

Evangelical Congregational Church

So You're A... Congregational Historian



THE RECORD

Both the Old and New Testaments tell of God's activity in history. In Psalm 71:1 the psalmist gives praise for God's "wondrous deeds" (RSV). Since the close of the Biblical record twenty centuries of church history tell of God's ongoing activity. Some of that activity is taking place in the churches of our denomination and someone is needed to record those activities. Generating that record becomes the task of the "congregational historian", and our Evangelical Congregational National Conference directs that each local congregation has a person for a four-year term to gather the history of that local church. (See the "Special Rules of Conference" section in the Journal.) Would you like to be that person? If the task seems too large, there is the possibility that a committee can serve in this endeavor in your church.

THE RESOURCES

A reading of this brochure will help you get started in your task. A second publication available from the Church Center in Myerstown, "Guidelines for the Congregational Historian," will assist you in sorting and cataloging materials (an E.C. publication). Also in print is "Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation. Caring For Your Church's Heritage," (Cokesbury 1997). A United Methodist church video which enthusiastically promotes the task of the congregational historian can be borrowed from Rostad Library, Evangelical School of Theology, Myerstown, PA 17067. Call 1-800-532-5775 and ask the librarian for "Memory and Ministry. Caring For Your Church's Heritage." Reading these materials and viewing the video will help you to answer the question whether you should make yourself available to your church as its historian.

Once you have been selected, the work must begin—but where? Your local church has plenty of resources. Each church has a permanent Record Book listing members, baptisms, weddings, etc. In many churches additional record books may be in storage containing materials from a previous era. Someone needs to identify, mark and preserve these books. The Local Conference Record Book should also be classified. Documents and papers awaiting your touch are often tucked away in desks, cupboards and filing cabinets without any rhyme or reason; you can gather these vital papers and put them in order, since there may come a time when the church will need the information. Preserving and safe-guarding audits, annual reports, and architectural drawings also come in this category. Access to them now placed in a safe environment by you could save hours of research later on.

Then there are people who are long time members of your church anxious to tell its story. From them you will soon learn oral history is the most exciting! Why not sit down and record their memories while there is still time? The resources become endless once a search is begun!

Cataloging, organizing and documenting your church's history represent the early stages of the work. (And it is sometimes difficult when no one else worked in this area before you.) It is good therefore to inform the Ministry Council or Official Board about your progress.

Some of the information garnered should be sent to the denominational archives in Myerstown. This suggestion becomes significant when it is realized that local church historians represent the souls of the denomination's history.

THE RIGHT PERSON

A consecrated, caring, Christian who is interested in history is needed to harness all these local materials; he or she/they should have an inquiring mind, along with the desire to work hard. An ability to organize is almost a must for this work. But gathering records is only one of the tasks. Expanding responsibilities are possible—meaning you should have a flexible schedule. For example, you may be called upon to summarize your findings into a local history (you may not think of yourself as a writer, but someone with that gift could cast into words a history if the materials are there); or, your work could help in the production of a church anniversary booklet. Perhaps during the year cherished photos and artifacts might be placed by you in a display for “Heritage Sunday.” A permanent place might be chosen in your church to display not only pictures but artifacts such as a communion chalice, award pins, hymn books, etc. a “spirit of belonging” is provided to congregational members through an exhibit of this nature. Your part in building enthusiasm for history with other members of the congregation will be manifest. Having a working relationship with your pastor, lay delegate and other officials is vital. After all, their advice and prayers can be a source of support for your efforts.

THE RESULTS

Look for many positive results: the congregation will be able to see how change has occurred both physical and spiritual within the church over the years. And, once the word spreads that you have assumed these tasks, other members may contact you about pictures, booklets, and mementos they believe are a part of the church's record. You will discover that to have a ‘congregational historian’ functioning full time is a ministry your church has overlooked. It has immense value, and as this new century begins, you will join a growing number of local Evangelical Congregational congregations whose historians are telling our story. Personalities and events from the distant and recent past will begin to take on new meaning. Significantly, in the future when our children ask “What does the church mean to you?” (Joshua 4:4-7) there will be an ongoing source of information and inspiration available.

*All scripture text is taken from the New International Version unless noted otherwise.
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