

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland's 19 regional presbyteries

Introduction

In the Presbyterian system of church government, a presbytery consists of ministers and elders who are drawn from local congregations and other ministries in a particular area.

As a court of the church each presbytery is responsible for overseeing those congregations in its local area, while undertaking other important tasks, which include the ordination and installation of ministers (also known as teaching elders), the ordination of elders, and the annual selection of the Moderator.

Each presbytery has a Moderator of Presbytery who serves for one year chairing each presbytery meeting and undertaking other duties. The Clerk of Presbytery is responsible for the day-to-day running of the presbytery and organising of its business.

There are currently 19 regional presbyteries. The Presbytery of Monaghan and the Presbytery of Dublin and Munster are located in the Republic of Ireland, while the Presbytery of Derry and Donegal is cross border, with congregations located in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

One of a Moderator's duties during their year in office is to undertake four Presbytery Tours during their year in office. First and foremost they are pastoral tours, an opportunity to encourage ministers and their congregations. They are also opportunities to 'out and about' and get to know the church they are leading and occasions to acknowledge the often overlooked quiet witness of God's people serving their local community.

The Presbyteries

Presbytery of Ards

The Presbytery of Ards stretches from Helens Bay, on the eastern shore of Belfast Lough, and follows the North Down coast taking in swathes of County Down sweeping inland and down the entire Ards Peninsula. Taking in the main towns of Bangor and Newtownards, the Presbytery is made up of 32 local congregations. While the earliest Presbyterian minister began his ministry in Bangor in 1615, it wasn't until the 1640s that several congregations were established – each of them continuing to this day.

Presbytery of Armagh

The Armagh Presbytery encompasses much of the historic County of Armagh. Its 29 congregations ranging in size from those with 17 families to more than 550. Stretching from the southern shore of Lough Neagh to the border near Keady, the Presbytery extends to Waringstown and into the south-east corner of County Tyrone.

Presbytery of Ballymena

The Presbytery of Ballymena is made up of 31 congregations. Bounded by the North Channel on the east Antrim coast, the Presbytery extends southwards to Eskylane, then west to Tamlaght O' Crilly, in County Londonderry, and northwards to Rasharkin, through Clough and Newtowncrommelin to Cushendall. The Presbytery also takes in the nine glens that make up the famous Glens of Antrim.

Ballymena is the principal town, with Broughshane, Cullybackey, Ahoghill and Portglenone being the main villages. While heavy industry has declined in recent years, local enterprise and farming are still strong.

The oldest congregation, First Ballymena, dates back to 1627, while the most recent, Ballee, was opened in 1976. New buildings have been constructed in recent years by Wellington and First Ahoghill, with a further development planned for Buckna.

Presbytery of East Belfast

Presbytery of East Belfast is one of the three presbyteries that make up the city of Belfast, and contains 23 churches. Covering a swathe of the city east of the River Lagan, the Presbytery stretches from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Rosetta up into the Castlereagh Hills and Castlereagh Presbyterian, then out to Dundonald and on to Holywood.

It then doubles back down the eastern shore of Belfast Lough and across the Sydenham bypass to Mersey Street Presbyterian and Westbourne on the Newtownards Road before continuing to the Ravenhill Road. The oldest congregations date from 17th and 18th centuries with the vast majority of churches founded in the last century and the 19th.

Presbytery of South Belfast

The Presbytery of South Belfast runs from Townsend Street Presbyterian Church at the corner of Townsend and Divis Street, which is at the most northern point of the Presbytery. The Presbytery then stretches from there up the line of the M1 to Kilmakee in the Seymour Hill estate. It then travels eastwards to Ballycairn and onto Saintfield Road Presbyterian, from there the Presbytery follows the Saintfield Road itself towards the city centre. The Presbytery includes within its boundary Queen's University, the city centre, several hospitals, PCI's Union Theological College, Assembly Buildings, PCI's administrative heart, and 17 congregations.

Presbytery of North Belfast

The Presbytery of North Belfast is made up of 20 congregations. Stretching from the Shankill Road across Ballysillan to New Mossley and Glengormley to Rathcoole, the Presbytery then heads back down the Shore Road to Whiteabbey and the historic Sinclair Seamen's Presbyterian Church in the docks.

Presbytery of Carrickfergus

The Presbytery of Carrickfergus is the longest established of the denomination's 19 presbyteries. Bounded strategically by the scenic East Antrim coast, within, and around a triangle marked by the main towns of Ballyclare, Carrickfergus and Larne. Consisting of 20 congregations. Among these is the oldest congregation in Ireland, Ballycarry Presbyterian, whose origins date back to 1613.

Presbytery of Coleraine & Limavady

The Presbytery of Coleraine & Limavady stretches along Northern Ireland's north coast from the holiday destinations of Portrush, Portstewart and Castlerock to halfway down the western shore of Lough Foyle.

Made up of 36 congregations, a number of the churches were established in the mid to late 17th century. From Lough Foyle, the Presbytery moves across County Londonderry sweeping up Binevenagh, south to Dungiven and the northern reaches of the Sperrin Mountains. The Presbytery then moves up to Garvagh, with Kilrea and Boveedy at its western reaches.

Presbytery of Derry & Donegal

From Ballykelly in the north eastern part of the Presbytery, to Donegal Town in the south west, Dunfanaghy in the north west to Sion Mills to the south east, the cross-border Presbytery of Derry & Donegal stretches across three counties in the north western corner of the island.

With most of its 48 congregations centred around the City of Londonderry and the eastern half of County Donegal, 30 are located in Donegal with 18 in Northern Ireland. A number of the churches were established in the 1640s.

Down Presbytery

The Down Presbytery consists of 21 congregations. It encompasses the area along the western shores of Strangford Lough, from Comber to Downpatrick. Its southern bounds run from Ardglass across to Clough. The main road from Clough to Carryduff then forms the western boundary. The oldest congregation within the Presbytery, First Comber, was formed around 1645.

Presbytery of Dromore

Covering the north eastern corner of County Down, the Presbytery of Dromore extends along the Lagan Valley from the City of Lisburn, westwards towards Moira and the south eastern shore of Lough Neagh. To the south it reaches beyond Hillsborough towards the Dromara Hills and eastwards to Anahilt. Six of its 22 churches trace their history to the mid-17th century, with the newest, Elmwood Presbyterian, having been started in 1976.

Presbytery of Dublin & Munster

Incorporating most of the provinces of Leinster, Connaught and Munster, the Presbytery of Dublin & Munster is the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's largest presbytery geographically, containing 30 congregations.

The oldest churches can trace their lineage back to the mid-17th century, while the newest in the presbytery (and PCI) - Donabate Presbyterian Church in County Dublin and Maynooth Presbyterian, in County Kildare (known locally as Maynooth Community Church) - can trace their history back to the start of this century.

Presbytery of Iveagh

Formed in 1962 by an amalgamation of the former Banbridge and Rathfriland Presbyteries, the Presbytery of Iveagh is named after the historic title associated with the south and west County Down. The Presbytery has 27 congregations.

From the popular seaside resort of Newcastle in the east, the Presbytery runs north-westwards through the Mourne foothills and the Bann Valley, taking in the towns of Rathfriland and Banbridge. It then stretches as far as Gilford, Donacloney and Tandragee on its western border. Four of its congregations, Magherally, First Rathfriland, Tullylish and Loughbrickland, were all formed in the earliest period of Presbyterian Settlement in Ulster in the 17th century.

Presbytery of Monaghan

The Presbytery of Monaghan takes in more than just County Monaghan, stretching from the Wild Atlantic Way across country to the shores of the Irish Sea. Made up of 34 congregations, its extends to Dundalk in County Louth in the east, to Ballina in County Mayo to the west and from Sligo City in the northern part of the presbytery to Kells in County Meath in the south. Most of the congregations, however, are situated in counties Monaghan and Cavan.

Presbytery of Newry

The Presbytery of Newry consists of 24 congregations. It stretches from Annalong in the east, to Markethill in the west, and south to McKelvey's Grove and Garmany's Grove Presbyterian Churches across the border. The Presbytery centres on the city of Newry and includes the major towns of Kilkeel and Markethill and the Port of Warrenpoint.

Its largest congregation is Mourne Presbyterian in Kilkeel, which is also one of the largest in the denomination. The Mourne area is a popular holiday destination, particularly for caravaners and mountain-walkers.

Four congregations can trace their origins to the 17th century – First Newry, Warrenpoint, Markethill and Mourne; nine to the 18th century, and the remainder to the 19th century.

Presbytery of Omagh

Omagh Presbytery covers the geographical area of west Tyrone and all of County Fermanagh, and is one of the most widespread presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Largely rural, the presbytery is made up of 40 congregations taking in the towns of Castleterg, Newtownstewart, Omagh, Fintona, Ballygawley, Irvinestown, Enniskillen, Lisnaskea and Pettigo.

Route Presbytery

The name 'Route' is an unusual one, and is derived from the ancient territory Dalriada, which was occupied by the descendants of Riada, a chieftain who lived in the 3rd century, from which Route is derived. From Bushmills in the north, round the coast road to Ballycastle, it extends across much of north County Antrim, taking in Cloughmills to the south and Finvoy to the west with the town of Ballymoney at its heart.

With 21 congregations, the Presbytery is one of the oldest in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and contains some of the longest established congregations: First Ballymoney, Bushmills, Dervock and Ramoan Presbyterian Churches were established in 1646, with First Kilraughts following in 1660 and Finvoy Presbyterian in 1688.

Presbytery of Templepatrick

The Presbytery of Templepatrick can trace its history back to 1725, but many of its congregations trace their histories back to the earliest days of Presbyterianism in Ulster. The Presbytery itself is made up of 20 congregations.

Taking in the towns of Antrim, Crumlin, Randalstown and Templepatrick, the Presbytery lies to the north and eastern shores of Lough Neagh. Extending to just before Toome in the northern part and as far as Ballyeaston to the northeast and Dundrod in the south of the Presbytery, it reaches to Mullusk at the Presbytery's eastern edge.

Presbytery of Tyrone

Despite the name, much of the Presbytery of Tyrone is not actually in County Tyrone. Almost all of its northern congregations are in south County Londonderry and many of the congregations that are in County Tyrone aren't in the Presbytery at all.

The Presbytery was formed in 1659 and currently consists of 33 congregations, 16 in County Londonderry leaving 17 in County Tyrone. Situated on the western shore of Lough Neagh it runs from Swatragh in the north to Upper Clonaneese in the south. There are three distinct areas in the Presbytery with congregations that look to Magherafelt in the north, Cookstown in the centre, and Dungannon in the south.

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