

Writing a History of Your Church

by L. C. Rudolph

There probably are several good reasons for wanting to write the history of your church. Its life has been long or exciting or both. There is an anniversary occasion of the church or region or nation so the congregation wants to take its place with those who are contributing to the celebration. Some scholarly members have kept insisting that good general histories must depend on good local histories. Also, we Christians believe that God touches this world and its people, holding them in His hand. It may be refreshing to rehearse what God has done and to remember whose we are.

Whatever the reasons, this essay assumes that your church is to have a history prepared and that you have been commissioned to prepare it.

I. Understanding Your Orders

First you will want to “unpack” your commission. If there is an official action of the Session which names you to be historian, read that action carefully. Reconstruct the discussion leading to your commission. If the Elders have no clear image of the history to be produced, are you to present some definite proposal or proposals to the officers for final decision? Has any money been committed to pay for the history or are you to solicit support as well as do the planning and writing?

II. Making the Model

Try to formulate a preliminary goal and model to give shape to the work. If your history is to be an attractive four-page leaflet for wide distribution, it will be wise to do careful layout planning first of all. Resist hastening to an early contract for printing but

enlist the ideas of some able print designers. You may want your history leaflet to fit into a standard business envelope and form a normal enclosure with a letter of one page. If so you will want to fold some paper samples with an expert, considering the facts about weight of paper and cost of postage. Plan the photographs or art to make the precise impact you want on the receiver and the potential reader. Moving backward from these format decisions, you will arrive at a specific space and word count available for your history. Such limitation may be the basis for a delightful discipline, motivating lean copy with the story line of the history as sharp as a television special.

Early layout planning is equally advisable for a booklet or for a larger bound book. What precise purpose is this history to fulfill? If it is to be given away, how large and how well-illustrated can you afford to make it? If it is to be sold, how many copies can you expect to sell and what portion of the cost will your potential customers be able or willing to pay?

An excellent earlier history may need only be reissued with a supplement. Two or three available manuscripts by former historians may need only expert consolidation, augmentation, and publication. But a sesquicentennial celebration for a church which has no previous history on file may seem to require a heroic plan to fund and produce a new illustrated blockbuster of a history with a hundred pages. Somehow the purpose and occasion of the history needs to inform its size and format. You will plan best and write best if you have in mind the precise book you are preparing and the precise reader group for whom you are working.

III. Doing the Research

Now that you know what you are to produce and for whom, you are ready to start gathering materials. Avoid rigid separation between "doing the research" and "doing the writing." Many a historian has filled a trunk with "research" only to be stopped in cold terror before that first blank page which begins the "writing." A good idea is a precious and fragile thing. When one comes to you during your research, encourage it by writing it into a few paragraphs of your history in first draft form then and there. You can evaluate, modify, integrate, or even discard these paragraphs later but you will be stimulating your research by doing some of the writing as you go.

Make a few decisions about the mechanics of researching at the beginning. The current

edition of the manual for writers of term papers by Kate L. Turabian, or of the manual of style by University of Chicago Press on which Turabian's is based, will give you a form for research writing. Identify every note or quote with its source-author, title, place of publication, publisher, year of publication, page number. For citations from a magazine, include also the volume and issue numbers and the date. If the source is obscure, you may wish to record in the identification where you were able to locate the copy. Even if you do not intend to document all your notes, quotes, and facts in your printed history, you will want to file one or more completely documented copies for reference.

If you use cards to make research notes, use large cards with room for substantial notes and identifications. Since copy machines produce 8½ x 11 inch sheets, you may find it most uniform and convenient to make and keep all research notes on

8½ x 11 pages instead of cards. The pages are less expensive than cards and the roominess is beautiful. Whatever note stock you use, be sure to write on only one side so that you can find and arrange the notes easily or even divide them by cutting if that is useful. If you use a computer to make notes, investigate tables, databases, and other products that will assist you in your work.

Put yourself on the spot to produce a preliminary outline for your history almost at once, just as you would if you were submitting and explaining an idea for a book to a publisher. Even if your first outline has only half a dozen points, these will sharpen your hunter's sense for the research and make convenient pegs for numbering and gathering your notes. The outline can be expanded and refined as you study.

Now you are ready to go hunting. You are likely to work best by producing record units—one or several pages of documented notes on a particular subject. It may help to mark the record units with one or more point numbers from your outline. Make record units for such things as (1) the account of the founding of the congregation; (2) each pastor; (3) each church building; (4) interesting members, officers, or families; (5) each major church organization, notably the church school; (6) statistics of the congregation's life and work; (7) major fights and reconciliations; (8) ministries offered within the congregation; (9) obstacles faced and overcome; (10) interaction with notable world and local events; (11) evidence of community impact and world impact.

Always note and document the location of an interesting story. If it livened your attention as a researcher, it will probably refresh the reader's interest as well. You may choose to investigate it or to exclude it later but you will save hours of searching if you make a record unit of a story at once. Also keep a register of pictures and illustrations

from the very first day of your research; it needs columns to record the type of picture, the scene or persons pictured, and the precise place where the picture can be found.

Since a single church is such a convenient unit for research, you can set your goal high. You can aim to find and study all significant sources which exist, to "leave no stone unturned." You will want to:

1. Find and read all the books of minutes of the Session and of such official boards as the Deacons and Trustees.

2. Read as many of the church files as can be opened to you including correspondence, annual reports of all organizations, church bulletins, church newsletters, pastoral letters, legal papers, financial accounts, membership lists, programs and prayers for special times.

3. Walk in the church's cemetery, if there is one, being alert for dates, family names, and inscriptions.

4. Find and read references to the congregation in local history sources such as files of the community's newspapers, city and county histories, and the resources of city and county historical societies.

5. Cooperate with the pastor and staff to prepare a description of your writing project to be included in a pastoral letter or the church newsletter; then request repeated two line reminders in the newsletter or bulletin so that church members know you want to see documents and hear stories about the church.

6. Interview some older pastors, officers, and church members, taking pains to get a faithful transcript of their remarks.

7. Make a list of the presbyteries and synods to which the congregation has been related and read the published histories of these bodies. Scan the published minutes of the appropriate synods and of the General Assembly for congregational statistical data and for any other references.

8. If the church was founded or served by home missionaries, see if there is correspondence from these missionaries to mission headquarters. Look in the denominational agency records and the files of the American Home Missionary Society. Letters make lively history.

9. Write to the Presbyterian Historical Society, 425 Lombard St., Philadelphia, PA 19147-1516. In writing give your church's name, founding date, and a list of pastors. Ask if they have any records which may help you in your writing. Tell the depository about the projected size and format of your history and ask if they can recommend some histories produced by other churches. Ask for the name of a good book on American church history and a good book on Presbyterian church history so you can be sure to get and see these for background.

10. Consolidate and preserve the church records you discover. Ask the Presbyterian Historical Society for information about its records deposit service and about its microfilming program. Through this latter program you can arrange to have all the essential documents of your church onto high quality microfilm and so place a copy permanently out of reach of insects, fire, or deterioration.

As you prepare your record units you may feel strongly that God has called out His people to form His great Church and that the Church universal is directly linked to the working out of God's eternal plan. If so, you may want that conviction of faith to be allowed to show in your local congregational history without apology. Such conviction can be

flatly stated; it may show in your interpretation of events. But remember that history written in such a context is not exempt from responsible research. You must still get at the truth as painstakingly as ever and document your assertions of fact. And for the “holy history” parts you will want to enlist some especially competent evaluators. It will be doing God no favor to load the history of His Church with any bad Bible exegesis or weak theology.

And if you decide to stay entirely clear of theology, presenting “just the facts,” that still leaves room for great care. There is rarely such a thing as an uninterpreted historical fact. History has always been assorted and colored by those who have preserved it. So it is no wonder that stories about the Church and her members have been lovingly shaped to make an impact and an impression. You can rejoice in that impact or impression and pass it along as you wish. But you will help your reader by not being simply naive and by recording your sources carefully.

Weigh carefully as well how far you can accept the common language of evaluation. If a struggling church has ministered to the lives of dozens or hundreds before dissolving, has it “failed?” If a church has existed for one hundred fifty years and paid off a series of mortgages, has it thereby “succeeded?” It may be better to reveal some of the significant heights and depths of the life of the fellowship than to measure it a success or failure by too simple a gauge.

IV. Writing the Story

Moving from the record units to the narrative history will test your writing skill. The record unit is the stuff of your narrative. However you need to do something more than simply string the units together in a choppy continuum of a history or even unite them in a more clever scissors and paste mosaic of a history. Let us assume that you have written the record units without squeezing out the connectors and the transitions and the high interest detail. Even more crucially, let us hope that the very process of research has given you such a command of the story that you can use the record units freely within the larger unity. By now the story may be compelling you to tell it and you may have written several narrative parts even while doing the research.

There are many primers on writing available with reminders on writing in a readable style. You may want to scan some before starting your narrative. The Gospels are good

examples of straightforward writing. Just do not let the heavy concept of “writing history” get in the way of telling your story.

You will be glad and proud and relieved when you get the first draft of your history written. It is also natural at this stage of fulfilled weariness to settle heavily and to resist revision. You will have had more than enough of the hard work of writing. Changing, especially shortening, the manuscript will seem like dismembering your own child. But this is the very time for creative editing. Have your draft manuscript read by two or three able evaluators—not by your mother or by your dearest friends but preferably by people who make their living by editing. They may be more willing to help if you provide them with a clean double spaced copy with good margins for them to mark. Be sure they understand that you want professional criticism because your goal is a first rate history. Read their comments or markings when you are in your most receptive mood and follow up with a personal editorial conference where practicable. Be especially sensitive to those suggestions and judgments in which two readers concur. Revising the draft of your history twice may actually make it twice as good.

V. Getting It Printed

If you have planned your format and layout with a model from the beginning and have written your history to fit that plan, you should be in good position now to move to producing the copies you need. But you may still be faced with a dazzling array of possibilities for publication, most of them expensive. Take another look at the sample histories you have accumulated. Your most economical book production may be photocopied pages bound in plastic spiral spines and paper covers. Or you may have a more handsome book printed by a commercial press. If you have pictures or art work to incorporate, inquire early about the possibility of getting sharp reproductions. Once more, your best counselors will be persons who make their living at copying or printing. Do not contract too quickly at the first sales offer or quotation. Explain that you want to get together all the good options and present to the Session your idea of the best combination. Take time to get the full picture and the best counsel.

You can probably do little about the high cost of printing. Try to choose the best duplication process or combination of processes from the galaxy of possibilities. And exercise strenuous quality control over the material submitted for duplication, e.g., error free copy, sharp contrast photographs, clear layout instructions. If a printer gives you proof

sheets, get help and give them the prompt but painstaking reading and rereading which will correct every error. Having invested much in the writing, you want the best presentation you can afford.

VI. Promoting its Use

Offer your history with personal modesty but mix that with a healthy persistence in getting it used. That first public presentation of the finished copies should be a congregational celebration. If the Session has directed that the history be sold, move from the celebration with a clearly defined sales procedure. All present and former members should receive an order blank, an addressed return envelope, and plain indication to whom to write a check in payment. Be glad if some copies remain; there should be a continuing use for these with new members and with study groups. Send a free copy to the Presbyterian historical societies, to your state and local libraries, to your state and local historical societies, and to the local newspaper most likely to give it a review.

The publication of your history will be a notable event in your church's life. Certainly the preparation of the history will be an unforgettable chapter in your own. Perhaps it will be a very rewarding one.

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