

Presbyterian 101

A General Guide to the Facts About the PCUSA

Who are we?

"In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus.'" — From A Brief Statement of Faith

Presbuteros, the Greek word meaning elder, is used 72 times in the New Testament. It provided the name for the Presbyterian family of churches, which includes the Reformed churches of the world. Both Presbyterian and Reformed are synonymous with churches of the Calvinist tradition.

In America, the first presbytery was organized in 1706, the first synod in 1717; the first General Assembly was held in 1789. Today's Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was created by the 1983 reunion of the two main branches of Presbyterians in America separated since the Civil War — the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. The latter had been created by the union of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1958.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is distinctly a confessional and a connectional church, distinguished by the representation of elders — laymen and laywomen — in its government. The church has a membership of 2.3 million in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Currently there are nearly 11 thousand congregations, over 21,000 ordained ministers, 1,100 candidates for ministry and more than 94,000 elders.

Presbyterians are BELIEVERS and DOERS

WE BELIEVE - in the Great Ends of the Church, as set forth in our *Book of Order*: "the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

WE BELIEVE - in a theology of mission, as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith: "... Christ hath commissioned his Church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are therefore under obligation ... to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the Kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth."

WE DO - mission and its related functions in "good Presbyterian order" through the structures of our General Assembly, synods, presbyteries and local churches, which provide accountability in a connectional system. The chief agencies of the General Assembly are the Office of the General Assembly, General Assembly Mission Council, Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Foundation, Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program and Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

WE DO - mission in partnership locally, nationally and globally by prioritizing our available resources, guided by the emphases given by our General Assembly, the biannual meeting of clergy and lay commissioners who represent the presbyteries of the church. Through the General Assembly, all Presbyterians have a voice in setting directions for mission and through their General Mission Giving, have a vital responsibility in carrying out what the General Assembly has mandated.

Presbyterians are ATTUNED to the TIMES

Our style for doing mission is biblically based and historically appropriate. It builds solidly on our past commitments and mission experience, but it also adapts to newly emerging needs and to changing relationships in a sensitive manner. Mission in the United States is decentralized as much as possible, determined by and administered at the appropriate level of the 16 regional synods, the 173 presbyteries, and the more than 11,000 congregations. Beyond our borders, we engage in mission and relations in partnership with churches and ecumenical bodies in more than 70 countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, Central, South, and Southeast Asia and East Asia and the Pacific.

Our witness, corporately and individually, is rooted in the gospel ministries of preaching, teaching, and healing, and in Christ's example of advocacy for the poor, the hungry and the oppressed.

Presbyterians are SERVING PEOPLE

As far back as 1837 the General Assembly declared that the church, by its very nature, is a missionary society whose purpose is to share the love of God in Jesus Christ in word and deed and with all the world. Witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world, Presbyterians engage in mission activities, seek to alleviate hunger, foster self-development, respond to disasters, support mission works, preach the gospel, heal the sick and educate new generations for the future. In partnership with more than 165 churches and Christian organizations around the world, the missionary efforts of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) involve nearly 300 volunteers and compensated personnel. A host of other dedicated workers includes mission specialists and contract associates; Presbyterian Church members working for overseas employers, recognized as having strategic roles with missionary intent; binational servants, who advocate the insights of one culture while living in another; and overseas Christians enabled by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) funds and ecumenical planning to go in mission with congregations and presbyteries in the United States.

Presbyterians are CARING PEOPLE

Besides annual receipts from congregations and income from endowments, additional special funds are received each year that make particular ministries possible. These include funds received through Selected Giving Programs and the Special Gifts Program, through the Hunger Fund, Presbyterian Women's Birthday Offering (spring) and Thank Offering (fall), and through four special churchwide offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, divided among Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Self-Development of People, and the Presbyterian Hunger Program; the Christmas Joy Offering, which supports racial ethnic schools and assistance programs of the Board of Pensions; the Peacemaking Offering to support peace education and peacemaking efforts throughout the denomination; and the Pentecost Offering to support ministries with youth and young adults and children at risk.

Presbyterians are LOOKING TOWARD the FUTURE

Presbyterians in the 21st century have a vision of ministry that is vibrant and inviting and reflects the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

The denomination has set four mission priorities for the next phase of our life as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Evangelism and Witness - We are called to invite all people to faith, repentance and the abundant life of God in Jesus Christ, to encourage congregations in joyfully sharing the gospel, and through the power of the Holy Spirit to grow in membership and discipleship.

Justice and Compassion - We are called to address wrongs in every aspect of life and the whole of creation, intentionally working with and on behalf of poor, oppressed and disadvantaged people as did Jesus Christ, even at risk to our corporate and personal lives.

Spirituality and Discipleship- We are called to deeper discipleship through Scripture, worship, prayer, study, stewardship and service and to rely on the Holy Spirit to mold our lives more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Leadership and Vocation - We are called to lead by Jesus Christ's example, to identify spiritual gifts and to equip and support Christians of all ages for faithful and effective servant leadership in all parts of the body of Christ.

With the knowledge that in life and death we belong to God, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues the journey with hope and confidence as we move toward a third century of witness and service to a world in need of love.

What is unique about the Presbyterian church?

Presbyterians are distinctive in two major ways: they adhere to a pattern of religious thought known as Reformed theology and a form of government that stresses the active, representational leadership of both ministers and church members.

Reformed theology

Theology is a way of thinking about God and God's relation to the world. Reformed theology evolved during the 16th century religious movement known as the Protestant Reformation. It emphasizes God's supremacy over everything and humanity's chief purpose as being to glorify and enjoy God forever.

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

- The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation;
- Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God;
- A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation;
- The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God. (*Book of Order*, G-2.0500)

Church government

A major contributor to Reformed theology was John Calvin, who converted from Roman Catholicism after training for the priesthood and in the law. In exile in Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin

developed the *presbyterian* pattern of church government, which vests governing authority primarily in elected laypersons known as elders. The word *presbyterian* comes from the Greek word for elder.

Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships. They shall serve faithfully as members of the session. (*Book of Order*, G-10.0102) When elected commissioners to higher governing bodies, elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office. (*Book of Order* G-6.0302)

The body of elders elected to govern a particular congregation is called a *session*. They are elected by the congregation and in one sense are representatives of the other members of the congregation. On the other hand, their primary charge is to seek to discover and represent the will of Christ as they govern. Presbyterian elders are both elected and *ordained*. Through ordination they are officially set apart for service. They retain their ordination beyond their term in office. Ministers who serve the congregation are also part of the session. The session is the smallest, most local governing body. The other governing bodies are presbyteries, which are composed of several churches; synods, which are composed of several presbyteries; and the General Assembly, which represents the entire denomination. Elders and ministers who serve on these governing bodies are also called *presbyters*.

Presbyterian Church History

The earliest Christian church consisted of Jews in the first century who had known Jesus and heard his teachings. It gradually grew and spread from the Middle East to other parts of the world, though not without controversy and hardship among its supporters.

During the 4th century, after more than 300 years of persecution under various Roman emperors, the church became established as a political as well as a spiritual power under the Emperor Constantine. Theological and political disagreements, however, served to widen the rift between members of the eastern (Greek-speaking) and western (Latin-speaking) branches of the church. Eventually the western portions of Europe, came under the religious and political authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Eastern Europe and parts of Asia came under the authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In western Europe, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church remained largely unquestioned until the Renaissance in the 15th century. The invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440 made it possible for common people to have access to printed materials including the Bible. This, in turn, enabled many to discover religious thinkers who had begun to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. One such figure, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor, started the movement known as the Protestant Reformation when he posted a list of 95 grievances against the Roman Catholic Church on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517. Some 20 years later, a French/Swiss theologian, John Calvin, further refined the reformers' new way of thinking about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity in what came to be known as Reformed theology. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, took Calvin's teachings back to Scotland. Other Reformed communities developed in England, Holland and France. The Presbyterian church traces its ancestry back primarily to Scotland and England.

Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history. The Rev. Francis Makemie, who arrived in the U.S. from Ireland in 1683, helped to organize the first American Presbytery at Philadelphia in 1706. In 1726, the Rev. William Tennent founded a ministerial 'log college' in Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, the College of New Jersey (now known as Princeton University)

was established. Other Presbyterian ministers, such as the Rev. Jonathan Edwards and the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, were driving forces in the so-called "Great Awakening," a revivalist movement in the early 18th century. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Rev. John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian minister and the president of Princeton University from 1768-1793.

The Presbyterian church in the United States has split and parts have reunited several times. Currently the largest group is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which has its national offices in Louisville, Ky. It was formed in 1983 as a result of reunion between the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), the so-called "southern branch," and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), the so-called "northern branch." Other Presbyterian churches in the United States include: the Presbyterian Church in America, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Theology

Some of the principles articulated by John Calvin remain at the core of Presbyterian beliefs. Among these are the sovereignty of God, the authority of the scripture, justification by grace through faith and the priesthood of all believers. What they mean is that God is the supreme authority throughout the universe. Our knowledge of God and God's purpose for humanity comes from the Bible, particularly what is revealed in the New Testament through the life of Jesus Christ. Our salvation (justification) through Jesus is God's generous gift to us and not the result of our own accomplishments. It is everyone's job - ministers and lay people alike - to share this Good News with the whole world. That is also why the Presbyterian church is governed at all levels by a combination of clergy and laity, men and women alike.
