

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

Oral History Interviews in the Congregation – Part 3: The Interview Questions

In this, the third column on the use of oral history interviews in the congregation, we will discuss the interview questions themselves. In the previous 2 columns we looked at the importance of planning for a successful oral history project. That planning is now put to good use as we develop the guiding questions themselves. The questions below are intended for congregation members. Different questions would be asked of pastors, with more emphasis on the particular type of leadership that role requires.

Interview questions – a sampling:

Prior to the actual interview, it is important for the interviewer to “set the stage” by recording the name of the project and other basic, introductory information, e.g., “This is an oral history interview done on behalf of First Lutheran Church, Centertown, North Dakota. Today, April 6, 2019, I am talking with Jane Peterson in the library of First Lutheran Church. This is Todd Schmidt, the interviewer, speaking”.

1. Please tell me about your background, where you were born and baptized, went to school, your family life and the beginnings of your involvement in First Lutheran.
2. What is your earliest memory of your time in this church? Your fondest memory?
3. Who was the most influential person in your faith development at First Lutheran - the pastor, Sunday school teacher or other adults?
4. What was your involvement in Christian education, whether Sunday school, youth group, Bible study or adult education?
5. What are your memories of confirmation instruction and the pastor’s role in it?
6. Did you serve on church council or in other leadership roles? How were those experiences?
7. Did you participate in a church choir or other worship and music activities? If so, what did you enjoy most about those activities?
8. Where and when did God seem most active to you in the life of First? Please share your memories.
9. Tell me about a time when you were excited about the ministry going on at First; a time when you might have been discouraged?
10. Share with me about a difficult or challenging time in the life of the congregation. How did you deal with it and how was it addressed?
11. What particular activities did you focus on in your life at First? Why did you choose those?
12. What was your family’s involvement in the congregation? How has that changed over the years?
13. When you think about First’s future what excites you the most? What concerns you?
14. What would you most like to remain the same at First and what would you like to see change?
15. Would you like to add anything before we conclude this interview?

At the conclusion of the interview it is important to thank the person for sharing their memories on behalf of the congregation. Their willingness to share their stories in this way is a gift to the church’s shared memory.

While the list above is not exhaustive, hopefully it’s a useful start. You will think of many more, I’m sure. Please contact me for additional questions as well.

The final column in this oral history series will be the next installment of “Ask the Archivist”. It will focus on the setting for the interview, helpful hints on how to conduct the interview itself as well as follow-up tasks after the interview is completed.

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