

The Structure of the Presbyterian Church of Australia

The Presbyterian Church of Australia is a part of the Christian Church throughout the world. The Church's name comes from the Greek word presbuteros, which is the word for an elder or a mature Christian leader in the New Testament. The use of the name Presbyterian reflects the Church's aim to be faithful to the Bible's teaching on the Church, even in the 21st Century. In its wider use, the name Presbyterian has also come to include the distinctive doctrine, discipline, worship, laws and practice of the churches which returned to Biblical standards in Europe at the time known as the Reformation.

Technically “Presbyterian” explains how the Church is governed. A Presbyterian Church does not function as an “Episcopal” or “top down” Church. There are no individuals with the power or authority of bishops in the way that word is used in some churches today. Likewise, the Presbyterian Church does not function as a simple congregational democracy. Not all decisions in the life of a local congregation are made by simple majority at the congregational level. In keeping with the Bible's idea of the Church as a body, individual congregations share a connection with others.

The Presbyterian Church of Australia is a federation of State Presbyterian Churches formed in 1901. Within this federation, the six State Churches preserve their own identity, although they have voluntarily handed over certain responsibilities to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia. These responsibilities include: guarding the doctrine of the Church and its practice of Church worship and discipline, world mission training of students for the ministry and the acceptance of ministers from other denominations. The principles adopted by the Church in these areas are set out in two documents called the Basis of Union and the Articles of Agreement. Any minister should be able to give you access to and explain these documents.

This federation means that while many of these aspects of the Church's life and ministry are organised at a State and congregational level, final responsibility for them lies with the General Assembly of Australia, and there may be times when local practice has to be changed to fit in with what the whole Church has decided. In the same way, it is also possible for a local congregation to suggest changes which can be considered and then adopted by the whole Church.

The surrender of ultimate authority does not prevent the state churches maintaining their own activities in the areas concerned. But if the G.A.A. makes a decision that contradicts the rules and practices of that church the G.A.A. decision will prevail and that practice will be required to change.