “pastoral necessity.”
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 60 In light of increasingly complex pastorates and the decrease in the number of available Ministers of Word and Sacraments, General Assembly instructs the Ministries and the Worship, Faith and Order Committees to review the question of what it means for there to be ‘pastoral necessity’ for Lay Presidency at the Sacraments and provide guidance accordingly.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To provide clear guidance to Assembly, Synods and local churches as to the meaning of the term “pastoral necessity” to allow for lay presidency at the Sacraments, in line with the Basis of Union §25.
Main points	With ministers serving multiple churches in a pastorate, it is increasingly hard to find ordained Ministers of Word and Sacraments (MWS) to preside with the regularity required by many churches. Synods are increasingly being asked to approve Authorised Elders to preside when a MWS is not available
Previous relevant documents	The URC Manual Section J, GA2016 Book of Reports pp90-107 and Record resolutions 14-19 on Authorised Elders
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	None
External (eg ecumenical)	There is already provision Lay Presidency in the Basis of Union, and question of ecumenical sensitivity were covered in

	the 2016 report. At this stage, no change in policy is proposed, but clarity on the existing position is sought.
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Lay Presidency at the Sacraments

General Assembly last reviewed its position on Lay Presidency at the Sacraments when it made provision for Authorised Elders in 2016.

Resolution 14 of the 2016 Assembly affirms that the normal pattern should be that a Minister of Word and Sacraments (MWS) should preside at Holy Communion and Baptism whenever available, but where there is no Minister available then an Elder may be authorised by the Synod to preside, after appropriate preparation. Preference should be given to “Elders of the local church and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship” (GA 2016 Resolution 14b). Resolution 14 updated Section F of the URC Manual accordingly.

In the last 10 years, the number of churches forming a pastorate served by an MWS has increased dramatically. It is now increasingly common for ministers to serve in a grouping of at least four churches, so is likely to lead worship at any one of those churches in their pastoral charge once a month or less often.

The most typical pattern for the celebration of Holy Communion in United Reformed Church congregations is monthly. Typically, therefore, a MWS will be asked to lead Communion at one of the churches to which they have been inducted every single week (which would be the normal pattern in former Churches of Christ congregations anyway), but when holidays, study leave and illness are factored in, inevitably there will be some Sundays when “their own” minister will not be available to lead Communion (let alone Baptism, although those occasions can often be planned around the availability of a MWS.)

Members of our Synod meeting considering this resolution also noted that there is a particular pressure point at the major Christian festivals, especially around Easter, when it is not possible for Ministers to preside at multiple churches in their charge on Maundy Thursday and/or Easter Sunday, for instance.

Similarly, with an ageing demographic, there is some anecdotal reporting of a higher number of requests for home Communion for those who find it difficult to attend Sunday worship. Where a pastorate covers multiple churches in a much larger geographical area, some Ministers are finding it increasingly difficult to meet perceived spiritual needs for isolated members.

Churches can, of course, seek retired MWS to preside, although whilst the number of retired ministers is growing, fewer feel that this is a service they wish to continue to offer, many having hung up their clerical vestments many years earlier.

Representations have also been made that even if a Minister can lead worship in each of “their” churches monthly, there may be missional reasons why including Holy Communion is less appropriate, including those occasions where a large number of visitors from the community may be present who have not been prepared for what we are doing when we break bread and drink wine.

Even at the formation of the United Reformed Church, we accepted that presidency by MWS would not always be possible — and we had considerably more ordained ministers available then, most with charge of only one or two congregations. Unquestionably it is getting harder to secure a minister's presence with a fixed regularity (the First Sunday of a month, for instance).

As a Synod, we have sought to make it clear that in many places the fixed regularity of the Sacraments may not be sustainable. Flexibility should be considered seriously by a local church. "We've always done it this way", is not a theological basis for Lay Presidency.

For the avoidance of doubt, this paper is not proposing a change to the Basis of Union. It is still the **normal** pattern for a minister to preside at the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. The onus remains with the Elders' Meeting, "to see that public worship is regularly offered and the sacraments are duly administered" as one of their functions (The Structure of the United Reformed Church, 2,(2)(ii). Further, the Basis of Union §25 starts by saying that, "The worship of the local church is an expression of the worship of the whole people of God." To act consistently with this foundational belief, there are appropriate standards to be maintained. The emphasis on, "the whole people of God," also means we must take seriously the ecumenical implications of our presidency at the Sacraments.

Amongst our typical partners in LEPs, whilst the Baptist Church would be far more concerned with the acceptability of the President to the local congregation, the Methodist Church would tend to be more concerned with good order and the President being agreeable to the wider Connexion. The Church of England would take a stricter view — Presidency is a task for a priest. We should also recognise that the ecumenical scene is broader than our traditional LEP partners, and a great many other denominations and church networks would lean towards the Baptist/Congregational view of the local church deciding.

Certainly, in our LEPs we must be respectful of the convictions and discipline of our partners, but it would be appropriate to bring in wider questions of ecumenism. The language used around Lay Presidency has always been "in cases of pastoral necessity" a Synod (and previously the District Council) could authorise lay people to preside (see also the footnote to §25 of the Basis of Union, which makes it clear that worship "should be led by representative persons recognised by the wider church as well as the local church.") "Lay" here includes Elders, who are ordained, but Assembly has previously made it clear that Elders do not share the same kind of ordained ministry as Ministers of Word and Sacraments. Similarly, CRCWs, as a commissioned, rather than an ordained ministry, are not automatically designated as those who may or should preside at the Sacraments.

The General Assembly has, from time-to-time attempted to explore what "pastoral necessity" means. Most significantly, the Faith and Order committee's reports, to Mission Council in 2015 and 2016 which led to the creation of Authorised Elders, wrestled with what the term means and how it was being interpreted. Their conclusion, essentially, was that it depends largely on the church tradition, as those formerly Presbyterian tended to emphasise the pastoral need in providing for the Sacraments to be celebrated, whereas those formerly of the Congregational tradition would see the necessity as having the President (ordained or lay) as someone in an established

pastoral relationship with the congregation. The Churches of Christ tradition of weekly Communion celebrations provided for Elders to preside routinely at the table.

In implementing denominational policy, the Synod Pastoral Committees (by whatever name) act on behalf of the Synod in appointing Authorised Elders at the request of local churches.

Time and again they are asked to decide whether there is a case being made of “pastoral necessity” for Lay Presidency, with almost no guidance as to how to decide whether such a case exists, often on the basis of partial information which requires follow-up and clarification, leading to frustration and resentment from local churches. It is increasingly difficult to make consistent decisions, when a little more information might tip the balance one way or the other.

The West Midlands Synod feels that having a clearer, definitive, statement on what constitutes “pastoral necessity” in our current ministry context is now needed. We are aware that the 2016 Assembly’s view was that a Synod is the appropriate Council to decide on the appointment of Authorised Elders, but we wish to see a consistent standard so that people moving from one Synod to another will find a common approach being followed.