

A Snapshot of The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The name *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek term in the New Testament for elder, *presbuteros*, a term used 72 times in the New Testament. The Presbyterian movement began among Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries and centered on what form of church government would be appropriate. Some thought the church should be governed by bishops (Greek: *episkopos*) and became the Episcopalian party, some by elders and became the Presbyterian party, and some directly by the congregation, which became the Congregationalist party.

Presbyterian church government emphasizes that the leadership of the church is shared between those called to be ministers and church members called to be elders within the congregation — we use the terms Teaching Elder to refer to ministers and Ruling Elder to refer to church members called to be elders. This strong emphasis on Presbyterian church government is our heritage from Scottish Presbyterians.

In North 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 in its government. Other Presbyterian churches in the United States include the Presbyterian Church in America, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, ECO (A Covenant Order of Presbyterians), and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed by its Constitution, the *Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*. The church has a membership of 1.6 million in all 50 states and Puerto Rico with nearly 10 thousand congregations and worshipping communities.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is **Reformed** in its theology and **Presbyterian** in its church government.

Reformed: Human beings are created to “know God and enjoy God forever.” 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. In its confessions, the PC(U.S.A.) expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition, which emphasizes these 6 beliefs:

- God is **sovereign** and Lord of all history;
- God’s people are **elected** (chosen) not for special privilege, but for salvation and service;
- participation in the **covenant** life of the Christian community, the church, is an integral part of Christian faith;
- since all we have comes from God, God’s people are called to be good **stewards** of all of life;
- our tendency to idolatry, placing ourselves above God, deceives us into thinking we are without sin; but **sin** is real and pervasive, destroying human lives and community;
- the Christian faith is about **justice** and **social transformation**, as much as it is about **salvation** and **personal piety**.
- (BONUS) The words **grace** and **gratitude** give us a snapshot of Presbyterian identity and conviction. Together they express our witness to God’s extravagant love expressed in Jesus Christ—grace—and our response—our gratitude—as Christ’s disciples committed thankfully to doing God’s work in this world.

Presbyterian 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, a form that stresses the active, representational leadership of both ministers and church members. Presbyterianism refers to a form of church governance. The Greek word *Presbyter* refers to an elder. Presbyterians are governed by elders.

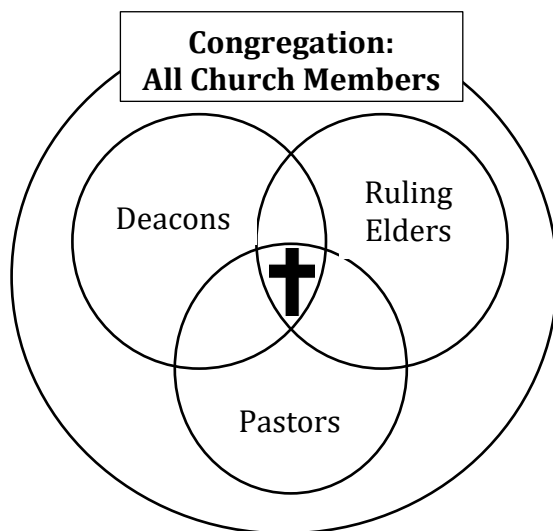
Elders are chosen by the people. Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large, including ecumenical relationships. They serve faithfully as members of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

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. Presbyteries and synods are also collectively referred to as mid councils.

The ministry of the church includes four different groups of people.

- a. **Church Members:** the ministry of Christ's Church
- b. **Deacons:** the ministry of Compassion & Service.
- c. **Ruling Elders:** the ministry of Discernment & Governance.
- d. **Teaching Elders/Pastors:** the ministry of Word & Sacrament.



“There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; and there are different ministries and the same Lord; and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good”
(1 Corinthians 12:4-7).