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Celebrating the Congregational Anniversary: Planning the Congregational History, Part 1

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“Ask the Archivist” by Paul Daniels

Celebrating the Congregational Anniversary: Planning the Congregational History, Part 1

Among the most frequent questions I receive are those dealing with the congregational history. This important project is usually planned alongside the celebration of a significant anniversary. This makes sense since the church anniversary, especially if it's for a 50th, 100th or 150th milestone, is a natural time for reflecting on God's activity in the life of the congregation over the years.

As with other major projects of the anniversary celebration, careful consideration should be given to several questions about the history project early on. I want to suggest several factors that, if addressed thoughtfully, will affect the outcome of the history project in positive ways.

Capacity for the Project - spend time thinking together about the commitment and energy needed for the effort. The congregational history is usually just one of several planned efforts for the anniversary celebration. It is also one of the most labor intensive and can be costly if not budgeted for properly. It's important to be honest about the level of engagement for the project that you're likely to have. For instance, will you have the committee members to advise on the project and the writer(s) able to create an effective, engaging narrative?

Scope and Audience - it's also important to define how broad, as well as in-depth, you want the history to be. For instance, if you are celebrating a 150th anniversary and you already have a well-done centennial history, you may not want to re-write the congregation's entire story, but only the past 50 years as an addendum to the earlier work. If, on the other hand, you've recently discovered church records that were not used in the original narrative it would be a wonderful time to weave this new information into the church's story.

Additionally, you will need to think about who the intended audience for the history is. Will it be predominantly an “in-house” narrative, intended for the congregation itself or will it place the church's story within the larger community around it? As a reader of many of these histories, I can tell you that the narratives that convey the congregation's ministry stories within God's wider world are much more compelling, interesting and simply better reading. Don't underestimate the interest of the larger community in your church's important and singular contributions to the community they've been grounded in for many years.

It's also important to think about how the history could be part of the “welcome and orientation package” for new members and even confirmation students. Congregational story telling as outreach can be a wonderful resource.

Format - early on you will need to determine if the most effective way to tell your church's story is the traditional written narrative in printed form or a video compilation of memories or some type of online presence - maybe even a hybrid combination of all three. The bane and the blessing of the times we live in is that there are simply so many good options for delivering stories to readers or viewers. It can be very challenging to sort out the options and determine which one will best serve your purposes.

Next Steps: Planning the Congregational History, Part 2 will address the style and content of the narrative.