

Action to come before the Commissioners at the April 13, 2024 Stated Meeting. This action is being brought by PMRV Leadership Team to Commissioners.

The Presbytery of Milwaukee asked if PMRV would be willing to concur with the request for presentation of an Overture to the 226th General Assembly seeking an Authoritative Interpretation of the Directory of Worship W-3.04, Book of Order 2023-25 (page 95-103).

The purpose of an Authoritative Interpretation is to seek clarity regarding statements within the Book of Order. The request involves the following statement: *“What does the term “public worship” include, and may a congregation celebrate the Lord’s Supper within an electronic worship service?”* During the pandemic it was common practice to do the Lord’s Supper during electronic worship. It is unclear whether a virtual church service still qualifies as “public worship” as it was during the pandemic.

To “concur” with the request simply means that PMRV agrees with the rationale for Presbytery of Milwaukee seeking an Authoritative Interpretation to eliminate ambiguity regarding the term “public worship.” It doesn’t mean we are “voting” pro or con. It simply means we think the issue should be determined through PC(USA) processes.

The content of Presbytery of Milwaukee’s request is below.

PMRV will be voting on whether to concur with the request for an Overture seeking an Authoritative Interpretation.

The Presbytery of Milwaukee respectfully overtures the 226th General Assembly (2024) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to issue an Authoritative Interpretation regarding the Directory of Worship W-3.04 (pg. 95-103, Book of Order 2023-25) on the celebration of the Lord’s Supper:

What does the term “public worship” include, and may a congregation celebrate the Lord’s Supper within an electronic worship service?

During the pandemic many churches moved to celebrating the Lord’s Supper with their community through online formats. An advisory opinion from late March 2020 contributed to this move, and it became the practice of many congregations as they worshiped from home. Since then, most churches have returned to in-person worship, however, with the increase in streaming and other virtual capabilities, many of our congregants continue to join worship online, some full-time and some part time.

Many congregations have found themselves with adherents who are regularly attending from a distance, making it impossible to participate in any form of in-person celebration of the Lord’s

Supper. Congregations have members who are advancing in age which may pose limitations on driving and continued isolation to avoid contagions. Across our denomination, elders and deacons are aging as well, which may create an insurmountable burden in some of our churches in finding a way to take home Communion to everyone.

Within the bounds of the Presbytery of Milwaukee, we have one congregation now worshiping completely online as their building has been sold. The old rule does not fit the new reality and many worshipers will be excluded from receiving the Sacrament of Communion. As stated by the Session of the Second Presbyterian Church of Racine, “most importantly, each person receiving the Sacrament on a different day in a different place does not feel like true communion with one another.”

While there has been an advisory opinion regarding the sharing of the Lord’s Supper in an online setting, that opinion was non-binding and suggests that congregations should move back to a traditional in-person practice once the emergency is past. There is, however, no indication of how the church defines whether the emergency / pandemic has passed. As our congregations are being encouraged to find new and creative ways to gather as the people of God, it seems likely that online gatherings will increase, not decrease. In addition, as suggested above, there are other reasons why a congregation might seek to continue to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with both in-person and online participants.

Considering these concerns, we respectfully request an Authoritative Interpretation to guide our worship.