

The term Presbyterian refers to the branch of the great historical and worldwide church which governs itself through a system of elders or presbyters.

Elders are faithful people who have been elected, ordained and inducted to that position by their fellow Christians following recognition of their spiritual leadership and talents in teaching.

Two distinct roles have evolved within the office of the eldership over the years.

The first is that of the elder, with a responsibility to govern the church. The second is that of the minister, sometimes called the pastor, who has a teaching function. The minister is an elder who has been specially called, trained and set apart for full time work in the eldership.

Federal Structure

Presbyterian Churches, or Reformed Churches as they are sometimes called, are organised into a series of courts, based on a federal model.

The term federal does not mean a national or geographical framework for politics. It refers to a organisation or government where the higher levels exercise their authority only when defined and limited by agreement with the lower levels.

In the Presbyterian Church, the extent of each church court's jurisdiction is clearly defined in writing. No court may involve itself in matters that fall properly within the domain of another court, except as a result of procedures such as appeal or petition ... and only then when the matter falls into the domain of the higher court.

The Australian Constitution and the civil court system are also examples of federal structures.

All this contrasts with other churches and organisations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and government departments, which are bureaucratic or hierarchical in their structure. In these cases authority lies at the top and is delegated to the lower levels of the organisation.

The Australian Church

Australian Presbyterianism has adapted its organisation to the geography and politics of our continent and nation.

In 1901 the state churches united to form the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The constitutional foundation for this union is a document called the Scheme of Union, which sets out the doctrine and organisation of the new church. The Scheme contains a declaratory statement which specifies doctrine vital to

the Christian faith, and allows liberty of opinion on any other matters.

The document also defines the rights of dissenting groups when changes are made to the doctrinal base of the church.

The Courts of the Church

There are four levels of courts that operate within the Presbyterian Church of Australia. Each court has functions that can be described as legislative (rule-making), judicial (administering justice) and executive (leadership and management).

All church members have the right to petition an appropriate court and to expect a fair hearing on matters that are of concern. They have a clear right of appeal to higher courts.

The Session

The church court governing all the affairs and welfare of the local congregation is called the Session, and consists of the minister and a body of elected elders.

The Session promotes the spiritual life of the congregation, including worship, pastoral care, Christian education, evangelism and discipline. It has oversight of all the organisations that operate within the congregation.

Members of Session are also ex officio members of the Committee of Management, which is the body elected to handle the property and financial aspects of the congregation's activities.

Ministers are invited to serve the local congregation by means of a call, whereby members of the congregation sign an indication of their agreement and willingness to support the new minister. Once inducted, ministers remain in that position for an indefinite period, usually until they accept a call to another congregation.

The minister acts as the moderator or chairperson of the Session.

Elders are elected to office by their congregations and are ordained for life. However they cannot transfer their membership of a Session to another congregation. In a process that reflects the ministers' call, they must wait until their new congregation recognises their gifts and agrees to their induction.

The Presbytery

The next court up from the Session is the Presbytery, which comprises equal numbers of ministers and elders from all parishes in a geographical region.

Among its concerns are the selection, ordination, induction and welfare of ministers within its bounds, the supervision of doctrine and order in congregations, and the definition of parish boundaries.

All ministers who have been inducted into a pastoral charge are members of the Presbytery. Retired ministers and people who hold an office, such as a Convener or Director, are also granted a seat on Presbytery.

Elders on Presbytery are appointed to represent their sessions. Where necessary, extra elders are appointed by Presbyteries to maintain equal numbers of ministers and elders.

The State Assembly

Each state has a General Assembly, consisting of the minister and an elder from every congregation, retired ministers, and a range of persons who hold an administrative office in the church.

The General Assembly meets annually and has responsibilities for overseeing a range of matters such as the rules of the church, broad strategies, property, investments, church schools, outreach, Christian education, training for the ministry and many other areas.

Much of the executive work of the Assembly is handled routinely by executive committees that meet regularly during the year. These are supervised by a Standing Committee of representatives from Presbyteries.

The Committees include Ministry and Mission, Church and Nation, Code, Evangelism, Theological Education, Financial Co-ordination, Beneficiary Fund, Social Service, and others such as school and hostel boards.

A Commission of Assembly is appointed to transact any special business remitted to it by the Assembly during the year.

The General Assembly of Australia

The General Assembly of Australia, which meets triennially, has a broad responsibility for matters such as doctrine, world mission, and standards for the ministry and the eldership.

Its members are made up of equal numbers of ministers and elders, appointed by Presbyteries and Assemblies in proportion to the number of parishes within their bounds.



The Presbyterian Fellowship

Understanding the Presbyterian Church

Church Organisation

Presbyterian Fellowship Publication No 1 1994

The Barrier Act

Reflecting the federal nature of the church, the Presbyterian Church of Australia has adopted the Barrier Act, passed by the Church of Scotland in 1697.

This act requires that any proposed changes to the rules and constitutions of the church that are to be binding on members and the courts of the church are to be sent down to Presbyteries for their opinions and consent before they become law.

The Code

The body of church laws and regulations is called The Code and it may be changed only by the appropriate assembly acting within its field of jurisdiction, and usually only then under the provisions of the Barrier Act. The General Assembly of Australia and the state Assemblies maintain their own Codes.

Using NSW as an example, there are three parts to The Code.

Part 1 consists of the Standing Orders which are the rules whereby the courts and committees of the church conduct their meetings.

Part 2 comprises the Standing Laws of the church which are the regulations under which the church, its membership, its congregations, and its courts are organised.

Part 3 is made up of the constitutions and regulations of the committees, boards, organisations and institutions that operate as part of the church. All regulations must be approved by the assembly.

The Trustees

The Assemblies, acting according to civil laws, appoint trustees to supervise the management of property and investments held in the name of the church. These investments may come from bequests, gifts, loans and a range of other sources.

The trustees serve as stewards, seeking to ensure that civil laws are obeyed, that investments yield a fair return, and that trusts are applied in good faith to the purposes for which they were set up. Their supervisory role extends as far as the property and finances of local congregations.

The Law Agent and the Procurator

The church retains the services of legal officers who advise the church, its courts and its institutions, on matters relating to church and civil law. They are

required to be active members of the church and they have seats on the appropriate General Assembly.

The Law Agent is a solicitor and the Procurator is a barrister. They carry out their professional functions in the affairs of the church as they are called upon, usually through the General Secretary.

The Procurator may be called upon to represent the church in the civil courts.

The General Manager

The General Manager is the chief administrative officer of the church. The position carries a seat on the Assembly.