

September 10, 2020

Virtual Ordination/Commissioning

W-4.0403 states that an ordination may take place at a special service outside the Service for the Lord's Day, but you have to have reading and preaching of the Word (that requirement is also in G-2.0403). In practical terms, having the service take place during the Lord's Day service will encourage the congregation to see and celebrate the new elders and deacons, and allow the new officers to have their support. There are questions to the congregation, so there has to be a congregation participating in some way (if you can't hear the congregation or the elders, you can't necessarily assume they have answered the questions in the affirmative.) So it probably needs to be via Zoom or another service so everyone can see and hear each other.

W-4.0404 describes the place of ordination as "at the baptismal font" and the language of the laying on of hands is mandatory language ("will"). There are reasons for that ecumenically speaking although those concerns aren't as important for lay leaders as pastors.

What I'd do in this circumstance is have a "commissioning service" via Zoom or another service. I'd include the constitutional questions and prayer as an ordinary ordination but omit the laying on of hands and anointing with oil (I'm an anointer). I'd explain to the congregation that we will hold a full ordination service once it is possible to do so. Although there is currently no Book of Order guidance in this area, the principle of G-2.1001 is that emergency or special situations can allow for the commissioning of a person without ordination.

Update as of late July: the OGA and PMA of PCUSA issued a joint statement recommending the following three options:

- 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 (**however, the statement also states that ordinations are like baptisms, and are not to be unduly delayed**)
- 2) 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.

- 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

And also recommended the following as an additional add-on to a virtual service (not alleviating the need for a physical laying on of hands at some point).

- 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 a stole or shawl.
- 5) Inviting online participants to hold their hands up to the camera.

Among these options, the one I initially recommended back in May, outlined above, was (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," although I was labeling that a "commissioning," which language I stand by, since in our polity, a person is ordained only once. However, at this time, the situation has changed somewhat both legally and in terms of some of our churches now meeting in-person using various protocols. Depending on the situation and input of the person or persons being ordained and the church, I would now recommend either (3) or (2), "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." The ordination taking place at the church's baptismal font is desirable, but not necessary (any bowl of water set apart for that purpose could also temporarily serve as a font).

It is also worth noting that installations do not require laying on of hands, and therefore, could be conducted virtually without a polity concern.

You can read the OGA/PMA statement here:

https://mcusercontent.com/1721a6b9451a1567ee53b00fc/files/33677274-5da6-4366-a8c0-76c49ec76d31/On_Baptism_and_Ordination_in_a_Time_of_Pandemic_.pdf

Grace and peace,

Marianne