

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In 1973, a large group left the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)—the official name of the Southern Presbyterian church—to form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). In 1981, another exodus from the northern United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA) resulted in the formation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). In 1983, the mainline northern and southern branches of presbyterianism reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or PCUSA.

Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler describe the last part of the 20th century as a period when most denominations reverted to a regulatory model of leadership. Efforts have not been successful in stopping the membership and money erosion, so the tendency for presbyteries is to try to regulate the system to get the desired results.

Attempts were made through the expansion of the *Book of Order* to legislate behavior for which there was no consensus, much less commitment. This is seen as increasingly futile. Historically, Presbyterians have often sought to resolve their doctrinal differences by focusing on mission (churching the unchurched). The consensus that the church was to spread the gospel so that people would become believers in Jesus Christ has waned as the frontier has disappeared, both nationally and globally. The 1925 Life and Work slogan “doctrine divides but service unites” has been proven wrong in the broad ecumenical circles which had so much hope for this maxim as the basis of unity. Presbyterians are discovering its problems in this denomination.

A major factor in Presbyterian decline is the theological, cultural and ecclesiastical gap that developed between congregations and governing bodies. The division between the “congregational church” and the “governing body church” is the problem of the regulatory denomination.

The regulatory mentality of contemporary Presbyterianism failed to recognize the limits of legislation in voluntary organizations like the church ... Ironically, the more they governed the weaker they became. The irony is that at the 1983 reunion we shifted the terminology from ‘church courts’ (PCUS) and ‘judicatories’ (UPCUSA) to ‘**governing bodies.**’ The term judicatory refers to any regional office of a denominational structure. This office is responsible for the governance of and providing resources to its local congregational bodies. The responsibilities and authority of this office varies depending on the denomination. Different denominational groups have many names for this middle level of organization including Conference, Diocese, District, Presbytery, Region, and Synod.

When it comes to mission, it’s about the congregations. There is emerging a clear understanding that the three governing bodies—Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly—exist only to nurture missional churches.

Presbyteries could have an important role in nurturing missional church behavior. This will not exhibit itself in any regulatory manner. Rather than presbytery as a dictatorial corporate bishop, it will claim its proper authority through a nurturing of community that will focus the attention of congregations on their apostolic ‘sentness’ as missional churches recognizing their missionary situation. “Missional” is not the same as “mission-minded.” *Missional* is simply the noun “missionary” adapted into an adjective. For example, someone who is “adversarial” is acting like your enemy. Thus, a *missional church* is a church that acts like a missionary in its community.

Theistic evolution asserts that classical religious teachings about God are compatible with the modern scientific understanding about biological evolution. In sum theistic evolutionists believe there is a God, that God is the creator of the material universe and (by consequence) all life within, and that biological evolution is simply a natural process within that creation. Evolution, according to this view, is simply a tool that God employed to develop human life.

The Roman Catholic Church, not known for theological liberalism, declared that the acceptance of evolutionary theory is not incompatible with Catholicism, so long as one recognizes that at some point in human evolution, God inserted an immortal soul into humankind.

The Baptist Church has no central authority that decides on matters of religious doctrine, and thus has no official position on Biblical infallibility and evolution.

The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, first printed in 1941, contains several passages concerning evolutionary theory: “We should not expect to look upon Genesis as possessing any scientific value for the modern world. ... It is impossible to maintain the Biblical stories of creation in their literal state ... Modern Judaism accepts the conclusions of science but adds to them its own thought; that behind all existing things is the ever-present God, the perpetual creator.”

The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) passed an overture rejecting all evolutionary views of Adam’s origin. Here are the declarations passed:

1. We affirm that Adam and Eve were special, unique, direct creations of God, created in His image, with Adam being formed from the dust of the ground and Eve being made from his side; as such, they were real human beings and the first man and woman,
2. We affirm that the account of creation of *Adam and Eve* as found in Genesis 1 and 2 is history;
3. We deny any teaching that claims that the account of creation of *Adam and Eve* as found in Genesis 1 and 2 is mythology;
4. We deny any theory that teaches that Adam and Eve descended from other biological life forms and that such a theory can be reasonably reconciled with either the standards of the ARP Church or Holy Scripture.

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) believes Theistic evolution is a compromise view. Dr. Richard Phillips, senior minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, believes “that theistic evolution will eventually split the PCA, being convinced more than ever that it is impossible to believe consistently in both the truthfulness of the Bible and Darwinian evolution. We have to choose one or the other.”

The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) believes that Genesis 1 and 2 is not “a scientific description of how the world began, but proclamation”, according to Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann: i.e., *Creator creates creation*.

Ordination of Women. Prior to 1930, the mainline Presbyterian denominations did not ordain women. The ordination of women as ministers of Word and Sacrament came to the UPCUSA in 1956. The PCUS followed in 1964. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, established in 1981, has grown from 180 churches five years ago to 306 in 2012. Its Book of Government under “Rights Reserved to a Particular Church” (7:1-7) lists “the right to elect its own officers.” This includes the right to limit elders and/or deacons to one gender or to open these offices to both genders. Currently about one-third of EPC churches elect both genders to the office of elder. As for Teaching Elders, that right was held by each Presbytery, since the same page of rights says “The particular church has the right to call its own pastor(s), provided the Presbytery concurs by receiving such pastor(s) into its memberships.” As of 2012, the EPC currently has two women ordained as Teaching Elders — one pastor and the other a retired hospital chaplain.

Some in the EPC oppose the ordination of women, but support the EPC's principles, as stated by the committee, that “women's ordination is a nonessential issue about which faithful believers may have honest differences of Biblical interpretation and practice.” Delegates to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church's 31st General Assembly voted to allow congregations to call women to ordained ministry, even if their presbytery (governing body) objects for theological or doctrinal reasons.

Neither the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church nor the Presbyterian Church in America ordains female ruling elders. Section G-6.0105 of the PCUSA *Book of Order* simply states “Both men and women shall be eligible to hold church offices”.

Emergence of the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. The Fellowship of Presbyterians began in January 2011 as a conversation between seven PCUSA pastors that wanted to find new ways to encourage each other in common faith, ministry and mission. These seven pastors, and thirty-eight concurring pastors (all white males), published a letter to the whole Presbyterian Church USA declaring the denomination to be “deathly ill” and declaring that the church needed to be “radically transformed.”

A few statistics about the churches whose pastors signed this letter: The smallest congregation has 190 members and an annual budget of \$375,000. The next smallest has 591 members with an annual budget of \$1,071,980. Of the forty-three churches represented, the average membership is 2309 members with an average annual budget of \$3,765, 269. (Statistics came from the PCUSA's online membership stats for the year 2009.)

Next, the group issued a nationwide call to others of like mind who envisioned a new future for congregations to connect and grow while sharing a Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical heritage. In August 2011, more than 1900 men and women answered that call, gathering in Minneapolis.

In January 2012, a conference in Orlando solidified the dream of The Fellowship of Presbyterians and launched a new Reformed body, the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. As an expression of The Fellowship of Presbyterians, ECO seeks to serve the ministry and mission of Christ's Church. The name represents a three-fold commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ (Evangelical), connect leaders through accountable biblical relationships founded in God's grace (Covenant), and commit to a shared way of life together (Order). The acronym ECO also speaks to a commitment to strengthen the "ecosystems" of local churches, providing the resources needed to grow, thrive, and reproduce.

Just as earthly ecosystems draw richness from the right kind of diversity, ECO is committed to unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, young leaders, and every ethnicity. ECO's name also draws from the Greek term *oikos*, meaning "household," used in the Bible to reference the network of relationships that nurture an individual. Notably, the ECO affirms the role of women in leadership positions. The group states, "We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ's offices within the world beyond the church."

The appropriate confessional standards for the Fellowship and the ECO are the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the *Book of Confessions* – The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith.

The underlying issue is that the PCUSA has lost its passion for evangelism. We're not growing; we're dying. In his plenary speech, John Crosby said, "The denomination is dying because all of us are failing to reach a world that is passing by the living Christ." There has been a lot of talk about being more *missional*—seeing this new group of Presbyterians being the ones who are really going to get serious about being missional in the world. Looking for where God is on mission in the world and joining in with that is really important. Does that mean we need to create a new denomination to focus on it?

Fellowship of Presbyterian leaders envisions the organization as an “umbrella” for Presbyterian congregations who wish to “differentiate” themselves from the PCUSA.

The different contexts in which churches find themselves determines how best to proceed. At least four options are considered:

- Remaining within the PCUSA but being more selective in participation in denominational matters;
- Creating new presbyteries within the bounds of existing presbyteries for “like-minded” congregations;
- Creating dual Committees on Ministry and Committees on Preparation for Ministry in existing presbyteries based on support for or opposition to the PCUSA’s new ordination standards;
- Creating a new Reformed body, with some churches departing the PCUSA and others maintaining “dual citizenship”, at least in the near term.