

Congregational Historians

What do they do?

Can't anyone be a congregational historian?

Congregational historians have often been seen as near the bottom of the totem pole of church offices. In some congregations it's a "lifetime" position. In others it's given to the first person who hints he/she has even a little interest in history. In still others it's "tacked on" to the job description of another position, for example the church secretary.

This is unfortunate. To be a successful congregational historian requires skills and gifts that congregational personnel committees should bear in mind when appointments are made.

Who's a good person for congregational historian?

Often this has been an older person who has lived a lot of the history of the congregation! This is an asset. But it's also not enough. The individual should be knowledgeable and involved in the current life and structure of the congregation. Congregations evolve and change, and the historian needs to maintain awareness of present activity and thinking, since the role includes preserving the present as well as the past.

Does the historian know the current committees and who chairs them? Did the current historian perform the expected duties in the past term? If not, was the person unclear about the duties, or did he/she just have limited interest? If the former, how can this be improved? If the latter, perhaps another person might have a better combination of gifts and interest.

What are the various parts of the historian's job?

We've mentioned keeping record of the current life of the congregation. Some congregations ask the historian to write an annual summary of the congregation's activities. Then there's spotting the older, historical items that only surface from time to time when an older member moves into a retirement home, someone dies, or there's a pastoral change. And then there's working together with a larger group at the time of special events -- anniversaries, home-coming celebrations, the writing of a congregational history. The "continuing education" part of the job would be to participate in workshops sponsored by the conference or local historical societies. Or if the person has just been appointed, it might mean a visit to the Mennonite Archives of Ontario at Conrad Grebel University College (or a virtual visit to the Archives' website) to see what's currently in the congregation's collection.

What are the "current" things that should be collected?

The historian might ask to receive two copies of everything that circulates to the congregation, or might ask the church secretary, or the pastor, to throw one copy of everything into a box. Then the historian only needs to gather and sort it once a year before sending it on to the Archives at CGUC, or placing them in the permanent files of the congregation if they are maintained in safe conditions in the church building. Electronic files, though common, are not geared to long-term preservation (Remember beta? Floppy discs?). Printing to paper is, for now, still the best option.

OK, but what are the items?

Church bulletins, everyone thinks of that. But there's also the annual report book and minutes of the annual meeting and other congregational meetings. The congregational newsletter that's becoming more and more common among Mennonite congregations. The members address list or picture book. Programmes of special events. And the minutes of committees that normally circulate to the congregation -- some churches circulate church council minutes for example. This could mean other minutes as well, if they're run off in the church office.

What about items when there is only one copy?

This would be things like the minute book for a committee where the last entry was in 1975. Maybe the book keeps being passed to the new secretary, who keeps passing it to the next secretary, who keeps.... You get the picture. This would also be file folders of correspondence from five years ago.

That sound's easy -- what about the old stuff?

This takes more initiative by the historian. If you know someone's moving to smaller quarters, ask what's happening to their old church-related things. If it's going to family, that's fine. If it's going out the back door, ask if there are things that might be historically valuable -- old church periodicals, programmes, photographs, etc. If an older member has died, it's even more important to check with the family on what's happening with old books, diaries, photographs, letters, etc. Don't forget the slides the family shutterbug took at all the church retreats, Christmas programs, etc. Or the fellow who got a tape recorder way back when, and still has a tape of services involving former minister or special speakers.

When the current pastor moves on to a new assignment, ask if he/she has records that are being disposed of, and whether they might have some value at the Archives. Encourage the pastor to talk to the Archivist if there are questions about confidentiality. If any potential donor has questions, seek the advice of the Archivist at CGUC. He/she may be able to clarify things for the historian and the donor.

If the historian does gather some of this material, he/she should check that it's fully identified. When was the picture taken, who took it, who is in it? When was the service taped? Are as many voices as possible identified? Are there dates on the documents?

Then there's the old stuff that's stored in the back of the drawer or on the top shelf in the furnace room at the church -- the old deeds, obsolete cemetery records, conference report books, multiple copies of hymnbooks, Bibles and other things formerly used in the church.

Anything else?

Really keen historians gather a few other things -- newspaper clippings that include congregational members, obituaries of congregational family members, taped interviews with the pastor that's moving on, or the MCC worker just back from an assignment. See that a tape of a worship service gets to the Archives when a new pastor is preaching. Take pictures of the exterior and interior of a church before and after a renovation project is completed.