

THE PRESBYTERY OF EASTERN VIRGINIA
A BRIEF HISTORY
2007

Prior to the year 1700, there were at least five Presbyterian ministers assigned to Church of England parishes in Virginia. These ministers served "without presbytery supervision or any intent of organizing Presbyterian churches." Although not in Anglican orders, they apparently took full care of the church. First in this area was the Rev. James Porter, in 1678, in Lynnhaven Parish in what is now Virginia Beach. The Rev. Josiah Mackie in the Elizabeth River Parish, now Norfolk, arriving around 1697, closely followed him. There is reason to think that both of these Episcopal parishes included persons of Puritan or Presbyterian persuasion.

In 1683, the Rev. Francis Makemie arrived in New York and made his way southward. Makemie had visited the south side of Hampton Roads by late 1683, and returned in 1684 to spend the better part of a year before settling on the Eastern Shore in 1685. In 1706 Makemie founded the first American Presbytery at Philadelphia, with the presbytery reporting in 1710 that, "In all Virginia there is but one small congregation at Elizabeth River and some few families favoring our way in Rappahannock and York." Among several churches that he founded, Makemie Presbyterian Church in Accomac, existed between 1708 and 1710. It was later revived in 1837 and continues in ministry today. Naomi Makemie Church was named after the wife of Francis, and is located near the site of her father's home in Onancock. Naomi and Francis Makemie made their home in Virginia, just outside of Temperanceville, where Makemie Park is now located. Her father's home was licensed in 1699 (Accomac County Court Record Book 1695-1705) as a place for meetings, and is one of the earliest court records in America of a Presbyterian place of worship.

Probably because of the domination of the Church of England, there is little information about any growth of Presbyterian Churches in Virginia until the Great Awakening that followed the Revolutionary War. Throughout this time, the Episcopal Church was established by law in Virginia; strict conformity was demanded, and everyone was required to contribute to its support. "Attendance at the meetings of non-conformists was punished by severe fines, and the rich were obliged to pay the forfeitures of their poor brethren;" (Hodge's History, p. 46). Nevertheless, having previously garnered permission from the Governor to preach and care for several frontier congregations, the Rev. Samuel Davies founded the Presbytery of Hanover, also called "the mother of all Southern Presbyteries," in 1775.

The Civil War not only divided the country, but the Presbyterian Church as well. After the war, the church grew in two parallel streams. The so-called "northern" stream was initiated by Mrs. Samantha J. Neil, the widow of a Union officer who had lost his life on a Virginia battlefield, began Presbyterian work in the South among Freedmen in 1864 at Amelia Court House, Virginia. She taught her first class under a big oak tree in Amelia for African-Americans, of all ages, who were thirsting for knowledge. From her work, Presbyterian work among Negroes began, resulting in six Black Presbyterian churches established in Amelia and Nottaway Counties. The oldest was located on the same ground on which Mrs. Neil organized her first class and was appropriately named "Big Oak." Financing came largely from the Board of National Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. In 1887, the network of churches in Virginia formed the Presbytery of Southern Virginia, which became a part of the Catawba Synod. Four churches presently within Presbytery of Eastern Virginia spring from this Synod: First United and Messiah in Norfolk, Carver Memorial in Newport News, and Community in Portsmouth.

The so-called "southern" stream witnessed the establishment of sixteen new churches within thirty years. Sentiment developed for a separate presbytery, as Hanover Presbytery was very large, with many churches clustered within the Richmond and Tidewater areas. A new presbytery emerged in the Tidewater region and was named the Presbytery of East Hanover. In 1893 the Synod of Virginia responded to an overture by defining an area to be called Norfolk Presbytery, with the boundaries similar to those of East Hanover.

Another war spurred a period of church growth when, from 1917, fifteen churches were founded in fourteen years. Then after another pause, World War II precipitated eleven churches started between 1940 and 1949, during which time there was an extraordinary shift of population from rural to urban centers.

After the reunion of the "northern and southern streams" in 1983, presbytery boundaries were adjusted as representatives from two denominations sought the best ways to combine presbyteries, in whole or part, to effectively carry out the mission of the church. The final decision left the boundaries of the new presbytery, then known as Presbytery III, essentially unchanged from the boundaries of Norfolk Presbytery (PCUS), but welcoming four predominantly African-American congregations who were members of the Presbytery of Southern Virginia (UPCUSA). A Transitional Steering Committee was elected with equal representation from both presbyteries. A conscious effort was made to plan a new presbytery, which would not project an image of four racial-ethnic congregations being absorbed by a much larger, predominantly Caucasian presbytery. Happily, on July 21, 1989, the organizational meeting of the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia was held at First Presbyterian Church, Norfolk (which had also been the site of the organizational meeting of Norfolk Presbytery in 1893).

Over the course of more than 300 years, Presbyterians have formed a closely-knit ministry in Southeastern Virginia that includes the southern Eastern Shore, and churches stretching from Gloucester and Williamsburg south to the North Carolina border and west to Franklin. There are presently 64 churches and 18,288 members, led by the Rev. J. Richard Short, General Presbyter, and the Rev. Mary Newbern-Williams, Associate Presbyter.

In addition to these churches, the presbytery has been blessed by the growth of a strong Sister Church Pairing partnership with the Presbyterian Church in Kinshasa (CPK), in the Democratic Republic of Congo, nourished by the efforts of Congo Mission Interpreter Etienne Bote-Tshiek. There is a vibrant camp and conference ministry maintained on the grounds of Makemie Woods, just north of Williamsburg, named appropriately after Francis Makemie and directed by the Rev. "Mike" Burcher. The growth of urban centers within PEVA's bounds has also led to active campus ministry in several local colleges and universities, including the Westminster Faith Center at Old Dominion University, shepherded by PEVA staff member, the Rev. Linda Rainey.

In the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia, the three-hundred-year-old legacy of James Porter, Josias Mackie, Francis Makemie, Samuel Davies, and Samantha J. Neil thrives!

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