

Celebrate a Congregation Anniversary



Resources for Preserving and Proclaiming the Story of Christ's Church

For the successful celebration of any anniversary within the church, much depends upon setting aside resources well ahead of time, planning by a healthy variety of people, responsible follow-up of tasks assigned, and prayer. Among the most important are the following:

- The commemoration focuses on the many blessings and faithfulness of God through Christ. Remember that the Lord continues to be the Lord of his congregation; he has poured out his grace on the saints of the past as they worked together to proclaim the gospel.
- Form a comprehensive anniversary committee early. If plans are begun well in advance of the anniversary (a year and a half is not uncommon), a variety of special historical resources, events and worship services can be produced.
- Build into the congregational budget ample funds to help finance the anniversary events, publications, and services.
- Involve the congregation as extensively as possible in a variety of anniversary-related tasks and events.
- With specific skills and abilities in mind, ask church council, committees and leaders to carry out specific aspects of the anniversary plan.
- Produce a congregational history or yearbook utilizing photographs and stories from a variety of members and

former members. Conduct interviews with members who have been involved in major projects or who remember details of ministry activities.

- Prepare and design exhibits and displays with a heavy concentration on old photographs, artifacts, and keepsakes from the congregation's past.
- Undertake a concentrated series of special worship services, culminating in the actual anniversary day or Sunday.
- Enlist the presence and participation of former pastors and teachers of the congregation.
- Record anniversary events and worship services using a variety of media (audio, video, photographic). Remember that proper identification of individuals in photos will greatly enhance their usefulness in the future.

Below are detailed suggestions that the congregational leadership should consider in observing a congregation's anniversary.

Anniversary Worship Service(s)

It has been traditional for God's people to express their gratitude to the Lord who has blessed them so bountifully over a period of time, to acknowledge these blessings and their heritage, confident of a future under the Lord's continued forgiveness and promises. Special anniversary services may be for a single Sunday or spread out over the entire anniversary year with monthly emphases on the founders, the pastors and teachers,

congregational organizations, youth, education, social ministry, evangelism, missions, history and archives, and so on.

Orders of service may contain special music, choirs or instruments, banners, offerings and even a piece of music written specifically for the congregation's anniversary.

Some congregations have used orders of service (including hymns, Scripture readings, and the Creeds) dating back to the time of their founding, even if the first order of service was in another language. Inviting descendants of the congregation to perform, for example, German songs and hymns often sung during the time the church was established is just one possibility. Some congregations have included a mixture of languages for various parts of the service.

During the course of such anniversary services, missions or synodical ministries can be chosen and special offerings taken.

Again, make intentional plans to record the services with photography, audio or video, taking time after the event to identify individuals for future reference.

Producing a History of the Congregation

The anniversary committee is responsible for assigning qualified members to research, write, and present an updated history of the congregation's life.

At minimum, the updated congregational history can be included in a congregational pictorial directory; the first several pages of the directory are devoted to outlining the history of the congregation with text and photographs. Companies producing pictorial directories will often make introductory pages available at little financial cost.

Preferably, a separate book or booklet of the congregation's history is highly recommended. This option will give more flexibility in presenting a more detailed and

illustrated history. The costs for a stand-alone published congregational history must be taken into account but can be included in the committee's budget, or the congregation can make an appeal for sponsoring a high-quality congregational history.

The research phase of the history should include an inquiry to the WELS Archives for historical information and direction—not only about the congregation but also those who served to establish the congregation as well as those who served after the congregation was chartered (her pastors, staff ministers, and teachers).

This first phase of producing a current congregational history should also include an appeal to members and former members for photographs and stories of the congregation's past, with guidelines concerning the handling of private photographs and documents and how best to include copies of these photographs and documents in the congregation's permanent archives.

Translations of Congregational Documents

If early congregational documents are in a language other than English, consider a project to translate the official records of the parish into English. Consider both the official acts (usually recorded in the congregation's official "church-book") and the minutes of the voter assembly meetings.

Compiling a List of Official Acts

Some congregations have enlisted the help of members in preparing a spreadsheet/database of all the records of official acts beginning with Baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funeral, keyed to the sources in the official congregational ledgers. This can be a beneficial project and may serve to gain deeper interest from people interested in family history and genealogy.

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From the spreadsheet, a printed summary could be produced for inclusion in a published history of the congregation.

A complete listing could also be produced as a separate publication.

Cemetery Records

If the congregation owns one or more cemeteries, an additional project could be to prepare a complete record of all burials by copying the tombstone inscriptions and mapping the cemetery grounds. Such maps and tombstone inscriptions have become increasingly valuable to the descendants, particularly as families live in locations outside the communities that surround the congregation. See www.findagrave.com.

Photo Collecting

Announcements revolving around the retrieval and display of historic photographs of pastors, teachers, buildings, and congregational committees and service groups will bring a greater sense of depth to your anniversary celebration. Photography collections can also include the present life of the congregation. Ask members and friends of the congregation to take photos or videos of events and services in the several months leading up to the anniversary year. These current photos can then be displayed alongside the older photos collected.

Displays

Displays coinciding with the various events are intriguing for the community and present and former members. There are any number of subjects which could form the basis for separate displays, depending, of course, on the resources and spaces available. Local artists or school children could create a scale model of your historical Lutheran town and display it in the church narthex. Security for such displays is very important. Objects should be accurately labeled, identifying the subject and the owner.

Displays could also center on such subjects as:

- Wedding gowns of the past or wedding certificates.
- Baptismal certificates and Church-books, Bibles, Catechisms, Hymnals, and Devotionals.
- Photographs of former buildings, pastors, teachers, confirmation classes, weddings, and sons and daughters of the congregation who went into full-time church work.
- Altar ware, old paraments, and vestments, or furniture previously used in the sanctuary.

The success and interest in historical displays may encourage a congregation to set up a dedicated space, perhaps shared with the church library, to have permanent exhibits. Congregations engaged in building projects should seriously consider have space set aside for displays that tell the story of the congregation and its faith.

Music Festival

Utilize the languages and culture of the early days of the congregation as much as possible. Make provisions for the creation of a special hymn or music for the choir. School bands or childrens' choirs should also be included.

Maps and Charts

Because of the changes of surrounding features such as rivers, lakes, place names, road and street names, and the relocation of buildings and businesses, etc., it is helpful to prepare maps of the area that note such changes over time. This is especially helpful if the congregation itself has changed locations during its history.

Family History and Genealogy

Don't forget to gather and display family histories, genealogical tables, and family trees. Prizes could be awarded to those most thoroughly or artistically completed. Displays could be enhanced by including family photographs or heirlooms that tell the story of the family and their Lutheran faith.

Living History

A congregation's anniversary celebration may be enhanced by efforts to bring elements of the past into the present. This might include an old-time arts and crafts festival complete with ethnic foods from the period. The youth of the parish could hold an old-time lemonade picnic and play games from the period when the congregation was established.

An evening's entertainment might include men, women, and children dressed in historical costumes. Women's organizations could sew dresses patterned after those appearing in old wedding photographs. Modeling old wedding dresses and suits always proves interesting. (Check with local rental agencies for the availability of appropriate clothing.)

Men of some congregations have had beard-growing contests. Judges could determine the wearer of the most authentic costume or unique accessories. In some cases, members of a church have even obtained horses and buggies or antique cars in order to arrive at the anniversary worship service in costume. The pastor might also make use of vestments of the period and wear a black robe and *beffchen*.

Resources for the Anniversary Committee

The primary resource for your congregational anniversary celebration will, of course, come from your congregational

archives and from members, former members, and their families who have kept congregational materials produced over the years.

Another source of information can be found in the congregation's archives, such as documents produced for earlier anniversaries, church newsletters, bulletins, minutes, and reports of the congregational assembly and its boards.

Finally, the WELS Archives can significantly supplement the above resources with additional information about your congregation and the individuals who served there from documents, publications, biographical information, photographs, and artifacts archives.

welshistoricalinstitute.org/contact-us

The research staff can help you search our extensive holdings to find pertinent information from synod convention proceedings and synodical publications.

Additional sources may be found in the large online collections of historical essays and primary sources of [Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary](#) or at the [WELS Historical Institute website](#).

A Final Word

Please remember to send two copies of printed pieces such as worship service bulletins, congregational history, and anniversary event programs to the synod archives. The material you send will help us provide meaningful resources to your congregation for decades.

The Lord's blessings as you joyfully prepare for your congregational anniversary, giving thanks for his continuing faithfulness and grace.