

A Brief History of the Presbyterianism in America

How did the Presbyterian Church begin in America?

The earliest settlers in the American Colonies were primarily Reformed Protestant exiles from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the European Continent. Many of these were ardent Presbyterians. The largest group of Presbyterians was the Scotch-Irish immigrants from Scotland and Northern Ireland who settled primarily in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Carolinas. The first Presbyterian churches were formed in America in the late Seventeenth Century, and the first Presbytery was formed about 1706 by Francis Makemie, the “Father of American Presbyterianism.”

Makemie landed in Maryland in 1683 as a missionary from Northern Ireland. He immediately began traveling up and down the eastern seaboard establishing new Presbyterian churches, five of which are still in existence. He traveled to Great Britain and brought back new preachers and, around 1706, he formed a handful of Presbyterian clergy into our first U.S. Presbytery. This Presbytery is widely recognized as the first organized denomination in the United States and the beginning of American Presbyterianism.

Presbyterians were so much a part of the Revolutionary War that some English leaders called it “the Presbyterian Rebellion!” The Presbyterians’ belief in democracy and freedom put them solidly on the side of the patriots and most historians agree that the Presbyterian understanding of church government strongly influenced the shaping of the Constitution of the United States. Indeed, the only clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian president of Princeton.

In the southern colonies, the young Presbyterian clergyman, Samuel Davies, combined solid patriotism with evangelical fervor and preached the cause of independence as well as the love of Christ. Before he died at age 38, he had established several churches, influenced Patrick Henry, formed the first southern Presbytery, and served as a college president.

In 1789, shortly after the formation of the new United State of America, several American Presbyteries and Synods came together for the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

During the Civil War period the Presbyterian Church split between the north and the south. The northern wing became known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) and the southern wing became known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). The PCUSA gradually moved away from the doctrinal distinctives of classical orthodox Christianity. In 1936 a group of ministers and churches under the leadership of J. Gresham Machen left the UPUSA. That group eventually divided into three churches: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, The Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod, and the Bible Presbyterian Church.

The southern wing (PCUS) moved more slowly in the direction of this same liberalism. In 1972-73 a significant number of ministers and churches left the PCUS and formed the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). In 1981 some more churches left the PCUSA and the

PCUS and formed the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). In 1982 the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod joined the Presbyterian Church in America. In 1983 the PCUSA and PCUS were reunited.

The PCA and Christ Presbyterian Church

The Presbyterian Church in America has a strong commitment to evangelism, missionary work at home and abroad, and to Christian education. From its inception, the church has determined its purpose to be “faithful to the Scriptures, true to the reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission.”

Organized at a constitutional assembly in December 1973, it was first known as the National Presbyterian Church but changed its name in 1974 to Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). It separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern) in opposition to the long-developing theological liberalism which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the inerrancy and authority of Scripture.

In December 1973, delegates, representing some 260 congregations with a combined communicant membership of over 41,000 that had left the PCUS, gathered at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and organized the National Presbyterian Church, which later became the Presbyterian Church in America. In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, joined the Presbyterian Church in America.

The PCA has made a firm commitment on the doctrinal standards which had been significant in Presbyterianism since 1645, namely the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*. These doctrinal standards express the distinctives of the Reformed tradition.

The PCA maintains the historic polity of Presbyterian governance set forth in *The Book of Church Order*, namely rule by presbyters (or elders) and the graded assemblies or courts. These courts are the Session, governing the local church; the Presbytery, for regional matters; and the General Assembly, at the national level.

The PCA is one of the faster growing denominations in the United States growing tenfold since 1983: 1,808 congregations, 367,033 members, and 4,416 ministers.

The influence of the PCA extends far beyond the walls of the local church. Mission to the World has 519 career missionaries in almost 60 nations of the world, 169 two-year missionaries, and over 6500 short-term missionaries. Because of the unique relationship between Mission to the World with over thirty mission organizations with whom some of our missionaries are working, some consider that the influence is far greater than our size might indicate. Indeed, PCA churches support an additional 690 career missionaries, covering over 130 nations. Further, with more than 100 chaplains in the military, Veterans Administration, prisons, and hospitals, and 45 college and university campus ministers, the Gospel is proclaimed to a rather large audience around the world not reached through usual outreach channels. Because of the emphasis on education, there are many members of the PCA who are teachers and professors at all levels, including a significant number of large universities and theological seminaries.