

# Our Denominational History

The earliest Christian church consisted of Jews in the first century who had known Jesus and heard his teachings. It gradually grew and spread from the Middle East to other parts of the world, though not without controversy and hardship among its supporters.

During the 4th century, after more than 300 years of persecution under various Roman emperors, the church became established as a political as well as a spiritual power under the Emperor Constantine. Theological and political disagreements, however, served to widen the rift between members of the eastern (Greek-speaking) and western (Latin-speaking) branches of the church. Eventually the western portions of Europe, came under the religious and political authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Eastern Europe and parts of Asia came under the authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In Western Europe, the authority of the Roman Catholic Church remained largely unquestioned until the Renaissance in the 15th century. The invention of the printing press in Germany around 1440 made it possible for common people to have access to printed materials including the Bible. This, in turn, enabled many to discover religious thinkers who had begun to question the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. One such figure, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor, started the movement known as the Protestant Reformation when he posted a list of 95 grievances against the Roman Catholic Church on a church door in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517. Some 20 years later, a French/Swiss theologian, John Calvin, further refined the reformers' new way of thinking about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity in what came to be known as Reformed theology. John Knox, a Scotsman who studied with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, took Calvin's teachings back to Scotland. Other Reformed communities developed in England, Holland and France. The Presbyterian Church traces its ancestry back primarily to Scotland and England.

Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history. The Rev. Francis Mackemie, who arrived in the U.S. from Ireland in 1683, helped to organize the first American Presbytery at Philadelphia in 1706. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the Rev. John Witherspoon, was a Presbyterian minister. The Rev. William Tennent founded a ministerial "log college" in New Jersey that evolved into Princeton University. Other Presbyterian ministers, such as the Rev. Jonathan Edwards and the Rev. Gilbert Tennent, were driving forces in the so-called "Great Awakening," a revivalist movement in the early 18th century.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States has split and parts have reunited several times. Currently the largest group is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which has its national offices in Louisville, Ky. It was formed in 1983 as a result of reunion between Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS), the so-called "southern branch," and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA), the so-called "northern branch."

In the summer of 2010, seven pastors from the Presbyterian Church (USA) spoke of finding new ways to encourage each other in faith, ministry, and mission. They were concerned by the declining membership within the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) which had declined from four million to two million in 40 years. And they worried that growing

denominational disputes over theology and bureaucracy stole focus from their pastoral calling of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and equipping a new generation to lead. These pastors dreamed of reclaiming a sense of covenanted community among leaders from a Presbyterian and Reformed heritage, and to find new ways for churches to connect, grow, and multiply.

In January 2011, these pastors sent out a letter to PC(USA) pastors around the country, asking if others wanted to join in crafting a new way forward. The response was overwhelming: just seven months later, in August 2011, nearly 2,000 men and women gathered in Minneapolis to dream and pray. This became the birth of The Fellowship of Presbyterians, a ministry association that seeks to equip and connect those in various Presbyterian denominations including the PC(USA). But some pastors and congregations felt God calling them to leave the PC(USA), and many young seminarians were looking for a different context for ordination. As a result, in January 2012, at a conference in Orlando with more than 2,200 in attendance, a new denomination was formed: ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

ECO currently has over 390 churches covering every state in the U.S. and there are over 120,000 Covenant Partners (members). It's core values are:

**Jesus-shaped Identity:** We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

**Biblical Integrity:** We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, teaching all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

**Thoughtful Theology:** We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind, and we celebrate this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

**Accountable Community:** We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

**Egalitarian Ministry:** We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

**Missional Centrality:** We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission—including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice—in our communities and around the world.

**Center-focused Spirituality:** We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus—what “mere Christianity” is and does—and not fixate on the boundaries.

**Leadership Velocity:** We believe identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

**Kingdom Vitality:** We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God