

ADVISORY OPINION ON BAPTISM AND ORDINATION DURING THE PANDEMIC
From the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA)
& the Rev'd Dr. Christian D. Boyd, Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Milwaukee

1 September 2020

On baptism

When local authorities and medical experts determine it is reasonably safe to do so, hold baptisms in a suitable outdoor location with a pastor or commissioned pastor, a ruling elder representing the church's session and the one being baptized, including family, if applicable. Others can take part and bear witness via livestreamed video. Attendees should wear masks, wash hands and check temperatures. Coronavirus tests might also be administered a few days after the service.

Maintain safe distances during the service, only entering into somewhat closer contact for the act of baptism itself. The water can be poured from a vessel at arms-length, which allows for maximum distance between the candidate and the presider. The presentation and welcome of the newly baptized should take place at a distance and/or online.

"It would be best to avoid situations," the statement says, "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 issues, 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."

the PC(USA)'s Directory for Worship says it's the session's responsibility to encourage parents or those exercising parental responsibility to present children for baptism "without undue haste or undue delay."

"On the 'undue haste' side, there is no theological reason to rush baptism, as we don't believe 'emergency baptisms' are necessary for salvation," the authors state. "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."

More information is in the first chapter of the Book of Order's Form of Government, W-3.04 in the Directory for Worship.

On ordination and installation

This section, the authors note, applies to the ordination and installation of deacons and ruling elders as well as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

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

Here's what some presbyteries and sessions are doing:

Delaying ordination until it is safe for at least a small contingent to gather (2 people for an administrative commission, ruling and teaching elder), sometimes authorizing the person to begin serving temporarily prior to being ordained.

Having at least one person (ideally more, if safe) present to lay on hands. That person could be a family member who happens to be an ordained ruling or teaching elder.

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 a stole or shawl.

Inviting online participants to hold their hands up to the camera.

For more information on ordination and installation in the PC(USA), consult Chapter 2 in the Book of Order's Form of Government, section W-4.04 in the Directory for Worship.