

Discovering Trinity: Structures

Here are some key terms to help you to understand how our church works:

Presbyterian: While Presbyterian churches hold to a certain set of beliefs (outlined in the Westminster Standards), the word itself refers to a system of church government. “Presbyter” is the Greek word for elders; a presbyterian church government is one that is elder led. That is, unlike Anglican or Catholic churches, it is not hierarchical with a system of priests, bishops and archbishops. Neither, like many Bible churches, is it democratic and independent, with all major decisions being made by congregational vote and each congregation on its own. Instead, each church is led by a group of elders who are selected by the congregation to have authority over them. Each church also is part of a larger network of churches, a “presbytery,” in which they partner together and hold each other accountable.

Session: Our “board” of elders is called the Session. The Session is entrusted with the spiritual care and oversight of the church. It is the primary decision-making group within a local church. The Session is composed of teaching elders and ruling elders, each of whom have the same decision-making power.

Teaching Elder: this is another way of referring to the pastors of the church. Teaching elders have the same authority as ruling elders, but are especially entrusted with the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. For someone to be a teaching elder, he must have received extensive training (usually in a seminary), examined, and ordained by a presbytery (see below).

Ruling Elder: Ruling elders are trained lay leaders who have been selected and ordained by the local congregation. At Trinity, when someone is ordained an elder, he is permanent part of the Session (until he decides to step down); there are no elder term limits.

Deacons: Deacons are trained lay leaders ordained by the congregation to assist them in showing mercy to those in need within the congregation and the local community. Deacons, together with trained commissioned women, form our church’s diaconal team.

Women’s Shepherding Team: At Trinity, the Women’s Shepherding Team is a trained group of women leaders commissioned to work together with the elders to provide spiritual care for our church, focusing especially on the spiritual needs of the women.

Presbytery: A presbytery is a network of local churches within our denomination who partner together in mission and spiritual care for each other. The presbytery is the group that ordains (and disciplines) teaching elders, and it is also the “court” to which members can appeal when they believe that their Session may have erred. Our presbytery, the Chicago Metro Presbytery, meets four times per year. The group that meets consists of the teaching elders, and up to two ruling elders, from each church within our presbytery.

General Assembly: Our denomination has an annual national gathering of teaching and ruling elders from the entire country. This gathering oversees our national committees and denominational decisions.

Presbyterian Church in America (PCA): A conservative, Reformed denomination committed to upholding the authority of Scripture and living out the Great Commission. It was organized in 1973, after it separated from the larger PCUS due to concerns about liberalism.