

The Reformed Institute is offering a series of essays over the summer months to consider the state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An introduction to this series by Director R. Bruce Douglass explains its purpose.

Whither the PC(USA)?

The Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington is the creation of a group of Presbyterian congregations located in the DC area that are all affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. As the largest Reformed church in the nation, the PCUSA is a classic example of what has come to be known as "mainline" American Protestantism. But that sort of church is the product of an earlier time, and it is one that is clearly being challenged by certain changes that have been occurring in American society in recent decades. The challenge is so great, in fact, that some have even proposed that we are living in a "post-denominational" age.

Not surprisingly, this state of affairs has prompted much soul-searching in the "mainline" churches, including the PCUSA. Denominational leaders routinely find themselves being asked whether the churches in question have a future, and if so, what it is. The leadership of the Reformed Institute believes this is a matter about which all Presbyterians need to be informed. Toward that end, we have asked a series of people (both laity and church professionals) who are active in the work of the Institute and knowledgeable about the state of the denomination to provide written personal statements on the subject that will be posted, once every other week, throughout the summer of 2011.

We have asked the people contributing to this series to consider the following topics as they prepare their statements:

- 1) The PCUSA has suffered a steady decline in membership over the past several decades. How significant is this development in assessing the state of the church? Do numbers matter? If so, how?
- 2) We often hear that the mainline Protestant churches are now in a new situation in American society. Do you believe that is true? If so, how would you define the new situation? What is the appropriate response to it? What implications does it have for the church's mission?
- 3) Do you believe the PCUSA stands for something coherent theologically? If so, what is it? If not, do you consider that a problem? Why or why not?
- 4) We are hearing a lot these days in the PCUSA about structures and the need for structural reform. Do you think structures matter? Do you think structural reform can make a significant difference in the church's life?
- 5) If you could make one change in the PCUSA as it now exists, what would that be-- and why?

However, we have also asked the contributors to keep their statements brief, using no more than 1200 words. So none of them can be expected to take up all the issues we have raised. They can be expected to provide nothing more than a sample of what their authors think. But even that, we suspect, will be informative, and we very much hope that it will stimulate some fresh thinking--and discussion--about things that might be done to address the challenges our denomination now faces.