

The Church – Universal and Particular (G-4.0100)

The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation, together with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in a fellowship under his rule. Since this whole company cannot meet together in one place to worship and to serve, it is reasonable that it should be divided into particular congregations. The particular church is, therefore, understood as a local expression of the universal Church.

A particular church consists of those persons in a particular place, along with their children, who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who have been gathered for the service of God as set forth in Scripture, subject to a particular form of church government. Each particular church of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall be governed by this Constitution. Its officers are ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons. Its government and guidance are the responsibility of the session. It shall fulfill its responsibilities as the local unit of mission for the service of all people, for the upbuilding of the whole church, and for the glory of God.

The Unity of the Church (G-4.0200)

The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it. The Church is a fellowship of believers which seeks the enlargement of the circle of faith to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church. As the Bible speaks of the one body which is the Church living under the one Spirit of God known through Christ, it reminds us that we have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all." (Ephesians 4:5-6)

Visible oneness, by which a diversity of persons, gifts, and understandings is brought together, is an important sign of the unity of God's people. It is also a means by which that unity is achieved. Further, while divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity and is willing to seek and to maintain communion and community with all other branches of the one, catholic Church.

Gandhi and Christianity



But Gandhi, when he was in South Africa early in his career, went to a Christian church where his English friend C. F. Andrews was to preach, only to be turned away at the door by an usher because his skin was not white. The opponent of caste in the Hindu religion found caste at the door of a Christian church.

-Gordon Poterat, *The Interpreter's Bible* (1957), Vol. 12, p. 36

We sat with him on the floor in Gandhi's little house. We felt very humble in the presence of such a great man. We asked him many questions about the future of India and as he replied we could see he had great plans for the country. Then we were surprised when he said this. "I have a great respect for Christianity. I often read the Sermon on the Mount and have gained much from it. I know of no one who has done more for humanity than Jesus. In fact, there is nothing wrong with Christianity, but the trouble is with you Christians. You do not begin to live up to your own teachings." That made us all the more humble. We were impressed by his honesty and his very gracious words.

-James McEldowney, 1997

General Assembly



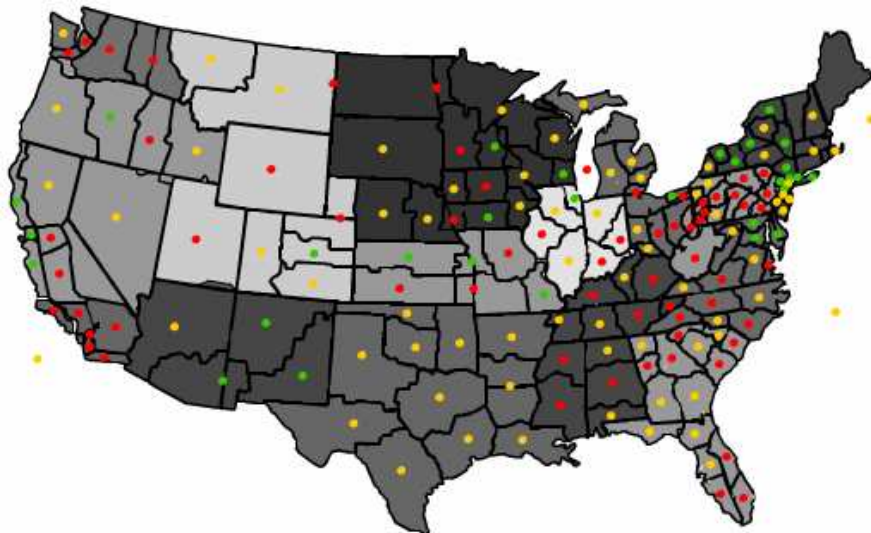
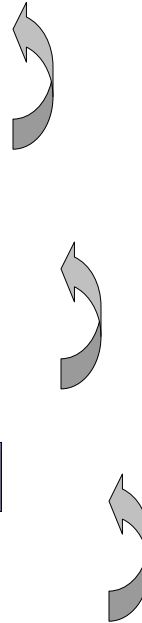
Synod



Presbytery



Session



Presbyteries and Synods of the continental US

Principles of Presbyterian Government (G-4.0300)

The Presbyterian Church (USA) reaffirms, within the context of its commitment to the Church universal, a special commitment to basic principles of Presbyterian polity:

- a. The particular churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church;
- b. This church shall be governed by presbyters (elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, traditionally called ruling and teaching elders);
- c. These presbyters shall come together in governing bodies (traditionally called judicatories or courts) in regular gradation;
- d. Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ;
- e. Decisions shall be reached in governing bodies by vote, following opportunity for discussion, and a majority shall govern;
- f. A higher governing body shall have the right of review and control over a lower one and shall have power to determine matters of controversy upon reference, complaint, or appeal;
- g. Presbyters are ordained only by the authority of a governing body;
- h. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power, to be exercised jointly by presbyters gathered in governing bodies;
- i. Governing bodies possess whatever administrative authority is necessary to give effect to duties and powers assigned by the Constitution of the church.

Contemporary Protestantism has no more serious impediment to its missionary work at home and abroad than the limitation of many of its congregations to those of one race or of one class....A divided church cannot integrate a world rent by racial, class, and national tensions... When Christ's followers of all nations, races, economic classes, and cultural levels become "of one accord" under his lordship, the Spirit can descend and work through them in power.
-Henry Sloane Coffin
1956

The nature of Presbyterian order is such that it shares power and responsibility. The system of governing bodies, whether they have authority over one or many churches, sustains such mutual relationships within the structures as to express the unity of the church.

The Presbyterian system of government calls for continuity with and faithfulness to the heritage which lies behind the contemporary church. It calls equally for openness and faithfulness to the renewing activity of the God of history.

This form of government is established in the light of Scripture to give order to this church but is not regarded as essential to the existence of the Church of Jesus Christ nor to be required of all Christians.

Diversity and Inclusiveness (G-4.0400)

The church in its witness to the uniqueness of the Christian faith is called to mission and must be responsive to diversity in both the church and the world. Thus the fellowship of Christians as it gathers for worship and orders its corporate life will display a rich variety of form, practice, language, program, nurture, and service to suit culture and need.



Our unity in Christ enables and requires the church to be open to all persons and to the varieties of talents and gifts of God's people, including those who are in communities of the arts and sciences.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) shall give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership and shall provide means which will assure a greater inclusiveness leading to wholeness in its emerging life.