

Where Do I Begin?

Recovering Women's History in the Local Church

You have decided to research the history of women in your church. No one in the past has made any effort to collect that information, and you are faced with a room full of records and a church full of people who are potential resources. What steps should you take?

The first step is to do some reading! Familiarize yourself with the history of your church, the history of your area, and the history of women and religion. (*Begin with the women's history bibliography in this packet.*) Read broadly to learn what the world was like for women in the past, not only in the church, but also in the community, state, and nation.

Next, carefully examine your church archives. What records exist of Ladies' Aid Societies, Missionary Circles, the Woman's Society of Christian Service, or the Otterbein Guild? (*Names of denominational women's organizations are listed in this packet.*) Information about women will be contained in many other records as well, including Sunday school records, newsletters, and administrative minutes.

Are women's history projects being done at the conference level? Check with your annual conference Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Women, Commission on the Status and Role of Women, and ethnic caucuses. You will find important materials in the conference archives, such as records of the annual conference women's organizations. Also, conference newspapers and journals will have information about your church and about women's activities in the annual conference and the general church.

Work with your congregation. Family records can be a gold mine of information. Photographs, scrapbooks, and diaries that belonged to women members can supplement and enhance the church's records. If a family is unwilling to donate materials, perhaps they will allow you to make copies for the church archives.

Go beyond the church to community historical agencies. See what information and assistance they can provide. (*For suggestions, see "Who Can Help Me?" in this packet.*) Remember that many church women have been active in community affairs and social reform organizations like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

As you gather information, create subject files about organizations, people, and events. These will be useful for later research projects, and are a handy way to organize bits and pieces of information—notes, photocopies, clippings, and photographs.

The process of learning how women have served your church and community will lead you to some exciting research projects and special programs. (*See "How Shall We Celebrate?" in this packet for additional ideas.*)