

ADVISORY OPINION
Ordinations and Installations in the Age of COVID

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One of the persistent questions, as we cannot/will not/should not gather for worship, is "How are we to ordain/install teaching elders, ruling elders and deacon?"

Our traditional services of ordinations and installations are done in physical proximity with physical touch in the laying on of hands in ordinations. Also, there is an expectation that those being ordained and/or installed, and the members of congregations will give verbal assent to the "Constitutional questions." (W-4.0404)

What is ordination? What is installation?

*In Baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ's name. God calls some persons from the midst of congregations to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. In **ordination** the church sets apart with prayer and the laying on of hands those who have been called by God through the voice of the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament (teaching elders).*

*In **installation** the church sets in place with prayer those who have been (previously) ordained as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and are now called anew to service in that ministry. (W-4.0401)*

Only ordinations include the "laying on of hands." This requires in-person, physical, action

Installations only require the asking and answering of the Constitutional Questions. Thus, installations may occur digitally but must allow for interaction with the congregation.

Who carries out the ordination and installation?

At the congregation level it is either the whole session, or a representative group from the session (an administrative commission as defined by the

Book of Order). That group (AC) is made up of at least two ruling elders and the Moderator.

At the presbytery level the ordination and/or installation is carried out by an administration commission. (G-3.0109b) The presbytery's administrative *commission shall be composed of ruling elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament in numbers as nearly equal as possible and sufficient to accomplish their work*. It could be as few as three people meeting the composition criteria for both the session and presbytery.

While the *Book of Order* allows the Moderator to invite all in the congregation or the presbytery who have been ordained as elders (teaching or ruling) to come forward for the laying on of hands, it is not necessary. In fact, during the era of COVID, that many people gathered around the person to be ordained is highly inadvisable. The "laying on of hands" is the visible/tangible sign of the person being set aside, blessed, authorized to fully engage in the ordered ministry to which they have been called. The administrative commission, representing the whole church, is sufficient for the laying on of hands.

It is unreasonable to hold off ordinations and/or installations until the time when worship with physical presence safely can be held. Elders and deacons have expiring terms and newly elected ones want to begin their terms of service. Sessions and boards of deacons would be hamstrung in their responsibilities if those with expiring terms just walked away without others, duly authorized, to replace them.

For teaching elders to be fully authorized to perform many of their functions in the congregation, and other Councils of the church, they must be ordained. If in pastoral service they must also be installed to their position. Functions such as officiating at the sacraments, officiating at weddings, and moderating session meetings require ordination. Installation establishes the particular place where they exercise these and other responsibilities.

What are some options for sessions and presbyteries for the ordination and/or installation of those called to ordered ministry?

There are many ways to accomplish the ordination outside the usual and customary manner, especially in this COVID era. Here are some suggestions but use your creativity to meet the spirit of the *Book of Order* and of the Holy Spirit.

A. In an in-person worship service:

- a. The Constitutional Questions can be propounded and answered by the ordinand(s) and the congregation.
 - b. Only the administrative commission (masked and with six feet distancing) to gather around the person(s) to be ordained and extend their hands without touching the ordinand(s) or each other. Much in the same manner as the worship leader does when pronouncing the benediction (blessing) at the end of worship.
- B. If the service must be done digitally, there are options for extraordinary times like now.
- a. Blended
 - i. A minimal number of participants could be gathered in one place with others participating either by teleconference or live streaming.
 - ii. Both the propounding of the Questions and the laying on of hands could be accomplished for those being ordained, and/or being installed.
 - iii. Congregation members present and those participating via a teleconference platform could give their affirmation to the questions either audibly or visually.
 - b. Teleconference Only
 - i. Using a teleconference platform (like Zoom), the Constitutional Questions can be asked and answered by the ordinand(s) and those being installed, and congregation with all computer microphones open.
 - ii. The laying on of hands could be done digitally with the administrative commission extending their hands, as if over the head of the ordinand(s) and with the ordinand(s) being able to see that on a monitor.
 - iii. Another option for the laying on of hands has been symbolically accomplished as in the picture below. The members of the session or administrative commission are asked to trace their hands-on paper. The tracings are then used to cut material into the shape of each hand. The material hands are then attached to a kind of shawl (as shown) which is placed over the shoulders of the ordinand(s) by the administrative commission or a single person present with the ordinand(s).



Thanks to Patrice Harley for this model.

Supplemental Note from C.D. Boyd: If an ordination occurs by teleconference only, with the laying on of hands as suggested by the Rev. Yost in B.b.ii., it is advised that when the church is able to reconvene to in-person gatherings safely, a reaffirmation of ordination may occur with the physical laying on of hands (especially in the ordination of ministers of Word and Sacrament).

Remember always, God is Spirit, and we worship God in spirit and in truth.