



Constructing Your Congregation's Story

**by
James P. Wind**

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About this Guide

There are times when all congregations need to reflect upon who they are and where they have been to discern and understand where they are going. At such times, it is important for a congregation to research, create, and present its story. James Wind, president of the Alban Institute, offers a complete and concise guide to constructing and telling your congregation's story. Beginning with assembling the raw materials and developing the basic skills, Wind shows congregational historians how to collect the inner and public profiles of a church's life, as well as how to create and tell a compelling story. Although written for Lutherans, this resource can be readily used by other denominations.

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About the Author

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Introduction

Why, out of all of the things that individuals and congregations might do, do they choose to write their local church histories? A number of answers come to mind.

Just as there are certain moments in our individual lives that encourage us to stop and think—moments such as birthdays, New Year's Eve, and wedding anniversaries—so congregations have milestones. Most obvious are anniversaries of special events. Founders' Day, anniversaries of ordinations, or moving into a new building provide gentle prods to remember.

Major milestones like a centennial anniversary call for more recognition. They remind us of the accumulation of stories, events, and lives that make a congregation what it is. They push us to think about what the next 100 years will be like, and they send us back into our past in order to understand better who we are and what has happened to us.



Midwest church, early 1900s

The Need to Reflect

There are other times when it is especially appropriate to open up a congregation's past for signposts to the present and future. Congregations experience times of transition when their identities seem uncertain. A long pastorate ends and the congregation begins to envision life without Pastor So-and-so. It seeks to find its moorings and clarify its character so that the next called pastor will fit the congregation's current needs instead of echoing its past.

The file drawers of denominational leaders are full of documents that point to mismatches of clergy and congregations, which result in part from ignorance of the ways our history shapes us.

Sometimes a congregation attempts to make a radical break with its past and calls a pastor who is an exact opposite of the predecessor. Too late, members find that their new pastor just does not fit, that he or she seems to come from another world than their own.

Or a congregation might look for a carbon copy of a beloved pastor, unaware of how the congregation has changed in the years since the pastor first arrived and how

subtly the congregation outgrew him or her, even while coming to cherish the pastor.

Versions of these stories frequently result in dispirited and divided congregations, malaise or breakdown in clergy careers, or both. The fact that many denominations now urge congregations to reflect on their history in the process of calling a new pastor indicates the growing recognition of the power of congregational histories. The fact that most congregations do not naturally stop and think about their history in the unsettling time of transition between pastors does not mean that they do not need to. Rather, it suggests that most congregations are not equipped to think critically and creatively about their past and how their heritage shapes who they are and who they might be in the future.

Transitions in pastoral staff are not the only times congregations are faced with questions about their identity. Someone proposes a new ministry to the homeless, to the hearing impaired, or to business leaders. A congregation divides over a major issue, such as how to interpret the Scriptures or whether or not to relocate the congregation's building. Members discover new liturgical styles, and some want to adopt them while others steadfastly refuse to consider such a change.

At all of these times, congregations are faced with the challenge to discover who they really are. In modern America, most congregations will not find that challenge easy to face.

Changing Communities

The environment we live in puts pressure on us to define ourselves. Communities change. The cities siphon young people from rural America, and agribusiness alters the farm economy so drastically that towns die. Once-thriving congregations find themselves caring for a terminally ill community and perhaps having to merge in order to survive.

In large metropolitan areas, congregations share the fates of their neighborhoods, undergoing transformations as one group after another moves in and out. Some congregations in our cities have expressed five or six different identities, some of which reflect a particular ethnic group. Each change has left an indelible mark on the congregation.

In addition, the denominations that congregations belong to go through their own transitions. One group of Lutherans merges with another. Seminaries that once were sources of pastors for a congregation close, merge, or go through such changes in character that the congregations no longer recognize them.

Major movements in society also can have powerful effects. In the last half-century, for example, congregations have been powerfully affected by the professionalization of work, the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, the sexual revolution, and global conflicts.

For congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), there is yet another reason to probe their histories. In 1988 a new church was formed, the most recent step in a complicated American Lutheran journey toward union. Over the course of three centuries, many Lutheran groups have come together for confessional and ethnic reasons into a number of tributaries that have gradually

flowed into even larger streams, which have kept merging until we finally have formed the ELCA. While this unifying process seems to have resolved many of the long-standing differences between various streams of Lutheranism, it also has brought all members of the merging churches to a time of self-definition.

As the ELCA grapples with major questions concerning the shape of its ministry, the nature of its relationships with other denominations and church bodies around the world, the future of its seminaries, and its stances on major social issues, it will also inevitably have to answer for itself the question, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?" This coming together also has offered each congregation of the ELCA an opportunity to redefine itself.

By honestly searching our past and discovering what has happened to us and who we are, we have the opportunity to enrich our understanding of who we are and our expression of Lutheranism with the rich, raw materials of our shared and distinctive heritages. As the ELCA grapples with major issues such as inclusiveness and multiculturalism, each congregation will find itself nudged to clarify its self-understanding. History is an indispensable resource for that process.

History Lets Us See

Exploring congregational history, however, is not a process of unearthing the past and dumping it on a new generation. Instead, the historian creates opportunity for people to see that they were both more and less than they thought—that their histories involve success and failure, truth and deception, continuity and change. Nor is the history writing that you are preparing to do a nostalgic enterprise that diverts people to romantic "good old days."

On the contrary, you want to understand what really happened to your forebears and to you, so that you may respond faithfully to the moment at hand. As you open up your past, you will find that your stories involve moments of truth and decision, times when previous generations risked great change, and other times when they struggled against great odds to hang on to something precious. Such encounters can provide resources for your generation and succeeding generations to make both kinds of moves—and the wisdom to know when to invent and when to conserve.

As you probe your congregation's past, it is important to remember that the history of American Lutheranism and of the Christian tradition as a whole is only partially a history of councils, creeds, and great teachers and martyrs. The front line of this tradition is made up of countless groups of believers—sometimes small and remote from centers of power—who create out of their past and present.

The character of American Lutheranism in the next millennium will be shaped as much by the decisions of congregations regarding their budgets, educational efforts, practices of care, worship services, and selections of leaders, as it will by denominational statements or programs. What is hard for us to see but important for us to affirm is that Christian tradition is handed on and expanded as congregations go through the important process of defining themselves again and again.

So the act of writing a congregational history becomes much more than an antiquarian or nostalgic enterprise. On the contrary, it is an occasion when we can see again how the Christian tradition endures and becomes newly incarnate in a group of people gathered around Word and sacrament.

Questions of Identity

Questions of identity pervade the American culture. All of our religious and cultural institutions face such questions. We need to understand that our congregational attempts to answer identity questions will be saturated with this larger cultural burden. It is not just that congregations are struggling to define themselves. Members bring with them into a congregation's pews, boardrooms, and classes the identity questions of the voluntary associations they serve, the corporations they work for, the schools their children attend, and the local, regional, and national institutions to which they relate.

If there ever were a golden age when a congregation's members all came from identical backgrounds, held common theological understandings of the world, and shared ethnic and cultural values and ways of life, those days are gone. Congregations now teem with heritages. Higher education, specialized career paths, changing family patterns, and the increasing racial diversity of some communities have all contributed to the diversity of our congregations. The increasing tendency of Americans to migrate across denominational lines adds to the local color and confusion that now characterize so many congregations.

Congregations have become worlds of difference. Our congregations are becoming assemblies of individuals in search of their own answers to the "who are we?" question. As North America becomes multicultural, the challenges facing congregations only increase.

By clarifying their own identities, congregations might be able to help build the identities of their members, who can in turn strengthen many of the other institutions that join with us in a search for a clearer sense of who we are. Thus our congregational searches may have a larger public significance, and we need not view our attempts to probe our histories as merely "private affairs." They can be great gifts to our communities and culture.



Florida church

Here an image from the work of Wendell Berry can help us. Berry—a Kentucky farmer who is also a nationally known poet, novelist, and essayist—writes movingly about the beauty and fragility of local ways of life. In one especially important essay, he describes "The Work of Making Local Culture." He likens our small towns and local communities to an old wooden bucket hung on a fence post. Most passersby never gave the bucket a second glance. But Berry took the time to look into the bucket. There he found the natural process of earth making going on. Leaves, twigs, and

other debris from life were collecting in the bucket, decaying, and becoming black soil. Berry likens this process of turning the debris of life into the soil from which new life can spring to the work of our local communities, where memories of the past are gathered into a "communal compost pile" forming the basic material for new community life.

Berry's great concern is that our local communities are being overwhelmed by national, economic, technological, and other modern forces, which crush these local buckets. Our communities provide little soil from which distinctive and healthy ways of life can emerge.

Places of Nurture

Not everyone will race for the Kentucky farm and try to mimic the life that is so dear to Wendell Berry. But his concern about local cultures is one that is becoming widely shared. Many, in small towns and in great cities, are looking for distinctive ways of life that can allow for genuine human flourishing. We seldom speak of our congregations as if they were in the local culture business. And we have to be careful that such talk not become justification for patterns of exclusiveness, racism, classism, or sexism.

But congregations truly provide alternative ways of life for the world. They are to be places of nurture for faithful disciples. What is needed is good, rich soil that can support the new life these congregations exist to serve. Probing a congregation's history becomes a process of stirring all that has gathered in one local bucket. It is a form of composting. Probing history takes what many regard as the dead past and finds within it both raw materials for the present and signs of new life.

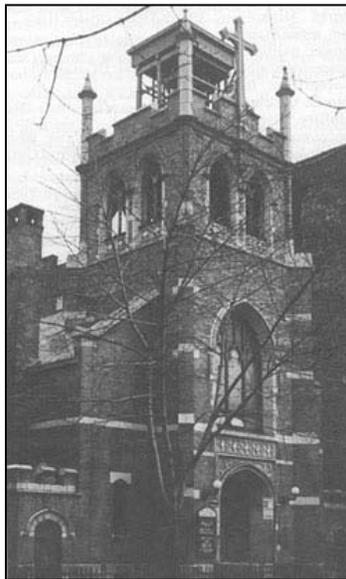
By strengthening one local culture through preparing a congregational history, you have the opportunity to do important cultivating and gardening. Strengthening the culture in your congregation and preparing it for a new generation is an act of creativity that allows members to mature to their full human stature. Thus, the work of the congregational historian is participation in the Creator's work, a life-giving act that prepares the ground so that new forms of human community may emerge.

It is this vocation that awaits you as you delve into a past that most will view as small and seemingly ordinary. But the very heritage that your congregation bears proclaims that it is in the small, ordinary places that God hides, that incarnation occurs, that grace is embedded.

Getting Started

A major obstacle to overcome early in your project is our culture's associations with the word *history*. Mention *historian* and watch the stereotypes emerge. We imagine dusty and lonely old men and women who spend all of their days in libraries and studies poring over yellowed pages. Their heads are crammed with names, dates, places, and other assorted facts. They seem ready to tell us more than we want to know about anything that we might raise for discussion.

What is more, we usually think of historians as people who work by themselves for the better part of their lives and leave behind a book that only a few stop to read. Other unpleasant associations come from elementary and secondary school, where history consisted of facts to be memorized and regurgitated for tests. Seldom did history connect with our lives. Only occasionally did we discover—perhaps when reading a biography, taking a vacation, or visiting a museum—that history could contain treasures of insight and wisdom.



Saint Peter's Lutheran Church, the Bronx

Breaking free of these stereotypes will be as challenging as any other part of the task you will face as you attempt to lead your congregation into a discovery of its own history. Every time your project is mentioned, people will hear those dusty, antiquarian overtones. Pastors, congregational leaders, and members—whether or not they are active project participants—will need to be shown and eventually to help explain to still others that what you are setting out to do is something very different.

The History Team

Let's begin by making this a community endeavor. What you want to build is a community of inquiry within your congregation, a group of people who share a desire and commitment to discover who your congregation is and has been.

Your congregation may choose to organize a history committee, thereby opening themselves to the proverbial wisdom that "a camel is a horse produced by a

committee." A rejoinder might be that horses are fine when the terrain is hospitable, but that something more complex is needed to survive in the desert. Committees bring a variety of perspectives, some disagreement, and when they work, more wisdom to the table.

Whether you call your group a "committee," "task group," or "team," you want to foster a process of collaboration and conversation. Depending on the size of your congregation and the interest and talents of its members, a team of three to seven members can become co-inquirers. Your group divides up the workload, meets together to plan the project, and reviews your progress.

Above all, you talk about what you are learning. For example, one member prepares an oral history with several people who have been congregational members the longest; another reads through all the parish newsletters; a third makes a trip to the denominational archives to review all the relevant official transactions and reports housed there; a fourth reads denominational histories; a fifth scours community periodicals to see what difference the congregation has made in the neighborhood.

You divide the labor because there is much to be done if the congregation's full story is to be told. But you also take time to talk to each other about what you are learning, because you know the importance of the cliché that one thing invariably leads to another.

A comment by an older member about a particular pastor's being too busy working to build a local high school, when she would have liked him to make more pastoral calls, gives the local newspaper reader something specific to look for. A paragraph in a denominational history about a now 75-year-old controversy over "unionism" can provide perspective on correspondence between a denominational official and a pastor over whether or not it was permissible for Lutheran and non-Lutheran Christians to share Holy Communion or even to pray together.

A Community of Inquirers

Thus, your task becomes not just more manageable but more productive as group members complement each other and enrich each other's work. Whether or not your group organizes itself as a formal committee, it's important that you form a community of inquirers—and that a congregation-wide conversation begins and continues as people share discoveries, raise questions, fit pieces of information into larger patterns, and together probe for the deeper significance of what they are learning. Meetings of your congregational history team can become places where people reflect in open, candid, and prayerful ways about your congregation's life, mission, and purpose.

As your committee begins to work, make tentative plans for your final product. Do you want to write a book? Make a video? Hold a celebration? Later sections ("Constructing the Story" and "Telling the Story") will help you make these decisions. You might change these plans as your research progresses.

But from the outset, your team should be thinking of ways to keep staff and leaders who are not team members informed, and to involve the congregation in the process of discovery. Prepare interim reports to present to interested groups or committees. Write newsletter articles about what has been discovered and what needs to be learned. Hold occasional history or heritage festivals to show off

treasures from the archives. Videotape and show interviews with the congregation's living legends and tradition bearers. Set up displays of photos and other information gathered.

These are all ways the congregation can learn about its history long before a final product is complete. The challenge here is to create an interest in the congregation and to help all the members feel that the discovery and inquiry are theirs.

Because the task of discovering your congregation's history will require hard work, keeping the committee or team's morale high is also important. You might want to plan joint visits to important sites, special visits by resource people to meet with the group as a whole, and times when people can enjoy an extended conversation about what they are learning. An initial planning retreat—in which you establish the congregation's time line, clarify the kind of history to be written, and come to an agreement about division of labor and deadlines—can help create your community of inquiry.

Building a Congregational Conversation

In the 16th century, Martin Luther called the local congregation a *mundhaus*, literally a "mouth house," to indicate that congregations were to be noisy places, full of preaching, singing, and the mutual conversation of brothers and sisters in faith. Most of our congregations live up to that description, being noisy places where the gospel is proclaimed, pastoral counseling occurs, meetings take place, countless educational events go on, and personal news is dispensed along with coffee or over potluck suppers.

Yet many observers have also noticed that congregations do not always talk about everything they should. Given the variety of values present in most congregations today and the complex contemporary issues we face, it is not surprising that many congregations are at worst silent, and at best reluctant to speak, about socially divisive issues like abortion, human sexuality, racism, just distribution of wealth, and the like.

More surprising is the fact that congregations often find it difficult to carry on deep and lasting conversations about basic matters of faith. At least some people are so disappointed by their congregations that they take their deepest spiritual questions and needs to other places that seem more hospitable—to an interdenominational Bible study group, spiritual retreat center, or self-help group. Many more simply keep quiet and deal with their questions and needs in private, where they need not risk disagreement or disapproval.

Discovering congregational history is not pastoral care—at least most of the time—and it will not require total self-disclosure from those who participate. But it will inevitably unearth sensitive, and at times, divisive topics. Because congregations are places where forgiven sinners gather, we can expect to encounter much sin and need for forgiveness. As people become more honest about their lives, sin will become ever more apparent.

So, as we open up the history of a congregation, we will find out that people hurt each other—sometimes deeply and with long-lasting consequences. Groups exclude some people as they welcome others. Certain needs are attended to while others are ignored. Alcoholism, sexual abuse, power politics, egocentrism, ethnocentrism,

financial irresponsibility, and dishonesty are part of our stories. So is unfaithfulness, in the classic sense of failing to trust God's promises.

One of the challenges your congregation faces when it takes part in a congregational history project is determining what kind of *mundhaus* it will be. Can members talk about the issues that have troubled the congregation's life, threatened its existence, hurt its members, or weakened its ministry to the world? Or will it be a place of repression, where the painful, unconfessed sins and unhealed wounds in its life are covered up, kept out of the congregation's public conversation?

The theology of the Word that lay behind Luther's idea of the *mundhaus* affirmed that talking is creative and restorative. When through the human speech called "confession" sin is brought into the gracious presence of the gospel, broken lives become whole and fractured relations between humans and God are healed.

Trust and the Gospel

Most of the time when congregations talk about their history, the power of words will remain in the background, unnoticed because the stories do not challenge the community's endurance, self-esteem, self-understandings, or conventional wisdom. But you may encounter a controversial topic and your congregation—not only your committee—will need to prove that it is a trustworthy place where genuine differences can be faced, where failure and evil can be met without fear.

What does it take to build this kind of a congregational conversation? The first ingredient is basic trust that this group of people is, indeed, the kind of *mundhaus* that Luther envisioned, that it is a place where anything can be talked about because the gospel is there first. Some congregations, perhaps because of conflicts experienced recently, will not enter easily into such conversation.

Your history team, however, can provide a great service to your congregation by engaging congregational leaders in discussion about the need for conversation, as well as about barriers and ways to overcome them.

Second, people must learn how to embody that gospel in specific acts of care and hospitality. Congregations have distinctive repertoires of such acts. Yours might reach out to strangers by welcoming the homeless into your basement, feeding the hungry, making room for the bereaved at the potluck supper table.

Congregations also demonstrate hospitality by the way members listen to each other, by being open to the needs and hurts of others, by offering big and little acts of care. The way arguments at church meetings are handled, the approachability of the pastor for private conversation, the way different opinions are treated in the classroom, the character of worship services—these are indicators and molders of your congregation's trustworthiness.

As your history project develops, your congregation must become adept at clearing space for people to tell their stories—both the successes and the failures—with the confidence that both storytellers and their stories will be taken seriously. Your history team might want to select a facilitator who knows how to listen openly to honest conversation and how to help people express in a caring manner even the most deeply held opinions and convictions.

Conversations might be most productive if they are conducted in small groups. Your team also might establish a ground rule that members will not gossip outside of your meetings about what is said.

You want to encourage members to be open and honest, not divisive. All members need to be equipped with an openness to be changed by the conversation that develops, with a love for the truth and for those who are different from us.

When your congregational history team begins to create a conversation about your findings and quests, you have an opportunity to enrich your congregation's overall discourse. By scheduling times for members to talk about the congregation's past, you can encourage a special kind of conversation. As you share your findings and ask for people's responses, you can improve the congregation's memory. Members will tell stories about worship life and organizational patterns that show how things have changed over the years.

Your team can lift up countless forgotten or undervalued acts and experiences in the congregation's past and present life—instances of sacrificial care that changed lives, or times of rare courage by a member in her workplace or community, for example—and help members see that far more than they ever imagined has been going on in their lives.

Because congregations routinely fail to take account of all their caring and witnessing acts, they usually see only fragments of their larger story. Conversation about difficult times in the past can build your congregation's capacity to deal with current controversies by showing how the congregation faced those moments of truth—and faithfully survived. As your team hosts this set of conversations, its main task is helping your congregation to discover who it really is.

Assembling the Raw Materials

Just as carpenters work with plywood, nails, and fiberglass, so congregational historians use basic materials to carry out their task.

First are the people. A treasure trove of recollections, anecdotes, and experiences that can open up a congregation's history awaits you in the memories of current and past members. Armed with either an audio or videotape recorder, congregational historians can begin to put together a mountain of information and leads. So begin with people and a little bit of technology.

Second, most congregations have collections of original records, documents, photos, bulletins, newsletters, minutes, and the like. Some congregations have carefully ordered these primary source materials into archives where they are safely stored in special folders, boxes, and vaults that protect them from decay, dampness, and fire. If your congregation has such an archive, your work will be much easier. But if no such archive exists, build one now. Many resources exist to help with this task. (See the "Resources" section for specific suggestions.)

By themselves, baptismal records, yearly audit records, and minutes of your Council can seem rather tedious and uninteresting. But armed with the right set of questions, which come from what you learn from members and other sources, these records can tell you a great deal. Like detectives or journalists, as they review these

materials your committee members need to ask, Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? (See pages 40-43 of my book, *Places of Worship* for sample questions to help you with your research.)

Church budgets contain clues about a congregation's values. How your congregation spends its money tells part of its story. Membership records tell you when important members and families joined or left the congregation and where they came from or went. These records reveal patterns of membership loss and decline. They also indicate patterns of congregational behavior when they record ages of Baptisms and confirmations, frequency of Communion, numbers of funerals and marriages, and so forth.

Church bulletins hold clues about what happened at worship and why. Read them sequentially and you can trace the unfolding development of your congregation's liturgical life. Watch for the introductions of new orders of worship, dedications of new vestments, organs, or furniture, or changes in the established order of service. Those are clues that something has happened that you must investigate further.

The official minutes of your congregation's various organizations often tell more than they intend to. They are, first of all, records of official decisions. Although frequently laundered for public consumption, careful reading of these documents discloses, in what is both said and unsaid, the mundane and the turning points of a congregation's life. Motions to call an associate pastor or a teacher, to repair the aging boiler, or to paint the church parlor indicate how your congregation cares for itself as an institution. Decisions to sponsor a refugee family, to support a community open housing standard, or to move to the suburbs are critical moments in a congregation's life.

There are other important primary sources besides the documents a congregation saves. Your church building itself is a very important resource, since it is usually the largest material statement the congregation makes about itself. Bricks and glass speak. They tell us about a congregation's aspirations, style, and background. Redecorating and renovating, or moving from one building to the next, are significant occasions when congregations redefine themselves. Pay attention to plaques on the wall, works of art, books in the library, furniture in the parlor. They also have stories to tell.

Finding Resources

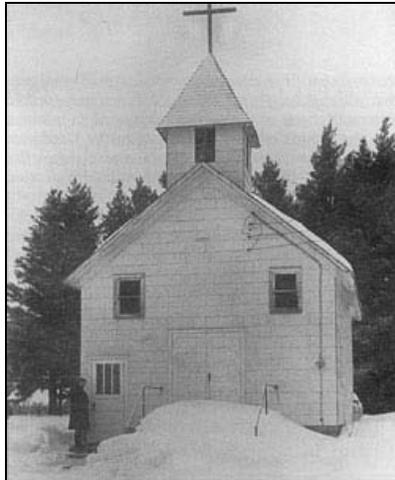
As you begin your inquiry, take an inventory of all the resources available. As you proceed, you will find that some things are missing. For some reason, the bulletins from 1918 are missing. A pastor's files are in his family's possession. Someone threw away the women's organization minutes.

Keep track of what you have and what is absent. Then develop a systematic plan to recover what you can. Assign individual team members specific tasks: seek copies of the women's organization minutes from the group's officers; pay a visit to the Lundquist family to secure access to the pastoral files; compare the bulletins from 1917 and 1919 to determine if you need the 1918 set or can do without them.

You will meet dead ends. Some materials never turn up. Then historians need to invent ways to find what they are seeking. If no minutes for an organization can be found, then oral histories of key members might be the only avenue available.

Sometimes the historian must accept defeat, too. We never can recover the whole past. Instead, historians work with the fragments they can find, and admit that the story they construct is partial, at best.

It is important to turn outside the congregation for help as you assemble materials. Denominational archives—on the local, regional, and national levels—likely have saved official reports from your congregation and information on its clergy. Your denomination's historians and archivists are key resources for learning about parts of your congregational story that intersect with larger denominational developments. (See the "Resources" section for information on how to contact these people.)



Midwest church (c. 1950)

As you develop the congregational conversation mentioned above, be sure to include times when members can bring materials they might have saved. And do not forget about former members and clergy who can help with the task. In addition, local community historical societies, newspapers, and libraries are often able to provide valuable glimpses of the congregation from the outside.

As you proceed, the inventory will inevitably grow. The diaries of longtime members, the sermons of pastors, the minutes of the youth group, and scrapbooks of pictures, all of these add dimensions to the story you seek to tell.

Developing the Basic Skills

Historians reach back into the past to make sense of what they are experiencing in the present. They are detectives who look for clues and then seek relationships between the clues they find. They seek patterns and threads. They are convinced that time makes a difference, that yesterday had to happen for today to become possible. They try to see how things change and stay the same.

To be a good historian, you need to be curious and always ask "why?" Why is this congregation still alive? Why did its members choose this pastor instead of another? Why do our members behave this way at worship, in the classroom, or at the congregational dinner?

A second key quality in the historian is a healthy bit of skepticism. Because you study people, you need to be constantly aware of the finitude and falleness of your

subject matter. People's memories deceive them. Sometimes individuals and communities deliberately distort the past because it contains a truth too painful to face or too explosive to share with others.

Even when they do not deliberately deceive, humans experience the same events differently. The mother of the bride, the organist, the custodian, and the groom will all have different versions of the same wedding. The same is true for parties in a major congregational controversy. So, as a historian you always must test your sources by comparing them with others to see how they are true and false.

A third key quality is imagination. Historians are not mere chroniclers who compile lists of facts. While you cannot succeed if you do not have facts, you must have imagination as well. You must be able to think your way into the other person's shoes, to see the world through the eyes of those who acted in the past. These qualities must be combined with certain organizational and research skills. Historians need techniques and skills to ensure accurate note taking, a file system that organizes the material gathered, the ability to listen to what is said and not said and then come to an independent judgment.

But history is as much an art as it is technique or science. While you must be certain the claims you make are accurate and carefully evaluate all the available sources, as a historian you must love learning about the human story and must love the particular group, in this case the congregation, that you seek to understand.

Defining a Lutheran Congregation

Depending on whom you ask, the answer to this question, "What's Lutheran about this congregation—and what's not?" could be "everything" or "nothing."

Some will point to the Northern European names on membership rosters, the Norwegian piety, or the German insistence on sound doctrine and suggest that everything about their congregation is Lutheran. Others will concentrate on congregations that are a mixture of heritages and cultures and suggest that there is little difference between St. Paul's Lutheran Church and Grace Episcopal or Westminster Presbyterian down the street. They will suggest that the congregation is primarily a reflection of its community and that whatever is Lutheran is actually window dressing on an American socioeconomic community.



Gabriela Cuervos (center), first Puerto Rican confirmed in the Lutheran Church (1898)

Your history of your congregation will take you into a consideration of this question. As you review the sermons preached and confront the references to Martin Luther and the Reformation, as you ponder the hymns chosen and not chosen for regular worship, and as you dust off the catechetical materials used to introduce new generations to the Christian faith, you will inevitably face questions about your congregation's distinctiveness.

When you consider your congregation's response to racial changes in its neighborhood, to changing sexual mores, or to divisive social issues such as the Vietnam War of the 60s or the abortion controversy of the 90s, you will want to ask: "How is this congregation the same as any other American congregation, and how is it different?"

When it opens food pantries, pours money into an alternative school system, collaborates in the building of an orphanage or hospital, or moves to the suburbs, who really are the people making those momentous decisions? How is this congregation just like every other Lutheran congregation in the United States—or the world? How is it different, if not unique?

A Signal from the Sixteenth Century

In 1530, while the outlaw Martin Luther was hiding from pope and emperor, Luther's learned and faithful colleague, Philip Melanchthon, presented the Augsburg Confession to church and world. That document, in which the Reformers clarified the issues between them and the Catholic Church and then proposed what they believed to be the essentials for a new agreement, quickly became the first of several reference points for Lutherans, a collection of documents called the Lutheran Confessions. In times of confusion over the centuries, people have turned to these documents for help in determining their Lutheran identities. The Lutheran Confessions, and the Scriptures to which they bore witness, have been the sources for self-definition.

In Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon offered the first Lutheran definition of the church. "The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly" (*BC 32.1*). This lean definition also contains the Lutheran criterion: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments" (*BC 32.2*). Article VII identifies the essential sameness the Reformers were after, but it also makes room for considerable differences: "It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere" (*BC 32.3*).

In this article of the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon and Luther (by long distance) were not thinking primarily about individual congregations. Their emphasis was upon the "one holy church," of which congregations were small but essential parts. But for several reasons, this is a pivotal place for us to begin our search for identity. First, the article reminds us that Lutheranism began as a protest movement, and the reformers were concerned about the whole Christian church, not merely one ethnic group in it. Luther and Melanchthon did not feel called upon to invent something brand new. Instead, they wanted to call the whole church to return to its treasure, the gospel, and to make room for the breathtaking freedom that radiated from its core, the proclaimed Word about Jesus and the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

Luther's and Melanchthon's definition of the essential character of the church had enormous consequences. The history of Western Europe and the Americas are definitively shaped by the divisions of church and state that followed. The various Lutheran groups that migrated to the United States and the countless Lutheran congregations they formed are part of a tradition that grounds itself in Word and Sacrament. In the stories we tell now, this distinctive confessional stance is a benchmark. Each Lutheran congregation has behind it this confessional heritage, despite its ethnic, regional, socioeconomic, and denominational differences.

Key Questions

When we study our congregations, then, we need to ask how they have done with their treasure, the gospel and the sacraments. How have they built their lives, buildings, communities, and programs around these essential elements? How have they borne the gospel into the world? How has their understanding of the gospel changed over time? How has it stayed the same? How have the sacraments been administered, how have sacramental practices changed, and why? How has the

Lutheran tradition's evangelical heart beat throughout the congregation's life? How have the people, washed with baptismal waters and fed with the body and blood of Christ, offered God's life to the world?

To answer these questions, we need to remind ourselves of Luther's fundamental distinction between law and gospel. From his own spiritual turmoil, Luther discovered that the most important thing people could learn was their enormous need for Christ. In opposition to centuries of Catholic teaching and popular religiosity that stressed the need for humans to earn God's favor, Luther found that human efforts to please God, even those of the spiritual virtuosos, are never good enough. God's law is the basic scriptural revealer of this truth. The law, whether expressed as one of the Ten Commandments or one of the biblical stories, makes it apparent that humans are sinners. No matter how strenuously we try to keep the commandments, we always find ourselves caught up in a relentless cycle of accusation, self-justification, fault-finding, denial, and despair.

For Luther, the law—whether it addresses Sabbath observance or orders political relations—always accuses. Instead of trying to find some way to beat the law at its own game, Luther sought some other source of salvation. He found his alternative in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, where another route to God's favor became available. The Reformation formula, "we are justified by grace through faith," points to this understanding of the gospel, God's other word, which declares sinners saints by virtue of God's surprising gifts of grace and faith.

In the not-quite-five centuries that have followed Luther's identification of the true treasure of the Christian church, Lutherans have argued, both among themselves and with other Christian communities, about the distinction between law and gospel.

At their best, Lutherans have sought not to separate God's two words from each other but instead to be certain that each was playing its proper role—the one driving people to Christ, the other forgiving and reconciling them to God. That struggle to distinguish law from gospel, and in so doing to hang on to the church's indispensable evangelical treasure, is at the center of the Lutheran movement through history. When we come to writing the history of a Lutheran congregation, we must search for signals of that struggle in the local story.

There are several other distinctive Lutheran traits that flow from this central source.

First, Lutherans are a people of the book. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures sit in a privileged position within our congregations because in them law and gospel are authoritatively proclaimed. Speaking, preaching, singing, confessing—all verbal acts—are primary in this tradition, because the gospel and our recognition of our great need for it comes to us through spoken and written words, through hearing the great story of God's gracious self-expression in our human flesh and blood.

Second, because Lutherans view the world and their lives through law and gospel lenses, they affirm some amazing paradoxes. For example, they believe that Christians are *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously saints and sinners. The first word of God, the law, keeps exposing ongoing sin. The second word, the gospel, keeps remaking us into saints. At the personal level, this means that we Lutherans keep finding out contradictory things about ourselves. On the one hand, we keep unearthing evidence that we cannot keep the first commandment: "You shall have no

other gods before me"; that our lives are malformed at the center. On the other, the recurring word of forgiveness rises again and again in our own lives.

At the congregational level, this means that our congregations will bear all the marks of fallenness and finitude that the law exposes. Far from expecting our churches to be perfect, we should not be surprised when we find them to be self-serving, idolatrous, immoral, or unloving. Yet, these congregations that can and do look all too human are also places where, with each proclamation of the gospel, life is, for a moment at least, reorganized around the forgiveness of sins, where the normal human processes of accusation, competition, and oppression are interrupted by Jesus' better way.

Living with Paradox

For the full story of our congregations to come into view, we require an imagination lively enough to see them as paradoxical places. The early Christians proclaimed Jesus to be fully human and fully divine, and the Reformers asserted that the mundane bread and wine of human labor received at the Eucharist was at the same time the body and blood of our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. Just so, we must be able to carry on in this tradition of paradox and see our own congregations as, at one and the same time, a gathering of the world's fallen and a community of those who have been born again—and again.

The challenge for you as the congregational historian is to resist the temptation to resolve the paradox. Instead of telling a story that is one of heaven on earth or one that portrays your congregation as entirely evil, you need to search relentlessly through the traces of your congregation's past for the interaction of sin and grace in its life. There are additional resources in the Lutheran tradition that can take you deeper into that paradoxical character. The emphasis Luther placed on the "priesthood of all believers," for example, encourages you to probe the lives of individual members for evidence that members carried the gospel into the world.

A second resource is Luther's understanding of vocation or calling. His elevated view of the daily work of Christians should embolden you to write a story about more than a congregation safely ensconced behind the walls of its building. These reformation insights will make you ask why Lutherans so often invoke the priesthood of all believers idea and then reduce talk about ministry to what pastors do and what church members do when they are not doing normal secular things but are involved in some special religious or church activity or cause. The goal of your history committee is not to tell a pious religious story. Rather, it is to search for the presence, and absence, of the gospel in the lives of a particular group of people.

Cultural Factors

As you look for this distinctive Lutheran presence, you need to be prepared for other realities you will encounter. Lutheran congregations in America do look strikingly similar to many other kinds of American congregations. They share similar features like worship services, parking lots, lay/clergy struggles, limited resources, and human fearfulness. Many observers have commented that Americans seem to like compartmentalizing religion in congregational packages, because that keeps religion from intruding into important public, economic, and social arenas.

Some of these observers are critics who see congregations as life-style enclaves that foster patterns of exclusiveness and privilege. Others warn against the individualism that is so ingrained in the American character and express concern that this American malady infects much of our congregational life as well. To be sure, the congregations of the ELCA are not culture-free zones. On the contrary, they are culture-laden places that bear all the strengths and weaknesses of the many cultures that come together in their lives.



Shishmaref Lutheran Church, Seward Peninsula, Alaska (c. 1970)

You, the congregational historian, therefore, must come to your task with heightened cultural sensitivity. The congregations of the ELCA exist in a context of great religious and cultural competition. People church-shop in ways quite similar to the way they buy groceries or purchase a car. Ours is the age of the religious entrepreneur who beams blessings at us on the television or invites us to sample the new improved product at the church down the street. You should expect your own congregation to reflect this entrepreneurial character by supporting a variety of new programs and missions. At the same time, you should expect it to be in tension with the consumer culture that fuels the competitive spirit.

More than one religious way of life will permeate any congregation's life, since our nation is manifestly pluralistic. Worshippers bring with them into the pews dashes of Zen, traces of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, large portions of fundamentalism and pentecostalism, and whiffs of New Age religion. The vague American religiosity that some call civil religion also manifests itself in arguments about patriotism, morality, and citizenship. And ethnicity, the skeleton of American religion, will be an important part of every congregation's history—whether the congregation is a group of long-assimilated Germans, second-generation Hispanics, or African Americans new to the community.

These cultural factors interact with the Lutheran heritage carried in your congregation to shape a distinctive local answer to the question, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?" Rather than assume that every congregation should be a carbon copy of every other one or that each is a unique entity, you want to learn how your congregation puts itself together, how it takes all these threads and weaves a fabric out of them. As congregational historians sort through all the evidence gathered, you have the opportunity to help your congregation ponder a question as old as the Christian church itself: the relation of Christ and culture in history.

As H. Richard Niebuhr demonstrated in his book *Christ and Culture*, at various times Christians have answered that question in different ways. At some times, Christians have taken strong stances against the world, forming themselves into alternative communities at some distance from the surrounding culture. At other times, Christians have so thoroughly accommodated themselves to a culture that they seemed almost totally of it. At other times, they have seemed to float above the culture, almost in a world of their own. Many times they have sought to transform the culture by changing it from within. Occasionally, Christians have adopted paradoxical postures, employing more than one of these stances at the same time.

As you begin to delve deeply into your congregation's past, this question will come increasingly to the fore. Our congregations sit on the front line between the sacred and the secular, the private life of home and personal belief and the public life of action and moral discourse. They mediate between many cultures, classes, traditions, and experiences. By asking, "How does this happen here?" you will help your congregation begin to discover who it has been and who it is now. Discoveries about those questions also can help your congregation decide who it should be in the future.

Your Congregation's Inner Life

What makes your congregation different from all the others? Asking such a naive-sounding question invites a variety of responses. There are many who expect only a monotonous sameness from American congregations. After all, congregations do similar things like conduct worship services, run Sunday schools, provide pastoral care, and minister to the needs of those whom Jesus called "the least of these." They play a common role in our society as they gather people from a community and help them to search for God and to find deep and strong connections with one another. Moreover, they all address the same set of human needs for meaning and belonging, and they provide rites of passage at key moments in life: at birth, entry into adulthood, marriage, and death.

Others will argue that denominational distinctiveness is lessening in our society and point out how Lutherans have borrowed from Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, and evangelicals. They will show how similar liturgical practices, hymnody, educational strategies, and patterns of organizational governance are found in so many different congregations and denominational settings.

They will also remind us that few congregations can point to a single denominational or ethnic lineage. Lutherans do not marry only other Lutherans, and the new members of our congregations often bring other denominational, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that can soften whatever original distinctiveness a particular congregation might have had. Has American religion really homogenized the traditions that people brought with them to this country? Has the melting pot cooked us all into a bland stew?



First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galveston, Texas

A third group will disagree with these readings and argue that there are distinctive differences between congregations. They will point to the differences between inner city and suburban congregations, between acculturated mainstream Protestants and new Asian or Hispanic congregations. The sheer diversity of American culture makes impossible an oppressive or bland uniformity, in these people's eyes. Instead, they

point to the ongoing American saga of the arrival of newcomers and their always unsettling new worlds of belief and practice that refuse to fit neatly into any single cultural form. The future of our culture does not seem to be in the direction of a generic American oneness. Instead, our "manyness" seems to be growing more and more apparent.

In addition to the strong cultural diversity in our society, there are clear differences between denominations. Worship at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City differs from worship at an Eastern Orthodox cathedral in Baltimore. Women can be clergy in some denominations and not others. Some congregations baptize only adults and insist upon their total immersion. Others sprinkle people of any age. Genuine religious distinctions still do exist and give congregations a Methodist, Catholic, or Lutheran feel.

But even those who would agree that there are differences between American congregations might find it difficult to affirm that every congregation can point to its own unique character. Yes, Lutherans might differ from Methodists, or Asians might differ from Anglo-Saxons, or rural might differ from urban, but just how can one Lutheran, midwestern, suburban church differ from another? These people might feel comfortable talking about distinctive types of congregations but shy away from asserting that each congregation has its own distinctive story to tell.

This section will take you beyond concern only for a Lutheran distinctiveness. Instead, it will help you discover how each congregation—including your own—constructs its own particular identity out of a wide variety of cultural, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, familial, denominational, and biographical materials.

The materials will, by necessity, include strands that are the same as those found in other congregations. In certain ways, Germans are like other Germans; professionals do share certain life-style preferences; urban congregations have certain characteristics in common. And Lutherans should expect to find similarities with other Lutherans. But what congregations do is package similarities in distinctive ways. The congregational historian seeks to learn how one group of people has shaped its identity over time.

Where to Look First

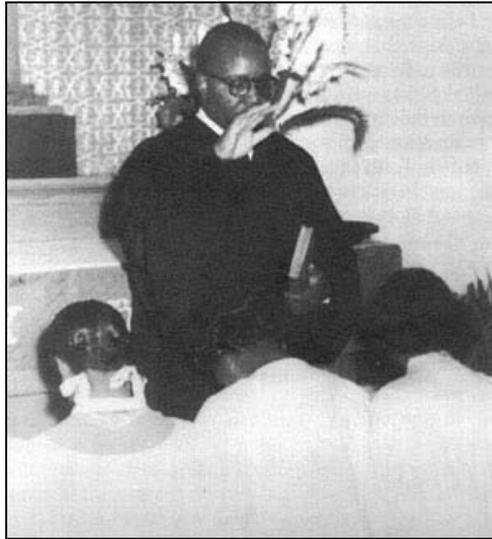
The place to start the search for your congregation's distinctive character or identity is so familiar and so contemporary that few will expect to find historians paying attention to it: Sunday morning worship. We normally expect historians to begin with the earliest evidence and then to work their way step by step to the present. But in this case, the inquiry begins with present practice and asks, "How did this come to be this way?"

Instead of approaching your regular worship service in a habitual manner, however, it is important that you come as if you were from another culture and that you pay attention to every detail. Suspend your familiarity with the routines and people. Try to see your congregation as if for the first time. (In fact, at this point in your work, you might want to ask your congregation's newest members for their impressions. You could even invite several people who are not members to visit and tell you what they see and experience.)

What will you see? People. But they are not just any group of people you might

see at an airport, museum, or ball game. This is a particular group of people with a pattern of relations. Follow them, watching closely who they talk to and who they avoid. Eavesdrop on their conversations and pay attention to the topics discussed and language used.

Arrive early on Sunday morning and watch as they prepare a space and themselves for worship. Note how the individuals begin to become a congregation as they take their places in pews, the choir loft, or around the altar. Pay special attention to the objects that they use—both those that they bring with them into the worship space and those that are permanent fixtures. Listen to the kind of music that is played, the language that is spoken. Put all your senses to work. What peculiar tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and sights do you notice?



Bishop Nelson W. Trout, Trinity Lutheran Church, Montgomery, Alabama (1952)

Every time we enter any setting, our senses process all the signals that come to us from the people, objects, and actions taking place. Most of the time that monitoring goes on automatically. We notice our noticing only when an unexpected, frightening, delightful, or unpleasant stimulus strikes us. The task here is to turn off the autopilot that guides you through most congregational encounters. You want to find out what is really going on when this congregation gathers.

In essence, this field trip into a congregation's inner life makes you, as the historian, a participant-observer, or what anthropologists call an "ethnographer." In this unusual role, you are above all a people watcher. By heightening your observer role, even though you normally participate, you have the opportunity to gather an amazing variety of clues about the identity of your congregation.

An Imaginary Journey

To illustrate how to play this role, let us take an imaginary journey to Faith Lutheran Church, an 80-year-old congregation established in one of the oldest suburbs of a major midwestern city. Pause across the street from the church building and observe the Sunday morning events. First, notice the neo-Gothic architecture and the impressive limestone structure sitting on the prominent corner lot. There is a tall bell tower, but in place of real bells are speakers for an electronic carillon. The grounds

are well cared for, and there are signs that the building has recently been made accessible to people with wheelchairs. The church is landlocked; there is no room for it to grow, at least architecturally.

Before the cars start streaming into the small parking lot (a sign that most of Faith's members originally lived within walking distance), glance up and down the streets to take note of the neighborhood that surrounds the church building. The carefully groomed lawns and large houses might be first clues to the aspirations and achievements of Faith's past and present members.

Now watch the members arrive. The mixture of Hondas, Volvos, and General Motors cars indicates something about the professional makeup of the congregation. But do not overlook the handful of Jaguars and BMWs and a number of cars that have seen better years. They are signs that a spectrum of economic backgrounds is present within the congregation.

What kinds of people climb the stairs into the church building? The mixture of young nuclear families with older couples and single people of various ages indicates that Faith welcomes families but that it is more than a "family" church. The vast preponderance of white faces indicates that members are primarily from European origins, although the smattering of African-American and Asian people entering the front door suggests some openness to diversity. Yet there is an apparent sameness.

Everyone is well-dressed, and the people make their entrance with a certain reserve and decorum.

Follow the people into their sanctuary. The rich browns of the carved woodwork and the blues and reds of the stained glass windows meet your eye. As one of several polite ushers hands you a bulletin and greets you by name, you hear the first notes of an organ prelude by J.S. Bach. As you make your way down the center aisle, your eye drifts up to the choir loft where 25 members in choir robes are taking their places. Few pews are empty—except for the front ones—but most have room for one or two more people in them.

As you take your place, you pull the *Lutheran Book of Worship* from the rack and find the appropriate order of service, noted in the first page of the bulletin. Scanning the bulletin's contents, you note the long schedule, "This Week at Faith." There are other worship services on Sunday and Wednesday. Adult classes, Overeaters Anonymous, the women's organization, a young mothers group, the Social Ministry Committee, and the Council have meetings scheduled for this week. A special plea for canned goods for the food pantry and a weekly statistical report on attendance and offerings catch your eye.

As the prelude ends, Faith's pastor enters the sanctuary. You watch her reverence the altar. You note that all the candles are lit and that two beautiful bouquets of flowers stand on either side of the high altar. The pastor steps around the freestanding communion table with its veiled chalice and walks down the steps from the chancel to the nave where she greets the people. They are sitting quietly, waiting to hear her announcements of special news in the congregation's life. She informs them of the death of an elderly member, the anniversary of a middle-aged couple, and a new baby born to a single woman. A visiting medical missionary from Nepal is introduced, and the congregation is reminded that the doctor's work is supported through Faith's benevolence funds.

The pastor asks members to be certain to greet any visitors who are present and then invites the congregation to turn and face the processional cross during the singing of the opening hymn. As she makes her way to the back of the church, the gold thread in her vestments sparkles. The organ begins to roar from pipes in the transepts and the back balcony, and the congregation stands to sing "Lift High the Cross."

Clues to Character

Even before the worship begins, you, the participant-observer, have gathered a long list of leads. All of these are routes into the congregation's inner life. The neo-Gothic building, the music by Bach, and the predominance of northern European complexions suggest that this congregation might have certain ethnic origins. The affluent neighborhood and the professional demeanor of the people present indicate something about its socioeconomic setting. Rich vestments, a processional cross, and the fact that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is the only worship resource in the pew rack are clues about Faith's liturgical orientation.

The fact that the pastor personalizes the beginning of worship with a greeting and then conveys important news about members suggests that individuals play an important role in Faith's life, and that it is important to be known here, especially by the pastor. The full schedule of meetings and the carefully printed bulletin are indicators that order matters, and that this congregation is a busy place that tries to meet many needs. There are clues to the congregation's priorities in its array of musical resources and in its appeal for canned goods. The flowers and ushers are signals of a certain gentility and decorum.



Augustana Synod Founders, Rockford, Illinois (1885)

Each of these clues can help you unlock the distinctive character of a congregation. They are signs of traditions and practices that the congregation has made its own. You move from your role as participant-observer to historian when you begin to ask how these things came to be. Why the Gothic architecture? Was the congregation originally all German, or were its leaders fans of the American neo-Gothic movement that overwhelmed church architecture in the first half of the 20th century? Why the bell tower with no bells? And whose idea was it to marry modern recording technology with this architecture so that the sound of the church bells could be heard without real bells and without their skilled, committed ringers?

Why did the congregation build on this piece of property? Was the idea to create a presence in this community—and did the strategy work? When did Faith get its processional cross, and why did the wheelchair ramp get built five years ago? As you begin to ask about changes over time—Have we always worshiped like this? When did the social action committee come into existence? Is Pastor Schmidt the first female pastor?—patterns and characteristics of the congregation's inner life begin to come into view. As you follow the various routes and as you struggle to fit together what you learn on these routes, Faith Church begins to take on its own distinctive character.

Exploring Other Routes

Before pursuing these various routes further, it is important that we identify each one. The church building and all of its artwork and furnishings provide an architectural route into the congregation's life. The worship book, high altar and freestanding communion table, processional cross, and vestments are signposts along the liturgical route. Faith's address, its location in a particular neighborhood, the dress, demeanor, and resources of members open up a route into the particular ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds of the church. The various meetings and classes announced provide points of entry into Faith's educational and organizational life.

The information about offerings and attendance, along with the observation about the landlocked status of the congregation, points to institutional dimensions of the congregation's history. The individuals named in the announcements (including the medical missionary) and the reference to the food pantry are indicators that this congregation has an ethic of care and compassion that sustains church and community members, as well as people around the world. Those named individuals along with Pastor Schmidt are representatives of the personal and familial stories that run through Faith's life. The name "Lutheran"—on the church's cornerstone, its bulletin, and its worship books—is a reminder of the theological/denominational dimension of Faith's life.

You must explore each of these routes if the congregation's distinctive character is to come into full view. As participant-observer, you will not stop at the threshold of worship, for example, but will want to examine the full range of practices that make up Faith's liturgical life. This means going more deeply into the formal and informal worship events of the congregation.

You will need to determine the place of Baptism, Eucharist, and preaching—both in the congregation's present life and in its longer past. Has Baptism always been a part of Sunday morning worship, or did it have more of a private family ceremony character in early years? Was the font always located at the entrance to the church? How has preaching changed in style and substance? How has eucharistic practice changed over time? Is the sacrament celebrated more or less frequently than in the past? Is the celebration somber or festive? Why the freestanding communion table when there is such a beautiful high altar just a few feet away? And why have all these things changed or stayed the same? Has the pastor always worn this kind of vestment? Does she always sit in an ornate clergy seat, or are there times when she sits with the people?

Fully exploring the liturgical route will mean attending to the special services—funerals, weddings, ecumenical worship, holiday services—that have been a part of Faith's life. It will also mean exploring the worship life of the congregation's members. What kinds of family and personal devotions have they practiced? What extra congregational worship experiences do they seek?

Congregational Organizations

You need to probe each of the other routes in a similar manner. The organizational route, as another example, opens out into the congregation's administrative, social, and missionary activities. The groups mentioned in the bulletin define relationships that shape the larger character of the congregation.

The elected members of the Council function, along with the pastor, as the official leaders of the congregation. Their meetings and minutes provide rich resources for people watching. Who wields the power? What kind of authority is most respected—spiritual, familial, professional, economic? How are decisions made—by consensus, by majority vote, by ratification of conclusions reached elsewhere? What kinds of issues are debated here, and which ones are avoided? What have been the major controversies faced in the Council's meetings, and how are conflicts resolved? How have the Council's role and character changed over time? When you are involved in organization watching, it is especially important to note the discrepancies between official descriptions of organizational behavior and the way things actually work.



Lebanon Lutheran Church, Bristol, Connecticut (c. 1950)

On the other hand, the women's organization most likely has functioned quite differently from the Council. It will be important for you to identify the distinctive roles and contributions of this organization, for often these groups have allowed women to express their creativity and leadership when the official channels of the congregations were for men only. Often, women's organizations have supplied the benevolent and financial energy that expanded congregational horizons at the same time that they made possible new patterns of care and support for members. Watch for ways that these groups raised extra funds to accomplish tasks that the official congregational budget could not include. New ministries frequently begin in these organizations and later become established parts of the congregation's ministry.

There is a story in every organization that exists or has existed in your congregation. The ebbs and flows of the various youth groups, the sudden emergence of a new support group or social ministry committee are signs that members are trying to express their faithfulness to the gospel and to do justice and love mercy. At the same time, the various activities of these groups carry within them all sorts of clues about the particular cultural and ethnic character of the church. The food served at church suppers and luncheons, the types of social activities chosen when people wanted to have a good time, even the decorations and china used, are all signs of the commitments and values of Faith Lutheran Church—and your own church.

As you move deeper into your congregation's life, keep asking how the congregation teaches and practices its faith. How are young people nurtured in the faith and prepared for leadership? Obvious answers: through Sunday school, vacation Bible school, and youth organizations. But young people also learn the faith from a much larger curriculum, the congregation's total life. Children learn in worship, at funerals, in the discussions they overhear in the hallways, and in the family postmortems of worship services or meetings in the car on the way home. Adults are shaped not just by what happens in Bible class or new member classes. They are taught the values of a congregation in the way meetings are run and from the ways members treat each other. Powerful teaching goes on in pastoral care in the emergency room and in the conversation offered over coffee as one member helps another through the aftereffects of a divorce.

Discipline and Leadership Styles

It is also important for you to recognize that the Christian faith is not the only thing taught in a congregation's life. Contending with the gospel for people's attention will be all sorts of worldly wisdom and ways, ranging from the business practices of the modern corporation to the latest psychological fad. Here it is important to attend to the ways that a congregation exercises discipline of its members.

In earlier times congregations had a distinct repertoire of disciplinary practices. Many Lutheran churches set aside regular times for members to confess their sins in private to the pastor before receiving Communion. Certain sins were serious enough to require public confession before the congregation. At times, offenses were so serious that congregations would excommunicate members permanently.

In our times, these practices have largely vanished. But discipline still goes on. A pastor may still encourage members to avail themselves of private confession and absolution. The congregation adopts policies on abortion or investments in companies doing business with dictatorships. The congregation may have certain rules about alcohol consumption on its premises or at congregational events where the public is invited.

But discipline also goes on in much more subtle ways. Conversations change when the pastor walks into the room. Members express their disapproval of life-styles and behaviors in classrooms and in conversation. The congregation's specific character will become clearer to you as you learn how it puts together its own distinctive teaching and disciplinary practices.

Another important clue to a congregation's character is its style of leadership. Some

congregations are pastor-centered with a powerful Herr Pastor heritage in place. Others have strong lay leaders who have left indelible marks on the congregation's life. It is important to identify the full web of leaders in your congregation—pastors, elected leaders, teachers, and professional staff are the most obvious. How have they interacted across the years? For what have they struggled? Have there been significant moments when balances of power have changed? Times when lay leaders exerted themselves or pastors attempted to expand their power?

But it is also important not to overlook the other leaders, the unofficial ones who lead the way into new social ministries or new spiritual odysseys more by virtue of their own integrity and commitment than because they hold a special title or position.

By beginning as a participant-observer and exploring the many leads you find in a congregation's present-day behavior, you have the opportunity to capture the tone and style of your congregation at the same time as you open paths into the sources that previous generations have left behind. Old worship bulletins and church minutes can come alive once you begin to look for characteristic habits and customs.

A congregation's moral character—the particular selection of certain moral concerns over others—can become apparent, as can its economic, social, and spiritual sides. A pronounced focus on personal morality in sermons and educational programs, for example, and silence about racial injustices in the community, indicates that the congregation understands its moral responsibilities to be of a certain nature.

The things that a congregation chooses to do and the things that it avoids help disclose its particular identity. Even its budgets bear witness to its character. The story it tells about itself and to itself can become more apparent as you, the historian, move back and forth between past and present behavior.

Congregational Transitions

There is, however, a danger in trying to capture a congregation's character. History is full of surprises, and settling too rigidly on one portrayal of a congregation's character can result in missing the surprises in a congregation's life or doing injustice to the way it grows and changes over time.

Just as individual identities develop through life's stages, congregational identities go through transitions and, occasionally, radical transformations. A socially conservative congregation that failed to address racism in the 1960s can surprise us with a bold decision to become a sanctuary church in the 1980s. A once-dynamic congregation that played a powerful leadership role in its community or denomination can become a backwater.

So as the congregational historian, you must pay attention to the points in a congregation's life when its character seems to change suddenly and to those other times when it decisively reasserts its traditional ways. Those moments merit special consideration as you prepare to tell your congregation's story. But you must also look for the subtle changes—when a congregation becomes more participatory over a decade, or when its use of Scripture changes by virtue of a new way of teaching that spreads slowly over the years. Each nuance and trait you discover will result in a congregational history that helps members see how distinctive and colorful they really are.

Your Congregation's Public Profile

The inner life of a congregation—its life when it gathers to worship, meet, eat, celebrate, mourn, decide, and care—is only one-half of its story. Unfortunately, most congregational histories tell only part of the first half and leave out the second half entirely. The second half of the story occurs when the congregation disperses after the benediction or closing hymn. Discovering this side is more difficult because the traces of the congregation's life in the world are so scattered. But there are ways to bring portions of this life into view, even if we can never recover all of it.

One way is to take a stance similar to the one that led us into Faith Lutheran Church in the previous chapter. But this time, instead of standing across the street and watching the people move into their place of worship, stand on Faith's front step and (without making judgments) track the congregation as it leaves the building. Where do people go?

Once upon a time, we might have glibly answered, "home." After Sunday worship, the people went home for Sunday dinners, family visiting in parlors, and quiet time for Scripture reading and Sabbath keeping as Christians came to reinterpret the Jewish practice. Nowadays the dispersal is much more varied. Some might still return home for a specially prepared Sunday dinner. But others just as likely will be found on their way to places of employment or to leisure activities.

Most of the time, we lose sight of the congregation as soon as this dispersal occurs, acting as if the congregation ceases to exist once people leave its building. But as congregational historian, you can follow the lead of Luther, who wrote of the priesthood of all believers, and St. Paul before him, who described the church as the body of Christ made up of many members with many gifts. You have the opportunity to correct our vision, to help us see how far the congregation reaches into the world.

Congregations reach out into the world in two basic ways. Acting as a whole, congregations do things like sponsor food pantries, march in protest rallies, petition legislatures, or run schools and day-care centers. Congregations also make an impact on the world through what individual members or small groups of members do in the homes, offices, ballparks, schools, nonprofit organizations, and businesses of the land.

One Person's Story

From the vantage point of the front steps of Faith, you (again the participant-observer) need to find ways to identify both of these types of public impact. Once more, the best way is to follow the people and watch what they do. Martin Miller, for example, is an elder of Faith Lutheran Church. He spends most of every Sunday morning at the church, and at least two evenings of the week he can be found there. One of the last to leave the building after Sunday worship, he makes a stop at the community hospital to extend the celebration of the morning Eucharist to a member recovering from hip replacement surgery.

Once home he joins his wife and two children for a traditional Sunday dinner where they dissect the pastor's sermon, giving Pastor Schmidt high marks for delivery but questioning her interpretation of the current political situation. In the afternoon, Martin and his wife, Janet, return to Faith to attend a concert that is part of a series

of sacred music events sponsored by the congregation for the community. After the concert, the Millers join another couple from the community for dinner. There the group's conversation turns into an impassioned discussion about the morality of abortion on demand.

During the week, Martin commutes downtown to his office, where he works as chief financial officer for a Fortune 500 corporation. Throughout his workdays, Martin is called upon to make decisions that affect hundreds of employees and thousands of consumers. His planning will determine whether the corporation grows or declines; a decision to manufacture a new product line in Mexico will create many new jobs south of the border, but it will also result in a plant closing back home in the United States. The personnel and compensation policies he shapes will determine the expectations and behavior of employees around the world.

His noon lunch meeting is devoted to leadership of the local United Way fund-raising campaign. Later he meets privately with a staff member whose family is coming apart under the ravages of alcoholism. One of his weeknights will be spent at a meeting of the local Lutheran high-school association, where he serves as Faith's official representative. Another evening is given to hosting the congregation's religion and literature group, which includes a number of people who are not members of Faith.

Most of the things that Martin does outside the walls of Faith church are invisible to most of its members and might not be viewed, even by Martin, as extensions of Faith's ministry. Yet in individual acts ranging from setting the tone of dinner conversations to counseling a co-worker to supporting a concert series, Martin is extending into the world the congregation's struggle with sin and grace. Each decision he makes at work, each commitment of his time, each expenditure of money is an occasion for Faith to reach through him to the world that God so loved.

But notice also how, as Martin moves through his week, he occasionally participates in actions of the whole congregation. The Sunday concert series is one way Faith reaches out corporately to the world. So are the meetings of the religion and literature group and the congregation's participation in a local high-school association.

Certainly few members occupy positions with as much power as Martin does. But your congregation well might have a school leader who has inspired the imaginations of hundreds of high-school students, or a personnel officer who helps new immigrants prepare resumes at the same time that she shows them how to survive in the city. The point is that each member follows a distinctive path into the world and carries the congregation's influence—for good and for ill—into the world.

Following those paths into your community's organizations, social activities, and economic and political decision-making arenas helps you bring the congregation's full story into view. Obviously, a congregational history cannot include the total experience of all of its members. But as you work, you will want to remember that the drama of the congregation's story, the place where the Word becomes flesh, is in the lives of its members. Representative samples across the congregation's history must be taken. Here is where oral history, diaries, even obituaries can be precious resources.

A Pastor's Story

You do, however, need to single out at least one member—the pastor—in order to capture another side of the congregation's life. In your effort to make your congregational history something more than an expanded biography of clergy, do not leave out these important actors in your congregation's story. Instead, you as congregational historian need to place pastors in their proper place within the larger story you are telling.

Pastor Schmidt, for example, will head straight home from Sunday worship for dinner and a nap after a full morning, before she continues an exceptionally busy week. She, too, attends Faith's concert, but then she stays at church to meet with the congregation's youth group. Later that evening, she stops by the community hospital to pick up the pager carried by the staff chaplain who is taking the night off. For the next 12 hours, she is on call for any emergency that occurs at the hospital. On previous occasions being on call has almost always meant a return to the hospital to comfort a family she had not known before that is in the midst of tragedy, or to pray with someone at death's door.

Monday morning begins at breakfast with the neighboring clergy who gather weekly to study the Scripture lessons for the coming Sunday. This ecumenical group is unofficial, but it also serves as a place where clergy discuss parish problems and community issues. During the week, Pastor Schmidt will continue her sermon preparation, as well as take time for other study. She will also attend a meeting of the local ministerial conference of her synod and a board meeting of the local Council of Churches. One evening of the week she will be out calling on people who visited Faith on the previous Sunday. Another afternoon will be spent back at the hospital, where she serves on its bioethics committee. There will be stops at the local food pantry to drop off canned goods gathered during the previous week, at the high school to discuss New Age spirituality with a parents group, and at the nursing home to lead monthly worship services.

Although many of her evenings are spent in meetings and counseling sessions at Faith, one night of this week is reserved for a meeting with other female clergy who gather to reflect on their experience and support each other. Each week Pastor Schmidt also takes a day off, and she usually plans two or three evenings for family, friends, and personal activities. Twice a year she attends board meetings of the seminary from which she graduated, and occasionally she stops in at meetings of the city council when important community issues come up for debate. Although she has never marched in public protest since arriving at Faith, the files of several state and federal officials contain her letters advocating particular positions or causes.

Tracking Pastor Schmidt is one way of following another part of Faith's public story. In this case, her weekly comings and goings take us into many of the local community agencies—a hospital and food pantry, the high school, the city council, a nursing home. They also take us into numerous religious institutions: her seminary, the local clergy group, the Council of Churches, the ministerium of the ELCA. If we read her letters to the government officials and listen in on her conversations with the female clergy, we will find that her story takes us into numerous social and political movements, as well. Moreover, some of the local organizations she works with are parts of natural structures, so she is participating in processes that reach far beyond her own community.

By itself, Pastor Schmidt's story would result in a lopsided congregational portrait. The same would be true if we relied only on Martin Miller's story. The challenge facing the congregational historian is to relate these and other member stories to the other threads of Faith's history.

Uncovering Others' Stories

Following living members teaches us how to follow previous generations of members, whether they left through transfer, disaffection, or death. Although you can no longer wait on the doorstep to catch these past members, there are ways that their public impact can also be discovered. Most communities, for example, have local newspapers, and often these papers carry stories about the churches in the neighborhood. Often, local history societies and libraries will have materials or living resources that can help tell part of a congregation's public story.

Institutions that have had long relationships with a congregation can often be important sources of information. An orphanage founded by the congregation 50 years ago, the local council of churches, the YMCA or Rotary Club might have stories to tell if you ask about the congregation's past life and that of its members. Churchwide, regional, and synodical archives and seminaries often will have official records about the congregation that can illuminate portions of the congregation's past.



Building dedication, Southwest church (c. 1940)

Pursuing the public side of a congregation's life could turn into an unending quest; when do you stop? Two factors help answer that question. The first is the limit of the sources at hand. In many cases you will find only a few older members whose memories can open up previous generations of the story. Only one or two diaries or scrapbooks will turn up in your committee's early inventory. The town newspapers might have burned in a fire or might have little information on your congregation.

Historians constantly have to make do and work with what they have.

But even if resources are plentiful, a time will come in your research when basic patterns emerge. When people keep mentioning the same institutions or members, when a particular style of congregational engagement with its community, its denomination, and the larger world have become clear, then it might be time for you

to turn to other parts of the historian's task.

The goal of this look outward is to capture the full evangelical reach of the congregation, to see how this group of people embodies its faith in the world. As you identify the ways members of your own congregation have acted collectively and individually, you probably will find that at times the congregation took stances that were quite at odds with the surrounding culture. Perhaps members boycotted a movie theater out of concern about the quality of its programming, or perhaps your congregation resisted a mass exodus to the suburbs and chose to stay in the city.

At other times your congregation might have been at the forefront of popular opinion, leading the way for a new school to be built or a new hospital to be founded. Then the congregation looks startlingly like its surrounding culture and seems to be part of the community's way of life.

Usually congregations are neither starkly opposed to their communities nor virtually identical with them. Instead, they simply do things that the community needs, often before anyone else does, but often in tandem with other members of the community. Many of the hospitals, libraries, universities, clubs, and civic organizations of our communities exist because a few members of a congregation saw some needs and organized people and resources to meet them.

But above all, you in your role as congregational historian need to watch for how your congregation cared for the "least of these." It is in the response to the homeless, the starving, the poor, the abused, the sick, and the dying that congregations most clearly reveal their character. In many cases, historians will find that the congregation has done far more to care for these people than they ever imagined.

But the record will most likely be mixed. At the same time that the congregation cared for some, it may have neglected others—either unintentionally or deliberately. A congregation's biases and blind spots, as well as its greatest compassion and faithfulness, often exist in close relation, signs of the presence of sin and grace.

Constructing the Story

Exploring the many nooks and crannies of your congregation's past and present life is like going on a voyage. You embark at one place, stop for a while to look around at another, and then move on to yet another destination. As the historical voyage continues, you discover reasons to visit places that were not on the original itinerary.

Soon your neat map begins to look like a map of St. Paul's missionary journeys, as your searches and discoveries lead you on detours, back to sites visited earlier, and on to places you never knew existed. As you proceed, your historical knowledge expands, connections begin to emerge, pieces begin to fit into larger wholes. Unknown dimensions of your congregation's life come into view.

The discovery voyage, however, is only a part of the historian's task. You will be tempted to keep on traveling, to turn up one more fact, to examine one more pastoral letter or worship bulletin. But congregational historians do not fulfill their vocation until they have made a story out of their discoveries—and then told it. So you must, even in the early days of your investigation, prepare for the second part of the task: making a compelling history out of all the discoveries.

Before turning to specific suggestions that can help you shape your congregation's history, it is important for you to understand what is required for the final product. The kind of history we seek to offer our congregations is one that is truthful and fair, whole, human, and interesting.

What Is Required

A Truthful and Fair Story

Those attributes seem self-evident and attainable, at least at first. But inevitably, because congregations are communities of saints who are also real sinners, historians will discover places where the truth—at least all of it—has not been told. What happens when you encounter the underside of a story? Will you continue to cover up the dark side, or will you take this opportunity to shed light on what has long been hidden? How a community deals with questions of honesty and truthfulness is a sign of its character. Historians have no less a burden to bear.

Although we often idealize them, congregations are places of argument, disagreement, and conflict. Granted, historians can never become purely objective reporters. You nonetheless have a responsibility to help succeeding generations understand how things have come to be. For your project, this means you need to treat fairly both or all sides of the many controversies that are a part of congregational life.

A bit of introspection will help you here. You will have strong feelings or commitments about some of the issues you handle as a historian—say the role of women, or the degree of formality in worship. You need to recognize and name those feelings and commitments. As much as possible, you should try to keep your project balanced, so that your history does not become a religious western where the good folks wear certain kinds of hats and the villains others. Be honest with your team members (and with your future readers) about your convictions. We all have a point

of view of which we must be aware. And then we must be open to the insights of others who may see things differently.

Although few of us like to deal with conflict, points of controversy in congregational life are the places where congregations define themselves. Faced with a controversial social ministry or building renovation proposal, members of your congregation will most likely disagree. As they work to reach a decision, however, the congregation will opt for one way of acting over another. Each decision like this expresses a congregation's self-understanding. If you skip over the conflicts, therefore, you will most likely be omitting some of the most important aspects of your story. Without turning your enterprise into muckraking, you need to deal with decisive conflicts truthfully and fairly.



New England church, Little Compton, Rhode Island

A Whole Story

We also seek to tell whole stories. *Whole* here does not mean that you must tell everything. An occupational hazard for the historian is the pressure to tell everything he or she knows. Good historians learn how to throwaway (mentally) extraneous things—or better, to preserve in archives and files what will overwhelm or distract from the final written product.

Your challenge is to choose from your research those key pieces of information that will allow you to prepare histories that are rich rather than poor, thick rather than thin, full rather than empty. So your story must deal with all the dimensions of the congregation's life. The history you are probing is not just of pastors or just of laypeople. It is not devoted only to worship or only to social ministry. The congregation's whole life—its strengths and flaws, its great moments and its times of failure—must come into view.

To tell the whole story without telling everything sounds like an impossible dream. Historians respond by finding a representative incident or a telling example to make a point. Thus if your congregation struggled throughout its history to find ways to root its young people in the Christian faith, you need to search for the most

compelling or vivid example of that struggle. After describing that example fully, generalize about how that struggle recurs throughout your congregation's life. If the struggle is central to your congregation's story, talk about the different ways the struggle manifested itself in succeeding eras, but without telling everything about each moment along the way.

A Human Story

The story we tell should also be a human one. Given that the actors in this story are humans, that again seems self-evident. But you might be tempted to write a story in which, because God is believed to be involved, the human dimensions disappear. Some congregational histories read as though only angels belong to that congregation. Events seem to happen miraculously, no one seems to have an ulterior motive, no harsh words or human failures darken the pages. The new congregational histories we write need not be so other-worldly. Since the gospel is that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the histories that we write should be full of all the quirks and differences that make humans human.

An Interesting Story

A final goal, perhaps more intimidating than the others, is to write an interesting and engaging history. All of us have been in the presence of someone who had a passion for something, but who managed to smother our own interest in the process of trying to kindle it. Or perhaps we ourselves have watched in dismay as we bored someone to tears about a matter of great importance. The histories we write will ultimately fail if we do not find ways to interest subsequent generations in the story we are telling. Here it is important to know your audience, to write well, and to select materials and fashion them into a story that is important. This story should focus on the biggest concerns of people—life and death, their future, what they value most.

Making Up a Story

It is at the point of turning all the parts into a whole that most breakdowns in history writing occur. The results of our efforts, all too often, are scrapbooks, lists of events, rosters of names, or strings of anecdotes that offer readers few connections with their own lives and convey little meaning for future generations. We have data but no history.

Part of the historian's task is to find the unifying plot in all the details of a congregation's life. In our culture, this task is difficult. On the one hand, Americans seem to be storyless people. Ask any of your congregation's members to recite his or her family lineage. Most will be able to name grandparents, but few will be able to retrieve a more complete family past. Impoverished at the level of personal history, most Americans are unaware of the larger pasts in their institutions and society.

We are unlike many other cultures, which place a premium on remembering long genealogies and revering institutional heritages. Whether or not we would say it as sharply, we act as if Henry Ford were right when he said (in a quote made infamous by Aldous Huxley's novel, *Brave New World*), "History is bunk." Ford felt that the past tied us down and that hope lay in new events—including his inventions. Like Ford, ours is a culture infatuated with tomorrow and bored by yesterday. We yearn for the new and yawn at the old.

On the other hand, whether we recognize it or not, our culture is brimming with stories. This nation of immigrants has welcomed and continues to welcome an unprecedented variety of peoples. All these newcomers bring baggage. Tucked in with all the precious cargo they packed for their journeys are their stories—familial, ethnic, religious, national, cultural.

Our congregations—and those of us who want to capture their histories—embody both sides of this paradoxical character. We do not know our own stories, yet we bear them in our habits, customs, traditions, and routines. One of the main challenges the congregational historian faces is to identify the hidden or partially submerged stories that are embedded in each congregation's life. Previous sections have provided suggestions for how to unearth many of them. (See the "Resources" section for additional strategies.) But then the congregational historian has to weave them together to see the one story in all the others.

Building a Skeleton

How do you discover the plotline that ties all the threads together? How do you discover the central clue that tells you who you as a congregation really are? Imagine that you are sitting surrounded by all your note cards and files of historical research. Pretend that you are about to create a living, breathing historical being.

The materials that surround you are like clay. In the spirit of Genesis, you begin to shape a skeleton. In this case, the skeleton is made by arranging your discoveries chronologically.

A practical way to find your history's skeleton is to construct a time line, beginning with the congregation's founding and continuing until the present. (Often you have to stretch the time line back past the congregation's founding because its story is really a continuation of an older one.) As you arrange your discoveries along the time line, you will find that the story, as your congregation remembers it, contains flaws. People recall events out of their actual sequence. Or they leave huge gaps in their story. They act as if there were cause and effect relationships between events that were in fact not directly related at all. So the time line begins to correct, supplement, and enrich the congregation's memory. It helps you see the flow of the congregation's life.

After you have filled in your congregational time line, do at least two more things. First, draw several more parallel to it. Create a national time line, a denominational one, a community one, and any others that can help you relate your story to other important ones.

Some congregational stories, for example, are entangled with the story of a powerful local family. A congregation in a "company town" will be affected by the ups and downs of that one business. These parallel time lines will enhance the interest and significance of your congregation's own story. They will also occasionally reveal how events outside of the congregation's perceived life actually shaped it.

A word of caution is necessary here. Your history will be only as strong as the skeleton you build. Historians have a special responsibility to get their facts right. Because people's memories are fallible and because the traces they leave behind for

future generations are equally fallible, the historian must check and double-check facts. If you mistakenly place a date one year ahead of or behind another—sometimes the error can be as small as one day or one hour—an untrue story can result.

If you unwittingly carry over a distortion or deception in a trusted source's version of past events, that error will plague another generation of members. If a longtime member claims that Pastor Erickson took a call because a new church offered a better salary, when in fact the pastor left because that same member led a group that forced him out, that account will continue to shape congregational perceptions until other versions and evidence of earlier undermining are surfaced. If your history team must rely extensively on oral traditions, you will have special concerns for accuracy. (See the "Resources" section for further reading on the unique riches and problems of oral history.)

Historians quickly learn to weigh the trustworthiness of their sources, to mine for solid evidence that something happened when a source says it did, and to search for the sources that get closest to events. Historians usually value eyewitness accounts more than recollections written 20 years later, and they seek several versions of a controversy, rather than trusting one partisan's side of the story.

Turning Points

After you have established and verified the time line, step back and scan it for turning points, for decisive shifts in the story. A flood in the town, the collapse of an industry, rerouting a highway, calling a particular pastor, and adopting a resolution to begin a new social ministry or to open an educational institution are but a few examples of such decisive shifts. What you are looking for are places where a new trajectory or dimension in the congregation's life begins.



The Rev. John Dovich, Vietnamese Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington (1985)

Here is where your committee's collaboration is invaluable. Different people will see different turning points. As you discuss and weigh those turning points, a sifting process occurs that allows the distinctive shape of your story to emerge. This is a time when consultation with other historians and archivists (denominational and local) can be especially helpful, since they will also see things that may not have been obvious to those who live closer to the events.

History is more than a series of turning points, however. It also includes the subtle dynamics that sometimes eventually produce larger changes than those produced by sudden intrusions or catastrophe. A congregation of German laborers and shopkeepers gradually becomes one of professionals and various ethnic heritages. Over several generations, women move from restricted areas of congregational life into equal partnership. Traditional worries about eternity spent in heaven or hell give way to modern quests for self-realization.

Now turn the time line on its side and let the prominent events and central dynamics become the sturdy bones, ligaments, and joints of your story. You have a skeleton upon which you can hang many of the discoveries that are bursting to be released from your files.

Fleshing Out the Story

Skeletons by themselves are dead bones. They need to be filled with organs and wrapped in flesh. The major organs of your congregation's historical body are the ideas, beliefs, traditions, and values that called it into life and sustained it. Here is where the kinds of concerns addressed in "Defining a Lutheran Congregation" are especially important. What has your congregation believed, said, and done? What have been its central concerns and commitments? What does it treasure most? By what has it been most frightened? And, most importantly, how have these beliefs, commitments, and fears changed over time?

Because these ideas, values, beliefs, and commitments must be hung on a skeleton made up of names, dates, events, and places, your history team's discussion of them must be specific. It will not be enough to assert that St. Paul's was Lutheran, Norwegian, and middle-class American in the 1890s. You need to go further and show how this group of people worked out the relationship between what happened in worship on Sundays and what the congregation decided at its congregational meetings on Monday, or in its response to racism in its community throughout the rest of the week.

How did your congregation reveal its Lutheran character in specific actions? When was the congregation's Lutheran heritage clearest? When did your congregation submerge its confessional identity or contradict it by responding first to ethnic, national, or socioeconomic loyalties?

Many times the answer to such inquiries will be ambiguous. Did St. Paul's begin its parochial school because of a commitment to teach the faith, or did it create the school as a way of building a fortress around its ethnic enclave? Or were both motivations involved? Was the congregation's embrace of an inner-city ministry a response to Jesus' command to care for the least of these, or was it a way to avoid social and economic injustices in its own life or right around the corner? Or both? Or neither? Your task here is to report the congregation's actions and, to the extent possible, the reasons for those actions, without taking sides or passing judgment.

Skeletons also need muscles and flesh. Here fit the major actions and activities of your congregation. The kind of buildings constructed, the types of benevolences sponsored, the patterns of social interaction, the organizations created within your congregation, the network of care it has constructed will drape your skeleton and give it a distinctive body shape.

The lives of individual members cover the almost complete body with particular colors and textures. And the style and character of the members—the way they behave at church suppers, in meetings, in their dispersed lives—will etch in the body's finer features. How do members care for one another, offer hospitality to strangers, or solve problems? The congregation's local customs, demeanor, emotional hues, and idiosyncrasies help this congregation stand out from others.

Finding the Life

Finally, after you have finished building and sculpting, you as the historian will need to search for the life that animates the congregation and its story. What makes this group of people tick and hum?

As you search for the life of your congregation, track the gospel in its story. Identify the specific ways this group of people has experienced the gospel, responded to it, borne it into the world, lost sight of it, and then experienced its surprise once more. As you do so, the skeleton, organs, muscles, and flesh will begin to take on a life of their own. Watch for the times when the congregation has risked its life to be faithful and for those other times when, in seeking to save its own life, it has almost lost its soul. Identify the parched spiritual times in its life and those when new life burst forth within it.

Just as any body is born, matures, grows old, and dies, so this body of believers has a life cycle. Your congregation was born at a specific time; it came of age. It ages, and some day it will die.

As you discern how this distinctive body has changed over time, its full history—the story of its life—will come into view. This kind of story, when it is well told, can animate a congregation and individuals. As members hear the story and discover the connection between their lives and the many other stories that run through their congregation, they will begin to experience the specific form of grace that comes when the Word takes on congregational flesh.

The congregation's story—when told clearly, fully, and compellingly—will challenge all who read it to see a larger purpose and mission in their comings and goings. They are offered through this mediating story—one that connects individual lives to something much more important and promising—a part in the great story of Christ and his church, of the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying acts of the Lord of history.

Telling the Story

Telling a story is an art that depends on certain qualities and techniques that separate good storytelling from the mediocre. While we may not be able to identify all of the devices and talents employed by a master storyteller, we know that a great story takes hold of our imaginations and seems able to transport us to another world. We cannot wait to see how it turns out. But we also dread coming to the story's ending, because the experience itself is so rare and so wonderful that we want it to go on and on.

We cannot explore all the fine points of the storyteller's art or the historian's craft here, but we do need to pay attention to several major features.



Frederick Lutheran Church, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands (1966)

First, storytellers are people who know great stories, who love them, who live to tell them. Basic to all that they do is a certain engagement with the story itself. The story seems to possess them as much as they do the story.

If your history is bland or lifeless to others, it might very well be that the story you are telling does not interest you sufficiently. Perhaps you have not entered it deeply enough for it to have a hold on you. If it does not grasp your imagination, it will most likely fail to move others. In such cases, it might be best to let someone else tell the story. Or you must search further until you find the drama that brings to life you and the story you seek to tell.

The Audience

Second, storytellers know their audience. They know what this specific group is interested in, what moves them, what their hopes and fears are. As you prepare to write your congregational history, it is important that you consider your audience. Whom are you addressing? Whom do you seek to interest in this story? And why should they be interested?

There are several answers to the audience question. The most obvious answer is that you are writing for your congregation. This group, whether it has 150 or 2000 members, is your primary audience. How well do you know them? What interests them? How do they learn? What is the hook or the bait that you can use to draw them into your story?

But your congregation is not your only audience. People in your community, members of other congregations—within and beyond your denomination—can join the audience if you reach out to them when you tell the story. Your audience also includes those who come after this generation. Twenty-five or fifty years from now, your congregation might still be alive, and others will be trying to discover their story through a fresh probing of its history. Historians are trail makers for those who follow after. In what they write and in what they save for others to sort through in archives, they provide the raw materials for succeeding generations to fashion their story anew and to connect to something greater than themselves.

As odd as it sounds, historians also write for those who have gone before, for the dead as well as for the living and the not-yet-born. Part of keeping faith with the past is telling the story as if the dead—parents and grandparents, congregational founders and clergy, theologians and saints of the church—were listening in. In so doing, historians hold themselves accountable to those who told and lived the earlier stories on which ours depend. Addressing the dead keeps us from losing the longer and broader plot lines of the ages in all the bustle of contemporary life. They provide perspective and reference points.

Envisioning your audience has several practical payoffs. First, it will help you determine the appropriate style and voice for the narrative you intend to write. Format, length of chapters, tone, and (to a certain extent) even the subject matter follow from the interests and needs of your audience. The sharper the profile you draw, the more likely you will be able to write for people who will want to read what you have labored to write.

Second, establishing an audience, which consists of more than just those who are currently on the scene, means that the way you will write recognizes that not everyone in your congregation knows all the things the insiders do. As soon as other generations and people outside the congregation enter your audience, you will find how much you take for granted about your story. When you write for those who do not know what "everybody knows," the book will be more intelligible for them, too.

The Final Product

In addition to clarifying who your audience is, it is important to determine quite early in your efforts what kind of final product you wish to produce. Will you prepare a conventional hardbound book? If so, who will publish it? How will you finance its publication? If you intended to produce a more elaborate book with many photos, the publication will be still more expensive; can you afford such plans?

Perhaps conventional publishing is not right for you. Rather than trying to find a commercial publisher who has to think in terms of a minimum number of copies and a minimum return per copy, what about finding publishing resources within your congregation? Are there members who can help with editing, proofreading, page layout, computer typesetting, and so forth? What about desktop publishing, which has the advantage of greatly reducing production costs and allows for revised

editions to be more easily prepared? What about publishing your product on the Web, making it possible for readers to provide immediate feedback, search on key words, and download a print-ready version onto their computers?

Beyond Books

While most of us assume that a book-like product is the goal of the congregational history effort, it is important that we not let our imaginations be limited to just that one outcome. Books are indeed important ways to make historical discoveries available to a wide audience. They last and we know how to use them. And the discipline of writing a book enables a collection of facts to become a history.

But there are many other ways you can share what you have learned. A congregational history fair, for example, can be a wonderful occasion to bring old-timers and newcomers together for exploration of a common heritage. Through displays, skits, multimedia exhibits, dinners, worship services, and times of informal sharing, you give your congregation the chance to enlarge its memory. People can bring their own memorabilia and contribute to a time of mutual discovery.

Not to be missed are the many ways people can learn the congregation's story through its daily life. A videotaped interview with an elderly member can introduce parts of the story to members of a women's organization or the Council who might never find time to sit down and read the book you write. You need to consider, however, deliberate strategies for helping those who lead the various organizations of your congregation to use the congregational history as a text for orienting their own work.



Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, General Synod, Louisville, Kentucky (1911)

For example, what would happen if the congregation council decided to reflect seriously in its regular meetings upon the significance of the history you have made available? Would it help them develop a clearer sense of the distinctive mission and purpose of your congregation? How can you help them and other groups in the congregation get a clearer picture of the congregation to which they belong? What kinds of presentations and discussion series could make their history come alive for them? Are there current problems or challenges that parallel earlier periods in your congregation's life and that might help members discover new possibilities for now?

Church anniversaries, even those that mark less glamorous milestones such as the 22nd or 43rd year, can become more meaningful times of remembrance with the help of your history. Founders' days can take on more depth, too, once members have deeply probed the past.

The challenge for your congregation is to resist the temptation to think that the job is done once the history volume is on the shelf in the library. New opportunities arise with each new member class, the installation of new parish leaders, and each change in pastoral leadership. Your history committee will need to consider ways to keep alive the historical consciousness your congregation has achieved.

Consider ways to make your history available to other groups whose stories intersect with your own. People working on family genealogies, local history societies, and denominational archivists and historians all can benefit from what you write. But these groups are also potential allies for finding ways to keep the history alive rather than letting it mold in a bookcase.

In essence, you and your team need to become public relations agents for the story you have to tell. In adult education classes, in displays in the narthex, in shared ventures with neighboring congregations, in the establishment of a congregational archive, keep finding ways to keep your story alive. By so doing, you contribute to its unfolding beyond your telling. You push it ahead into the next generation.

Keeping the Story Going

The difference between a living story and a dead one is that people keep telling the one, while they forget the other. The Christian story, for example, stays alive through the process of telling and retelling. Jesus told stories to his disciples, often borrowing elements or making specific connections with the stories of the ancient Hebrews. Those stories, along with others told about Jesus, became part of a large oral tradition that spread throughout the ancient Roman world. Those stories, along with recollections about the earliest Christian communities, spread further in written form, in the gospels, epistles, and historical writings of the early church.

The ancient collection of stories was not the end of Christian storytelling and historical reconstruction, however. As new communities formed across centuries and continents, people gathered local legends and documents and passed them on—first orally and then in written form. Through the rising and falling of empires, in one ethnic region after another, in songs, poems, scholarly tomes, and sermons, through rare acts of martyrdom and countless acts of daily faithfulness, the story kept unfolding.

That rich heritage is the background that informs the work of the modern congregational historian. There is something about the Christian tradition that requires continued storytelling and makes our historical work necessary. That something is ultimately the character of the gospel itself that God acts in and through history to save humans. Again and again, we read in the Scriptures and in subsequent historical documents of the church how new generations experience freedom and come to new life when they hear the old stories of God's saving acts and then dare to live with trust that God is not finished.

For many reasons, some sacred and some secular, modern congregations do not see much significance in their own stories. They listen faithfully to the ancient stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Hosea and Gomer, or Jesus and Mary. They may even relish stories of Augustine, Teresa of Avila, Luther, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, or Dorothy Day. But they seem to have little zeal for their own stories.

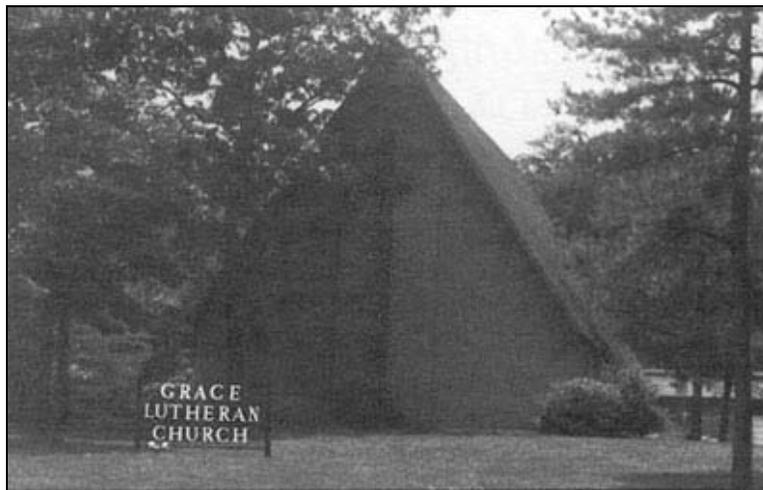
Part of this lack of interest in our own stories is the influence of the paradoxical American response to history noted earlier. But more is involved. There seems to be a modern suspicion that if God had anything to do with history, it was only in ancient times. The idea that the ministry of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Indianapolis or St. Stephen's in the Bronx might be 21st-century sequels to the Acts of the Apostles seems absurd at worst, quaint at best. Our doubts about the significance of our own stories seem to testify to our desire to keep God free from guilt by association with people like us. In fact, we seem to doubt that God acts in a history that is as complex and as saturated with evil as the last century has been with world wars, totalitarianism, materialism, and injustice.

Yet the promise of the gospel assures us that God is hidden in the mundane, sinful, and broken communities of faith that we call congregations. The same God that our forebears in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures sometimes had such trouble finding in their own stories, but somehow dared to trust, is at work in our own.

The challenge facing our congregations is to find connections between the story of the Christian faith and the stories of our lives. At stake in the occasionally tedious and often arduous work of the congregational historian is the next link in the Christian tradition. If we fail to tell stories that forge those links, the tradition fragments, a living tradition becomes weak and ill.

To be sure, the stories that we tell will be partial, fragmentary, broken, full of human failure. But as we retrace our steps, we have the chance to confront the deceptions and distortions, the fallenness in our past, in light of the greater grace that keeps the story going and gives historians the chance to recover something of value from the shards of the past.

The work of the congregational historian is part of making local culture. If we succeed in our efforts, we will give a new generation the raw material necessary for sustaining life. As we tell our congregation's stories, we help extend the story of the gospel a bit further. This story makes its way congregation by congregation, sometimes thrilling its hearers, sometimes disappointing them, but often inspiring them to revise their individual life stories in light of the Christian one, to add a chapter, to extend its reach.



Grace Lutheran Church

For centuries, Lutherans have echoed their namesake by asking, "What does this mean?" That catechetical question is still the right one. We need to ask again what the commandments, creed, sacraments, and disciplines of the church mean for us. One way to do that is to ask what is really going on in the story of the place where we worship—the place where chief parts of the faith are tested once again. We need to find out what our own history—both its dark side and its brighter side—means. That is the vocation of the congregation historian.

Our purpose is to prepare a history that takes seriously who we really are and what we have really done. We are challenged to capture the latest installments and local versions of the Christian tradition's encounter with the world. And we intensify the encounter by stirring up the past once more and by giving people a new occasion to discover who they really are.

Resources

General Help

[**Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You \(Second Edition\)**](#) (Book)

David E. Kyvig, Myron A. Marty, Authors. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2000.

This general introduction includes sections that deal with archives, oral history, building preservation, and so forth. It has many practical suggestions about how to read historical documents, photographs, and other source material.

[**Places of Worship: Exploring Their History**](#) (Book)

James P. Wind, Author. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 1990.

In this volume, James Wind focuses specifically on congregational history, exploring in greater depth a number of different approaches to congregational history writing. See especially the chapters "First Impressions," "Indispensable Questions," and "Building Blocks" for more complete discussions of these approaches.

Places of Worship demonstrates these different approaches by using congregations from a variety of traditions (Methodist, Jewish, Catholic, Pentecostal) as case studies. These explorations can help distinctive features of your own story become more visible to you. In addition to providing examples of how various parts of the historical project are done, the book has several pages of questions that can help shape your inquiry.

Archives

[**"A Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations"**](#) (Web Resource)

Elisabeth Wittman, et. al., Editors. Chicago, IL: Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

This document explains the reason for establishing a congregational archives, defines archival materials, lists items to be preserved, and suggests forms of preservations. Also discussed are electronic records, microfilming, digital imaging, and reformatting.

[**Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How-To-Do-It Manual \(Second Edition\)**](#) (Book)

Gregory S. Hunter, Author. New York, NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2003.

True to its title, this book explains the "how-to"s of outstanding archiving—from acquiring and arranging materials to preserving and promoting them. This second edition also examines the opportunities and challenges of electronic record-keeping.

[**"The Work of a Congregational Archivist and/or Archives Committee"**](#) (Web Resource)

Chicago, IL: Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Here is a "nuts and bolts" guide to the basic tasks of an individual or committee developing a congregation's archives. Also included are quick points on how to establish an archives committee.

Oral History

[***The Methods and Skills of History: A Practical Guide \(Second Edition\)***](#) (Book)
Conal Furay, Michael Salevouris, Authors. Arlington Heights, IL.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000.

Here is a concise handbook on collecting and verifying information.

[***Number Our Days***](#) (Book)
Barbara Myerhoff, Author. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1980.

Barbara Myerhoff has written an outstanding sample ethnography of the Jewish elderly of Santa Monica, California. This book was later made into a documentary film nominated for an Academy Award. Myerhoff asks excellent questions about the role of religion in the life of a community.

[***Talk Straight, Listen Carefully: The Art of Interviewing***](#) (Book)
M.L. Stein, Susan F. Paterno, Authors. Ames, IA: Iowa State Press, 2001.

Although written primarily for journalists, this book will help anyone interested in obtaining, preparing for, and conducting interviews. Included is advice on conducting interviews that might touch on sensitive or controversial topics.

[***The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History \(Second Edition\)***](#) (Book)
Edward D. Ives, Author. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005.

The Tape-Recorded Interview gives practical suggestions on conducting oral history interviews. It features everything from running a tape recorder to evaluating responses.

[***The Voice of the Past: Oral History \(Third Edition\)***](#) (Book)
Paul Thompson, Author. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000.

Paul Thompson has written a very readable introduction to oral history from a social history perspective.

Lutheran History

[***The Lutherans in North America \(Revised Edition\)***](#) (Book)
E. Clifford Nelson, Editor. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1980.

This book remains a useful resource for Lutheran history up to the middle of the twentieth century.

[***Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the Twenty-First Century***](#) (Book)
Richard Cimino, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003.

Lutherans Today examines changes within American Lutheranism, focusing on the tensions between Reformation principles and postmodern pluralism. Essays on the Missouri Synod, the "Lutheran Left," and ELCA megachurches are included.

American Religious History

[Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America](#) (Book)

Martin E. Marty, Author. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985.

This excellent and readable single volume provides an overview of American religious experience. Stories about the work of such leaders as William Penn, Mary Baker Eddy, and Martin Luther King are featured, as well as discussions of how feminism and racism have affected the religious landscape in America.