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Ask the Archivist: The Congregational Anniversary - Part 1

Paul Daniels
Luther Seminary

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Ask the Archivist: The Congregational Anniversary - Part 1

First Thoughts:

One of the many aspects of my work that I enjoy is working with congregations in planning their celebration of a major anniversary. The life of a congregation, like the life of an individual, contains important milestones. For the church, these milestones include celebrating the community's anniversary, especially those marking 75, 100, 125 and 150 years of ministry. It is a time to reverently thank God for those saints among us whose lives of service helped advance God's work in the world. It is also a time to joyfully celebrate the birthday of our particular community of faith. A successfully observed anniversary provides both expressions, each a testimony to God's unchanging faithfulness and presence among us.

Setting the Tone:

I've noticed several common traits found in effective anniversary celebrations. Among these is the avoidance of nostalgia, or the "gee, it was great when..." approach. It is far too easy for us to set a tone that only looks back, but not in honest, reflective or even interesting ways. Rather, the "nostalgia trip" that some anniversaries fall into leads us back into a past that may never have really existed in the first place. At the very least, it does not look forward to where God is leading us now. It is possible to both honor and celebrate the stories of God's work among us, but to do so with care, honesty and even humor. Not only will we learn more using this approach, but we will also enjoy the effort much more.

So, what do I mean by saying that studying the past can propel us forward? First, look for threads of continuity that can be pulled forward to today and beyond. For instance, in preparing your congregational history you may discover (or re-discover) that your church has always been interested in global missions, or outreach in the community or the richness of new forms of worship. Whatever these special traits are, look for ways in which they are expressed today in your life together and even dream about how they might look in the years ahead. This is a life-giving, mission-focused approach to the anniversary celebration.

Planning the Scope:

There are many factors to consider when planning an anniversary celebration. These include the lead time you have, the size and energy level of your committee and the budget you will work with, to name just a few. It is important in the initial meetings of the committee to be realistic about how much can be done *well* in the time you have and with the budget you have. In general, "less is more" is a good guide. Setting out a limited number of activities and products is a good rule of thumb. For instance, focusing on creating a new (or simply updated) church history, a weekend anniversary gala event and several newsletter columns might be enough, and leave people wanting more. On the other hand, you may want to use the anniversary to get to work on the church archives, digitally scan at-risk records, compile oral history interviews with church members, or commission a work of art or a piece of music for the event. The options are nearly endless, make realism a critical part of your planning.

Parts 2 and 3 of the Congregational Anniversary series, will discuss the makeup of the anniversary committee, how to write a strong congregational history, the basic "how-to's" of oral history interviews and what makes a successful series of anniversary weekend events.

Please note: I'm happy to advise congregations in more detail by email, phone, online materials and onsite visits.

Paul Daniels, ELCA Region 3 Archives and Luther Seminary Archives
651.641.3205 pdaniels@luthersem.edu