

The church historian collects and arranges the records of the church, sees to their preservation and sums up the church's life from time to time to help give a sense of identity to the church.

## History and Background

Our faith has roots in a past and is lived out in present events. History can teach generations about the action of God in the lives of people. Since before the time of written records, there have been men and women whose responsibility has been to preserve and tell stories of events and people of days gone by. In this recalling of its heritage, the community can recapture its vision and renew its strength. Isaiah advised the people of God to "look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug" (Isaiah 51:1). Over and over in the Bible the people did look to their history. In Hebrews 11 there is a long recital of history. From the days of entrusting everything to memory to today's sophisticated technical equipment, the preservation of the stories has been important.

## Common Practices

Some churches have had historians for generations. There you are likely to find a well-documented history, records collected in a safe place and

booklets that periodically sum up the life of the church. The historian usually has a small budget for supplies and storage of records. Sometimes there is even an oral history project, in which long time members are interviewed. Other churches have haphazardly kept the church's records in the church office, but no one pays much attention to them. Most churches with a historian combine the duties of interpreter of history with that of an archivist—a person who collects the records.

## Responsibilities

Your duties will vary depending upon whether you are establishing a record of your church's history, updating it regularly or publishing a view of that history. If you are publishing the history, plan to print as accurate and attractive a publication as financially feasible. Get advice from printers, editors or anyone in the publication field. Use illustrations or photographs, if possible.

At all times you will be responsible for:

- Conveying an accurate and understandable picture to future generations.
- Acknowledging more than buildings.
- Acknowledging that pastors aren't the only important leaders about whom to report.
- Recording the negative—splits, divisions and problems—as well as the positive.

- Acknowledging that the church is part of the world. That may mean recording stands about local and national issues. It might mean telling what it was like to be an ethnic community at a time of war, or to be settlers in a native culture, or telling when women were first allowed to be on certain committees.
- Providing correct information, including correctly spelled names.
- Using primary information when possible. When ledgers, minutes and rolls are kept, go to those sources rather than annual reports. But go to annual reports before newspaper reports or people's memory of past events. Memories are great for flavor, but they are not always accurate.
- Providing a copy of the history to archives, libraries or historical societies.
- Using inclusive language.

## Materials to Include in a Written History

- Founding date, organizers and how they went about founding the church.
- Setting (rural area, town, Indian reservation) and any changes.
- Names of organizations to which it has belonged (conference, synod).
- Relationship to the denomination and any specific aid received from the denomination.

- Dates of buildings and other acquisitions, such as cemetery, housing for the elderly or parsonage.
- Covenant, catechism or statement of faith.
- Liturgical changes, such as moving from common cup to individual cups for communion, moving from a pulpit-centered to an altar-centered sanctuary or the use of banners.
- Official actions and reactions to denominational changes, such as unions.
- Description of organizations within the church.
- Participation in community activities, such as scouting, day care and ecumenical organizations.
- Participation in wider church settings (conference, association).

## Materials to Keep

You'll be responsible for keeping the following information and records after they have been compiled:

- Successive constitutions and bylaws of the church and its organizations.
- Copies of deeds to and descriptions of the church's physical properties and blueprints and pictures of the property.
- Contracts and mortgages.
- Vital statistics (baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals).
- List of church officers and clergy, with biographical information.

- Minutes of congregational and committee meetings.
- Financial records.
- Records of church school and other organizations.
- Bulletins and newsletters.
- Newspaper clippings, clearly labeled.
- Photographs, clearly labeled with names, dates and places.
- Print copies of web pages.

## Identifying and Storing Records

All church records should be stored at the church or a public storage facility such as a historical society. Have in writing that all church records are property of the church. When it is your responsibility to collect the records:

- Label each record book, major document and file identifying the office or committee or organization, dates covered and type of material.
- Sort into groups according to origin and file chronologically by activity. For example, the records for the deacons should be together, with books of minutes arranged chronologically, followed by account books of the discretionary fund, also in chronological order.
- Type an inventory of records in storage and send a copy of the inventory to the United Church of Christ Archives, 700 Prospect Ave, Cleveland, Ohio 44135.

- Store in acid-free folders and containers, fireproof and climate-controlled, if possible.
- Microfilm or scan, if possible, for a duplicate record that can be handled without damaging the original
- Electronic records should be preserved in written form as well as on computer files or discs. Materials maintained on disc should be updated to new program versions along with the church's or historian's computer; otherwise discs may eventually be unreadable.

## Skills and Attributes Needed

- A sense of the importance of history.
- Knowledge of the church and community.
- Ability to sort out the important from the unimportant.
- Accuracy and patience.
- Understanding of the broad outline of the denomination's history and traditions.
- Enjoyment of research.
- Enjoyment of details and ability to see the whole picture.
- Enjoyment of recordkeeping.

## Things to Do

- Find out what is already recorded about the history of your church.
- Belong to a historical society to

gain an appreciation for the ways things are done and receive information.

- Visit museums, libraries and archives.
- Interview long-term members, former pastors, neighbors and anyone with insights about the church.
- Go through local or area newspapers and conference or association newsletters for references to your church and to better understand issues of the day.
- Write to the American Association for State and Local History (530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219) for its annual catalog of pamphlets and books helpful to the amateur historian.
- Contact the United Church of Christ Historical Council to receive information about the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed Historical Societies. Write to the United Church of Christ Archives, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115.
- Learn how to collect oral history.
- Write to the Oral History Association, 1093 Broxton Avenue, #720, Los Angeles, CA 90024 for guidelines.

## Sources of Information

Besides the primary church records, you may get information from:

- Members of the church. They may have scrapbooks, photos, diaries and bulletins from special events.
- Conference archives, newsletters or publications.
- Denominational archives, especially for ministerial biographies and mission records:

United Church of Christ Archives (for United Church of Christ, Evangelical and Reformed or Reformed), Lancaster Theological Seminary, 555 West James Street, Lancaster, PA 17603.

Congregational Christian Historical Society, Congregational Library (for Congregational and Congregational Christian), 14 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108.

Eden Archives and Library (for Evangelical Synod and some Evangelical and Reformed), Eden Theological Seminary, 475 East Lockwood, St. Louis, MO 63119.

Amistad Research Center (for American Home Missionary Society letters and materials related to African-American history), Tilton Hall, Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118.

Elon College Library (for Christian Churches), Haggard Avenue, Elon College, NC 27244.

Catawba College (for Southern Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed), 2300 West Innes Street, Salisbury, NC 28144.

- Local newspapers.
- Local public library.
- County, state and regional historical societies.
- Recollections of members collected in taped interviews or letters.

## Issues Facing the Church

- How can we come to terms with items in our church's history that make us uncomfortable? Should programs be scheduled periodically to define accurately the issues and how they were resolved?
- How can a church's history be recorded and used in a manner that brings a sense of identity without an undue sense of pride?

## Questions

- What is your primary responsibility: collecting, updating or analyzing records or preparing a history for distribution? How does that influence what you do?
- What are sources of history which you hadn't thought about before?
- What can you do to improve your storage or records?