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“Ask the Archivist”, by Paul A. Daniels, ELCA Region 3 Archivist

Oral History Interviews in the Congregation – Part 4: Final Interview Details and Conclusion

This is the fourth and final column in this series. It will complete the discussion of the interview itself as well as provide helpful suggestions for properly concluding the project.

“Mechanics” of a successful oral history interview: In the rush of planning the interview project, it can be easy to forget the simplest things, like choosing a quiet, comfortable space with a good, solid table for the interview. The right table will help reduce vibrations and “buzz” with traditional cassette recorders and ambient noise with digital devices. Also, it is important not to be disturbed. Placing a sign on the door saying that an interview is in process will help, as will turning off cell phones not being used as the recording device.

Another consideration is the length of the interview. Typically, 90 minutes is the maximum length of time for both subject and interviewer before fatigue sets in and the quality of the interview suffers. It is acceptable to take breaks, but only between completed questions, so that the flow of the interview is maintained.

The right equipment is also important. If you use a cassette recorder make sure that you don’t rely on batteries alone for power. It’s always best to use the power cord. It’s also important to use an external microphone (the built-in microphones in cassette recorders are not as effective) that can be positioned close to the interviewee.

If you use a digital device like a cell phone it’s best to opt for the cord just as it is with the cassette machine. Regarding the microphone, the quality of the built-in microphone on cell phones is very good. With either technology you’ll want to test the quality of the recording prior to beginning the interview.

Transcription of the interview – a necessary task: Production of a printed version of the interview is critical for the ongoing usefulness of the piece. By using a cell phone or other digital recording device you are able to apply voice recognition software to the recording and produce a rough draft of the interview. This is a great help for what can otherwise be a tedious process. Voice recognition software, while not yet perfect, has improved over the past few years and can be an important tool for producing a printed transcript.

If you use a cassette recorder, producing the transcript can be more involved. You will need to locate a pedal operated old-style transcription machine. It is also possible, with both digital and cassette formats, to have the transcriptions done for you. Costs and quality of these services vary, so it’s wise to check with the ELCA Region 3 Archives or your city, county or state historical society for suggestions on reputable services.

Deed of Gift form: Some congregational oral history committees formalize the gift of the interview from the subject to the church by using a Deed of Gift form. Examples of this form are available online or through the ELCA Region 3 Archives. The Deed of Gift form can help clarify how the subject’s interview becomes part of the congregation’s archival collection. Whether or not the form is used, it is critical that the interviewee has a final opportunity to review the transcript and add, delete or amend sections as desired.

After this, the final transcript becomes part of the congregation’s archives and available for the important study of God’s work in that time and place as experienced by one particular congregation member. Oral history work can be time consuming, and even a bit daunting, but it is well worth the effort. The final result is a rich contribution to our shared memory as God’s people in community.

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