

“Ask the Archivist” by Paul A. Daniels, ELCA Region 3 Archivist

Oral History Interviews in the Congregation – Part 1: Introduction

What are oral history interviews? Over the years one of the recurring questions I receive involves oral history interviews in the congregation. It’s wonderful to see church members get excited about recording the faith stories of others in their church. While this is often done in connection with a major congregational anniversary or another milestone event in the life of the community, sometimes this rich story material is gathered as an ongoing function in the life of the congregation.

Just as shared memories of common experiences are at the heart of our individual family lives, they are also at the heart of our lives as Christians together in community. The stories of how we live out our faith both as individuals and as the body of Christ, are central to our congregations’ sense of self- understanding.

One of the most effective methods of gathering these shared stories is through the oral history interview process. Some of us have conducted these interviews with elders in our own families. Now, we’re applying the same techniques to interviewing fellow church members. Congregations are a “gold mine” of valuable memories and stories that will inform, challenge, delight and surprise us if we gather them from our members. Among the unique features of oral history interviews is that they often capture a candid, heart-felt and lively history that textual materials often do not.

Determining the oral history project scope: As with any successful project, good planning is required for an effective oral history program in a congregation. Too often, well-meaning people will assume that simply recording an unstructured, casual conversation over coffee with a congregation member will suffice as solid oral history content. In fact, this approach rarely yields much useful material and usually results in a loose, rambling string of unrelated memories that are not helpful in the long term.

It is first necessary to think together as a committee about the purpose of the interviews, who the likely interviewees/interviewers will be and the expected use of the collected stories. This is best done by a small committee (3-4 members) of people committed to seeing the project through to the end. These members may or may not be either interviewers or interviewees, but they should be people who know the church well and can think in terms of key areas of the church’s life to cover. For instance, if the only determiner for interviewee selection is someone’s age (we typically, and rightly, try to capture the stories of our elders first), we might be missing some important areas of coverage. The committee will want to focus on its “experts” in certain areas (e.g., church leadership, worship and music, Christian education, missions and outreach,

etc.) of the congregation's history and plan to interview them as part of overall coverage of the church's story. These experts may well be elders anyway and so capturing their stories is still accomplished.

As you can see, this introduction just scratched the surface of this topic. There are many more items for discussion of the successful oral history project. Please see the second installment in this series in an upcoming "Ask the Archivist" column for additional thoughts on oral history projects.

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