
Southern Synod Lay Presidency and Authorised Elders Guidelines

1. Introduction

The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church (para.25) allows for lay presidency at the Sacraments in cases of pastoral necessity. The following guidelines have been drawn up in the light of that acknowledging the need for good order and keeping in mind the ecumenical implications where many of our partner churches do not recognize lay presidency.

In 2016 General Assembly agreed that the existing guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments (The Manual, Section F) be amended to read:

The pattern 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 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 with the provisions of §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 years, 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.

The guidelines have been designed to be as easy to implement as possible.

2. Training

It is important that all who have the privilege of presiding at the sacraments are as well-equipped as possible. **Successful completion of an approved course such as the Southern Synod Sacraments Course or the URC Sacraments Course is an essential requirement for those in categories 3,4,5 and 6 below before seeking authorisation for the first time.** However, we would also encourage **everyone** who is authorised to preside to undergo initial training (or a refresher course). For details of courses, please contact the Synod Training Development Officer or the Synod Lay Preaching Commissioner.

3. Lay Preachers and presidency

3.1 The Synod Ministries Committee holds overall responsibility for the policy and gives oversight to the provision of Sacraments courses ensuring that there are a sufficient number in the places where they are needed.

3.2 Authorisation is given by Synod/United Areas at their meeting with a recommendation from the Area Pastoral Committee. The Areas, through their Pastoral Committees, are responsible for the running of the Sacraments Courses normally using their Area Lay Preaching Coordinators to set up the course, venue etc., whilst the course itself would be delivered by recognised Tutors. Lay Preaching Coordinators will keep lists of tutors, of those wishing to take a course and those in their Area who have successfully completed it. The Synod Lay Preaching Commissioner will hold lists for all Areas to maintain an overall view. Authorisation is given for three years.

3.3 **Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers** are authorised to preside at any church which invites them to do so if they have been previously authorised or have completed the Sacraments course. Newly Accredited Lay Preachers will be required to complete the course. It is the responsibility of the Synod/United Area Lay Preaching Co-ordinator to ensure this happens. Authorisation is given by the Synod Area for three years.

3.4 **Locally Recognised Lay Preachers** are authorised to preside at any church within the Synod which invites them to do so. Not all locally recognised Lay Preachers will have done, or completed, the Sacraments Course. Each Synod/United Area Lay Preaching Coordinator will present a list to the Synod Area Pastoral Committee. The Committee will then consider those names, checking that the Sacraments course has successfully been completed, and the Synod Area will issue authorisation for the person to preside at any church in the Synod for three years.

4. Authorised Elder

4.1 If a Minister of Word and Sacraments or authorised Lay Preacher is not available, the Church Meeting may request an elder to be authorised by synod, in accordance with the provisions of §25 of the Basis of Union: elders of the local church regularly conducting worship there should be considered first.

4.2 Authorisation for such presidency by the Synod Area, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three years including a probationary year on first appointment, with the possibility of renewal. Before renewal there should be consultation by the Synod Area with the congregation, and a review of its needs.

4.3 Synod will provide regular support and guidance for each church without an authorised elder within its membership through the Synod/United Area Pastoral Committee; and also, for authorised elders, for example by holding an annual meeting where experiences can be shared. This will be organised by the Training Development Officer.

4.4 Synod Area Pastoral Committees will keep a record of a person's authorisation. Six months before renewal, a letter will be sent to the church secretary of the elder's church to seek Church Meeting approval for a further appointment.

4.5 On the basis of information from Synod Areas, Synod Ministries Committee will provide the names of authorised elders and lay preachers whose authority to serve has been withdrawn to the General Secretariat, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere without the previous difficulty being addressed to try again.

5. Local Church Leaders (where not covered by (3.3) & (3.4) above) are authorised to preside in the local church to which they are appointed for as long as they have that role. This will be included in their Volunteer Agreement. Where the Local Church Leader's church forms part of a joint pastorate, authorisation may be extended by the Synod Area to include the other church(es) in the pastorate if this is desired by the pastorate.

6. Ministerial Students are authorised to preside as part of their training during placement or internship where this is consistent with the policy of their college.

7. In cases of **genuine last-minute emergency**, if no authorised person is available a suitable Elder should be appointed by the church and the Synod/United Area Lay Preaching Co-ordinator informed as soon as possible afterwards.

8. Those who are authorised as above may also preside at **Home Communion** in both private & residential homes.

9. In any other cases, reference should be made to the Moderator.

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