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**Telling the Story**:

Writing and Celebrating Your Congregation’s History

The history of the Lutheran church in America is told through the stories of each individual congregation. Some of these stories are very old, reaching back to the early 1800s when northeast Ohio was the growing edge of American Lutheranism. Others are more recent, having their origin in the post-WWII church-building boom. Whatever their age, these histories demonstrate how the Gospel has been told, sung, and embodied through the work of this Church. Moreover, they provide valuable context for how this Gospel work can continue to animate vibrant congregations today.

We hope that the following suggestions will assist you in telling your congregation’s story. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Some congregations tell their story in relation to the procession of dedicated pastors who have served them. Others prioritize the congregation itself, with the pastors being “supporting actors” in the story. However you decide to structure your history, there are a number of resources available to you in this endeavor. We encourage you to explore as many of them as possible as you outline the contours of your congregation’s story.

1. To begin, establish the purpose for writing your history. Is it to celebrate the past? To narrate the past? To connect the past to a future vision for your church? To use the past to illumine present challenges your congregation faces? Perhaps a combination of these. Once you’ve defined the purpose and scope of this project, you will have a clearer idea of what sources to draw upon.
2. Identify sources of information.
   1. Congregational records and publications (e.g., Council minutes, committee minutes, newsletters, parish register, etc.)
   2. Public records (e.g., property documents, articles of incorporation, relevant city council meetings, etc.)
   3. Synod minutes of current ELCA synod and predecessor bodies (e.g., Joint Synod of Ohio, Lutheran Church in America, American Lutheran Church, The American Lutheran Church, American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Suomi Synod, Augustana Synod, etc.). Think about how decision points at the synodical and churchwide levels impacted your congregation.
   4. Churchwide publications (*Lutheran Standard*, *Lutheran*, *Lutheran Observer*, *Living Lutheran*, etc.)
   5. Local histories for your community, city, township, or county. It will be helpful to contextualize your congregation’s story within the broader history of your community.
   6. Diaries and family records of members
   7. Oral histories[[1]](#footnote-1)
   8. Tombstones, cornerstones, monuments, and engravings
   9. Local news sources
3. Research information about the following:
   1. Pastors
      1. Lutheran Almanacs, Yearbooks (ALC, TALC, ULCA, LCA, Augustana Synod, Suomi Synod, ELCA).
      2. Jensen, John M. et al. *A Biographical Directory of Pastors of The American Lutheran Church*. 1962.
      3. Michelson, Arnold R. *A Biographical Directory of Clergymen of The American Lutheran Church*. 1972.
      4. *Biographical Directory of Clergy: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. 1988.
   2. Lay leaders, charter members
   3. Buildings (past and current)
   4. Worship
      1. Use orders of worship, bulletins, hymnals, worship committee minutes, and other congregational records to identify key shifts in service times, number of services, and liturgy.
      2. Some congregations will have held non-English worship services well into the 20th century. Note these language shifts.
   5. Finances
   6. Organization
   7. Auxiliary organizations
   8. Relationships with other congregations or community organizations
   9. Denominational, synodical, and district relationships
4. Research and outline your congregation’s history
   1. Origins of the congregation
      1. Consider the reason(s) for organizing, key dates, and first place(s) of worship.
      2. Consider key figures like charter members and first pastors.
   2. Your congregation’s place within the community and larger church
      1. Think about your congregation’s place within its immediate community and relationships to other community members/organization.
      2. Think about the various synodical and churchwide affiliations and how your congregation participated in the work of the synod and broader church (e.g., special benevolence giving; sponsoring a missionary, home congregation, or refugee family)
   3. Milestones and distinct periods in your congregation’s history
      1. Mergers with other congregations, name changes, synodical affiliation, etc. Some of the earliest Lutheran congregations in Region 6 (think early-mid 19th century) were part of multi-point charges or shared pastors and meeting spaces with German Reformed congregations. Note these when applicable.
      2. Major decision points in your congregation’s history around finances, personnel, buildings, location, mission, etc.
   4. Congregational dynamics
      1. What are key identity markers for your congregation? Worship/liturgical identity? Christian education commitments? Missional outlook within community? You might consider examining the records and/or lesson plans of confirmation, Sunday school, vacation bible school, parochial school, adult education, etc.; trace the history of worship practices and shifts; identify mission and outreach initiatives.
      2. Note key individuals behind the significant transitions and decision points of your congregation.

**Using Oral Histories**

Oral histories can be a valuable component of a congregational history and conducting these has never been easier. Think about the functionality of recording on a cell phone and allowing Artificial Intelligence to generate a transcript of the conversation. The following are some suggestions for collecting the memories of people within your congregation.

1. Identify Interview Subjects
   1. Know what information you are seeking before selecting interview subjects. Find people who will be able to speak to the specific aims of the history you are writing.
   2. Importantly, select an interviewer who has both good rapport with the congregation and who has a general knowledge of the congregational history project.
2. Plan the Interview
   1. Be sure to have good questions planned for your interview. It is often best to organize your questions around specific persons, places, and events. Make this an intentional and focused conversation.
   2. Avoid questions that anticipate “Yes” or “No” responses. Ask questions that invite your interview subject to think deeply and respond reflectively.
3. Conduct the Interview
   1. Choose a quiet, comfortable room in which to conduct the interview. Minimize distractions and take measures to avoid interruptions (e.g., posting a “Do not disturb” or “Interview in process” sign on the door).
   2. Keep the interview to no more than an hour. Interview fatigue can negatively affect the quality of information you gather from the interview.
   3. **Make sure your recording equipment is functional and ready to use**.
      1. If using a cell phone, be sure the phone is fully charged and turn off all notifications during the interview (“airplane” mode can be used to eliminate incoming calls, texts, and other notifications).
      2. While most cell phone have adequate built-in microphones, it is a good practice to test the recording quality of your device *in the space where you are interviewing*. Prior to the interview, set your phone in the spot where it will be during the interview. Record yourself speaking from where you’ll be sitting. Then, record yourself from where the interview subject will be sitting (you could recruit someone else for this, too). Check to see that the voices are adequately picked up from each spot. The playback audio should be clear and easily heard. If this is not the case, consider using a wireless or Bluetooth microphone that’s compatible with your cell phone. Other recording equipment may be desirable if your phone’s recording capabilities are not adequate.
      3. If using a computer with recording software and a microphone, apply the same rehearsal practices above. The goal is to be able to switch your recording equipment on at the start of the interview and capture the dialogue in its entirety without malfunction or interference.
      4. *It is always a good idea to test your phone or other recording device for volume and clarity at the start of the interview.*
4. After the Interview
   1. For the sake of record-keeping and future availability, it is best to transcribe the interview, i.e., to produce a written copy of the interview. This will enhance the longevity and retention period of the valuable memories captured in the interview. You can type out the interview yourself or use a meeting transcription software to automatically do this. If using software or AI, be sure to proofread and edit the transcript as needed.
   2. Once the interview has been transcribed and all persons, dates, and places have been checked for accuracy, it is important to attain the permission of the interviewee to both use the interview and to make it the property of the congregational archives. A donation agreement signed by the interviewer and interviewee can accomplish this.

**Formatting Notes**

As your congregational history nears its final stages of composition, remember to include:

1. A title page with the name(s) of the author(s), the title, the name and location of the congregation, and the date of publication.
2. A table of contents, but *only* *if your history exceeds 60 pages or if there are clearly discernable chapters*.
3. Captions for pictures.
4. A bibliography at the end that lists all of the works cited for the project (e.g., church records, articles, newspapers, legal documents, and books).

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1. See next page for details on planning and conducting oral interviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)