

What is unique about the Presbyterian Church?

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

What are human beings created to do? Reformed theology says that human beings are to **“know God and enjoy [God] forever.”** 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.

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 members 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 as 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. Presbyteries and synods are also collectively referred to as mid councils.