

An Invitation to the Table: A Proposal for a Moravian-Presbyterian Covenant Partnership

Who are the Presbyterians? Presbyterians have roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation leaders John Calvin in Switzerland and John Knox in Scotland. They are part of what is often called the Reformed wing of the churches of the Reformation. Presbyterians first came to the United States in the late 1600s. There have been several splits and reconciliations in the history of American Presbyterians. The Civil War divided Presbyterians into north and south; these two churches reunited in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). There are several smaller, more conservative Presbyterian bodies that arose in theological debates of the twentieth century (primarily about biblical interpretation and the ordination of women).

Presbyterians have always stressed the laity of the church, and American patterns of democracy owe much to Presbyterians. At the same time, they have always emphasized a well-educated clergy. They have been noted for their interest in ecumenism and applying the gospel of Christ to the social life of our nation and world.

Why are they called Presbyterians? “Presbyterian” comes from “presbyteros,” the Greek, New Testament word for elder, and stresses the democratic, rather than hierarchical understanding of the church, often associated with bishops.

Where are the Presbyterians? Presbyterians are found all over the United States. As is the case with the Moravians, the majority of their congregations have fewer than 100 at weekly worship.

What do Presbyterians believe? The *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterians includes four creeds (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Heidelberg Confession, and the Barmen Declaration) that are among creeds significant for Moravians, as listed the *Ground of the Unity*, our Moravian doctrinal statement. Presbyterians see creeds more as testimonies to what God has done than as tests of right belief.

How do Presbyterians worship? Most Moravians would feel at home in a Presbyterian church. They do not use written liturgies as much as Moravians. Their music, like that of Moravians, varies from congregation to congregation. When they use traditional wording of the Lord’s Prayer, they say “debts” instead of “trespasses.” Like Moravians, Presbyterians are generally moving toward celebrating Communion more frequently. Like Moravians, Presbyterians normally practice baptism of children.

How are Presbyterians governed? Congregations are part of an area body called a presbytery. Clergy and elders from all congregations of a presbytery meet at least twice a year, in some presbyteries monthly. Presbytery meetings require equal numbers of lay and clergy. Several presbyteries together form a regional body called a synod. National meetings, equivalent to Provincial Synod, called General Assembly, are held every two years. Important legislation of General Assembly must be approved by a majority of presbyteries to take effect. The national executive officer, equivalent to PEC president, is called stated clerk. There is also a moderator, elected for a two-year term, who serves as spokesperson for the denomination. National offices are in Louisville, Kentucky.

What are the Presbyterian orders of ministry? Presbyterians have no bishops. The equivalent of Moravian deacons and presbyters are called ministers of the Word and Sacrament or teaching elders. They are examined and ordained by presbyteries and hold membership in a presbytery, not a congregation. Congregations extend calls to ministers; presbyteries approve calls and install ministers in congregations. Elders, persons elected by the congregation to serve on the session, the governing board of a congregation, are also ordained, but by the session of the

congregation. Deacons, who are charged with service to those in need, are also elected by the congregation and ordained by the session. Elders and deacons are ordained for life, but elected for specific terms of active service.

What are Moravians being asked to do? Moravian and Presbyterians have been in official dialogue since 2000, with most meetings between 2004 and 2007. From this dialogue has come “An Invitation to the Table: A Proposal for a Moravian/Reformed Covenant Partnership.” Three other denominations on the Reformed side—the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the Reformed Church in America—took part as observers but are not taking official action on the proposal.

This document celebrates many things: a history of working together in ecumenical bodies, on educational curriculum (Moravians and Presbyterians worked together on Covenant Life Curriculum in the 1960s), and in other ways; gifts we have to offer to and receive from each other; recognition and acceptance of one another’s ministries; and an open, welcoming Lord’s Table. This document does not require us to do anything, but it invites us, as congregations and denominations, more seriously to understand our ministry as ministry together with other Christians and more consistently to work together in whatever ways we can.

For a congregation, this might mean, for example, being present at a service of baptism in another congregation, common confirmation or membership classes, sharing the Lord’s Supper, working together on a Habitat for Humanity house or a rebuilding project on the Gulf Coast, combating racism together. For the Moravian denomination, this might mean sharing of clergy more freely; starting new churches together; developing educational resources for Sunday school, baptism, confirmation. Our full communion relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has led to these sorts of benefits for both Moravians and Lutherans.

Where can we find the proposal for Moravian-Presbyterian partnership, called “An Invitation to the Table: A Proposal for a Moravian-Presbyterian Covenant Partnership”? This is on the Website of the Moravian Church—Southern Province: mcsp.org. Click on “Moravian/Reformed Dialogue Proposed Covenant Partnership” and then on “A Proposal for a Moravian/Reformed Covenant Partnership.”