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Celebrating the Congregational Anniversary: Planning the Congregational History, Part 3

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“Ask the Archivist” by Paul A. Daniels

Celebrating the Congregational Anniversary: Planning the Congregational History, Part 3

Over the years working with churches planning anniversary celebrations that have included a congregational history project, I have been asked a number of excellent (and similar) questions people face when getting into the “nuts and bolts” of the history writing effort. In this, the third and final installment in this series on writing the congregational history, we will address some of these questions:

1. “You say we should do in-depth research based on original source materials for our history project. What do you mean by this? What is original source material?”
-The congregational history is an important opportunity to tell the full story of your church and its ministries, but this doesn’t happen without digging deep in the rich store of congregational records that all churches hold. Original material includes records that are unique to your church, including your council minutes, annual reports, newsletters, newspaper clippings, photographs and correspondence. These will provide you the raw material you will need to build the historical narrative.
2. “How do we handle the difficult or challenging events in our story?”
-This can be an especially tricky challenge for congregations that have a history of conflict or division. While the congregational history is not necessarily the best place to attempt a resolution of past difficulties, the history can provide an opportunity to tell the truth in ways that testify to God’s faithfulness through difficult times and not simply to re-open old wounds. The advice of the history committee is needed in cases where thoughtful group deliberation will find the best approach to telling the difficult stories honestly, but also carefully.
3. “You’ve said that it’s important to have strong visual material run alongside the printed narrative. What’s ‘strong visual material’ and how much should we use?”
-We live in an increasingly visual world, with so much information delivered via images, in addition to, or perhaps instead of, text. Consequently, it is difficult to overstate the importance of compelling, interesting and even entertaining photos to accompany the textual narrative. Even so, the use of images needs to be in balance with good, narrative story telling. The two, text and images, should complement each other.
4. “What if we do all of this work and nobody reads the history?”
-This is a difficult question, but one that I hear frequently. I am confident that if the history includes the rich human story of life together in Christ’s church, supported by inspiring visual material and presented in a readily accessible format, it will, in fact be read and appreciated for years to come. It will not only be an historical record, but it will be a tool of self-understanding for the church community as well as a tool of outreach to the wider community beyond the church’s walls.

For additional information and samples of congregational histories please contact Paul Daniels, Archivist for the Synods of ELCA Region 3 at 651.641.3205 or pdaniels@luthersem.edu