

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERY OF PHILADELPHIA: 1717-2017

The Presbytery of Philadelphia began when “the Presbytery,” the only general meeting of American Presbyterians, voted on September 21, 1716 to divide into four “subordinate meetings” and reconstitute itself as an annual general synod. Six out of seventeen ministers were assigned to the new presbytery and given wide freedom as to when and where they might meet. Meet they did, although the date, with the records, is lost. It was certainly before the first meeting of the Synod, September 17, 1717.



Old Buttonwood, by W. H. Paul (1956). The First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, built in 1704 and located on the south side of Market Street between 2nd and 3rd streets.

THE FIRST CENTURY

The mission of the presbytery in its first century was to perform the basic functions of a governing body. It organized congregations, examined and received new ministers, prepared and ordained candidates for the ministry, reviewed the work of the churches, supplied pulpits, disciplined the errant, and arbitrated local disputes. The sheer size of the area under its supervision—originally all of South Jersey and southeastern Pennsylvania—meant that the presbytery had only such authority over its churches as the congregations were willing to give it. It is a measure of the power of moral suasion and their desire to be supplied by a learned ministry that they did submit to the written admonitions of a distant church court.

Growth was slow. The boundaries of the presbytery contracted to Philadelphia and its surrounding counties. Philadelphia organized several new congregations in Lehigh, Bucks, and Montgomery Counties, but in 1800 only four Presbyterian congregations existed in a city of seventy thousand.

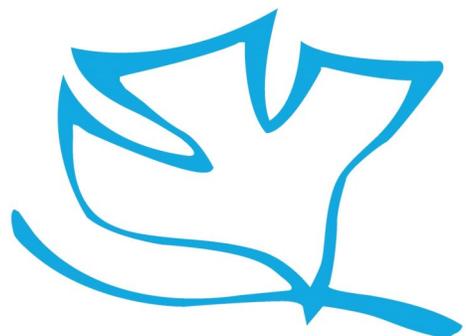
THE SECOND CENTURY

Philadelphia at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century was a booming seaport surrounded by farms. By mid-century Philadelphia was a city of a half million dominated by manufacturing, transportation, commerce, and banking. By the end of the century it was home to more than a million people and the “workshop of the world.” The churches, with no warning or preparation, had to respond to mass urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and cultural pluralism.

The presbytery did its work through standing committees, and met as a whole only four times a year. Presbyterians founded their own mission boards, three of them headquartered in Philadelphia. Locally, the presbytery supported an ever-expanding system of Sunday schools and charities for the poor, prisoners, and sailors.

Before the Civil War, Presbyterians founded congregations by “cloning.” A church would subsidize a worshipping community in a new area and send some of its elders to form a new session. By 1850, there were 37 churches in a city of 400,000. The presbytery divided itself twice in this period to accommodate this growth. By 1880, there were 83 churches with a membership of 30,000 in a city of 847,000—almost one Philadelphian in thirty.

After 1867, five Presbyteries of Philadelphia reorganized into three and entered their most ambitious era of expansion. Together they founded major charitable institutions, including Presbyterian Hospital (1871), Presbyterian Orphanage (1874), Presbyterian Home for Widows (1876), Berean Institute (1899), and the Philadelphia School for Christian Workers (1907).



THE THIRD CENTURY

Philadelphia, at the outbreak of World War I, was an industrial powerhouse and an international magnet for immigration. Presbyterians, identified with the expanding middle class of skilled factory workers, managers, industrialists, and professionals, prospered in this era and invested heavily in the causes that addressed their concerns. In the name of efficiency, the presbyteries consolidated, centralized, and professionalized their missionary and administrative staffs. In 1943, after more than twenty years of negotiation, they merged to form a “metropolitan presbytery”—176 churches with roughly 100,000 communicants covering Philadelphia and most of Montgomery, Bucks, and Delaware Counties.

Midcentury was the high water mark both for the city and the presbytery. The city population hit two million and its urban culture dominated the surrounding counties, but the move to the suburbs had begun. The Baby Boom filled the suburban churches, even as city churches were losing members at an alarming rate. In 1943 city churches accounted for two thirds of the presbytery. By 1993, they were less than one quarter. The presbytery’s priorities shifted to reflect the interests of a wealthier, family-oriented, suburban population. The presbytery purchased Pennington Island (1947), Kirkwood (1961) and supported Christian education with the Krisheim Conference Center (1976).

Several senior residences were brought together under Philadelphia Presbyterian Homes (1955). Urban mission focused on supplying food, shelter, clothing, and education through programs like Chester Eastside Ministries (1981) and Learning Tree (1989).

THE FOURTH CENTURY

Even when it appeared in the late 20th century as if both the city and the presbytery were locked in a spiral of retreat and retrenchment, the seeds of renewal were already sprouting. The Philadelphia region began to grow again as it transitioned to a “knowledge economy” based on medicine, education, technology, and communication.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia began to reinvent itself as a decentralized mission support movement, concentrating its energies on its congregations’ local initiatives, on innovative ministries, on repurposing old buildings, and on new worshipping communities.

