

# Who and What Are Presbyterians?

“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 seventy-two 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 2,405,311 in all fifty states and Puerto Rico. Presently there are 11,064 congregations, 21,194 ordained ministers, 894 candidates for ministry, and 101,324 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 Council, which coordinates and provides services for all of the agencies; Mission Support Services; Congregational Ministries Division; National Ministries Division; Worldwide Ministries Division; 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 750 international volunteers and compensated personnel and more than 180 national volunteers.

The national volunteers work in partnership with middle governing bodies and ecumenical organizations across the U.S.A. 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**

The 2004 General Assembly mission program allocation for the national and international work of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is approximately \$125 million. 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 church-wide 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 twenty-first 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 of 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.

### **Presbyterians...As WE BELIEVE, So We DO**

#### **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.

Points of Interest: Presbyterians confess their beliefs through statements that have been adopted over the years and are contained in the Book of Confessions. These statements reflect our understanding of God and what God expects of us at different times in history, but all are faithful to the fundamental beliefs described above. Even though we share these common beliefs, Presbyterians understand that God alone is lord of the conscience, and it is up to each individual to understand what these principles mean in his or her life.

### **Our position on social issues**

**In the 1958 Statement of the PCUA, p. 537: The General Assembly:** Affirms its conviction that neither the Church as the body of Christ, nor Christians as individuals, can be neutral or indifferent toward evil in the world; Affirms its responsibility to speak on social and moral issues for the encouragement and instruction of the Church and its members, seeking earnestly both to know the mind of Christ and to speak always in humility and love; Reminds the churches that their duty is not only to encourage and train their members in daily obedience to God's will, but corporately to reveal God's grace in places of suffering and need, to resist

the forces that tyrannize, and to support the forces that restore the dignity of all humans as the children of God,  
for only so is the gospel most fully proclaimed