

“Ask the Archivist”, by Paul A. Daniels Celebrating the Congregational Anniversary: Planning the Congregational History, Part 2

The congregational history is one of the most important results of months, perhaps years, of careful preparation by the anniversary planning committee. It is the permanent compilation of stories of our faith communities that deserve to be retained, studied and used. As such, it is important to consider the style and tone of the written narrative.

Style – As obvious as it may seem, every narrative, whether it’s for a church history, a secular history or a work of fiction, will adopt a unique style. This style will reflect the “personality” of the written piece. The following are just a few examples of styles that I’ve worked with in congregational histories donated to the ELCA Region 3 Archives. It is not an exhaustive list, but may suggest a range of approaches, including a preferred one.

-The list of facts – This is perhaps the most straightforward and familiar treatment of a congregation’s history. While it may provide a good amount of historical data in a brief amount of space, the “list approach” (lists of pastors, Sunday school teachers, confirmation classes, buildings through the years, etc.) does not make for the most readable, or even interesting, narrative. In a sense, it’s the skeleton that actual human stories could be hung upon.

-The personalized narrative – While this style lends itself to a more fluid, readable narrative it relies heavily on the subjective judgments of the writer, or team of writers. At best, it can be a rich re-telling of wonderful anecdotes of interest to most readers. At worst, it can be a narrow, purely personal rehashing of successes or grievances of interest to only a few readers.

-The hybrid – As you might guess, this is my preferred approach as it will effectively combine solid historical detail in a framework of basic facts with the more compelling feature of narrative story telling. The most effective congregational history is one that strikes a balance between these two approaches and then adds compelling images to complete the story.

Tone – You have the opportunity with a thoughtfully planned, researched and written congregational history to strike a balance between gratitude and celebration, raw historical data and flowing, personal storytelling - all of which are a part of our marking

an important anniversary. The narrative can, and should be, an accurate recounting of God's activity in one faith community in one time and place, but this act of remembering and thanksgiving also connects us to 2,000 years of the larger Church and its witness. We're telling the story of God's works, great and small, done among us (and usually in spite of us) "on the ground", so it's completely appropriate to have some reverent fun with the task.

For additional information and samples of church histories please contact Paul Daniels, Archivist for the Synods of ELCA Region 3 at 651.641.3205 or pdaniels@luthersem.edu .