

Community of Christ

OFFICIAL POLICY

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INTERPRETATION OF THE PRESIDING FUNCTION

Introduction

In recent years the church has sought to move toward a more inclusive style of worship. In recognition of this fact many leaders have made an effort to involve more persons in both the planning and participating functions of worship. As this has occurred, questions have arisen from time to time regarding which functions of ministry properly belong to priesthood and which are open to wider participation by both the ordained and unordained.

In 1974 the First Presidency issued a statement entitled "The Roles of Women in the Church". This statement included the following interpretation:

"All ministries which are not limited to priesthood by the laws of the church should be open to participation by any member of the church".

This was helpful to the extent that it made clear that the ordinances and sacraments of the church should not be performed by anyone but members of the priesthood. Section 17 of the Doctrine and Covenants clearly delineates which priesthood offices can perform which sacraments. Where the law is less clear is in regard to the presiding function and it is here that the First Presidency's statement is less helpful. It is the purpose of this present paper to clarify and interpret this aspect of ministry.

Discussion

The most commonly understood definition of the word *preside* is "to direct, control or regulate proceedings". It is in this sense that the church speaks of the necessity for every administrative unit at whatever level to have a presiding officer. Further, in the paper "The Presiding Role", published in 1975, the First Presidency held that the authority of presidency derives from the spiritual authority granted by the Holy Spirit, with the consent of the body, through the President of the High Priesthood and of the Church. This particular definition of presidency requires that at every administrative level there be one in charge of the work who is the presiding officer. This is "of necessity" and the church in every such instance should be led by "those having authority", it being understood that such authority is fixed primarily in the offices of the priesthood.

There is another meaning of the word "preside", however, which is commonly used in the church to denote the leading role in a service of worship. This is often referred to as being

"in charge" of the service. A question arises here as to whether this specific function of "presiding" also resides exclusively with the ordained ministry. A strict reading of Doctrine and Covenants 17:8f would seem to so indicate; "(an elder is) to take the lead of all meetings". But a certain ambiguity still persists in what is meant by "taking the lead".

In the early days of the Restoration, gatherings of the Saints were quite unstructured. There was no common agreement on a liturgical form and no set pattern of worship. Frequently the people would gather and wait for an elder to show up and take the "lead of the meeting". The elder would then conduct the meeting as "led by the Holy Ghost". Any prior plans for the service were in the mind of the elder. In the same setting, if there were no elder to give direction to the meeting, then a priest, or teacher was authorized to "take the lead". Such direction may have involved leading the singing, offering the prayers, reading the scriptures and preaching the gospel or appointing those who were to do so in that service. If other priesthood of the same or "lesser" office were present, they could be called upon to assist.

In the church of today, the situation is quite different. In all organized congregational units of the church there are members of the priesthood who are the presiding officers of these units. In this role all presiding officers are free to delegate certain functions, but in the ultimate sense they preside over all the activities of their congregations. In regard to the specific question of providing leadership in *worship* a quote from the *Priesthood Manual* (Revised 1982), p. 134-35, is instructive.

Church procedure requires that activities of the local congregations be under the general supervision of the pastor/presiding elder who is a priesthood member. In most cases, a priesthood member will preside over corporate worship services. He can be assisted in other leadership responsibilities in worship by other persons ordained or unordained. The only aspect of corporate worship that *requires* priesthood members to officiate is the administration of the sacraments of the church.

In choosing persons to offer leadership in services of worship consideration should be given to what particular ministry is desired and which persons in the congregation can effectively bring this ministry. The statement "All are called according to the gifts of God unto them" is wise counsel to follow. Although traditionally most or all leadership of worship has been done by priesthood members it is well to remember that the call to ordination is not a call to do all the ministry that is needed. Those in the priesthood should draw out the ministries which are inherent in all people.

Related Questions

As congregations make the effort to be more inclusive in their worship and still be faithful to the spirit of the principles under which the early church operated, certain questions arise relating to the presiding function. We will try to answer some of these on the basis of principles found in the scriptures and previous interpretations by the First Presidency.

1. Does the fact that the role of presidency belongs to the priesthood require that the ordained ministry alone be in charge of every aspect of the worship life in a given branch or congregation?

No. The elders are to "take the lead of all meetings" (D. & C. 17:8f) in the sense that they have over-all control, through common consent, of all that takes place in the life of the congregation. But they are free to delegate some presiding functions as they feel led to do, since they are to "conduct the meetings as they are led by the Holy Ghost, according to the commandments and revelations of God" (D. & C. 17:9).

2. Does this mean that on certain occasions an unordained person could be "in charge" of a specific service; that is conducting the service in the usual sense of greeting the congregation, reading the call to worship, announcing the hymns and taking responsibility for the quality of the worship experience?

Yes, the same principles apply. However, the key phrase may be "on certain occasions". It is a fact that for years unordained persons – women, men and even youth--have participated in and presided over public meetings and occasions of worship in church life. During church school activities, special worship services, and at other times, this role has been performed by arrangement with the presiding officer.

Good leadership does not merely consist of accepting all responsibilities personally. Rather, it must actively seek to involve all persons in the total work of the church, including its worship life. Good leadership can certainly be exercised without personally being visible to the public eye. But it should always be clear who is giving leadership in a service of corporate worship, so that all can look to that person for direction.

It is important for both the presiding officer and the one who is assuming some delegated presiding function to remember, however, that the **ultimate** responsibility for the conduct and good order of any service remains with the presiding officer. Therefore, the presiding officer or some other priesthood member should be available to "take the lead of the meeting" should disruption or disorder occur.

3. Does the role of presidency extend to the commission level? In other words, is it necessary that the chair of the worship commission or other commissions be the presiding officer or a priesthood member?

No. Again, the presiding officer may delegate that specific portion of the presiding function to another if felt led to do so (D. & C. 17:9). This is in recognition of the fact that some may be gifted in some aspect of congregational life and ministry which particularly equips them for that presiding function. In such cases those gifts and callings should be recognized and utilized. The principle here is that "all are called according to the gifts of God unto them" (D. & C. 119:8b).

However, in most cases it would be wise for presiding officers or their counselors to be ex officio members of all commissions. Further, they should be present at enough meetings to be confident that their understanding of the purposes and goals of the

congregation, stake, district, region and World Church are reflected in the activities and recommendations of the commissions.

4. Does an Aaronic priesthood member have authority to "preside" when an elder is the presiding officer or when a member of the Melchisedec Priesthood is present in the congregation?

This question deals with at least two different principles related to the presiding function. Firstly, "a branch may be presided over by a high priest, an elder, priest, teacher, or deacon" (D. & C. 120:2a). However, in practice an elder, when available, should be elected in precedence over a priest; a priest in precedence over a teacher; and only under unusual circumstances should a deacon be elected. Occasionally, circumstances are such that an elder, though present in a branch, may not be "available" for some reason to serve as presiding officer. In such a case, the priest or other Aaronic priesthood member, as noted above, may "take the lead of the meetings" through the principle of presidency and function as the presiding officer.

A second consideration in regard to this question is the principle of delegation. In the case of an elder, it is within the scope of the pastor/presiding elder's authority to designate a member of the Aaronic Order to assume some presiding functions, since the elder "is to conduct the meetings as he is led by the Holy Ghost" (D. & C. 17:9). This presiding function could take the form of being "in charge" of a specific worship service or the assuming of some other leadership role, under the direction of the presiding officer, it being understood that in no case would such function include ordinances or sacraments which the Aaronic priesthood member was not authorized to perform.

5. Is it appropriate for an unordained person to preside at a corporate service of worship in which there may be a sacrament (or sacraments) observed?

No. Since "officiating in the sacraments" is a responsibility of priesthood, it is felt that the presiding function in this instance should remain with those who have been ordained to so officiate. In the corporate observance of those sacraments which require an elder to participate, it is also desirable, although not mandatory, to have an elder preside over the service.

It is obvious that there might be many other hypothetical situations which could be discussed in regard to the presiding function. The attempt here has been to address the principles involved in the various aspects of the presiding function and give examples.

Summary

The presiding function basically inheres in priesthood. It is expressed in its most fundamental way when a priesthood member becomes the presiding officer of an organized unit of the church. Scriptural principles govern the authority under which a presiding officer may delegate some aspects of the presiding function in certain cases. It is our hope that as these principles are observed in the life and ministry of the church that all may work together in harmony to further the Kingdom-building task.