

Learn about  
**Being a  
Presbyterian**



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# What is a Presbyterian?

In the New Testament, “presbuteros” means elder, and refers to the democratic custom of choosing leaders and advisors from among the wisest members of the church.

## Presbyterians are a group of Protestants

whose church is founded on this concept of democratic rule under the Word of God.

## The Presbyterian denomination is a form of Christianity

democratically organized to embrace the faith common to all Christians.

## All that is required to be a Presbyterian

is to:

- confess the Christian faith
- trust in Christ as our forgiving Savior
- promise to follow Christ and Christ’s example for living
- commit oneself to attend church and to become involved in its work.



Anyone who can be a Christian can be a Presbyterian.

# What is the Presbyterian church?

It’s a representative democracy governed by elders elected from and by the congregation.

## Authority

resides with the duly elected representatives of the congregation in the appointed church governing bodies. The local church governing body is the session.

## Local sessions

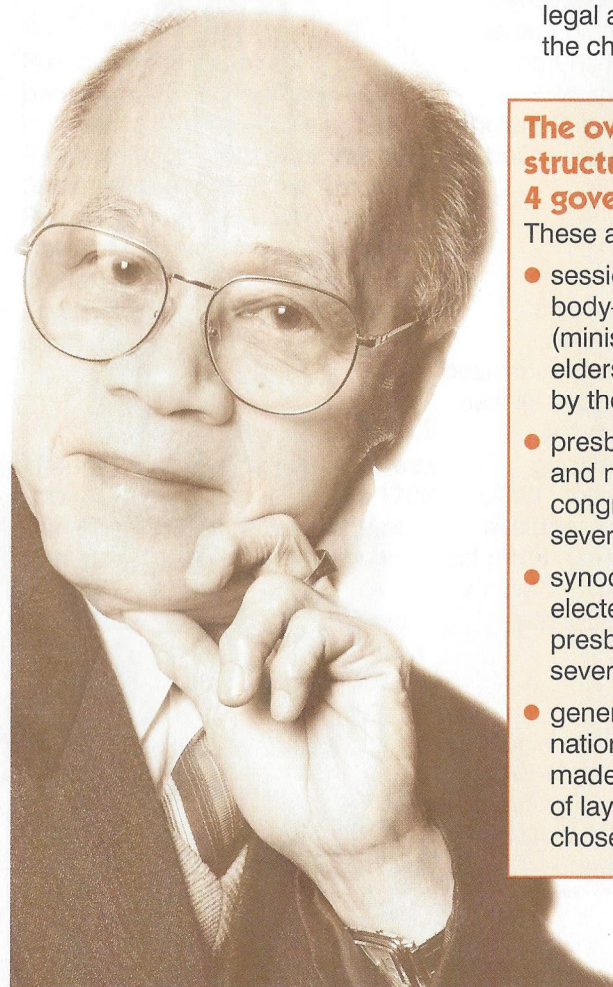
oversee the day-to-day work of the church and supervise:

- deacons—elected to conduct the temporal and charitable ministry of the church
- trustees—(in some churches) elected to manage financial, legal and property affairs of the church.

## The overall church structure is made up of 4 governing bodies.

These are the:

- session or local governing body—ordained ministers (ministers of the Word) and elders, all elected by the congregation
- presbytery—elders and ministers from congregations who oversee several churches
- synod—representatives elected from each presbytery to oversee several presbyteries
- general assembly—the national governing body made up of equal numbers of laypeople and clergy chosen by the presbyteries.





# The Presbyterian church has a rich and exciting history.

## 1. Early Christian church

The Presbyterian church, like all Christian churches, traces its roots back to the early church in Jerusalem. Many people consider modern Presbyterianism to be a rebirth of the early church of the New Testament.

## 2. Martin Luther

The Protestant Reformation moved forward in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther fought against the pretensions of authority by the Pope and called for direct authority from God.

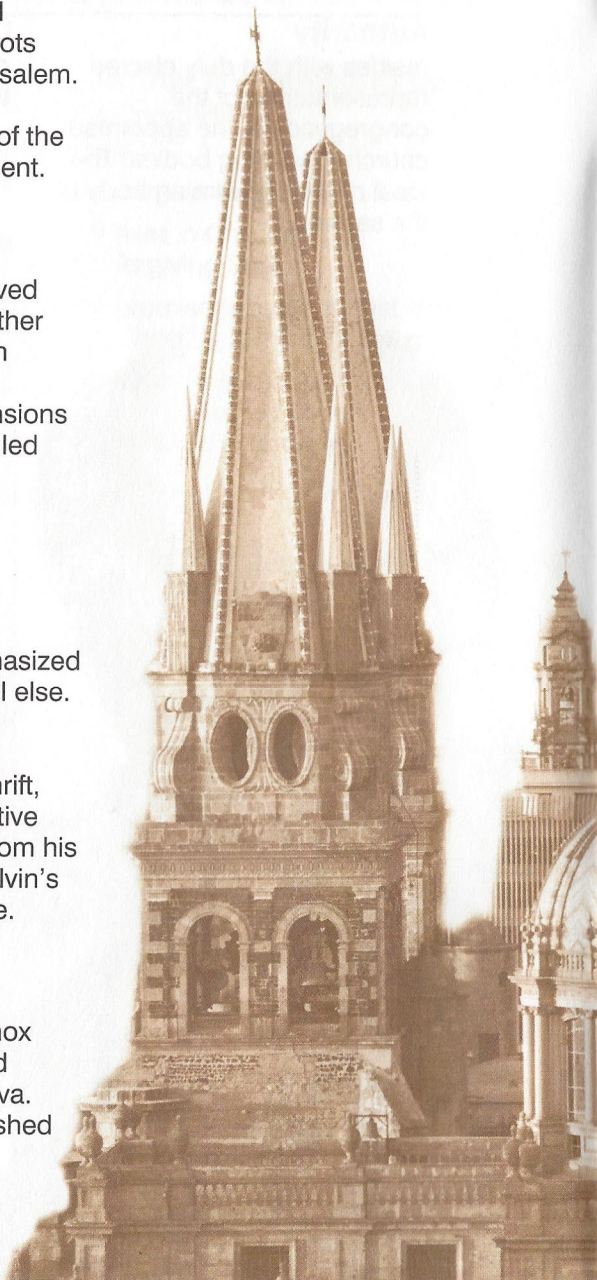
## 3. John Calvin

John Calvin, called the father of Presbyterianism, converted to Protestantism in 1533. He emphasized the sovereignty of God above all else. He interpreted the Bible as the revelation of God, emphasizing theology, worship, education, thrift, ethical behavior and representative government for his followers. From his adopted home city, Geneva, Calvin's ideas spread throughout Europe.

## 4. John Knox

The Scottish Protestant John Knox fled persecution in his homeland and studied with Calvin in Geneva. He returned in 1559 and established Presbyterianism in Scotland.

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## 5. Westminster Assembly

In England, the "Westminster Assembly" of 151 experts on divinity (Presbyterian, Puritan and Anglican) worked steadily between 1643 and 1649 to write doctrinal guides. Presbyterians now recognize these as some of their basic texts.

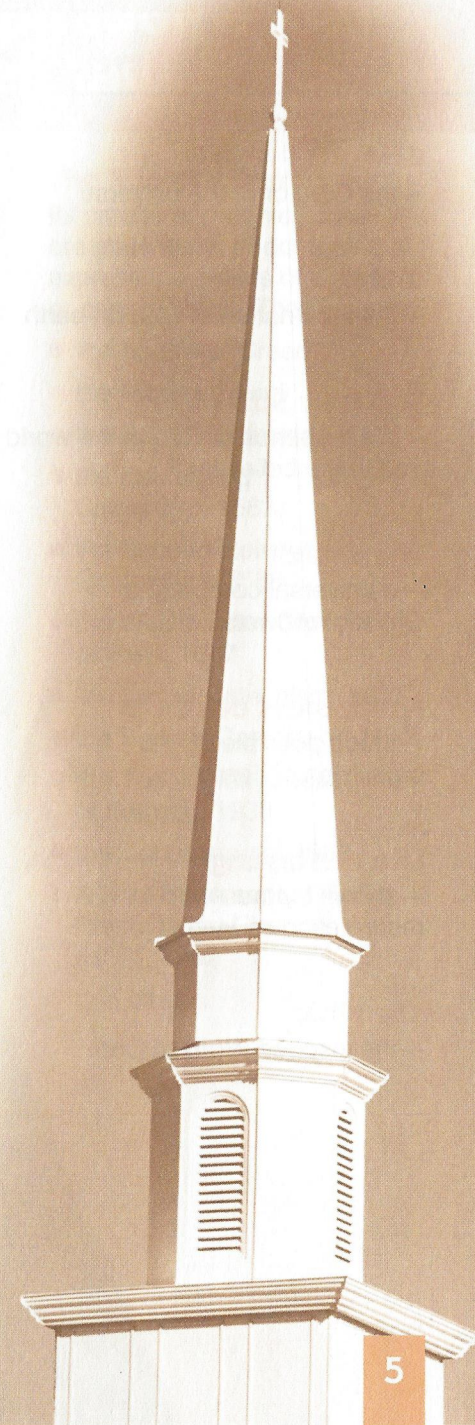
## 6. American Revolution

Presbyterians escaped persecution in Europe and settled in America. There were so many Presbyterians in America that some British people called the American Revolution the "Presbyterian Revolt." At least 14 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterians (including clergyman John Witherspoon).

## 7. Presbyterianism in the U.S.

The first presbytery in America was established in Philadelphia in 1706. During the 1800s, disagreement over slavery and evangelism broke the church into northern and southern branches. The two branches reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (USA).

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# What do Presbyterians believe?

## Presbyterians believe in:

### God

—the Creator of the universe

### Christ

—the incarnation of God on earth

### The Holy Spirit

—the presence of God in the world and in the believer

### The church

—a universal company of Christ's followers

### Forgiveness of sin

—made possible by the crucifixion of Jesus

### Life everlasting

—shown by the resurrection of Jesus

### The Bible

—the inspired Word of God.



# Presbyterians have 2 main sources for inspiration and guidance in their faith.

### The Bible

The Bible is an inspired record of the revelation of God to all.

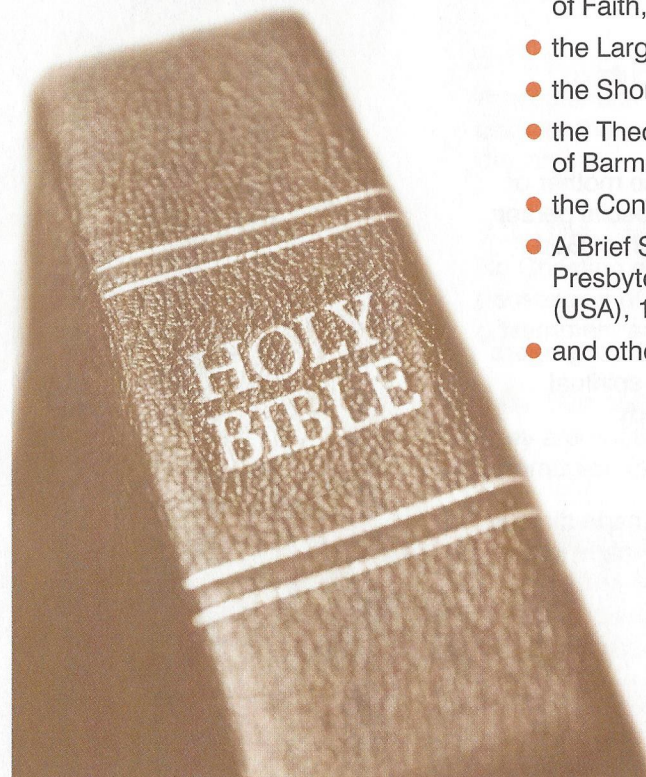
Presbyterians have always believed that the Bible is the most authoritative source for faith and practice for all people.

Presbyterians do not believe that the authors of the Bible were “pens of God” as the pre-Christian writers believed. Instead, they believe the authors were inspired by God to reveal God to all people.

### The Book of Confessions

Its creeds and confessions are statements of doctrine that express the beliefs of a church or congregation. They include:

- the Apostles' Creed
- the Nicene Creed
- the Scots Confession, 1560
- the Heidelberg Catechism, 1563
- the Second Helvetic Confession, 1566
- the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647
- the Larger Catechism, 1647
- the Shorter Catechism, 1647
- the Theological Declaration of Barmen, 1933
- the Confession of 1967
- A Brief Statement of Faith—Presbyterian Church (USA), 1991
- and others.





# Some Presbyterian beliefs

## 1. The Trinity

God exists in the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## 2. Christ

Christ is the Son of God, the Revealer of God and the Savior of humanity.

## 3. Heaven

The souls of the faithful are reunited with God in a warm and loving relationship.

## 4. Hell

Separation from God may exist now as well as in the hereafter.

## 5. Virgin birth

Jesus' birth was miraculous.

## 6. Mary

Mary is honored as the mother of Jesus. She was the special person chosen to bear the Son of God.

## 7. Resurrection

The resurrection of the body refers to the reuniting of the spiritual body and physical body.

## 8. Confession

This is voluntary and made directly to God. But it may be made in the presence of a pastor.

## 9. Salvation

God grants the gift of grace, which enables us to gain the faith necessary for salvation.

## 10. The cross

The empty cross symbolizes the risen Christ who opened the Kingdom of Heaven.

## 11. The sacredness of marriage

Presbyterians try to curb divorce by encouraging young people to prepare seriously for marriage.

## 12. Change

Presbyterians admit different understandings of the Confession of Faith. This is because they believe that the Holy Spirit constantly heightens truth.

## 13. Parenthood

There is nothing in the church's teaching that discourages intelligent, unselfish family planning.

## 14. Education

Presbyterians stress education, both for the ministry and for the laity.

## 15. The "only" church

No Christian church has exclusive possession of the church government authorized by Christ.

## 16. The sacraments

They are baptism and communion (see pages 10-11).

Presbyterians interpret the Bible very much like other Protestants do. Ultimately, however, every Presbyterian must find a personal set of beliefs through study, contemplation and worship.



# Presbyterians recognize 2 sacraments—as described in the Bible.

## Baptism

This sacrament unites us with Jesus Christ and makes us members of God's family, the Church.

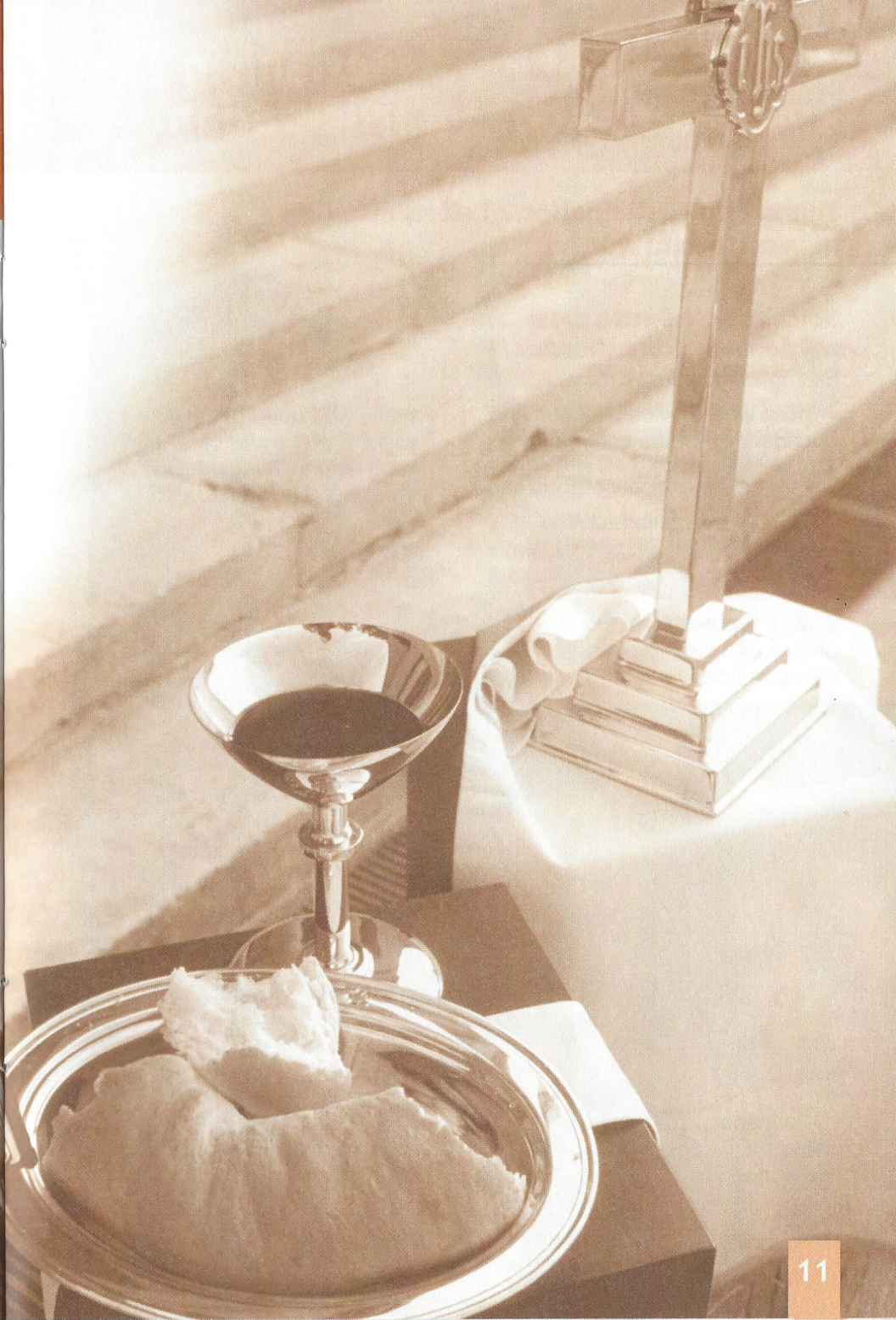
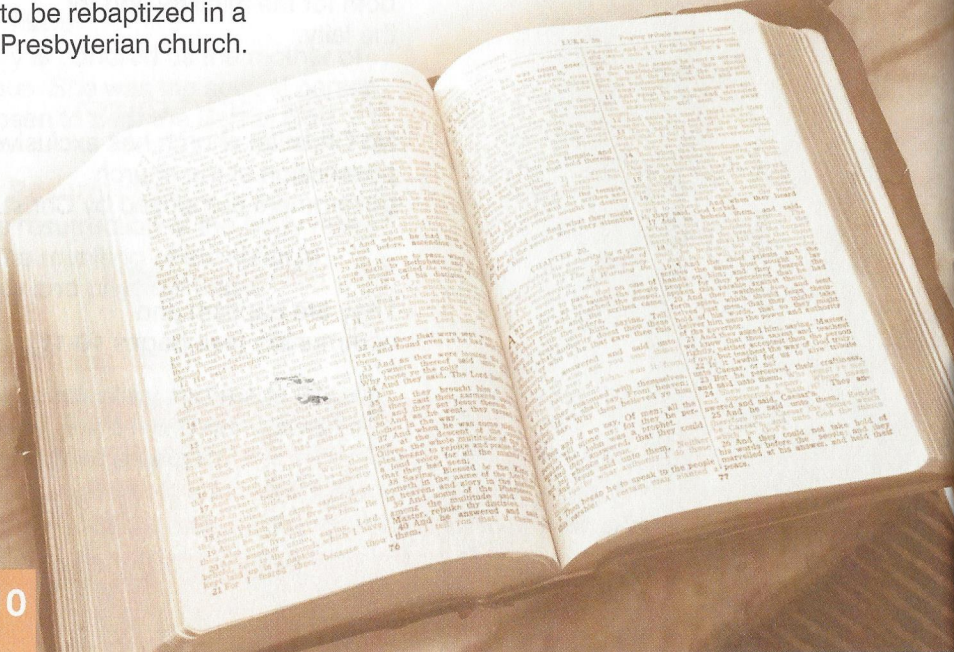
For Presbyterians, baptism:

- is an initiation into the church community, as ordered by Christ
- is a public confession, not a private one—it's a statement of faith made in the presence of others
- does not guarantee access to heaven—unbaptized people are not denied salvation
- can be performed in another church—there is no need to be rebaptized in a Presbyterian church.

## Communion

This is also called the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion or the Eucharist. It's a time to renew faith and strengthen participants for the duties and privileges of Christian service.

In communion, the bread and wine represent the sacrificial body and blood of Christ and recall the last meal shared with the apostles. Together they symbolize the new covenant between God and all people.





# The creeds of Presbyterianism emphasize active participation.

**This means participation of all its members in ministry and worship.**

**Some are chosen to preside over affairs of the church.**

Examples include:

- those who provide direction and leadership for the community of worshippers
- those who perform the different aspects of the church's function, such as preaching, teaching, charity and business.

## The ministry

is the membership of the church, not a special group set apart from the rest.



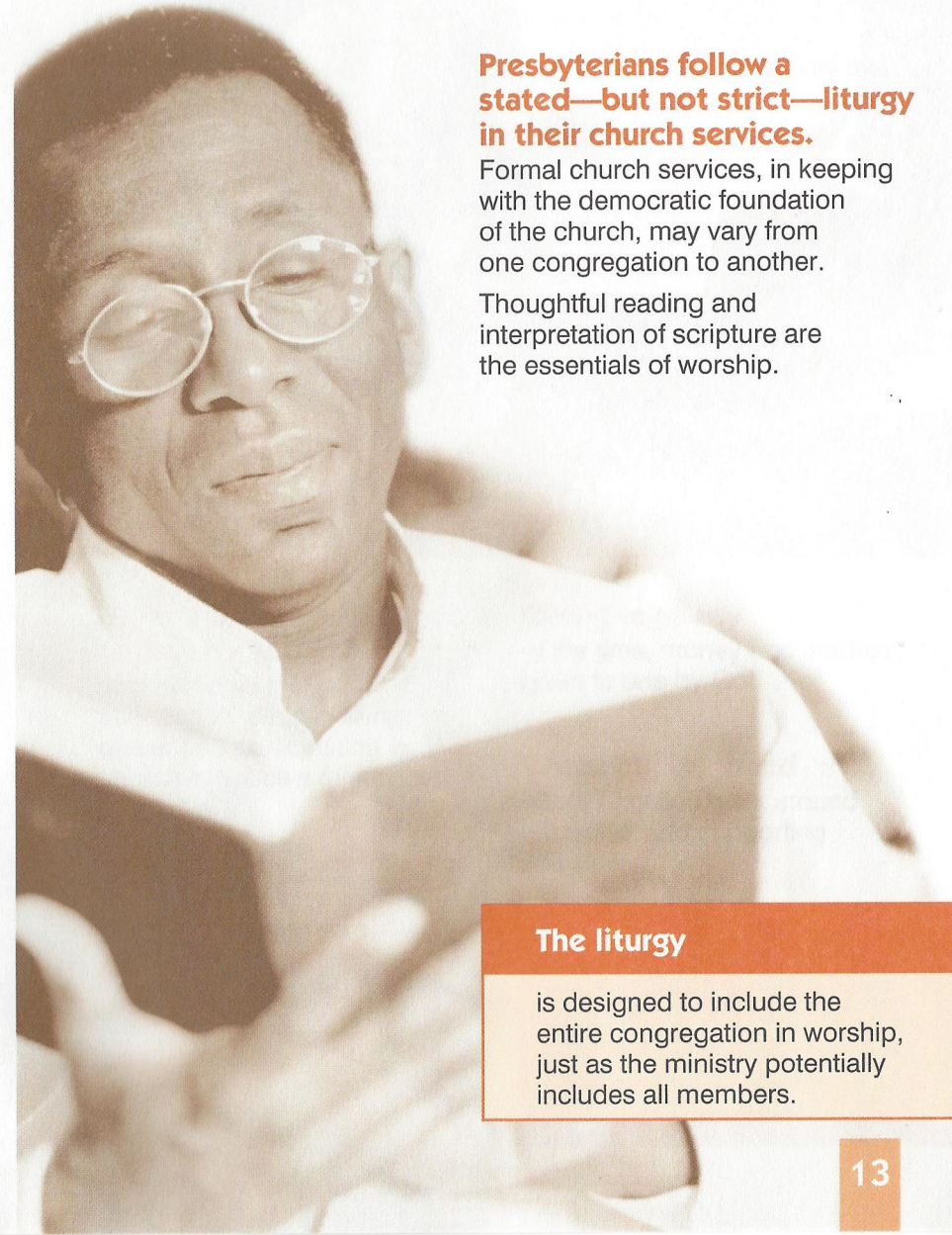
**Presbyterians follow a stated—but not strict—liturgy in their church services.**

Formal church services, in keeping with the democratic foundation of the church, may vary from one congregation to another.

Thoughtful reading and interpretation of scripture are the essentials of worship.

## The liturgy

is designed to include the entire congregation in worship, just as the ministry potentially includes all members.





# The Presbyterian church is really people.

## It includes:

The elders

The ministers

The deacons

The trustees

John Calvin

John Knox

John Witherspoon

You!



## Being a Presbyterian means:

**Maintaining Christian habits,** such as regular church attendance, Bible reading, prayer and participation in church activities and services

**Setting a worthy example** for the world, as a person who strives to be more worthy of Christ

**Giving regularly** of the time, money and abilities given to one by God

**Becoming informed** about Christian work around the world, and supporting this work.

**These are the keys to being an effective church member!**