



Southern Synod

Guidance: Presiding at the Sacraments.

For approval at Synod Together October 2025

Introduction

The United Reformed Church celebrates the two sacraments of Baptism and Communion, believing both to be of great importance in the Christian faith. We also believe passionately in the ministry of the whole people of God, calling some to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament, some to be Elders and some to be preachers, to name just a few.

This guidance clarifies for churches, elders, lay preachers and worship leaders in Southern Synod the arrangements for identifying, training, and supporting suitable lay people to preside when a Minister is not available. Its aim is to promote good order in churches whilst recognizing the authority of Church meeting.

This document and the processes therein are the responsibility of the Synod Ministries Committee.

Background

This guidance is underpinned by Resolutions 14-19 agreed at General Assembly in 2016 which is aligned to paragraph 25 of the Basis of Union¹ upon which the URC was established. Each Synod has developed guidance for its churches in implementing the Resolutions in practice. This guidance also incorporates the March 2021 Mission Council changes to lay ministry defining the roles of Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers and Locally Recognized Worship Leaders² and the 2023/4 URC Lay Preaching and Worship Leading Handbook (distributed to Lay Preachers and Worship Leaders in Feb 24). The manual Section J is also taken into account³

Southern Synod comprises four regionally defined Synod Areas including one United Area whose committees oversee the conduct and processes of churches within their catchment. Pastoral Committees⁴ are established in the Synod Areas to oversee Ministry and worship arrangements in churches.

Many churches within Southern Synod are within Local Ecumenical Partnerships or are United with denominations that have a different approach to lay presidency.

¹ The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church (para.25) allows for Lay Presidency at the Sacraments (Baptism and Communion) in cases of pastoral necessity.

² https://urcarchive.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/March-2021/DH2_-_Lay_Preaching_and_Worship_Leading.pdf

³ https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/J_Guidance_concerning_presidency_24_01_2020.pdf

⁴ <https://southernsynodurc.org.uk/pastoral-committees/>

Where ecumenical partners in a church are not content with lay presidency then the Communion or Baptism cannot proceed until a Minister is available.

Process

Communion or baptism would usually be led by the Minister of Word and Sacrament (Minister) with whom the church has a pastoral relationship. Baptisms can usually be arranged for a service where the Minister is available. Churches celebrating “regular” monthly communion will experience times when the Church’s own Minister is unavailable through sickness, other pastoral commitments or annual leave. For churches in vacancy there is unlikely to be a Minister regularly available.

In such a situation, churches should initially seek another URC Minister (including retired or visiting ministers) in good standing and with whom they have a pastoral relationship to preside if they are willing to do so. They should hold a current DBS check and be up to date with safeguarding training. Ministers in good standing from other recognised denominations such as members of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), World Communion of Reformed Churches or Evangelical Alliance, may preside if their own denomination permits this.

If no Minister is available, the church meeting should consider whether to reschedule communion. If this is not feasible, then an “Authorized Elder” from the church should be invited to preside. For a baptism, the family may or may not choose to postpone until the Minister is available.

Authorized elders do not need to lead the whole worship service; they would take over just for the communion and signify the local church ‘welcoming’ the lay preacher to communion with them. Some congregations, preachers and elders may find this uncomfortable initially but is a new way of Ministry for some elders, leading the spiritual growth of the church.

Some churches may struggle initially to identify elders willing to be nominated, but are regularly served by an Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher. If the AALP has a strong pastoral connection with the church, and are willing to undertake participate in refresher training the church meeting may seek agreement from the Pastoral / Area Committee that that individual be authorized to preside at that specific church.

Churches that do not have any elders willing to be Authorised Elders could move to a pastorate arrangement with a sacraments-trained Elder who is an Authorised Elder in their own church presiding under oversight of the Pastoral Committee

A Synod Recognized Lay Preacher (up to 2023) or Locally Recognized Worship Leader who is an Authorized Elder should only preside at their home church. If any are presiding outside their home church, a plan needs to be agreed by the inviting church meeting towards identifying their own Authorized Elders or agree with Pastoral Committee their Authorization for a period of up to three years or for specific dates.

A flowchart is provided in Appendix 1

Authorization and training

Lay Presidents must be in a pastoral relationship with the church, (which does not necessarily mean geographical proximity), have a good understanding of what they are doing and a spiritual awareness of the importance of the role. As well as being in 'good standing' with their local church, presiding at the Sacraments in public worship is also representing the whole United Reformed Church. For this reason, those presiding must also be authorized by the Synod, via the Synod / United Area meeting, having undergone an appropriate training course

In the URC, the church meeting is central to the life of each church. Church meeting should nominate two, or in exceptional circumstances three suitable and willing elders and submit their names to the Pastoral /Area committee for authorization

The nominees would then successfully complete a training course organized and provided by the Synod, before Authorization can be completed. This training should, ideally, be organized locally where demand is identified and participants nominated. The curriculum is set out by the URC⁵.

Local support for those newly authorized will usually be provided through the Pastoral or Area Committee, perhaps the Area Lay Preaching Coordinator. The Synod Lay Preaching Advocate and Training and Development Officer will support the coordinators and arrange annual gatherings of Authorized Elders to encourage information exchange and understanding of the wider work of the URC. The overall process is overseen by Synod Ministries Committee.

Authorization lasts for three years. Newly Authorised elders undertake a one year probationary period. After three years the church would then need to re-nominate the individual through the Pastoral/Area committee for a further term. It is recommended that refresher training or a documented review of activity and learning is undertaken before renewal is authorized.

Records of Authorized Elders, activity and completion of training will be maintained by the Synod Area administrators on behalf of the Pastoral /Area committees and the Committee will review at least annually the situation regarding availability of Authorized Elders and implementation of the policy.

Implementation of the Policy

Southern Synod has been successful in training Synod Recognized lay preachers and (now) Locally Recognised Worship Leaders in recent years, and these individuals and many pulpit supply secretaries are in contact with the SMC Secretary and Lay Preaching Advocate and Co-ordinators. There is some data on who has undertaken the Sacraments Course and has been invited to preside alongside leading worship in their local church or other churches. The Synod will work with Areas, Pastoral Committees, churches, and worship leaders to implement the policy by December 2025

⁵ <https://urc.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do/education-learning/presidency-at-the-sacraments/>

Presidency at the Sacraments in the United Reformed Church

Part One

1) Minister in pastoral charge not available to preside at Holy Communion or Baptism due to Ministerial absence or Church in vacancy.

2) Reschedule Holy Communion or Baptism. If not possible, due to pastoral need e.g. extended absence of Minister, date of baptism fixed affecting extended family members

3) Invite another serving or retired URC Minister, or Minister from another denomination (if the denomination permits it) in good standing, to preside.

4) Minister of Word and Sacrament is not available and there remains a pastoral need then an **Authorised Elder may preside** at their Church.

N.B. In cases of Baptism, it must not be assumed that this is acceptable to the Baptism party.

Note on Lay Preachers:

An Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher who is regularly associated with the pastoral life of the church, may preside if they have been Authorised by the Area Pastoral Committee and have completed the Sacraments Course. (General Assembly 2016 resolution 14)

Locally Recognised Worship Leaders (including Synod-trained Lay Preachers) who are invited to Preside at the Sacraments by another local church meeting need to be Elders in good standing at their home church, have completed the Synod Sacraments training, and the inviting church needs to seek authorisation from the Pastoral Committee for that individual to preside.

Presidency at the Sacraments in the United Reformed Church

Part Two

Process involved to Authorise an Elder to Preside at the Sacraments

- 1) The Church should consider that in a pastoral need who would be the nominated Elder to Preside at the Sacraments. It is recommended two or even three Elders should be identified.

Churches do not need to find anyone, but it will mean they will be without cover in an event of pastoral need.

- 2) Church meeting recommends two Elders for this ministry to the Area / Pastoral Committee.

- 3) If the Area/Pastoral Committee concurs and that the proposed Elders are in good standing; the nominees need to successfully complete the Sacraments course.

- 4) The Synod Area, or Area Executive needs to approve the names once they have successfully completed the training.

In practice this will probably take place during a Pastoral Committee meeting and ratified at the next Area meeting

- 5) The approval is time limited (3 years) but can be renewed. Frequency of services conducted by the Authorized Elder should be recorded. N.B. for new Elders there is a one-year probationary period.

The Area, through its Pastoral Committee should keep a list of Authorised Elders and be informed by the Church, at the renewal date of the frequency of Presiding. Renewal of approval It is not a 'rubber stamp' exercise.

- 6) Local Ecumenical Partnership agreements should state how Communion is conducted. If one ecumenical partner's denomination does not find Elders presiding acceptable, even if the local body of believers do, the service must be postponed.