

Our Distinctives

People often ask Wellspring who we are as a Presbyterian church
Sometimes the questions are asked these ways:

What are your theological distinctives?

What does it mean to say that you are Reformed?

What does it mean to be a Presbyterian?

The following terms will be helpful in defining what we believe and who we are:

WE ARE TRINITARIAN

God is Trinity - meaning He is one God in three Persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Person within the Godhead is and has from all eternity been in intimate communion with one another. Therefore, God is the standard and pattern of all covenantal relations. All faithful theology and life is conducted in union with and imitation of the way God eternally is, and so we seek to understand all that the Bible teaches in the light of an explicit Trinitarian understanding. We believe the Bible teaches creation and redemption are a work of the triune God from beginning to end. God the Father chose to redeem a people from all eternity. God the Son, sent by the Father-- took on flesh, lived a perfect life, died on the cross for the sins of his people at the hands of wicked men. Christ arose from the dead three days later and ascended to the right hand of his Father where he rules and reigns the nations with all power and authority. God the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son--applies the work of Christ's redemption to the lives of God's people.

WE ARE EVANGELICAL

We take our stand with those who believe in what used to be called "the fundamentals": the existence of the triune God, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the bodily return of Christ, and the infallibility and authority of the Bible. We joyfully affirm our unity with those of every tradition and denomination who hold to these fundamentals of the Christian faith.

WE ARE EVANGELISTIC

We take seriously the Great Commission, which is Christ's instruction that the church go and make disciples of all nations. Without compromising the sovereignty of God in salvation, we believe that it is the responsibility of every person to repent and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. We believe individuals and the church have a responsibility to extend a gospel invitation as a call to salvation. We invite all, without distinction, to come and drink freely of the Water of Life and to live eternally.

WE ARE REFORMED

The word "Reformed" can be defined in two ways: (1) It is a reference to our historical roots in the Reformation of the 16th century. We consider ourselves to be theological heirs of Luther, Calvin, Knox, and other reformers. (2) It is, more specifically, a term of reference to several theological distinctives. For more information, please see the standards of the ARP Church.

WE ARE PRESBYTERIAN

Below are discussed 5 central marks or principles of Presbyterianism:

The first feature of Presbyterian government is government by elders. The office of elder was prominent among God's people in both the Old Testament (Exodus 12:21; 18:13-26) and the New Testament (Acts 14: 23; 20:17; I Timothy 3:1-7). We believe that the office of bishop and elder are one and the same in the New Testament (Acts 20:17-38; Titus 1:5, 7). The elders should be selected, not because of their social status, popularity or worldly wisdom, but because of their love for Christ and His Church, their acceptance of the biblical faith, their gifts of spiritual wisdom and leadership, their godly example, their sense of call to serve the people of God, and their willingness to govern the church by the will of Christ as it is revealed in Scripture (I Timothy 3:1-13; I Timothy 4:7, 5:1; II Timothy 2:22-26; Matthew 20:25-28) and interpreted by the Form of Government of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Pastors are sometimes called

teaching elders (I Timothy 5:17). In addition to those qualifications expected of all elders the pastors, or teaching elders, ought to have gifts of preaching and teaching and have a sense of God's call to this office. Presbyterian pastors are normally required to fulfill a course of education resulting in degrees from both a college or university (Bachelors degree) and a theological seminary (Masters degree).

A second feature of Presbyterian government is that the power is always shared among a number of elders--it is never exercised by one elder alone. This is called "rule by a plurality of elders." It seems to us that the New Testament norm is for each congregation to have several elders working together (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17-38). For this reason our congregations have a plural number of elders who are all of equal rank. One elder may never govern alone, but only in session with the other elders. Thus, the pastors (teaching elders) and the other elders, sometimes called ruling elders, make up the Church Session which is the local church governing body. In this way mutual responsibility and accountability are built into the system. No church officers, including pastors, can be "lone rangers", but all are in subjection to each other in the Lord. Lord Acton's political axiom, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely," is as apt to be as true, we believe, in the church as it is in the world. Ruling elders do not work full-time for the congregation they serve. They normally make their livings in the same kinds of occupations and professions that the other members of the congregation do. In popular language they are often called laymen, although, since they are ordained elders, these terms are not technically correct. The pastors, on the other hand, are almost always employed by the congregation to work full-time in the Ministry of the Word and Prayer (Acts 6:4).

A third feature of presbyterian government is that it is a connectional system. Presbyterian churches are not independent, but are related to each other somewhat as counties are related to states and states to the national government. This allows for congregational individuality while maintaining the unity of the whole denomination. We believe that this connectional system best demonstrates the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ, often protects congregations from power-plays by pressure groups or individuals, and should help prevent congregations from going off on tangents in

matters of both faith and practice. The Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, had authority over the churches. Therefore, we believe this arrangement not only sets forth the unity of the whole church of Jesus Christ and provides checks and balances, but that it is biblical. Presbyterian churches in a local area or district are organized into a presbytery made up of the pastors and elders of the member churches. Wellspring Presbyterian Church is part of the Virginia Presbytery. All of the presbyteries (the ARP currently has nine) are organized into a synod made up of pastors and elders. The synod, or general assembly, of our denomination meets once a year, usually in early June, in Hendersonville, NC at Bonclarken, our conference and retreat center.

A fourth feature of presbyterian government is that it is constitutional. Because it is connectional there is one written Constitution for the whole denomination rather than separate constitutions for the individual congregations. The Constitution of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church is contained in The Form of Government. You can obtain a copy of our Form of Government by asking Pastor Stephen or by logging onto our denomination's website at www.arpsynod.org/fogcont.html.

A fifth feature of presbyterian government is that congregations elect their own officers: pastors, elders and (usually) deacons. This is done in a Congregational Meeting where all active members have voice and vote. Therefore, our government is representative. This is similar to our national government which was greatly influenced in its conception by the presbyterian system. Additionally, the congregation votes on any changes in pastors' salaries, buying or selling church property, and any major expenditure on existing properties other than routine upkeep. Deacons (Acts 6:1-6; I Timothy 3:8-13) are elected and ordained by most, though not all, Presbyterian congregations to work under the authority of the Church Session in ministries of mercy to those with special needs--both within and beyond the congregation. They also carry out other important tasks assigned to them by the elders. Although pastors are elected by the congregation, they are ordained to the ministry and installed as pastors in the congregation that called them by the presbytery. Thus, three parties must approve the call of a pastor before it can be carried out: the congregation, the pastor himself, and the presbytery. Because there are no

time limits written into the calls of pastors and no system for moving them on a regular basis, the length of time Presbyterian pastors serve the same congregation varies greatly. Some serve a lifetime in one place. Others move quite frequently. A pastoral relationship with a church can be changed only with the consent of the presbytery. This acts as a check on actions that might otherwise be capricious and/or precipitous.