



# What does it mean to be Presbyterian?



*A piper leads commissioners into General Assembly 2006*

This booklet gives a brief summary of the Reformation and Presbyterian history in New Zealand.

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Presbyterian Church  
of Aotearoa New Zealand



# Reformed beginnings

Today Presbyterians value the Celtic roots that nourished and continue to renew Scottish Christianity, but the genesis of Presbyterianism itself was the Reformation in Europe. Particularly important were the influence of the Swiss Reformers Zwingli and Calvin and the Scots leader John Knox.

The early 16th century was an age of political and religious turmoil in which matters of faith were deeply intertwined with the personalities and politics of the day. Defining issues for the Reformers were the authority of the Bible over the church and the importance of being able to read the Bible and pray in one's own language. The Reformers emphasised that each person could stand before God and claim forgiveness and help in the name of Jesus alone. The Church defined itself by the sacraments of baptism and holy communion (seen as a memorial of Jesus' last meal with his disciples but one in which he was present by God's grace and Spirit), by the free preaching of the Word of God, and by discipline – a way of life that reflected the Lordship of Christ not only over the Church and over the individual, but also over society. Elders were appointed for pastoral care and to ensure that people were able to pray and follow a Christian lifestyle. Ministers met together to study the bible. Together ministers and elders worked to call people into ministry and mission, and encourage each other. Baptism was for the children of believers, as well as for believers themselves. Education and poor relief were ways of making it possible for people to live the Christian life.

Much has changed since then, but many of these values underpin contemporary Presbyterianism. The key message remains that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone; our understanding of God and of how we live and worship continues to be tested by our reading of Scripture. Our decisions are made by a hierarchy of Church courts rather than individual leaders, as a safe guard against the abuse of spiritual power. While the Reformation also represented a "reforming" of the faith against excesses of authority, a rejection of symbols that went too far, and an emphasis on sin that did not always do justice to the complexities of human life, it also introduced a confidence that God's blessings are present in this life as well as in the life to come. While the Church is the interpreter of the Bible, the Reformation placed the Bible in authority over the Church. Study and education became more important, but the concept of being able to earn God's favour was firmly rejected.

John Calvin, although French, is closely associated with Geneva, where he developed his understanding of what Christians should believe, how they should live in a worshipping community or ordered ministry, and how a Christian vision should impact a Christian society. His followers further developed Calvinism into a school of thought that had a strong focus on the individual and on predestination. This refers to the

idea that people are born saved or unsaved (because God, who stands outside time, already knows where they will end up). Calvin's image has remained controversial, with divergent views on his teaching and leadership.

John Knox, a follower of Calvin's school of thought, is regarded as the father of the Scottish Reformation, which occurred in 1560 when Scotland repudiated the papacy and re-established the Church along reformed lines. The Reformed Church in Scotland had to defend its identity against both the British crown and the Anglican Church. During this struggle, the ministry of elders (or presbyters) and the way of organising the Church that arose from this became increasingly important. Decision-making by representative assemblies has become a characteristic of the Reformed heritage.

During the 17th century, Reformed Churches took root in other continents and came to dominate the colonisation of the New World.



*Statues of the Reformers in Geneva* istockphoto.com/x-drew

*Some of this material is taken from Lukas Vischer's "The Reformed tradition and its multiple facets" originally published in The Reformed Family Worldwide: A survey of Reformed churches, theological school and international organisations, ed. Jean-Jacques Bauswein and Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1-33*

# Presbyterianism in New Zealand

Presbyterianism came to New Zealand as a settler church, brought by migrants. Unlike Anglicans, Catholics and Methodists, the Presbyterian Church had not developed a mission to New Zealand Maori before the first migrants arrived.

A cross on the Petone foreshore marks the arrival on 20 February 1840 of the first Presbyterians intent on settlement. It took four years before they established the first Presbyterian church, which has become the congregation of St Andrews on the Terrace. The first church in Auckland was St Andrew's in Symonds Street, which opened in 1849.

Many Presbyterians from Scotland, Ireland and Australia had emigrated to New Zealand. Dunedin and Waipu were Presbyterian settlements, but there were also large concentrations in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland.



*General Assembly 2006*

The first General Assembly was held in 1862, although presbyteries south of the Waitaki River did not attend and formed their own Synod of Otago and Southland in 1866. The southern Presbyterians supported the founding of the University of Otago and had a strong concern for education.

The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand dates from 31 October 1901, when the churches in the Synod of Otago and Southland area amalgamated with those north of the Waitaki river. The name Aotearoa was added in 1991 to acknowledge the Church's special partnership with Maori.

The Pacific Island Synod was established in 1998 and a Council of Asian Congregations was formed in 2000, in recognition of the importance of the voice of these cultural groups and of the growing diversity of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

*More information about the history of the Church can be found in: [Presbyterians in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1840-1990](#), ed. Dennis McEldowney (Wellington: The Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1990)*

# Maori mission

Once the subject of mission, the Church's Maori arm has become a source of missionaries, particularly to the area around the Ureweras (also known as Tuhoē country).

In the 19th century, James Fletcher continued the early missionary efforts of James Duncan in Taupo. Edgerton Ward followed suit in Taumarunui, establishing the oldest Te Aka Puaho parish. Sister Alison entered the mission field in Taumarunui and opened the door for the deaconess order to enter Maori missions throughout the country. The focus of the deaconesses was in providing mission schools in Ruatahuna, Maungapohatu, Waiohau, Matahi, Waimana and Kawerau. In Nuhaka, the deaconesses were active in welfare. From 1907-1928, there were a number of covenant relationships established between Maori communities and the Presbyterian Church. The most well known were between Rua Kenana and J G Laughton, Sister Annie Henry and the Hapu of Ruatahuna and Eru Tumutara and J G Laughton.

Before 1953, there were only five Maori in leadership. The Maori missions decided to actively encourage Maori into leadership positions, which resulted in the creation of both the Maori Synod and the training institute Te Wananga a Rangi. During the 50 years up to 2005, the Synod built a number of parishes along Presbyterian lines from Auckland in the North to Invercargill in the South.



*Te Maungarongo marae in Ohope*

Today the Maori Synod has evolved into Te Aka Puaho; a name that is both Biblically and culturally based. Like many Maori organisations, it is a grass-roots movement based on the principles of self-help and self-determination. Ninety-eight percent of leadership positions within Te Aka Puaho are filled by Maori, and the Synod is actively training Amorangi ministers.

*More information about the history of Maori Missions and the Presbyterian Church can be obtained by contacting: Te Aka Puaho, PO Box 72, Whakatane or emailing [wtekaawa@nettel.net.nz](mailto:wtekaawa@nettel.net.nz)*

# More recent history

The number of people attending Presbyterian churches in New Zealand grew throughout the 20th century and, following the New Life Movement of outreach to new housing areas in the 1950s, peaked in the early 1960s at about 90,000.

During the 1960s, Presbyterians became divided on proposals for Church Union, which involved the not-too-dissimilar Congregationalists but also Anglicans and Methodists. Although Church union did not take place, cooperative ventures at the local congregational level continue to make up a significant proportion of our parishes.

Presbyterians were also split during the 60s in their reaction to the teaching of Lloyd Geering while Professor of Old Testament and Principal of Knox Theological Hall where ministers were trained. His series of statements on the nature of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus troubled many in the Church, attracted wide interest, and resulted in a much-publicised heresy trial. Geering moved on to head up the Department of Religious Studies at Victoria University.

The Church has also received media attention during the past two decades over debates about the place of homosexual people in leadership. General Assembly 2006 decided that people in sexual relationships outside marriage could not be admitted to training, or be licensed, ordained or inducted into a parish. While we are not the only Church to find this issue difficult, our decision-making processes mean differences of opinion have been aired in a relatively open and public manner.



*The Kids Friendly display at General Assembly 2006*

Today attendance at our Sunday services is around 30,000 people, about the same as at the start of the 20th century – but New Zealand's population has almost doubled. Migration is still significant, with people from different Pacific Islands, Korea, Taiwan and South Africa continuing to become part of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand's cultural mix.

# Presbyterian Support

Presbyterian Support New Zealand (PSNZ) is a federation of seven regional Presbyterian Support social service delivery agencies (Southland, Otago, South Canterbury, Upper South Island, Central, East Coast and Northern).

At the local level, Presbyterian Support emphasizes our links into, and our responsiveness to, our local communities. We work with many of the most marginalised people in our country. We contribute to the strength of the Presbyterian “brand” by the dedication of staff, our high quality services and our commitment to advocacy on behalf of the powerless and voiceless. Our Presbyterian heritage, and close “family” relationship with the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand remain at the essence of our being, and our public standing.

Presbyterian Support is independent in our administration. But each of our service organisations was founded by Presbyterian ministers and parishioners who wished to put their Christian values into practice - helping local community members in need through their time of vulnerability until they were able to be self-sufficient again. Presbyterian Support New Zealand maintains that strong value set. “Christianity in Action” is our core value. We state:

- Underpinning the work of the members of Presbyterian Support New Zealand are the values that for Christians are demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian Support has been in operation around New Zealand for about 100 years. Collectively, we are one of the largest social service providers in New Zealand with service-related expenditure of around \$120 million. We provide residential and community based services to older people and those with disabilities. As “Family Works” we provide a wide range of community-based support for children and their families, including development programmes for children and young people, social work support and counselling, parenting programmes, group learning programmes and localised community development. Some regions also provide hospice services.

Our agencies led the way in implementing “positive aging services”, developing services which maximised choice of supported life-style for vulnerable elders in our communities. That means more older people are able to remain in their own homes for longer. It also means that even when a frail older person chooses to move to a supported living or residential facility, they have greater flexibility, and exercise a higher degree of decision making in life-style. PSNZ now has a brand called “enliven” that distinguishes those services that are delivered under the “positive aging” philosophy in some regions.

*More information on Presbyterian Support can be found on our website [www.ps.org.nz](http://www.ps.org.nz) or by contacting the National Executive Officer on (04) 473-5025 or [pss.natcouncil@xtra.co.nz](mailto:pss.natcouncil@xtra.co.nz), or from your local Presbyterian Support.*

# What characterises our Church today?

Like other Christians, Presbyterians have a range of styles of worship. Some are more formal and liturgical; others informal and spontaneous. Different music expresses the faith of different cultures and generations.

Presbyterians have long been marked by a commitment to education, an appreciation of thoughtful preaching, and the involvement of elders in the governance of the Church at a congregational, regional and national level. The word “Presbyterian” relates to the Greek word *presbuteros*, usually translated as elders, and both ministers and elders were seen as presbyters of different kinds sharing in ministry. This means that the way we are organised and make decisions helps define the sort of Christians we are.

One dictionary definition of Presbyterianism is “a church governed by elders of equal rank”. Each congregation is led by the minister and the elders in partnership. At the regional level, ministers and elders come together in presbyteries, and nationally every two years in a General Assembly. Between meetings of the Assembly, the Council of Assembly handles issues that arise and works with the Assembly Executive Secretary and key national staff. The Council is made up people from different regions and groups, such as the Pacific Island synod and the Council of Asian Congregations. We have a particular partnership with Maori, through Te Aka Puaho, or Maori synod.

Presbyterianism provides checks and balances on processes and decision making. The different levels of structure and accountability mean that general consensus is needed before radical change can be enacted.

Our structure also gives individuals the opportunity for participation and involvement in the wider Church. Those serving as elders can go on presbytery, attend a General Assembly, and be nominated to serve on the Council of Assembly.

Presbyterians value theological training. Ministers study at undergraduate and post-graduate levels and are expected to continue their education throughout their ministry.

The Church was instrumental in the establishment of the University of Otago, New Zealand’s first university. We started the Turakina Maori Girls’ School in 1905. Currently there are 12 schools in New Zealand identified as Presbyterian.

At the parish level, home groups often study the Bible or churches will run seminar or lecture series on particular issues.

