

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

Oral History Interviews in the Congregation – Part 2: Planning the Project and Next Steps

This is the second column in a series on the role of oral history interviews in the life of the congregation. As we explored in the first column, preparation and careful planning are crucial for a well-executed oral history project. This includes forming a small committee to determine the project's scope (please see column #1 for a discussion of this) and choosing likely interview subjects as well as creating the interview questions themselves.

Choosing the interview subjects – identifying expertise: In the previous column we discussed choosing “experts” as interview subjects to cover certain areas of a congregation's ministry. While age and length of membership in the church may be considerations in selection, it is equally (perhaps more) important to choose the interviewees based on their particular areas of expertise.

If planning committee members agree that coverage of the church's main ministry areas is a priority for the project, they will need to create a list of those areas. These could include: both pastoral and lay leadership, Christian education, youth programs, buildings and grounds, worship and music, WELCA and its forerunners, community outreach and global missions support. While this list is not exhaustive, it is a step toward “covering the waterfront” of most congregations' ministry activities.

So, if one of your interview subjects is the long-time church organist or choir director, she would be a good fit to address the story of worship and music in your church. It may not be all she will talk about, but this topic area would be the focus of the interview based on her interests and expertise.

Similarly, the custodian who has served for many years and seen many changes in the church facilities would be the best subject for a discussion about the church building and its grounds, while the long-time volunteer for the church's homeless shelter would be the right person to talk about the congregation's community outreach efforts.

Choosing the interviewers – getting the right fit: While identifying interview subjects based on their special knowledge is a key part of the planning process so is aligning those people with the best equipped interviewer. An effective interviewer will be someone who knows the church's story well so that the interview can be a true “give and take” based on shared experiences. This will allow for flexibility in using the questions as a guide, allowing for some rich conversational “detours”, while being able to return to the framework of the interview questions.

On the other hand, it should not be a person (like a spouse or long-time close friend) who knows the interviewee so well that she finishes the subject's sentences for him. It's important for the interviewer to realize that he is not the subject of the interview. His job is to draw out the subject's memories pertinent to the interview questions. The result will be a rich conversation for all to appreciate.

The next installment in this series on oral history in the congregation will deal with the interview questions themselves as well as practical advice on conducting the interview.

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