

## **WRITING A PARISH HISTORY: SOME NOTES FOR BEGINNERS**

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### **WHY WRITE A PARISH HISTORY?**

So, you have been given the task of writing a history of your Church. It may be that it is intended to commemorate a significant anniversary of the foundation of the congregation. Perhaps it is an anniversary of a building or of the commencement of ministry by a regularly ordained clergyman of the denomination concerned. (Somehow, 50 is so much more significant than 49 or 51. There seems to be some magic in a round figure or a metric numeral.) Cynicism about the triviality of commemorating a building or “the works of men” or celebrating an arbitrary “round number” of years or bothering about such an insignificant corner of the Lord’s vineyard should, I believe, be set aside by the (perhaps) reluctant would-be historian. If it is important to write a good history of a church, and I believe it is for various reasons, then this “trivial” occasion may be the only opportunity you will get to help your congregation face up to some important lessons about its past, present and future. Since your humble, local congregation is, in time and space, part of the eternal and universal Church, it has as much right to the dignity of having a decent job being done of its history as any congregation of God’s people.

The would-be historian is advised to avoid producing a history which is merely a:

1. catalogue of buildings,
2. series of biographies of ministers,
3. summary of whatever documents come easily to hand,
4. copy of the last history written in 1957 with a rough “update” chapter on the period since, based on “common knowledge”, or a
5. compilation of the reminiscences of current, elderly members.

Of course, all of the above have a place in your history, but none of them alone comes close to being all of what you require in an insightful and useful history.

What, then, should be the purpose of your Church history? In 1973, at Regent Square United Reformed Church in London, I heard a fine sermon by the Rev. Dr Daniel Jenkins, in which he referred to a saying I had not heard before. “Church history is cordial for drooping spirits,” he said, was a very inadequate description of church history. Personally, I thought he was being a bit tough: sure, it is not *enough* that church history do this, but encouragement (with a critical edge) has a role to play in this exercise. To put it another way, you can use the writing of your parish history to discover and reflect on the past, certainly, but also to use that understanding of your local church to

improve the way in which you *are* the Church today. There will probably be tension between your devotion to the church and your professional standards as a historian. Can this tension be resolved? Probably not; but it can be incorporated creatively in the parish history.

## **RESEARCH**

First of all, the historian needs to locate the sources, written and oral, and survey the extent and depth of them. Some notion of what to look for or hypotheses to test would also be a good idea, without prejudging the story, of course. Certain phases of a church's history in Australia can be predicted. For instance, in any Presbyterian Church last century, questions of liturgical innovation (hymns, organs, posture for prayer etc.) would have been controversial to some degree. If you find nothing about this around the years 1850 to 1880, be suspicious and look further and deeper. (Refusal to face up to conflict is not new.)

Similarly, in the wartime periods, especially the Great war and the Second World War, look for the effects on church membership, attendance and activities, new opportunities for female leadership. How did the congregation respond to proposals for church union in the 1920s and 1960s and 1970s? To the Call to Australia in 1951 and to the Cold War? In the 1950s, how did the congregation react to the Wells system and stewardship? How did church finances and giving change as a result of their response? What was the response to the Billy Graham Crusades in 1959 and 1968? What effects did they have if any on church membership? How did the baby boom affect the church? How did your congregation experience the rise and fall of the Sunday School from the 1950s to the 1980s? The decline of church-based sporting clubs, dramatic and musical societies etc. To the Viet Nam War? What of the impact of charismatics? What have been the effects of the "working wife"? What has happened in your parish with greater sexual equality in society and church?

It is important to track down relevant published material, such as previously published accounts of the same parish, either books or in article form (learn from their mistakes!) or of adjacent parishes or circuits which may have preceded the establishment of your congregation or parish or, indeed, helped commence the work. Don't just reproduce the old parish history, maybe just adding an "update", without re-examining the earlier history and, preferably completely re-evaluating it.

Denominational histories can provide important institutional milestones and background information on movements and people in the denomination(s) which founded your parish. Histories of the local churches of other denominations are often useful for a comparative perspective and also for different points of view on sectarianism and the development of ecumenical relations. General histories of your local area will help put the story of the parish into a social context and

identify parishioners who were prominent in, or representative of, the local community. More significantly, they should help you to plan out stages in the development of the community, e.g., when real estate subdivisions occurred, schools were founded, transport links established.

More broadly even, a general understanding of the main contours of Australian history and of Australian religious history in particular is very helpful. The publications of the Christian Research Association provide up to date information on religious trends, which could provide comparisons and even ideas of what trends to look for in your own parish. Seek advice on what to read. The Uniting Church Records and Historical Society have people who can advise on these and other matters. In fact, it would be an excellent idea to join the Society for unlimited free access to the records and such advice.

### **Archives**

In the case of a Uniting Church congregation or parish, the archival sources could be in a variety of places. They may be in the parish: in the manse, vestry, a hall cupboard or in the garage of a former office-bearer. If you are very lucky, they may be in the Uniting Church Archives at Eskdale, North Parramatta.

Depending on the denominational background(s) of the parish, some records deposited pre-1977 may be found in the Presbyterian Church's Ferguson Memorial Library behind Chalmers Church, Sydney. Some relevant material may be found in the possession of former ministers who have moved, retired or died. The Mitchell Library or even the National Library of Australia may have some records. Early records of your congregation/parish/circuit may likely be found with the records of the churches which founded them, e.g. in the French's Forest area of Sydney, Presbyterian work was established from Chatswood, Methodist work from Dee Why. Chatswood Presbyterians stayed out of the Uniting Church, so their records can be found at the Ferguson Memorial Library, whereas the Dee Why Methodist records should be in the Uniting Church archives at "Eskdale".

What types of archival or documentary sources should be looked at and what given most attention? Having surveyed what there is, set priorities according to the time at your disposal and whether you have "research assistants". Which financial records do you need to see? Annual statements are probably sufficient; cheque books and receipt books can be ditched after a few years. Membership rolls can actually be quite useful. Minutes of Elders, Stewards, Deacons, annual meetings etc are of obvious importance. Records of Church organizations, existing and don't forget the defunct ones, including Annual reports...Parish publications...Reminiscences of ex-Ministers...Baptismal and marriage registers will include information on the ages and occupations of people, which can aid an analysis of the social composition of the congregation and how it may have changed

over time. The National Church Life Survey results of 1991 and 1996 will provide invaluable data for your congregation, if it participated.

As you go, progressively compile lists of major office-bearers of organizations, ministers, elders, deacons, stewards and so on, and statistics of income, membership, Sunday School enrolments and other memberships. Keep a record of stipend levels and contributions to the wider work of the church. This is not necessarily so you can simply print lots of lists, graphs and tables in the final text, although such things in the text or in appendices can be very useful and should at least be considered. Rather, they can be useful in checking the generalizations you have been tempted to make or stories you have heard from church members.:

### **Oral Sources**

Search out ex-members and ex-ministers, not just the stayers. Don't be afraid to ask ex-members why they left. This might give some balance to what might otherwise be excessively celebratory memoirs.

Should you use a tape recorder? Ask the permission of your informant if you intend to tape-record your conversation. If you prefer to take notes, make sure they are an accurate record of the interview and that you also note the levels of certainty with which informants report events. Remember to cross-check information against other written and oral sources. Winkle out photos, publications, documents. When you finally finish the history, consider lodging the photos, publications, documents and tape-recordings in the denominational archives.

Using the reminiscences of people raises important practical, ethical and legal considerations. Some people will not want to be quoted: assure them of their privacy and take measures to ensure that you continue to respect their privacy in the writing process, e.g., put a red circle around or otherwise mark clearly such material so you don't forget to treat it differently when you are writing up your research. Often, you will be allowed to uncover scandals, even those glossed over in the official records. The sources on such matters obviously have to be doubly and triply checked, so you do not go beyond your evidence. Don't forget that all of us, however lovable, have bees in our bonnets. Listen for the buzzing! Often, a congregation will have suffered some pain over these matters. How these sorts of things are dealt with in writing the history is another matter.

### **The Building**

The historian needs to look carefully and in an informed way at the outside of the building. Ask yourself, What does that building say about this group of people? What does their building say to the community, including to other Christians? How does it compare with the buildings of this denomination elsewhere or other denominations in this area? What are the local peculiarities and denominational peculiarities? Does

it have a spire? A cross? If so, what kind? Is the identity of the architect known? If so, what can you find out about his principles and any of his or her other work? Is this the congregation's first church building? If not, in what ways and why did the first one differ?

Move inside. What do you see? For instance, how prominent is the pulpit in relation to the communion table? Where is the font? Can rearrangements of furniture be detected which reflect changes of theology and liturgy? What memorials are there and what or whom do they commemorate and how? Stained glass: original or later? If there were changes, when and why? What does it depict? Were they donated? Were there ever flags in the church? Which, why and when? What has been done with flowers and how and why? Were Bible verses ever inscribed on the wall? How is the lighting: has it always been bright? How do the acoustics work?

## **WRITING**

Earlier, I referred to the value of doing some general reading of what might be called "contextual history", partly with a view to forming some hypotheses or ideas of what to look for, such as landmarks in local community history. Your history must be planned, and these hypotheses and landmarks can help give your history structure.

Building costs have to be among the most boring topics in church histories, but fund-raising is a very important part of real church life. Perhaps this dreary topic may be enlivened by reference to the spiritual effects of the church's "edifice complex". On the other hand, these effects may not be entirely negative: fund-raising can help to build community, not just a building. The contribution of women to the church in past years was often most visible in fund-raising efforts such as the fête. Even if these things are not necessarily the most important or profound of women's contributions, they are nevertheless not on that account to be despised by the historian. Anecdotes should be effective here, as elsewhere, in bringing the statistics and broad movements alive and bringing generalizations down to earth.

Many parish histories feature separate sections on the various church organizations. Whether this appropriate or effective in your case is a decision which needs to be made as a historian, but sometimes political realities intervene. Ideally, a holistic approach is to be preferred, but allow for the intractable fact that men, women, children and youth have historically tended to have fairly sharply differentiated experiences of church, and this needs to be taken into account when constructing the history.

In the section on research, the issue of how to deal with scandal was raised. The temptation is for the historian to collude in the conspiracy of silence. Certainly, discretion is required in how the matters are related, given that the market for the completed history will largely

consist of the easily offended! The writer's purpose is not titillation, but how scandals are dealt with tells us an enormous amount about a community. If they are badly handled, hurts may continue to fester. Hopefully, if the historian deals with such a hurt sensitively and even-handedly, even if the problem is not solved, the attempt may provide a pastoral opportunity to deal with it later.

Give consideration to illustrations, maps, portraits, graphs and tables. Much dry statistical detail can be compacted and made more understandable and meaningful in tabular form or in a graph (e.g. trends in membership or Sunday School attendance). Such tables can then be drawn on to present a more lively prose analysis without being bogged down in a sea of numbers in the actual text. Photographs need to be chosen wisely to illustrate as well as possible the total life of the parish over the whole period of the history. (Costs of publication will be a factor here.)

Sir Keith Hancock once said that the desirable characteristics of the historian were "attachment, justice and span". A more modern version might be "critique, empathy and imagination".

## **PUBLISHING**

Decisions need to be made about publishing the history. The budget will obviously be a determining factor. Issues to be considered include the size and format of the publication and the cover design. The size of the print-run will be small, but the unit cost is very high in a small print-run, so the intended market and your budget require some canny decisions. Don't forget ex-members are part of your market. In these days of desk-top publishing, you can do a very professional job of type-setting and layout on a personal computer with the right soft-ware. Scanners can now do a fairly good job of reproducing most sorts of illustrations cheaply as well.

Before you publish, contact the National Library for an International Standard Book Number ("ISBN"). Your work will then enter the Australian National Bibliography and be on permanent record. When you publish, don't forget your obligation to lodge copies in "deposit Libraries". Check which ones they are for you; usually the National Library of Australia and the relevant State Library, possibly a University and Parliamentary library as well. Consider giving a copy to your local library. Send one to the Uniting Church Records and Historical Society for review in *Church Heritage* and permanent lodgement in the Library and Archives.

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