



Guidelines for when no ordained person is available to preside

July 26, 2006 (revised June 26, 2008)

John Stanley Macholz, Bishop

These guidelines continue to be a working document and an invitation to conversation as together we struggle with a shortage of ordained persons to provide pastoral coverage in Upstate New York congregations. More and more of our congregations have moved to weekly Eucharist and some have mid-week services as well. The needs and traditions vary from place to place across the synod. These guidelines do not represent a change in the way we have been operating and are consistent both with the tradition in this synod and the ELCA policies. I continue to believe that this is not a matter of “rights and privileges” so much as “for good order” and *for the sake of the mission of the church*. Constitutionally it falls to me, as Bishop, to make these decisions. I do not tend toward legalism and I recognize that there are some gray areas and a fair amount of disagreement among us on these issues. Even so, I ask for the full cooperation of all rostered and congregational leaders in these matters.

I expect that when a called pastor is absent from regular worship services for vacation and other planned absences or when there is no called pastor serving the congregation (during a transitional time) that the congregation/pastor/leaders will choose from the following options:

- 1) That if the congregation regularly schedules weekly Eucharist or wishes to offer Holy Communion on a particular day that a serious attempt be made to find an ordained person to preside. This might be an ELCA rostered leader or a member of one of our Full Communion Partners. Emergency or last minute absences are more difficult, though the same general rule applies or
- 2) That the congregation use a Service of the Word, Morning Prayer or another non-communion worship service for the day.

Each Conference Dean normally keeps a list of those pastors who might be available for supply in their conferences – including those who are retired or on leave from call and those who are called to specialized ministries (including Synod Staff), etc. When ELCA pastors are not available, I encourage you to consider using ecumenical partners as one alternative. Ordained ministers in good standing with one of our full communion partners – the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Moravian Church and the Episcopal Church USA are welcome to preside in our congregations at the invitation of the local pastor. Please note that if this is a pastor in good standing in on the roster of one of our Full Communion partners this does not require permission. However, if an individual is not serving a congregation at the present time it is my hope that you will call me so that I can speak with their judicatory leaders to make certain the individual is in good standing. This may seem a

bit over the top but it has proven to create challenges in the past. In order to avoid those challenges I choose to be more proactive.

This is also true of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. (Technically LCMS folks are supposed to check with their own presidents before doing this, but we trust them and you to make appropriate judgments). I do appreciate knowing when it happens as it keeps my office informed about the extent of our ecumenical partnerships. It is important that unless you have previously worked with an individual that the person be cleared through their own denominational office for such service. If it is someone unknown to you, please check with my office or my assistants in the deployed offices, we may have a history with the person or we can assist in checking this person out with their denominational executives if needed.

Following an unsuccessful attempt to find someone ordained, I may be willing to authorize a non-ordained person to preside in a particular congregation on a particular date upon the recommendation of the pastor or the conference dean. Normally those persons eligible for such consideration are people who have been trained such as 1) someone who has been trained as a congregational, conference or synodical deacon, 2) another rostered church leader – a deaconess, diaconal minister or AIM, 3) an intern or seminarian or 4) someone who has seminary training but isn't currently serving on a roster. On rarer occasions I am willing to make the authorization for a specific time period such as 6 months for a synodical deacon or an intern in an off-site internship setting. I have, but am less comfortable with authorizing congregational deacons to preside on a regular basis at mid-week worship during a vacancy. This would be a good point for conversation. Authorization is not automatic and needs to be requested in a timely manner. It is best to send a request c/o Kathy Neugent at kneugent@upstatenysynod.org in the synod office, as I may be out of town.

These practices are in agreement with the current guidelines for deacons as found in the three Deacon Handbooks. I call your attention specifically to the Congregational Deacon Handbook in this regard. In Section I. DEFINITIONS AND FUNCTIONS, subheading E, Service at Worship, Paragraph 2) Presiding (found on page 6) it reads:

Deacons shall not preside at the Eucharist unless they are authorized to do so by the Bishop, in writing, for a specific date(s) and place. In keeping with ELCA policy, such authorization will be limited to emergency situations (vacation is not an emergency – illness is) or for the sake of the mission of the church (pastoral vacancy, isolated or special situations.) Every pastor and congregation should prepare ahead of time a plan of use in the unexpected circumstance when Holy Communion is scheduled and the pastor cannot be present because of an emergency.

Some other thoughts: I lean toward allowing appropriately trained lay persons to preside than for pastors to preside at a “private” service in order to provide a “reserved sacrament” for a congregation’s use. This, too, is consistent with ELCA practices.

Ultimately, the Eucharist is a sacramental gift from our Lord and Saviour and making it available to people who are hungry for it is a high priority. I am also convinced that it is not the only way that the Lord makes himself known to us and am concerned that we constantly be watching for God’s presence in the word, bible study, worship, song, communal life and prayer (to name just a few).