

A Brief History of the Presbytery of Blackhawk

In a major restructure of Presbytery boundaries in the state of Illinois, The Presbytery of Blackhawk was officially organized on January 11, 1972. Prior to this, the Synod of Illinois of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. was divided into ten Presbyteries. This new configuration of four Presbyteries in Illinois would be followed on January 1, 1973, by the joining of Illinois and Indiana Synods to form the Synod of Lincoln Trails. The churches forming Blackhawk were prior members of Freeport, Ottawa, Peoria, Chicago, Bloomington, and Monmouth Presbyteries. The historic reunion between the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (“northern church”) and Presbyterian Church U.S. (“southern church”) occurred in June 1983, ushering in the new name, Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

The new 1972 boundaries were described as the Illinois counties of: Boone, Bureau, Carroll, DeKalb, Ford (except that portion east of Interstate 57 – *this caveat was added later*), Grundy, Kewanee Church in Henry County, Iroquois, Jo Daviess, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, LaSalle, Lee, Livingston, Marshall, McHenry, Ogle, Putnam, Stark, Stephenson, Whiteside, Will, Winnebago, and Washburn church of Woodford County.

Ninety-eight churches and 110 ministers were the first members of the Presbytery. These churches held a membership of 34,163 communicants. In 1972, Blackhawk churches ranged in size from 32 to 1444 members with 15 congregations counting over 500 members. Our churches were served by 86 pastors (plus 16 honorably retired) with seven church partnerships who shared their minister. We baptized 473 infants and 142 adults that year. See below for a snapshot of changes through the years.

Some other interesting figures include a per capita assessment of \$2.47 in 1972 (GA – 92¢, Synod 70¢, Presbytery 85¢) and a total budget for Blackhawk of \$139,347. Per Capita for 2021 is \$38.50 (GA-\$8.98, Synod-\$3.81, Presbytery \$25.71). The total budgeted expenses for 2021 is \$643K.

Over the years, congregations have dissolved, merged, left the denomination and in a few cases, organized. First Presbyterian Church in Galena, established in 1831, is the oldest, still existing congregation in Blackhawk Presbytery. Our most recent, still active congregation is Rockford Korean, formed in 1978. Twenty-one congregations (of the original 98) were dissolved, with an additional two organized and dissolved in the last forty years. One church left to our neighboring Presbytery and seven churches have left the denomination. Three sets of mergers were accomplished, one of these subsequently dissolved, and one congregation newly federated with a Congregational congregation. Several congregations left their original locations to re-form in a new location, typically with a new building. And at least two new church developments were attempted which ultimately proved unsuccessful in new organized congregations. As of the end of 2020, Blackhawk still supports 69 congregations.

Over the course of its history, Blackhawk has been served by 9 Stated Clerks and 6 Executive/General Presbyters, including one interim. Office staff has fluctuated between one and four people. The Presbytery offices were originally hosted at Dixon First Presbyterian, later moving to its own office in Dixon. Beginning in January 1982 the office has been on Stronghold property, first occupying the “Basswood” house ‘down the hill’ and 1500 feet south of the current Stronghold entrance, then later in the old “Maplewood” house at the top of the hill. The Brubaker building, administrative center for Stronghold, is also the current home for the Presbytery office. This building, along with the Heritage Lodge were completed in 2003 after a capital campaign richly supported by Blackhawk churches.

Many of the churches in Blackhawk have had a long history of supporting the mission and ministry of Stronghold Camp and Retreat Center. The camp pre-dates the Presbytery by about a decade after the property owned by the Walter Strong family was purchased in 1963 by the Presbyterian Camping Association of Northern Illinois, an independent entity representing four Presbyteries and indirectly associated with the Synod at that time. Following the reorganization of Illinois Presbyteries, the camp was briefly under a new alliance between Great Rivers and Blackhawk, the Bi-Presbytery Agency of Camps & Conferences. It was later transferred to the Trustees of Blackhawk Presbytery in 1976 where it has been part of its mission and ministry.

Over the course of its history, Stronghold has offered hospitality and programs for countless children and adults, providing a place for spiritual growth, renewal, collaboration, and good fun. Following a multi-year process, Stronghold Center, Inc. was formed on January 1, 2021, when the Presbytery transferred all property and camp assets to Stronghold. Though a separate legal entity from the Presbytery of Blackhawk, Stronghold remains a committed Christian organization under the Presbyterian umbrella, where the two organizations share a covenant with each other.

One of the hallmarks of Presbyterianism is its connectional nature, reflected in its organizational structure from congregation to Presbytery to Synod to General Assembly, but also within each body. The Presbytery of Blackhawk currently meets in assembly five times a year, though this has fluctuated from 4 to 6 stated meetings over the years. Council, cabinet, commissions, and committees in 1972 numbered 14 (plus 10 Mission Councils); today's business is handled by 8 active committees and commissions plus a Presbytery Council with ad hoc groups as needed. The Presbytery has encouraged intentional networks of Presbyterians through the years, the most enduring being the Presbyterian Women with a long, long legacy of its own in Blackhawk.

Also reflecting Presbyterian polity, leadership in the Presbytery has attempted a balanced representation between clergy and lay, and equity in terms of gender and age. Our first Presbytery Moderator was Rev. Shirley Wooden, who was the only female clergy member of Blackhawk at that time. Her ordination in 1962 came only six years after the first woman was ordained in the PCUSA in 1956. Blackhawk is currently home to 105 minister members, 42 of whom are engaged in active parish ministry (63 retired and members at large). We are also home to between 15-17 Commissioned Pastors, formerly called "Lay Pastors" or "Commissioned Ruling Elders", who serve in a variety of ways including as full-time solo pastors. Approximately 43% of the leaders serving our congregations today are women pastors.

Though its actual mission statement has changed through the years, the Presbytery continues to exist today in 2021 to "challenge and support congregations to be thriving faith communities" just as it did in 1972.

BLACKHAWK STATISTICS THROUGH THE YEARS						
YEAR	1972	1982	1992	2002	2012	2020
Blackhawk Churches	98	94	91	88	79	69
Blackhawk Membership	34,163	28,292	22,207	18,342	13,047	8,387
Churches over 500 members	21	15	11	8	5	2
Total PCUSA membership	2,916,757					1,301,785
Total Blackhawk Ministers (MWS)	110	113	128	141	125	105
Ministers retired + members at large	29	31	49	75	74	63
Active Parish Ministers	81	82	79	66	51	42
Commissioned Pastors					6	16

*Written and assembled by Loreen Stravers
Blackhawk Office Administrator
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