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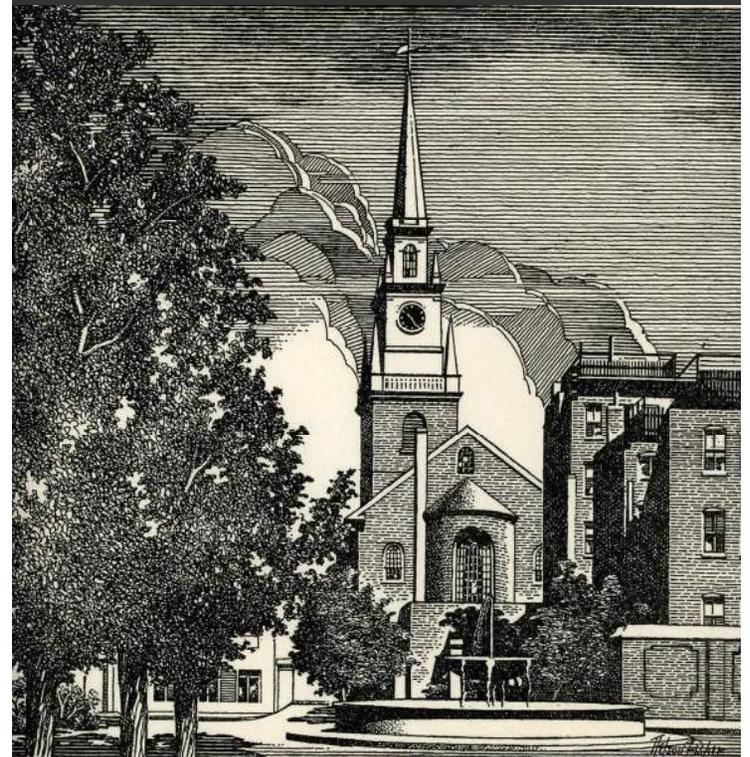
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*Writing a History  
of  
Your Local Church*



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## PRESENTATION

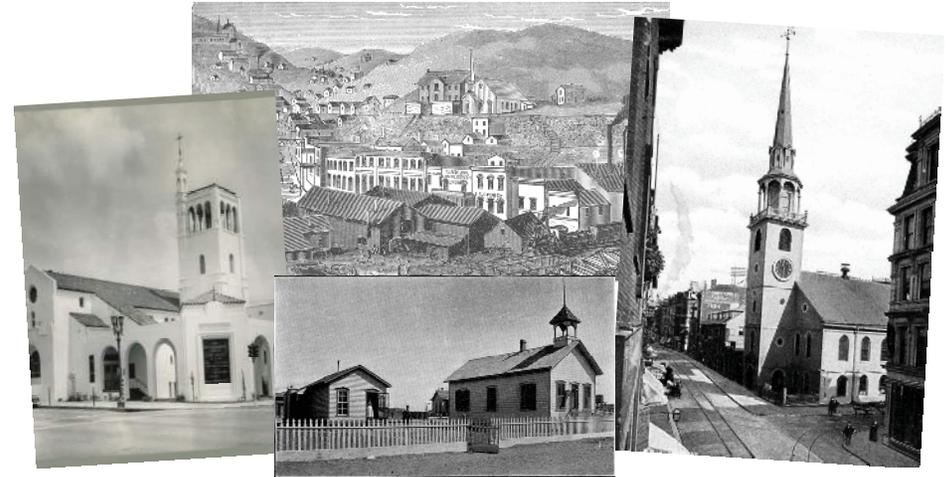
By the time you are finished with your history, it will be your work and the work of many other people as well. You will have been in regular touch with church leaders about your project, and will have enlisted members of the congregation for oral history interviews, research help, and as writing partners and proofreaders. The final “unveiling” should be a congregation-wide time of worship and celebration, thanking you for all of your hard work, but also raising thanks for all of the labors of many people who have built the church over the course of many years. Remembering their names, their life stories, and their contributions is a true gift to people who can never repay you, a “cloud of witnesses” who have already given you a priceless heritage, yet another gift to generations yet to come.



## TELLING YOUR STORY

Telling the story of a local church—how it came to be and how it has grown and changed over the years—is always a worth-while task. If no one ever stops to remember “what happened” way back when, the congregation has lost a valuable piece of its identity. And once the memory is gone, it is all but impossible to recover.

Unfortunately, many modern people often think of history as a luxury, or a hobby for certain people with extra time on their hands, or an aptitude for remembering names and dates. And certainly in many churches, long memories can sometimes block much-needed change. Who hasn't heard that old refrain, “we've always done it this way”?



But truly knowing and understanding your story is never a luxury. It tells you not just where you came from, but who you are and where you are headed. In fact, it's helpful to think of the local church historian's task as research into a congregation's DNA, its particular personality, its characteristic bent toward life. The present-day character of a local church often has deep historical roots:

- Were you formed, as many New England churches were, as an integral part of your local town? In other words, were you founded as a broader community institution or was your purpose exclusively religious?
- Were you formed as the result of a missionary effort, perhaps beginning life as a struggling act of faith?
- Or were you the result of a protest or an opposition to a particular set of theological ideas or a denominational action?

As is true with people, early circumstances don't completely determine what a church will become, but they can certainly set the agenda for what follows, often in subtle and surprising ways.

Writing the history of a local church, therefore, can open up new opportunities for reflection and recommitment, especially with the approach a centennial, bicentennial, or even tercentennial year. Of course, you may want to offer "just the facts" and keep the narrative simple—that is certainly an option. Not all of the stories you will tell will be uplifting or even positive; they may present some difficult realities that require some hard work on the part of pastor and people. This does not mean that you are allowed free reign with heavy-handed sermonizing or axe-grinding. Every writer aims to be a truth-teller, armed with appropriate sensitivity as well as a bit of holy boldness. Asking the congregation and church leadership for their blessing and support may be the first step you take in your role as story-teller.

## GETTING STARTED



The hardest part of any writing project is getting started. Do I have enough information? Too much? And how will I even begin to know what events and people to include and what to leave out?

- way for other researchers who might want to retrace your footsteps.
- Let others read and comment on your manuscript as you write. Passages that seem clear to you might not appear that way to other people going through your text for the first time. You may have a few writer's "tics" that a sympathetic friend can point out to you and help you avoid.
- You will also have to deal with the fact that, especially as your story gets closer and closer to the present, not everyone will remember an event the same way. As much as we would all like to tell an uplifting, happy story, we all know that every church goes through ups and downs, and even a few serious controversies along the way. Better to make sure as you go along that you're being fair and judicious, than to uncover a fundamental disagreement over the facts at the final unveiling of your history!

## LAYOUT AND PRINTING

What used to be an expensive and laborious task has now become the "easy part." A good software program like Word Publisher and an inexpensive scanner will allow you to produce an attractive final product with a relative minimum of expertise. You may want to work with professionals who do layout and graphic design. *A few words of advice:*



- Appropriately placed images can break up long, dense passages of text and make the final product easier on the eye. They should illustrate your text, but not unduly distract from it.
- Make sure you include captions where necessary. Don't assume that everyone knows who's who in every picture!
- Try to include a mix of subjects in your illustrations—ministers and buildings are important, but so are the people in the pews.

## WRITING

- The best writing is always simple and clear. Remember that you are a story-teller, and that your goal is to keep your readers interested. That means avoiding long lists of information or simply reprinting meeting minutes or correspondence—try to do as much of the explaining as you can, and to keep a clear sense of narrative flow.
- A good writer’s manual, like the classic Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*, or even Lynn Truss’s *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* can be a big help, as long as it doesn’t become a perfectionist’s distraction.
- Every writer has a method for dealing with that enormous blank white page that greets every new project. For most, the best approach is to just get something down on paper, even if the grammar and syntax isn’t perfect; you can always go back and fix it later.
- Write in coherent, connected paragraphs. The first sentence of every paragraph should introduce the main topic or idea, and make it easy for readers to follow your overall story. Try to avoid overly long paragraphs, especially those that run more than half a page of text.
- Find good ways to incorporate your sources into your story, by quoting directly or paraphrasing, perhaps even inserting text boxes into the final layout. This will bring other voices into your story, enlivening and enriching it. It’s your decision whether or not to work with some kind of footnotes—this of course depends on the audience and occasion for your project. If it’s a more informal kind of work, written mostly for congregational insiders, then your task is relatively easy. The main goal is to make sure your readers know where you got your information, and to point the



At some point, you’ll simply have to dive in and get going—but you’ll save yourself a few headaches by figuring out how you will deal with some preliminary issues:

### THE AUDIENCE

Decide early on who you are writing *to*. Is this project aimed at a general audience or is it intended mostly for people in your present-day congregation? Some combination of both? This decision will determine how much background information you’ll need to include and how much “insider” knowledge you’ll need to explain. It might also determine the tone and look of your finished product.

### A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE

Even though it’s very early in your project, try to determine how your story will flow. Will you simply divide it into chronological chapters from beginning to end? And if so, what do you think the major time divisions will be? Or might you include “feature” material about a particular event or person?

### BEGINNING TO ORGANIZE YOUR SOURCES

Early on, you’ll need to decide on a method for keeping track of information and then you’ll need to stick to it. No one method is correct: some researchers like to use old-fashioned 3x5 cards for note-taking, while others prefer file folders. You’ll certainly find a laptop computer a handy tool for organizing your research—but beware of depending too heavily on one electronic method. Always keep hard copies of your notes and other source material in a safe place.



## DETECTIVE WORK



The next step is to track down your sources and work through them as systematically as you can. If your church already has its own archive, or if its records have been deposited in a repository like the Congregational Library or local historical society, you are in luck. But you also might find yourself tracking down old ledger

books in church closets or even in the homes of parishioners—and deciding there and then to institute a preservation program as part of your writing project!

What you read is important. A history that focuses only on ministers and building projects will be interesting to some, but also leaves out a huge part of the story—the people of the congregation. So try and achieve a good balance between sources that tell you about church leadership and the “bricks and mortar” issues and those that give a sense of what life was like for the ordinary people in the pews.

Here’s a suggested research agenda:

- Read through the minutes of deacons’ and trustees’ meetings, taking note of key decisions and issues.
- Read all of the annual reports, newsletters and pastoral letters you can find.
- Look over financial reports to get a sense of the ebb and flow of giving and how it might have affected church life at various times.
- Work through membership statistics and put them into a chart. If these are not readily available in your church files, you can consult denominational yearbooks (available digitally on the Congregational Library web site).

- Create a biography file of all ministers. In most cases, obituary information is available in denominational yearbooks, and also recorded in a database on the Congregational Library web site.
- Create a list of missionaries or other workers your church has sponsored. Again, in many cases, biographical information is available at a good research library.
- Look for references to the church in your local paper and in old city and county histories. Your local historical society will be a helpful resource here.
- Conduct oral history interviews of older members. Here you’ll want to come prepared with a list of good conversation-opening questions (not yes or no or simply factual), a note pad, and a good electronic recording system. Do you want to keep these interviews in a permanent collection for later generations? In that case, some willing volunteers to help transcribe the interviews will be a great help!
- Create a picture file as you go, making sure to label every image as best you can.
- Give yourself a sense of the bigger picture by becoming acquainted with your denomination’s history. This might tell you whether your congregation was affected by a theological controversy, a movement for outreach or social reform, or a change in organizational structure. It might explain a decision or a controversy, or a change in leadership. Obviously, this can be a major task and could take a lot of time; it should not become all-consuming. But some sense of the larger religious world into which your congregation was born and grew is key to a compelling and complete historical picture.