

A Brief History of the Presbyterian Church in America

Southern Presbyterian Distinctives

Although the Presbyterian Church in America was first organized in December 1783, its historical roots can be directly traced back to 1861 in Augusta, GA, prior to the Civil War. However, its spiritual roots can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century under the leadership of John Calvin and John Knox.

The Old School-New School division occurred in 1837 over matters of church government and doctrine. The Old School reflected denominational traditions and did not want Union with Congregationalists in 1801. Also, the Old School wanted the denomination to have its own church boards rather than work under non-denominational parties, which the New School favored.

The Spiritual Nature of the Church

The first PCUS (Presbyterian Church United States, or “Southern Presbyterian Church”) General Assembly met at Augusta, Georgia in December 1861. James Henley Thornwell, one of the most prominent Southern Presbyterian Theologians, gave an address to all the churches. One of his major points was that the function of the church is essentially spiritual, not political. This was in opposition to the Gardner Springs Resolution in 1861 that declared that it was a Christian’s duty to support the Union. This fundamental thought is seen in Chapter 3 of the present PCA *Book of Church Order*.

Polity and Doctrine

In matters of doctrine, Southern Presbyterians were strongly committed to predestination and *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. With polity, Southern Presbyterians stressed that the work of the church is to be done by the church’s committees, not by outside boards. Also, much stress was placed on the Office of Ruling Elder. If a minister were to be ordained, the laying on of hands would come from ministers and elders. In addition, Southern Presbyterian Churches emphasized the work of presbyteries.

Missions, Evangelism, Worship

In the beginning, the PCUS was an urban church, not a rural church. The per capita giving was much higher. Worship was very reverent. A strong missions emphasis emerged after the Civil War with China open. A southern black minister named William Shepherd was sent to Africa.

During the War Between the States, evangelism was seen the Confederate Army (see Lee’s book, p. 298).

There was also a revival among the slaves with an outstanding black evangelist named Charles Colcock Jones. He was a pastor of a church, but resigned in 1832 to work full-time with slaves, developing a catechism for them.

Trends in the Southern Presbyterian Church

As you move into the Twentieth Century, the PCUS was strong. However, with the changing scope of the world (2 World Wars), the emergence of the German higher critical system of philosophical thought, the entrance of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and the rise of the Secular Humanistic Movement, the beliefs, ministry and mission of the church declined.

Growing decline in evangelism

In 1959, a declaration report on evangelism stated that evangelism was nothing more than Christian social action and that it had nothing to do with salvation. Read pp. 343-344 in *Watchman, Tell it True*.

Growing desire for ecumenism

Since 1882, the PCUS had exchanged relations with the UPCUSA (the "Northern Presbyterian Church"). In 1964, the UPCUSA joined with 3 other denominations to form COCU ("Consultation on Church Union). Its ultimate aim was to eliminate denominationalism and bring everyone to a great world church. There was great danger of compromise here.

Growing spread of liberalism

In 1943, *The Presbyterian Outline* was established to express the liberal views in the Southern Presbyterian Church. In some churches, the Bible was taught not as the Word of God. In 1964, the Covenant Life Curriculum was introduced. It was nothing short of heresy.

In 1972, the PCUS General Assembly refused to affirm belief in the plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible. It was out of these and other things that caused the origins of the PCA. Read p. 388 in *Watchman, Tell it True*.

The Formation of the PCA

The denomination was first called National Presbyterian Church, but was later protested by the UPCUSA. In December 1973, the PCA was formed out of the National Presbyterian Church to restore the great distinctives of the Southern Presbyterian Church, enunciated in 1861.

As you look at the historical sequence of events, you will notice that the PCA originated largely through layman's movements.

1965 – Reformed Theological Seminary was established. There were no clergy members on the Board. Four other organizations joined in the support.

1942 – the *Presbyterian Journal* was founded. G. Aiken Taylor was the founding editor.

1964 – *Concerned Presbyterians* was founded, organizing lay people to have an impact on the General Assembly. By 1969, it was not effective.

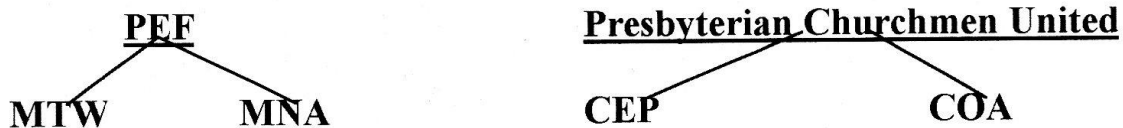
1967 – *Presbyterian Churchmen United*, a society of ministers was formed.

1958 – *Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship* was founded by William E. “Bill” Hill, focused on evangelism and world missions.

In 1970, the General Assembly adopted a statement called “On the State of the Church” that described problems existing between the conservatives and the liberals in the PCUS.

On August 11, 1971, those four parties met together to plan for a separate denomination.

Coming from these parties were the first 4 permanent committees of the denomination.



Concerned Presbyterians continue to exist among PCUS conservatives.

December 4, 1973, the Presbyterian Church in America held its first General Assembly at Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

Facts about the PCA

Members:

1. 1973 – 250 congregations--50,000 members
2. 1986—888 congregations—151,570 members
3. 1997—1,171 congregations—283,381 members

Missionaries: Over 460 career missionaries in over 70 countries

New churches: an average of 60 new churches is started each year

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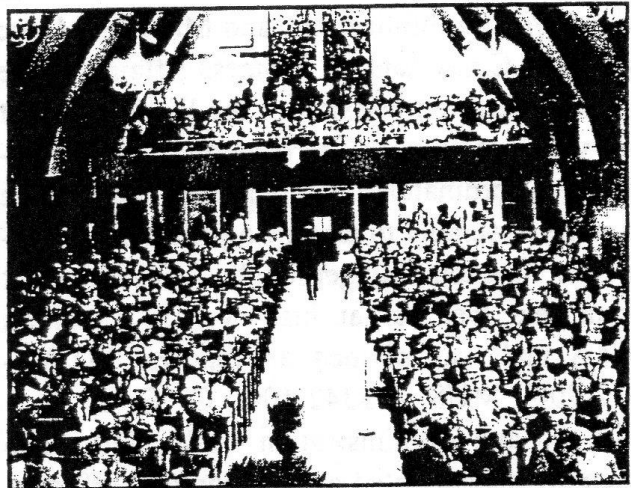
First General Assembly

The First General Assembly, of what was to become the Presbyterian Church in America, began on Tuesday evening, December 4, 1973 in the sanctuary of Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. After the assembly was called to order by Mr. W. Jack Williamson, Dr. Morton H. Smith, the temporary clerk, announced an enrollment of 338 commissioners. At the conclusion of the assembly, the final enrollment was composed of 387 commissioners (208 Ruling Elders and 179 Teaching Elders) representing 215 churches in sixteen presbyteries and several congregations not yet enrolled in a presbytery.

Ruling Elder Jack Williamson presented the opening address entitled "To God Be the Glory." In his remarks he proclaimed that "for at least three decades [conservatives] ... have attempted to stop the trends in the Presbyterian Church in the United States toward humanism, secularism, and syncretism.... The higher critical theories of Scripture and the neo-orthodox view of Scripture have become the dominate and official position of the PCUS today...." In briefly tracing the history of the conservative movement he continued by stating that "after years of much intensive effort, it became obvious to us that humanly speaking it would be impossible to recapture our church." He affirmed that this new denomination would be committed "to the rebirth and continuation of a Presbyterian Church loyal to Scriptures, the

Reformed Faith and committed to the spiritual mission of the Church as Christ commanded in the Great Commission."

Following the opening worship service Mr. Williamson called the Assembly to order. The Assembly then elected Mr. Williamson as it's first moderator and Dr. Smith as it's first Stated Clerk. Mr. John Spencer was elected as the Recording Clerk.



Commissioners at 1st Assembly

The conservatives in the process of organizing had incorporated as the Continuing Presbyterian Church in September, 1973. During the Wednesday afternoon session the Assembly voted to change the name of the denomination to the National Presbyterian Church. This name was changed at the Second General Assembly to the Presbyterian Church in America.

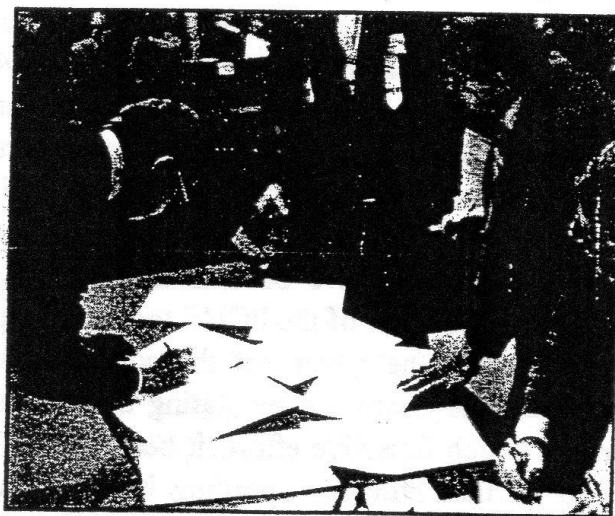
Included in the Assembly business was the establishment of several permanent committees. These committees included Administration, Judicial Business, Christian Education and Publi-

cations, Mission to the United States (now Mission to North America) and Mission to the World. Because of the gracious actions of Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship and the Executive Commission on Overseas Evangelism (ECO) the new denomination immediately had at its disposal financial assets, equipment and missionaries from these organizations. By accepting the offer of ECO, in his report on the Committee on Mission to the World, Rev. Donald B. Patterson stated that MTW would have six missionaries serving in three countries, one raising her support and seven candidates. He continued - "In a sense, we have inherited a family!"

The Assembly elected Rev. Larry C. Mills as Coordinator of Mission to the United States, Rev. Paul G. Settle as Coordinator of Christian Education and Publications and Mr. Dan Moore as Special Consultant on Business Affairs. Since the Committee on Mission to the World felt that they were not prepared to recommend an individual as Coordinator they requested permission from the Assembly to employ a provisional coordinator. The total budget for the four permanent committees was set at just over \$1.2 million dollars and was divided as follows: MTW - \$612,900; MUS - \$342,100; C. E. & P. - \$183,100 and Administration - \$89,600. The Assembly also adopted a provision that affirmed that "churches and individual donors shall be free to designate their gifts to the causes they desire to support and that there shall be no equalization of gifts so designated." This was an action prompted by the PCUS policy of dividing designated gifts according to a formula rather than by the desire of the donors.

One of the significant actions of the Assembly was the adoption of "A Message to all Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the World". This document outlined many of the reasons for the withdrawal from the PCUS and stated the essence of the theological position of the National Presbyterian Church. The Message declared that "the decision to separate has come only after long years of struggle and heartache on

the part of many of us to return the Church to purity of faith and practice.... We are convinced that our former denomination as a whole, and in its leadership, no longer holds those views regarding the nature and mission of the Church, which we accept as both true and essential.... [Their] deviations in doctrine and practice [include].... a diluted theology, a gospel tending toward humanism, an unbiblical view of marriage and divorce, the ordination of women, [and the] financing of abortion on socio-economic grounds...." After outlining the doctrinal weaknesses in the PCUS, the Message set out the theological stance of the new denomination by declaring that "the Bible is the very Word of God, so inspired in the whole and in all its parts, as in the original autographs, to be the inerrant Word of God.... We are committed without reservation to the Reformed Faith as set forth in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.... We declare that the ultimate purpose of the Church is to glorify God. We believe this includes giving top priority to Christ's Great Commission.... We regard this as the great end of our organization, and obedience to it, as the indispensable condition of our Lord's promised presence." After the adoption of the "Message to all Churches", it was made available for the commissioners to sign.



Signing the "Message to all Churches"

