

Writing Your Church History

By Cheryl Doty, KBC archivist.

Does your church have a history? Actually the question should be: Does your church have records of its history?

Even if your church was recently organized it definitely has a history:

- **Why** was your church organized?
- **Who** began the process by which your church came into being?
- **What** processes did these people go through?
- **When** did they decide your particular church was needed in the community?
- **Where** did they meet to discuss organizing, where were the first worship services held, where are the various locations of the church?
- **How** did those people establish a church and gather members?

The answers to these questions can be used to begin writing a history, no matter how old or how new your congregation is. In fact, the younger the church, the easier it will be to write a history that can be supplemented over the years.

Digging In

Before the actual writing, collect all the records that are available to help with the answers. This may necessitate a “scavenger hunt” throughout your church, members’ homes and community! Make an exciting game of your search, offer rewards/incentives, set a time of celebration—we tend to procrastinate if there is no deadline—so the “treasures” gathered can be shared with the entire congregation. Places to look include: attics, basements, garages, storage sheds, filing cabinets (old and those still in use), staff desks/shelves/closets, members’ houses. Contact inactive and former members, especially those who held leadership positions.

- A short sample of records to search for during your scavenger/treasure hunt include: minutes of business meetings
- Committee meetings
- Meetings of church organizations (unofficial handwritten minutes from someone in attendance can many times tell a better story than the sanitized official minutes)
- Bulletins, newsletters and correspondence
- News articles from your local newspaper
- News articles/histories of your community during the time of organization (provides perspective for the “why” behind your church’s beginnings)
- Photos. If your photos have no names/dates, put them in clear photo sleeves, exhibit them with sticky notes and pencils where your members will see them (never leave them alone though), and ask the members to help in identification.

Oral interviews, taped by audio or video, are a way of gathering history and this is an excellent time to conduct them with long-term church members (even inactive and former members who may have excellent stories to tell). You want to document these memories and stories before it's too late. Prepare a list of questions but don't be afraid to veer off into uncharted territory. Give this list to the participant(s) beforehand so they can be better prepared. Ask several long-term members to meet together as they tend to feed off the memories and excitement of each other. Some churches have found that oral interviews are best when conducted by mature 12 and 13 year olds and teens through the age of 17. Once you have finished the interview(s), transcribe what was said if at all possible. Technology is changing rapidly and you won't want the stories lost because equipment becomes obsolete.

Prepare for a two to three year process once you decide to proceed with a written history, time for: searching for old records; research in these records and at associational and state offices, your state department of libraries/archives, SBC, local seminary/Baptist college; writing your history; promoting and publishing your history.

Going To Press

Publishing a history is approximately a nine months process from the time the final draft goes to the publisher, a blue-line copy is received for corrections/last minute editing (additional cost for every change), and the printed volume is received. There are quicker and cheaper ways of printing a history by doing it in-house or through a local print company. If you go through a publisher, hard bound is not much more per copy than paper bound, yet more durable.

Finding the right author is the most important step you can take. The author can never be paid for actual services because the cost will be exorbitant! An honorarium, determined by the church history committee and based upon the budget allowed, reflects appreciation for the author's work. Sometimes the author may be a church member or someone who has an affiliation with the church or its members. A degree in English doesn't necessarily constitute an author but would be of great help in editing—and make sure spelling and grammar are correct, names and dates are accurate. Ask for samples of a person's writing to ascertain their ability to write a readable story rather than a list of facts, though lists are important in a history too. A history should be the interesting and readable story of your church, from its inception to the present.

Keep It Going

Once you have gathered your church's history through its various records and photographs, you do not want these lost. Now is the time to begin an archives to preserve them for posterity. Those in the future who will supplement your records and written history will praise your name and call you blessed!

Contact me for detailed information on writing your history, preserving your history and celebrating your history: Cheryl Doty, Cheryl.Doty@kybaptist.org, 1-800-266-6477, 502-245-4101.