

On Baptism and Ordination in a Time of Pandemic

July 2020

Many people are inquiring about how to celebrate the sacrament of baptism and services of ordination/installation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Office of Theology and Worship have prepared the statements below. Please note that this is not intended to be legal or medical advice. Consult government authorities and public health experts as you seek to discern the best course of action in your congregation. Remember also that we are in an evolving situation and that these recommendations are subject to change.

On Baptism

When local authorities and medical experts determine it is reasonably safe to do so, hold baptisms in a suitable outdoor location with the Minister of Word and Sacrament (or Commissioned Pastor), a ruling elder (representing the church's session), and the one being baptized (including family, if applicable); others may take part and bear witness via live-streamed video. Wear masks, wash hands, and check temperatures; Covid tests might also be administered a few days prior to the service.

Maintain safe distances at all times throughout the service, only entering into somewhat closer contact for the act of baptism itself: the administration of water in the name of the Trinity. The water may be poured from a vessel at arms-length, which would allow for maximal distance between the candidate and presider. The baptismal formula might be spoken immediately after the water is poured, allowing time to take a step back from the font. The presentation and welcome of the newly baptized would take place at a distance and/or online.

Because baptism has been the basis for so much recent ecumenical work (including the Reformed/Catholic mutual recognition of baptism) we do not want to encourage practices that might cause others to question the integrity of Presbyterian baptisms. It would be best to avoid situations where the minister and person are not in the same place at the same time. In a situation where the one being baptized is immunocompromised or has severe underlying health conditions, it may be advisable to have someone other than the minister administer the water. But this would be a pastoral exception, not something we would wish to present as a regular practice.

As for timing, our PC(USA) Directory for Worship says "The session's responsibilities for Baptism include: encouraging parents (or those exercising parental responsibility) to present their children for Baptism without undue haste or undue delay ..." (W-3.0403). On the "undue haste" side, there is no theological reason to rush baptism, as we don't believe "emergency baptisms" are necessary for salvation. On the "undue delay" side, we encourage people to be baptized (or have their children baptized) as soon as they are ready, so they can begin the lifelong journey of faith that is baptismal discipleship within the covenant community of the church, as the body of Christ.

For more information on baptism in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), consult the *Book of Order*: chapter one in the Form of Government and section W-3.04 in the Directory for Worship.

On Ordination and Installation

(Note that this is written in such a way as to respond to questions about the ordination and installation of deacons and ruling elders, as well as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.)

Online installations of those already ordained do not present a problem, since that does not involve the laying on of hands. However, we do not yet have clarity on best practices for ordinations during this time of online worship and social distancing.

Anecdotally, here are some things we have heard presbyteries and sessions are already doing:

1. delaying ordination until it is safe for at least a small contingent to gather, sometimes authorizing the person to begin serving temporarily prior to being ordained;
2. having at least one person (ideally more, if safe) present to lay on hands, perhaps a family member who happens to be an ordained ruling/teaching elder;
3. holding an online service of ordination, but planning to follow up as soon as possible with a service that will include the physical laying on of hands;
4. sharing a paper or cloth representation of participants' hands by tracing and mailing them, scanning or taking photographs and printing them, or making participants' handprints into stole or shawl; or
5. inviting online participants to hold their hands up to the camera.

When and where it is possible, permissible, and safe to do so, we would encourage options 1, 2, and 3, in that order; possibilities 4 and 5 could be added when following options 2 or 3.

For more information on ordination and installation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), consult the *Book of Order*: chapter two in the Form of Government and section W-4.04 in the Directory for Worship.