



# *What is Presbyterian?*

## Forms of Church Government

There are 3 general ways in which most churches are structured:

1. *Episcopal* (adapted from [moodymedia.org/](http://moodymedia.org/))
  - a. Churches having episcopal polity are governed by bishops. The title bishop comes from the Greek word *episkopos*, which translates as overseer. In regard to Catholicism, bishops have authority over the diocese, which is both sacramental and political; the bishop supervises the clergy of the diocese and represents the diocese both secularly and in the hierarchy of church governance.
  - b. While this form of government does prove efficient, corruption is always a danger, and the hierarchical and territorial aspects of the polity can be troublesome.
  
2. *Congregational* (adapted from [wordtruth.org](http://wordtruth.org))
  - a. The entire congregation votes on all essential matters and usually elects a board to supervise and/or oversee church ministries.
  - b. The possibility of immature believers "voting" on vital aspects of church life and ministry can lead to non-biblically based decisions. Another detriment of a congregational form of church government is that board members are often elected on the basis of popularity or business acumen. This structure can foster selfish, political maneuvering since the person or group with the most votes "wins," potentially sowing divisiveness and factions within the church.
  
3. *Presbyterian* (adapted from [theopedia.com](http://theopedia.com))
  - a. Elders are elected by the congregation to serve as representatives and the spiritual/theological/moral/visionary leaders of the congregation. In addition the Pastor serves as one of the Elders with a specialized role, and due to their role and extensive training, they are recognized to be the visionary leader in the life of the local congregation.
  - b. In the Presbyterian model, members give up some of their autonomy to Elders and higher governing bodies that are granted authority to make decisions on behalf of the church.

## Presbyterian Distinctives (from PCUSA.org)

*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, more than 21,000 ordained ministers, 1,100 candidates for ministry and more than 94,000 elders.

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.

## Leadership & Membership in the Presbyterian Church

*As defined in the PCUSA Book of Order*

### G-1.0402 Active Member

An active member is a person who has made a profession of faith in Christ, has been baptized, has been received into membership of the church, has voluntarily submitted to the government of this church, and participates in the church's work and worship. In addition, active members participate in the governance of the church and may be elected to ordered ministry (see G-2.0102). Active members shall regularly, after prayerful consideration, recommit themselves to the disciplines and responsibilities of membership outlined in G-1.0304.

### G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church.

*Such involvement includes:*

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,

*(continued next page)*

G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members (continued)

- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one’s membership, and considering ways in which one’s participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

PCUSA Installation Questions\*

To elders, deacons, and ministers:

W-4.4003g Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

To the congregation:

W-4.4004a (for installing elders & deacons)

1. Do we, the members of the church, accept (names) as ruling elders or deacons, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?
2. Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?

W-4.4006 (for installing ministers)

1. Do we, the members of the church, accept (Name) as our pastor, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to guide us in the way of Jesus Christ?
2. Do we agree to pray for him (her), to encourage him (her), to respect his (her) decisions, and to follow as he (she) guides us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?
3. Do we promise to pay him (her) fairly and provide for his (her) welfare as he (she) works among us; to stand by him (her) in trouble and share his (her) joys? Will we listen to the word he (she) preaches, welcome his (her) pastoral care, and honor his (her) authority as he (she) seeks to honor and obey Jesus Christ our Lord?

\* note that not one of these questions includes a qualifier such as “as long as” “if” or “unless”