

Guidelines for Writing a Congregational History

Many congregations have brochures or web pages dedicated to the history of their congregation. Traditionally, these “histories” often only review the facility and leadership changes. Rarely, do they display the evolution of congregational mission and experience in their communities and the world. Trauma-informed congregations recognize the significance of writing a congregational history that involves the scope of changes related to mission, context, and development. *This* history reflects the heart and compassion of the organization; it’s zeal and imprint on the well-being of the community.

Gather a diverse leadership group representative of the congregation, about 6-10 persons. Among them, consider including:

- Longest standing members
- Newest standing members
- Adolescents
- Staff
- Record keepers
- Mission leaders
- Facility manager(s)

If this is the first time you are considering your congregation’s history, calendar meetings to span three-nine months, meeting once or twice per month. During the time between meetings, members of the group research and meet with people who can help answer the upcoming question. If you are revisiting a collected history, a handful of meetings likely will suffice.

Dedicate each meeting to addressing a question. Prior to each meeting, assign members of the group to research and meet with people who can help answer the upcoming question. These tasks may involve reviewing minutes from meetings, identifying people in the congregation and impacted most by mission who can share details about historical events and decisions, reviewing old files and exploring congregational property. The meetings will focus on compiling information gathered from files, personal stories and accounts, and property. Organizing the information into communication pieces will come later.

The theme of each meeting may include the following questions:

- Why did we charter?
 - What was our original purpose?
 - Who participated in making those first decisions?
 - How did we meet the needs and costs of our original purpose?

- After chartering, what successes did we encounter along the way?
 - In what ways did our mission expand?
 - In what ways did our membership expand?
 - How did we continue to meet the needs and costs of expanding ministry?

- How did times of success and joy benefit the congregation or enhance the congregational mission?

- After chartering, what trouble did we encounter along the way?
 - Were there social challenges to contend with? Were they related to our mission or along side our mission? (For example, perhaps a congregation's mission mostly was focused on its immediate neighborhood, but it had to also contend with our country being at war for some time. Or, perhaps mission was challenged by national recession or depression.)
 - Were there national or local traumas to contend with? (i.e., natural storms, wildfires, earthquakes, acts of terror or violence)
 - Were there local traumas to contend with? (i.e., chronic economic stress, instances of abuse or violence, suicide, financial embezzlement, etc.)

- How did times of trouble harm the congregation or detract from the congregational mission?

- What symbols did your congregation use to express its faith, mission, hurt, or healing along the way? (i.e., art, stained glass, icons, relics, vestments, architecture, ritual items, musical instruments, attire for musicians, holy books, ornaments, etc.)

- What is the congregation’s philanthropy story to supply for its mission?
- Who were the ordained and lay leaders who strategized and implemented the congregation’s mission?
- What were specific signs of impact of the congregation’s mission in the community and the world in each significant season of the congregation’s life?
- After reviewing these many components of the congregation’s story, what parts are you most proud? What parts were most poignant in determining change in mission or practice?
- In light of the congregation’s history, what is the congregation’s current mission and practice in the community and the world?

After these questions are answered, or any others that came up in the process and seemed most useful, identify skilled writers and communicators who can compile the accounts into forms that communicate the story well. These forms may include timelines, charts, brochures or essays, short films, or documentaries. Include pictures and visual artifacts discovered during your research.

Celebrate the congregation’s story with a fellowship event. You may include tables that showcase historical pieces, provide table-top discussions, share testimonies and personal accounts with an open mic or by showing short films, include music and food that express the congregation’s heritage, and invite more people to be part of the next opportunity for reviewing the congregation’s history.