

How to Write a Congregation's History

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



All congregations have a history that is worth writing down and should contain the answers to questions put to any good news story: "who, what, when, where, and how?" A decision has to be made whether the history is to be merely positive recollections with a look to the future or a critical analysis bringing up to date the events of the past. Both approaches can be done by acknowledging God's mercy and grace. Appoint a historical committee to develop and carry out the details of the proposed historical sketch. The committee will want to begin compiling available historical information. Normally, it is better for one person to conduct the research and write the story. The remaining members of the committee assist the researcher by gathering specific information and offering feedback and encouragement along the way.

Start by Establishing a Timeline

History need not be a simple recalling of name and dates, but these things are indispensable for establishing a helpful framework and outline for making sense of the past and the context of your story.

Note: It is not necessary to incorporate secular history in a congregational account. However, tying in secular events, on a national or local level, can help anchor the congregation's history to points readers may already be familiar with and help them make connections.

*However, **tying in secular history should be done sparingly and judiciously.** For example, while noting the context of WWII and members' participation in the war may be prudent, giving an account of the Battle of Iwo Jima because a member was present is an example of a major derailment. Write an article or a separate book if you find worthy stories.*

- I. What Are Some of the Secular Events to Consider?
 - a. Immigration, local government, elections, transitions, death of leaders.

- b. Catastrophes, crises, and other events that materially affected the community and parish, including earthquakes, tornadoes and other natural disasters, also social and political crises.
 - c. Unusual weather developments, particularly if it affected the work of the parish and contributed to a stepping up or down of the parish's program, worship services.
 - d. Health and welfare—public housing, social reform, epidemics.

- II. What Are Some of the Religious Events to be Included?

Be sure to start with the congregation's church book of official acts, council minutes, and newsletters. Articles in WELS publications about pastors and anniversaries are often available. Don't assume that anything written down must be completely accurate.

- a. First recorded worship (possibly in circuit rider records) and formal establishment of the congregation with a constitution.

- b. Changes in congregational officers, including names and dates of transition.
- c. Calls extended to pastors and teachers, and notices of acceptance or rejection.
- d. Beginnings or milestones during programs conducted by the congregation, such as building programs, stewardship programs.
- e. Significant actions by voters' assembly, program boards and church council.
- f. Occasions in the life of the congregation marked by special services (e.g., dedications, installations, ground breakings, confirmations).
- g. Any first or last in the life of the congregation.
- h. Statistical milestones achieved (e.g., most number of people gathered for one worship service; five-hundredth baptism; day school enrollment at all time high).
- i. Purchase of major equipment or property by the congregation and also sale of same.
- j. Events in congregation's educational ministry (e.g., graduation, opening of school, vacation bible school, staff changes, textbook purchases).

Once a timeline is assembled, it should be edited for consistency and a relative degree of conciseness. The timeline may be published on the website or presented in some other way as a stand-alone project.

However, the timeline may simply be one step in a larger project. Following the assembly of a good timeline, a narrative can be formed. Some themes may be observed and fit into separate chapters. Other items that do not fit into the story can be cut if not important or relevant, or they can be put into foot/endnotes.

Answer Key Questions

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History committee members can put together a list of any "oral history" interviews that may need to be conducted. It will be the committee's job also to make all plans and arrangements for a special service or celebration that may be conducted in conjunction with the completed historical product. The extent of such a committee's involvement is largely dependent upon the degree to which the congregational historical record will be used, and the format (s) of the final product: pamphlet, celebration, service, etc.

Resources in which the local parish can focus its research are minutes of the voters meetings; baptismal, confirmation, marriage and burial records; local newspapers, old church bulletins and programs; previous congregational histories; the parish paper or newsletter; reminiscences of older members and so forth. Items that the historical researcher and historical committee should consider:

- How, where and when was the parish organized?
- Who assisted in its organization?
- What were the causes?
- Where did the people come from who participated in the organization? What were they looking for? What did they develop?
- Who were the pastors, teachers, and laymen who participated in the congregation's building and growth? **Use photographs.**
- Compile a list of those who have served the parish since it began and the extent of their service. Include not only full-time church workers, but also vicars, student teachers, congregational officers, organists and others who gave dedicated service to the congregation over the years.
- Who were the charter members? List them. Are any still living?

- What buildings have been used and are currently in use? How financed, where located, how used? **Use photographs.**
- If the congregation has ever relocated, including a map at this point is very important.
- What was the congregations' association with the church at large? Provide details of Synodical affiliation, financial support from mission treasury, church extension, etc.
- Worship in the parish; liturgical format; hymnals; languages; preaching; attendance; how festivals (Christmas, Easter, Reformation, Thanksgiving, etc.) were/are celebrated; and general conditions.
- Schools; number of grades; how many years per course; percentages of attendance; non-Lutheran children; state support; unusual conditions; facilities; transportation; teachers and their backgrounds; parental involvement;
- Sunday school; part-time educational agencies; V.B.S., Saturday school, released time, Bible classes, etc. What organizations does the parish have?
- Ladies' Aid, young people's organization, ushers' club, dart ball or bowling leagues, etc. **Use photographs.**
- If the parish at one time was rural, include a map of the area served, pinpointing the locations of its buildings. If it is rural today, include a map for more ready identification and accessibility. If the name of the community or the post office address has changed, **indicate names and changes.**
- Add human interest stories wherever possible. Unusual events in the community may have affected the work of the congregation. (Economic, social, health, epidemics, war, legislation, etc.)
- If the congregation owned or owns one or more cemeteries, include notes on its organization, number of burials, and

changes in its administration. Important tombstone inscriptions may also prove interesting. Locate the cemetery on a map if it is not adjacent to your present building.

- List sons and daughters of the parish who have entered the full-time work of the church.

More Resources

- After the resources of a local nature have been exhausted, there is a possibility that additional information may be obtained from the synod archives or seminary essay file. It is preferable to have a representative of the congregation do the research at the archives with the assistance of our staff. However, where great distances are involved, making such research too costly, we will be happy to assist in any way possible.
- Notices of groundbreaking, cornerstone laying, dedication, rededication, etc., of church buildings, appearing in the synodical publications may furnish helpful data. During earlier years of Synod, "traveling missionaries," who may have reached your congregation's area, published reports of their activities in various publications.
- District and Synodical Proceedings will supply the date on which the parish joined the Synod.
- District histories may contain references either to the pastors and teachers who served or to the parish itself.

Writing and Editing

It should be evident that simply answering the above questions in order would not make a fascinating read. Some sections of the history may be more easily understood if they are presented engagingly with tables, charts, diagrams, maps, etc. Some information could be put on a list.

However, a good congregational history will tell one or more stories that weave together relevant and connected themes. Without embellishing or offering vivid speculation, the author should try to write a compelling narrative that remembers God's work in the congregation. The committee at large can be very helpful in this. The author may wish to give the committee the compiled timeline and answer questions from the members. Afterward, the author may ask, "So, what do you think our story is?"

Always keep track of your sources. Preferably, a polished history will utilize foot/endnotes for specific information to aid future historians and researchers. At the very least, include a complete list of "works cited" in the back of the book.

The Finished Product

If your historical committee produces a printed history (surely a desirable result), most members of your congregation will probably want a copy. Print it as nicely as can be reasonably afforded.

Illustrate it well and caption the illustrations. Be careful with copyrighted material. Many congregations have increased the value of their printed history by including transcribed lists of official acts (baptisms, confirmation, marriages, and burials) as appendices. Finally, send two copies of the printed history to the synod archives. Your state or local historical society might also appreciate a copy.

Finally, **put something online!** You may be surprised how many people look at church websites hoping to find some history of the congregation and find nothing at all. It is a shame that so many "about us" sections omit any mention of God's saints and shepherds and their work in his name in the past.

As mentioned above, a good timeline with some pictures may be an efficient way to take

up little space and still share a lot of information. Otherwise, a synopsis of a larger history could be posted with links to purchase full-length histories. Some churches dedicate larger sections with several pages of information on pastors, building projects, cemeteries, etc.

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