

How to Write a Local Church History



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The Editorial Committee

It is generally wise to appoint a solid, trustworthy Editorial Committee or Board before beginning work on writing a local church history. This Committee should be carefully chosen. Included on the Committee should be representatives from the various age groups of the church. In addition, there should be one or more persons on the Committee who write well, or, at least, recognize good writing when they read it. If possible, also, the Committee should be a harmonious group who work well together and are not likely to fly apart at the first sign of a problem.

Use should be made of those in the church who have special talents such as a newspaper reporter, a school teacher, an editor, or someone who has previously published a book. The author of a previous history of the church should not be overlooked for his or her experience may be of considerable value. Remember that this is a working Committee, not an *honorary* Committee. Each member should have some qualification for membership. The committee should be inclusive of the diversity of the Church.

One of the first acts of the Committee, after selecting its own officers, might be to choose one person to do the major portion of the writing. Others might be chosen to assist in writing sections of the book, but there should be an overall editor-author who can give the book grace and style and smooth the uneven places. The Committee might even give some thought to paying an outsider who is a good writer to carry forward this part of the venture. Such a person, if chosen at the beginning of the project, would be able to sit as a consultant at all the editorial meetings to get a better feel for what is wanted in the history besides giving valuable advice.

The officers of the Committee might well consist of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, and at least two secretaries (one to record the minutes of the meetings and carry out those duties normally assigned to a secretary, and a research secretary to establish and care for a file where all information gathered for the project can be properly arranged for use of the editor-author of the book).

This is a simple but adequate structure. The Committee need not be a large body, but rather a small, efficient, hard working group seeking to produce the best possible history of a local church.

Setting Our Sights

At an early meeting of the Editorial Committee it might be well to discuss what kind of history will best meet the needs of the current situation. Some local church histories are lengthy, scholarly works that are more attractive to students than to church members.

Others are in the form of a picture book with a minimum amount of text, but with numerous prints from the early days of the church to the current year. Then there is the popular type of history that

moves along very rapidly. It gathers and marshals the most important events of the church's history and presents them in as entertaining a fashion as possible.

Another type of history simply finds a previous history of the church and, using numerous pictures, adds to it the events that have taken place since the last history was published. Some histories present a minimal amount of historical facts, but dwell mainly on the current events and programs of the church with a view to appealing to the passing visitors.

Which of the above types you use will depend on your *final aim or goal*. Is the story of the church to be a scholarly book written to preserve the history of a powerful force for good in the community? Is it to be a challenging work to catch the eye of a possible future member, or is it for new members to give them a better idea of what the church is all about? Is it a pleasant anniversary piece, much like a souvenir? Is it a book that will appeal to the casual reader? In other words, why are you writing this history?

The amount of money the Committee must spend will also play a part in what type of history is being written. Obviously, a long scholarly work will probably be far more expensive than a short popular history. A picture book may be the most reasonable of all. What kind of history does your Editorial Committee wish to produce? It would be good to discuss this question at the first meeting of the Committee. By the second meeting, each member of the Committee will have had time to test the feelings of some of the church members and to bring their reactions to the Committee for analysis. Also, the chairperson, secretary, or another suitable member of the Committee might well be assigned the task of gathering a group of histories of other churches for study and suggestions. Local historical societies and Annual Conference historical depositories will probably have a selection of various types of local church histories which they would make available to the Committee for review.

Eventually, a goal or aim must be set, and a course of activity laid out to reach that goal. By this time also a writer or editor-author should have been chosen so that he or she may have input into what kind of history will best suit the needs of the local church or community.

Gathering the Material

Gathering the material can be among the most fascinating activities of the work of writing a local church history or it can be exceedingly dull. The first place to look for material is the previous history or histories that may have been written about the church. In addition, good sources are anniversary booklets, programs, broadsides, and special events calendars that have marked the career of the community or church.

Other written sources are the minutes of the Board of Trustees, the Charge Conference, and any or all the minute books of the organizations that have been a part of the church at any time during its history. Much of this can be dull reading, but some of it will sparkle with gems of insight and events that will greatly brighten your history and its general appeal.

Sometimes much about the church has been told in the local newspaper, especially at the time of special religious events. These accounts should not be overlooked. In addition, many histories have been written about towns, cities or counties in which churches are located. These histories contain valuable information for the purpose of the Editorial Committee. Many of these histories often list their sources. Such sources are valuable since they may lead to further insights. Many of

the historians of towns, cities or counties are cramped for space and use only a small portion of what can be found in their sources.

In this connection, do not overlook the Annual Conference records or the Annual Conference newspapers or magazines. At one time a periodical called *The Christian Advocate* ran a regular column about local church events. Sometimes facts appear there that appear nowhere else. At one time, also, each District Superintendent reported about the work of the church on the district. Helpful information may be secured by reading those reports. Here may be found a brief record of a stirring revival, the dedication of a new organ, the clearing of a church's debt, or the building of an addition to the sanctuary. All these events are of paramount interest for the church's history. Certain boards, committees and commissions of the Annual Conference may also have preserved information about the beginnings of a church, or about loans to a church for building purposes. All this is food for the historical banquet of facts and figures.

People are also an excellent source of information for church historians. Talk to those who are involved in the key events in the life of the church. Some of these people were money-raisers and can give an informative account of how funds were raised for an addition to the church sanctuary or for the main building itself. It is curious, but significant, that some churches in the early history of religion in America were built from proceeds from lotteries—a method now being used to support some programs by governments. People of any and every age may have a story to tell. Get it! Much of this information can be recorded on tape or digitally and thus preserved in a more permanent form.

Since this booklet was first published, the use of the internet has become a valuable tool to search for information. There are digital resources on the web that can aid your research, including books, periodicals, and documents. Be creative when searching, look in regional newspapers, use all the names of your church, and search using the names of your ministers.

Once gathered, these facts should be filed with the research secretary, already mentioned above as an officer of the Editorial Committee, and permanently preserved. The sources of information should also be carefully noted. One weakness of many church histories is that they do not list their sources. Future historians, therefore, must work over this material again, some of which may be forever lost.

To gather all possible facts, various members of the Committee can be assigned the task of tracking down particular sources of information. For example, one may be asked to read the minutes of the Board of Trustees, another the town or city or county histories, another the minutes of the organizations of the church. Here it would be well for the chosen editor-author to consult with each researcher to advise what kind of material is required. The researcher must separate the wheat from the chaff. Not every event or debate is worth recording. At this point, an experienced editor-author is a valuable leader.

Once having gathered all this material and having had it properly filed and coded, we are ready to tell the story.

Telling the Story

It helps sometimes in telling the story to choose a title as well as an outline or agenda. Generally, the poetic or the dramatic, or the "fancy" title which does not describe the book without several further explanatory sentences should be shunned. It is better to inform the reader immediately what

he or she is about to read. Now and then, if a non-descriptive title accurately describes the history of a church, it may possibly be used.

In writing the history of the Arch Street United Methodist Church in Philadelphia we used the title, *Facing the Future of Change: The Story of a City's Central Church*. This title was carefully chosen, and the cover design was made to fit the title. The title was superimposed on a picture of the church set amid downtown traffic and tall buildings. Facing change has been the history of this church from its beginning. The title, therefore, was appropriate. We chose the subtitle *The Story of a City's Central Church* because we believed that to speak of the history of Arch Street United Methodist would have little meaning except for those persons who were acquainted with downtown Philadelphia. On the other hand, perhaps the subtitle would have appeal for many other churches situated in an urban setting. The title reflected what we wanted to say and had a universal appeal as well.

However, most of the histories which I have read or seen simply state what they are—namely, the history of such and such a church. And this may be the wisest kind of title.

Some histories of Annual Conferences have poetical titles, but they need considerable explanation and can be misleading. *Fire on the Prairie* is an example of a splendid bit of poetic writing, but it is not very informative and needs to be explained. On the other hand, *The Methodist Excitement in Texas* combines what is obviously history with a title that arouses curiosity. Most editors with whom I have talked prefer the straight forward title that clearly states what the book is about.

As a variation, the term “biography” has appeared on certain histories of rivers, cities, and churches. One such history is titled, *The Biography of a Church* and then contains the name of the church in the subtitle.

What is needed in the beginning is a working title which can always be altered before the book is published. More important, possibly, than the title is the outline or agenda which will control the way the story is told.

In the booklet titled, *Guidelines for Local Church Historian*, published by the United Methodist Publishing House, three possible outlines are suggested. The first is the chronological outline. This means simply to write the events of the church in their chronological order from the moment when the possibility of a church was conceived in the minds of a few persons down to the present day. Strictly speaking, this is not a history, but the annals of a church. This method tends to produce a flat-toned picture where every event may take on equal importance. It does tell the story, but the story tends to become monotonous. A second method is to divide the history into natural time frames or periods. By this system each period reaches a climax which then becomes the opening event for a later period. For example, the general outline could set forth the periods in the following manner:

Part I	The First Fifty Years	1862-1912
Part II	The War Years	1912-1945
Part III	Voices For A New Era	1945-1964
Part IV	Revitalization and Future Thrust	1964-2009

Under each part there could be separate headings and information that would tell the story of that period.

With this style of outlining, it is possible not only to tell the story of the church but to link that story with the events going on in the community, nation and world.

A little less fruitful method would be to divide the periods according to the pastors who served the congregation. Then each chapter heading might have a pastor's name: for example, The Smith Years; The Jones Controversy; Building with Pastor Brown, etc. I have never really liked this method since it tends to evaluate the history of the church in terms of the pastors' personalities and work. The history then becomes a series of short biographies rather than the story of a growing church and its relation to the general church and community. On the other hand, any history must sooner or later evaluate the work of various pastors. Their work, however, should be judged in relation to the whole picture of the church and community and not set forth as a thumbnail sketch to satisfy their friends or critics in the church.

Third, some historians use a topical method which is rather difficult to handle and may lead to repetition.

The Guidelines booklet referred to earlier suggests that the chapter titles could be:

1. Profile of membership past and present
2. Organization of the congregation
3. Buildings and other property
4. Pastoral and lay leadership
5. Organization and activities
6. Worship and music
7. Special occasions
8. Service and mission
9. Finances
10. Ecumenical and community relations

The clearest advantage in this method is that each of these sections can be parceled out to one or more persons who concentrate on that field. It would then be the difficult task of the editor-author to rewrite these sections so that the entire book is characterized by one style of writing. The most obvious disadvantage is that the story tends to become fragmented and, of course, repetitious. However, under the guiding hand of an able editor this disadvantage may be minimized.

Other methods of outlining will probably occur to members of the Editorial Committee. Certainly, one session of the Committee's meetings should be devoted to a thorough discussion of what type of outline should be used. Of course, where the history is simply a gathering of pictures or a rehash of an older history updated by pictures and a chapter or two, the Committee hardly need concern itself with methods of outlining. However, in cases where the history is to be a permanent contribution to the church and community, a great deal of care and thought should go into the making of the outline since the history will be bound by that choice.

In telling the story, make it factual, but with the facts enlivened by anecdotes and portraits of "the movers and shakers" who led the church through good days and less fortunate ones. Do not be afraid to relate the causes of any splits in the church, although here good judgment is necessary.

Bishop Ernest G. Richardson once told me of a church which was split from top to bottom over the question of whether its front lawn should be seeded or sodded. If the incident happened early in the church's history or at mid-point, it certainly should be included, and it can add a human quality to the history. If the split, however, is of more recent vintage it should be handled with great delicacy and absolute fairness.

All of this means that your history, especially the early years, can usually be packed with human interest stories. Some churches refused to allow musical instruments to be played at worship services; others opposed the use of choirs and organs; and in the matter of architecture, there was a time when Methodist Meeting Houses, as they were called, were built without steeples.

Visual aids came into use in the churches only after severe soul-searching. In the History of Methodism in Central Pennsylvania one layperson bluntly stated that if the pastor of the church in his community brought a moving picture projector into the church, the pastor might as well go out and steal chickens for all the influence he would have thereafter.

The relation of the church to the Annual Conference is also an important matter and should not be neglected. What was the attitude of the church at various times in its history to the overall program of the general church and how successfully were the various social activities and evangelistic emphases mandated by the general church carried out? The Annual Conference minutes or journal can be of great help here.

Do not forget what has previously been mentioned, namely that no church is built in isolation. It is part of a community, town or city, state and nation and the world. What steps did the church take to improve its community? Did it take part in the demonstrations that have marked the recent history of our nation? What was its relationship to the Sanctuary Movement, the quest for racial justice, the issues of war and peace, personal morality, and social problems such as drug addiction? How were the teachings of Jesus and the Gospel offered to the community? What was done about missions at home and abroad? It would not be out of place to lay down the future dreams and goals of the church as developed by its current leadership.

At the close of the history there might be an appendix containing charts concerning the rise and fall of membership, finances and other relevant matters. The pastors of the church with their years of service could be listed as well as the names of the organists and music directors, and possibly the members of the current charge conference. Charter members might be listed. If the history is to be a permanent record to serve the church for many years to come, it should be thoroughly indexed.

Some histories begin with a preliminary chapter on the background history of Methodism and the various splits and mergers that finally created The United Methodist Church. Others place this chapter in an appendix and begin the story of the local church at once. Either method is satisfactory. Some feel that a lengthy description of early Methodism itself would be of little interest to the general reader and, therefore, could be safely relegated to the appendix. Others see it as a necessary lead-in to the main story. In either case, it should be told in an entertaining fashion and with a high degree of accuracy.

It would be well, when the manuscript is nearly complete, to submit it to two or three qualified readers for their criticism. For example, a history professor, a teacher in a seminary, or a gifted preacher might make some suggestions to improve it. You may need to pay for this service, but it should be worth the price. Many readers will offer their services without charge.

Above all, if possible, have the manuscript read by a careful copy editor who will check it for spelling, grammar, possible mistakes in dating or other errors that can undermine the ultimate value of the book.

Selling the Book

A book worth writing is worth preserving and promoting. One of the first steps in preserving and promoting the history is to make sure it is well printed on good stock (preferably acid-free paper) with a durable cover. Care should be taken with the cover design and a decision will have to be made as to whether the book should be in softcover or hardback or both; also, whether the book should be in folio, quarto, octavo or some other size. Avoid odd sizes including folios. Your readers and especially librarians want books that fit comfortably on their book shelves. An odd sized book must be placed not on the book shelves, but on some closet shelf, out of reach and possibly out of mind and sight. An odd-sized volume is also difficult to carry around or send through the mail or piled on the tables in the narthex for sale to the congregation.

Decisions must be made as to what information should be included on the back of the cover, on the flaps of the hardback dust jackets and in the extra pages following an appendix. Also be sure to have the book copyrighted to protect it from illegitimate use. Write the Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20559 for all necessary information. The copyright information should be placed on the verso of the title page.

Lay down careful plans for promoting your history. Release periodic progress reports to the church and local newspapers. Promote sales by establishing a pre-publication price. Enough books may be ordered in this way to cover the entire cost of the publication. Of course, the actual price of the book will depend in part on whether the church is subsidizing the volume or whether the price of the book will be expected to pay for all expenses.

Together with the pastor and the choir director plan a special dedication service on the Sunday your history is to be released. The entire Editorial Committee, of course, should be present and recognized, especially the editor-author. After the service they should be seated at a table to sign copies. It might be a good publicity scheme to ask some of the members of the church to donate a copy to the libraries in the community. On the day of the special service, representatives of these libraries should be present to receive their copies along with the donor who will make the presentation. It would be a nice touch to present leather bound copies to each member of the Committee, to former pastors, the District Superintendent, the resident Bishop, and above all, the

Annual Conference Historical Society and the General Commission on Archives and History of the denomination (P.O. Box 127, Madison, NJ 07940).

Because of all these persons and institutions involved, the local newspaper might be persuaded to carry a story on how the history came to be written and even include in its report some of the more entertaining portions of the history. Some local news television programs might also be glad to note the occasion.

Be sure you have enough copies printed for some years to come since this will probably be the only history of the church to be written for another decade or two. Use the histories for special study groups, in confirmation classes, for new members, and for general publicity purposes.

Your church has a great heritage! Be proud of it! Proclaim it! Above all, use it to glorify the name of Jesus Christ and to advance the ministry and mission of the church.

For additional assistance in writing your history, contact your Annual Conference Commission on Archives and History, or write/email to the General Commission at the addresses below.

Printed copies of this booklet may be purchased from the General Commission. [Click here for an order form](#) or you may write for a list of publications sold through GCAH offices.

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