

Why Write a Congregational History?

The answer to this question lies in two key phrases: what is a congregation and what are its functions?

- What is a congregation? A congregation is a unique group of individuals who regularly gather to worship at a particular place. This group has a unique beginning and a unique environment.

- What are its functions? Each unique congregation is a cherished place, a place that remains the same throughout turmoil, joy, crisis, change, blessing, which comes into all people's lives day by day.

Churches, as a whole, provide sources of meaning and hope for more Americans than any other single type of volunteer organization. A congregation however, is a unique group that shares joys and sorrows, baptisms, marriages and funerals - the landmark happenings of life.

- What is a landmark happening of life? Our daughter was four when we returned to Abilene and to Hillcrest. She was baptized there, married there, and brought her first born to worship there, creating the threads that provide the structure of her life.

When one of our older Hillcrest sisters was asked what she wanted for a birthday celebration, she replied, "I want all of my family to come and sit with me at church on Sunday morning." That doesn't sound too hard to do; but as modern families do, they were scattered coast to coast across the nation. To her delight, they came, her children, her children's children, and their children.

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Oldest Form of Human Activity

Congregational functions are one of the oldest and most enduring forms of human activity. Throughout both the Old and New Testament the stories of groups of people brought together to worship have been told. And we know about them because they have been written down and passed along through the generations.

What I know about my colonial family comes from legal records. From the 1700s, we have the Virginia Northern Neck Land Grants, personal property tax lists, court proceedings (my forefather was appointed to make and repair the road that passed his house up to Peter Reid's mill.) Other available documents are Revolutionary War Service records, land deeds, diaries of itinerate missionaries, as well as will books.

Two generations later we have census records, newspapers and transcribed oral history which tells me about my forefathers moving down the Ohio river in keelboat. When they got to the Great Falls, they packed their goods around the falls, and let the boat down by ropes and grapevines over the falls. Likely these were commonplace happenings in those days, but today this method of moving is unique.

Written Words Interpret Congregational Behaviors

As common place as our day-by-day congregational behavior may seem to us, unless it is described and interpreted by current observers, much of it will be lost forever. Do you remember brush arbor meetings?

"The Smith Springs meeting was held under a brush arbor. Oil lamps furnished lighting. A box was nailed to a post to hold the songbooks. A hard rain began falling as one sermon was being finished but the lamps kept burning. There were several confessions and we took the candidates out and baptized them in the rain, 'at the same hour of the night'." - Jesse P. Sewell

Brush arbor meetings were one of the great social events of the year. Everyone knew what a brush arbor meeting would be. Ask a young person today what a brush arbor meeting is and see if you get a glimmer of recognition. Within our own lifetime, there have been similar changes.

A written congregational narrative provides a sense of accomplishment and new perspectives of these deeds. By putting these deeds and figures together in a meaningful way, the assembly gets a better picture of the congregational identity, of what the goals of the church leadership are, and of the accomplishments of the year. The historical narrative will provide a plumb line which is anchored in the past to chart the future.

Former Hillcrest pulpit minister, Dwight Robarts, in one of the last Sundays of each year lists the accomplishments of the congregation for that year, among which may be mission trips, workshops and community outreach to the Hillcrest neighborhood. In Dwight's notes below, we see in the primary sources from which he drew his information, and in the memory of his hearers.

Here are some of the significant events of 1998. I don't know whether this is the first thing, but it was the first thing that came to my mind. It is our family retreat down at HEB camp. I think it was a significant thing. We had about 150 folks who went down there and we had a great time together, and one of the things that we discovered is that we really like working together. We got evaluation back from the folks that said, "We like putting meals together and cleaning up dishes," and all that kind of thing. I don't really understand that. But anyway, it was a lot of fun, and a great exercise.

Focus on the marriage came along in April. That's what we did with our folks here; we took people with significant anniversaries and took them through a one month reminder, praying with them, elders going into their home and meeting, seeing videos and just celebrating the significance of those marriages. Summer missions contributions, \$50,000 given one Sunday for missions for Hillcrest for the summer. This is our folks going out and doing things. This is our kids doing Opt Camp in McCallen; it was folks going to Africa, it was a lot of things like that. And of course, the youth did the spring break trip to Indianapolis and to Phoenix and to Opt Camp in McAllen.

Vacation Bible School, we had a great vacation Bible school this year. It was the best vacation Bible school that we have ever had. In fact, it was so good that we took it on the road to San Diego. A lot of folks after Vacation Bible School loaded our stuff up in vans and suburbans and did it for a church out there.

And then came the tailgate party; that was not for a basketball game or a football game or a baseball game, but it was for our July fourth outreach here for all of those folks in our parking lot to watch the fireworks. We fed all of those folks you know; we invited them to come to church and all of that. You know, I don't know that we can see tangible results in this congregation because of that except that it changed us. And I think the more and more that we do this kind of thing the more and more we will see fruit.

We did the same kind of thing Halloween night with our trunk party and then we took the focus on the marriage outreach and invited folks from the community. We had no idea about whether that would work at all. Would people come to a strange place, would they let folks to their home to visit them that they didn't know, that they really didn't have relationship to encourage them to pray over their marriage. And the answer to that question is "yes" that there are folks out there who really want to be encouraged in their marriage; they are struggling with those marriages and their marriages are important to them, and they are looking for ways to be encouraged and come more in mind with God's will.

Financial peace university kicked off this month with 30 couples and then a couple of Sundays ago we had our special contribution for relief of folks who had been victimized by hurricane

Mitch in the Honduras, that \$10,700 we took up in contributions. The Sunday before that we filled up almost this entire pulpit area with food for Central Abilene Ministries. You put all of that together. We have given over \$ 62,000 in special contributions outside of the budget this year for special emphasis at Hillcrest. All of that says nothing about the fact that we have had 40 baptisms and 106 additions by transfers so far in 1998. But we are not done yet, the Lord's not done. We have got two weeks to go. Maybe those numbers will go up. This is the most baptism that we have had in a single year in over 10 years. So it has really, really been a good year.

How to Do a Congregational History

PLAN * PLAN * PLAN * PLAN!

Good planning is the key to a well-written record of congregational history. This is exceedingly important given the numerous elements such as congregational and personal records, anniversaries and historical dates, and budgeting issues that tie together to form the congregational history. Without proper planning, it would become very difficult to coordinate these elements and identify the scope, format and length of the project.

You will need to be organized. Form a group that is interested in congregational history by seeking willing volunteers from all age groups (the oldest to the youth because each age will have a different perspective) and from the different church ministries. A committee of capable people could draw up the outline of the project - The Plan - to create a unique congregational history.

Timeline

Make a timeline for writing and publication schedules. You need a goal; even if it does need to be altered in order to move the project along. Pinpoint when a church history would be needed. Anniversaries are good target dates in multiples of 25: 25, 50, 75, 100. Allow two to four years for the project depending on its size and depth.

Here are the timeline elements:

- Get leadership approval. Set up an appointment to get on the meeting schedule to gain approval of church leadership for a published history.
- Budget. During the second leadership meeting:
 - get cost estimates from printers and binders;
 - determine needed equipment (tape recorders, cameras, computers and software, and other needed supplies);
 - establish a budget, administered through the church office;
 - discuss personnel positions and policies.
- Selection of People. Hold a meeting of interested participants, selected by appointment or invitation. Specify scope, format and length of history. Decide type of history: chronological, narrative or interpretation.
- Assign responsibilities. Writers
- Researchers. Find materials and create lists of people
- Graphic and layout design. Covers, end pages, title pages, fonts, point styles, column widths

- Photographers. Find pictures from the past, take pictures from the present, make photograph selections including cropping.
- Interviewers. Talk with people of all ages about working with the congregation.
- Proofreaders. Catch the errors as early as possible.
- Photocopy/scanners. Have copies made of all pages before they are given to the printer. Have pictures digitized for best clarity.
- Staff data. Obtain staff's addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses.
- Staff Meetings. Distribute outline of goals and organizational structure. Get progress reports from the staff. Create a rough ladder of deadlines and include dates and names of those responsible for the materials on the deadlines.

Example:

April 1 - draft form of Chapter One completed; writer

April 15 - editor/writer meeting about how to proceed; editor/writers

April 22 - photographs, graphics selected for Chapter One; photographers, graphics

- Training Session. Train writers on the computer software system. Teach techniques of interviewing, create a list of questions to be asked, be sure necessary equipment is available.
- Promote the Book. "Hype" the delivery.
- Distribution Event. Plan an event or anniversary party for the distribution of the history. Give staff recognition.
- Debriefing. Plan for a time for the staff to get together for a debriefing after the publication of their work.

Doing Research

James P. Wind in *Places of Worship: Exploring Their History* has put together a list of probing questions that will start a researcher on the quest of a true word picture of the congregation.

- Who? Who has created this congregation? Its leaders? Its quiet pew sitters? Its discontented? Who have joined? Who left and why? Who wanted change? Who didn't want change? Who have been spiritual people? The moral consciences of the group? The status seekers? The power brokers? Who did the congregation seek as members? Whom have they shunned? Who tells the congregational story to the next generation?

- What? What did the founders set out to achieve when this congregation was formed? What have new members wanted? What questions or problems have caused conflict? What is the congregational style for dealing with controversy and resolving conflict? What is the congregational self-image? Her customs, traditions, and values? What is she proud of? Embarrassed about? What have been the key turning points in congregational life? What have been the greatest challenges? Achievements? Disasters? What held this congregation together and threatened to pull it apart?

- When? When did this congregation begin, when have dramatic changes come? When does it meet for worship? When has it taken new directions? Or reaffirmed old ways of doing things? When has new leadership taken its place? When has the congregation celebrated? When will the life of this congregation end? That's a sobering thought isn't it?

- Where? Where did the first members come from? Where do new members come from? Where has the congregation built buildings, and placed her priorities? Where have the ministers come from? Where do members go when they leave this congregation? Where is this congregation's mission? Where does she turn for help or resources? Where do the new ideas come from? Where have the congregation's most popular competitors come from?

- Why? Why did this congregation come into being? Why was the building designed like it was? Why have the new leaders come and old leaders left? Why have people continued with or failed to join this group? Why has she spent her resources the way she does? Why do people continue to gather, week in and week out?

- How? How does this congregation express its fundamental beliefs in specific practices? How has power and decision-making been handled? How is the money spent? How does she respond to change in society or neighbors? How does the congregation tell its story? In music? In social settings? In theology?

You may have ready answers to some of the questions, but there are some you likely haven't even thought about. Because each congregation is unique, there are no perfect or complete sets of questions or answers to the questions. They simply provide a route for a researcher to take. Armed with these comprehensive set of questions, the researcher can now seek places to find answers.

Research Resources

Since congregational history is actually the history of the congregation and its members, the material for writing this history can be garnered from numerous resources, both public and personal. Access to personal holdings and memoirs however, may be constrained by the owners. Therefore, it is essential that you establish a good rapport with the owners beforehand, so as to be privy to these materials more easily.

- Primary Sources. A wide base of primary sources provides for the best interpretation and understanding. These sources include:

- Church minutes of elders, deacons, and committee meetings should be preserved to protect the congregation and her leaders in legal matters.
- Legal papers such as deeds, mortgages, bills of sale, contracts for equipment. Copy the originals and keep them in a safe or a safety deposit box. Use the copies for most of the researchers' needs.
- Financial records for income and outgo.
- Reports issued by ministers, elders, committees, relating to church work, surveys, activities, plans, and projects need to be kept. Dates are needed on all papers.
- Blueprints of buildings should be kept to show where electrical, plumbing, and computing lines are located, where the weight-bearing columns are, or the size of a given space for carpeting or other replacements. The architectural style of the building tells something about the identity the congregation wishes to project.
- Membership rolls including how an individual was received by baptism, or by transfer of membership, and the date of the event.

- Staff correspondence dealing with policies, functions, personnel, plans and programs. Much is written in letter that is not made public until years later, usually after the death of the writer.

- Congregation Publications. These encompass a wide variety of materials that includes:

- Newsletters like Sissy's Sendout by Thelma B. Coffman, or God's Work in Review for 1992 by Kay Patton
- Bulletins like the Colorado Christian
- Church directories like the one at Culbertson Heights Church of Christ, Oklahoma City or the Hillcrest Church of Christ in Abilene
- Handbooks
- Brochures
- Historical booklets
- Promotional fliers
- Annual reports
- Leaders' diaries
- Printed orders for installation, funerals, ground breaking, cornerstone laying, dedication ceremonies
- Telephone books and city directories help to establish times and places

- Media. Tape and/or video recorded interviews with members is another way to collect materials. This medium is not currently long lasting and should be transcribed. Jack and Marble Burford left a legacy to the ACU Library of over 5,000 tapes of ACU Lectureships, workshops, and special programs they had taped in their lifetime. The ACU Library now has these tapes with a printed finding aid. This would be a good place to start to see if sermons of your congregational ministers have been recorded.

- Photographs. Photographs add a great deal to a history by bringing back memories and sharpening details. Readers frequently look to the pictures to tell them what they might want to know more about. Identify pictures, yours and the ones that the committee receives.

Even now, our three-year-old grandson, James, is pointing to the pictures of his seven-year-old brother Robert, and telling us, "that is me, that is James." Unless it is written down, what will James say when he is 30? "That is me, James."

When gathering photographs for mass copying, plan to have them digitized. The procedure produces a sharp, clear image that is easy to reproduce as well as long lasting.

- Newspapers and Journals. Dr. John C. Stevens told us many times as he searched the ACU student paper, the Optimist for his ACU history, No Ordinary University, "This is a gold mine of information." The local newspaper, church and church affiliated papers carry many nuggets of truth. For instance, if your current minister has been with you for more than a couple of years, can you pinpoint the date that he came to work with your congregation?

- The church bulletin will likely help, but the Christian Chronicle or Gospel Advocate may also yield valuable information. There is a print index of Gospel Advocate from 1855 to 1982 available through the ACU Library catalogue. Texas congregations will want to check Eli Borden's paper, The Christian Pilot or the microfilm of Burnett's Budget at ACU.
- Electronic Resources. In an age where anyone with a computer and access to the World Wide Web can upload and download information, it can become overwhelming to sort through, or even know where to begin with any sort of search. Our suggestion would be to [contact](#) ACU's Special Collections with some general questions about what you are looking for. They should be able to help point you in the right direction.
- Biographies. Biographies and family histories of church leaders as well as county histories shed light on church happenings. Biographical sources include:
 - Batsell Barrett Baxter, Preachers of Today, 5 volumes,
 - H. Leo Boles, Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers
 - Restoration Serials Index has an author list of current writers and lecturers in the Churches of Christ.
- Personal Holdings. Members of the congregation may have materials in their possession. Be willing to photocopy if necessary. The sources may be primary or secondary and will come from all of the family storage places like attics, basements, closets, trunks and boxes. Some may be treasure troves with surprises to discover.
- Others. Secondary sources include:
 - The church office may have kept congregational, local, or regional scrapbooks of congregational happenings.
 - Imagine my surprise when I found a book written by one of my great-great-great-great-uncles in the Ohio State University holdings. Contact your local library. If they don't have what you need, they may be able to arrange an inter-library loan of materials that you need.
 - Community resources such as country court houses, history collections, college and university libraries, and research centers such as ACU's Center of Restoration Studies or the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville will be helpful. Vertical files of ephemeral materials (newspaper clippings, programs, announcements, published and unpublished writings) may have the information you need.

Writing Mechanics

The quality of writing depends on the time and care invested in the research. Historians are concerned about which things endure, which things change, and which disappear as time passes.

- Bibliography. A full bibliographical entry of every resource you consult is needed. For example:

- Foster, Douglas A. Will the Cycle be Unbroken? Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 1994.
- Call Number: REST 261.09F754w

- Taking Notes

- * Be ethical! Look at every available resource you can find to have a balanced, complete story.
- * Be open! Allow the research to lead you beyond what you thought you would find. Don't start with conclusions and then find materials to support your conclusions. In an oral history interview I did with Dr. Richard Hughes, he told how R.L. Roberts reacted when he presented his plan to research and write a Restoration Movement history book within one year.
- * Be honest! Record the facts and quotations accurately. Do not change the meanings or take material out of context to give the spin that you want it to have. Remember the views of the distressed church members must be weighed against the bubbling hopefulness of newly appointed ministers. The shades of gray need to be blended in the rose-colored narratives.

- Writing the Story

- The committee should select a researcher who is fair-minded with good judgement. He/She should have good writing and English skills as well as the time to undertake such a project.
- * The committee should schedule the writing task with a timeline. The history of a congregation starts with its first official act. It does not start with the Acts of the Apostles or the Protestant Reformation or the history of the Stone-Campbell movement.

- Writer's Outline

- Several types of outlines might be considered. A congregational history may be told chronologically. This would be the life of the congregation in simple historical sequence.
- A second arrangement could be by periods of time or by tenure of the ministers. At Hillcrest, we have had the following pulpit ministers: Carl Spain, Jimmy Jividen, Terry Bell, and Dwight Roberts. A History of Hillcrest could have four sections: one for Spain, one for Jividen, one for Bell, and one for Roberts.
- A third way is to organize by subject. This is an interpretation of the history and is the most difficult to write. Dr. Jim Mankin's doctoral dissertation, Role of Social Service in the Life and Growth of the Madison Church of Christ would be an example of a congregation's history that has been interpreted by subject.
- Include the human-interest stories.
- Pay close attention to accurate spellings, particularly of proper names; people are very protective of their names.
- The writer should be prepared to make two or three drafts as the committee provides editorial suggestions. Dr. Charlie Marler was the editor for Dr. Stevens' book No Ordinary University. I could always tell when Dr. Marler was reading because Dr. Stevens would be back in the archives looking for more materials to be added to the script.
- Footnotes or endnotes should be prepared for unfamiliar materials and all quotations. Use an accepted writer's guide such as Turabian, MLA, APA.
- Appendices might include copies of legal documents such as the deed to the building, lists of charter members, present members, ministers, elders, and deacons. Include as many names as

possible. Statistics may be placed in appendices as well, including membership through the years, baptisms, and committees.

- For your material to be useful to future researchers, it is imperative that you create an index. Our lives are so full that there is not time to read an entire book to see what is being said about one detail. An index will help insure maximum use of your work.

How to Publish

From the beginning, plan to publish. Obtain estimates of the costs related to the project before you start. Carefully prepare the copy. Select three different readers to proofread the manuscript. Each reader will bring his/her experience and expertise to the reading. All three editors of Restoration Serials Index read the printouts of the current year.

Photographs increase the cost of the publication but their value is unlimited. Glossy back and white photographs with sharp contrast work the best. Have each print digitized for optimal reproduction quality. Pictures from newspapers, maps, and books do not reproduce with the clarity that photographs and digital pictures do.

Copyright all material by placing a © on the back of the title page with the date and name of the person or group, who did the writing and the notation, "all rights reserved".

- Book Order: Use this book order in putting the pages together.

- Title page
- Dedication page
- Preface or forward
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations
- Text footnotes
- Appendices
- Index - ALWAYS INDEX

- How many copies to print.

- For each church family, including the homebound.
- For new families as they come to the congregation.
- For families to purchase the copies for gifts.
- For the local public library.
- For the ACU Center for Restoration Studies.
- For the Texas State Library, Austin, TX or your own state library.
- For former ministers, elders and members.

- Promotion. Timing is an important component of getting the word out after a history has been published and is available for distribution. An anniversary celebration would be a good time.

- Informational fliers are good reminders. Folks can pick up copies to mail to friends and family who might be interested in having a copy of their own.
- Pulpit announcements made by an energetic member of the congregation or the minister.
- News releases with a photo, if possible, to the newspapers.
- Posters.
- Direct mail to former members.

Preservation of Materials

Historic congregational materials need to be properly stored and identified. It is best not to allow the history materials to be kept by one person in his/her home; they are not readily accessible for others of the congregation to use. When there is a death or a need to move, those who handle the materials may not realize their value and could allow them to be destroyed.

Because of the short life expectancy of audio cassettes, they need to be refreshed and transferred onto new media products often. Photocopy newspaper clippings onto acid-free paper. Newsprint is very acidic because of the chemicals used in the paper's production. It will deteriorate quickly and fall apart.

Use no conservation treatment that cannot be undone if necessary. Use simple treatments to prepare materials for storage. Spread the paper documents out flat; remove the metal paper clips, the pressed leaves and the flowers, as well as the rubber bands and cellophane tape.

- Photographs

DO:

- Identify people, events, and dates.
- Use black and white photos because the process is more stable and will outlive color photos by many years. Color photos will fade.
- Store photos away from light and placed in plastic or paper protective covers. Light may cause fading and brittleness. Gritty dirt and dust will be abrasive to photo surfaces.
- Store negatives separate from prints when possible.
- Place photos in a commercial archival-quality album.

DON'T:

- Touch a photograph anywhere but the edges. Skin oil will damage any part of the emulsion that you touch.
- Use tape to attach the pictures to a sheet.
- Use paper clips, rubber bands, or other kinds of fasteners on pictures.
- Use highly colored paper, magnetic or "no stick" albums. These will deteriorate rapidly.

For more information on caring for photographic collections, visit the [Library of Congress](#).

- Safe Environment. Keep the materials that you have decided to keep in a safe environment. It should have moderate temperature and low relative humidity; clean air; out of any direct sunlight or long term exposure to indoor lighting. Use good housekeeping practices. Don't store materials in the attic or basement or the garage or near a water source, like overhead steam or water pipes.

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Place materials on metal shelving or in metal cabinets.

Air-conditioning will ventilate, filter air, control temperature, and control humidity.

Paper is very affected by direct contact with natural or artificial lighting. Keep papers away from the direct sunlight, i.e. windows. When materials are on exhibit, turn the pages or remove from the exhibit every three months.

Check the area often to look for signs of vermin, insects, and excessive dust.

Handle the collections carefully. Eating or drinking should not be allowed in the areas of the collections.

Plans should be made for preservation procedures to use with natural disasters, e.g. fire, flood, storm and broken pipes. The Center for Restoration Studies is on the middle floor of the library; there is a floor between the papers and the roof and a floor between the materials and the basement, which in our case is located in a natural waterway. The Center does not have an outside wall, which gives additional protection from the elements. Lights may be turned off and on as researchers have need of them.

- Suppliers and Practices. Please [contact](#) ACU's Special Collections for a list of current trusted suppliers of preservation materials, as well as starting a conversation on how they can help you preserve your resources.

Conclusion

Within a generation, what is known about your congregation, your people, your hopes, and your accomplishments will be mostly forgotten unless they are recorded. Put your fingers on the keyboard today to start saving the story of your congregation.

This resource was originally created by Erma Jean Loveland, and has seen little modifications since being published on the original Center for Restoration Studies website. If you find that any of the information no longer applies, or if you have any questions, please contact ACU's Special Collections.

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