Telling Our Congregation’s Story

Your Church’s History Reveals More Than A Few Significant Dates

Say the word *history* and many people look for the snooze button in an effort to avoid all discussion of people, dates, and events associated with anything older than yesterday. It is an understandable response, particularly in relation to the church. After all, church is about a living faith - not a list of dates and events described in books to be memorized in preparation for confirmation. On the other hand, an exploration of the events and people that encompass the breadth of a congregation’s life over time can yield a rich tapestry of unexpected strengths, orientations, and themes to reveal a recurring identity.

As we prepare for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation there is much to explore and discover. Whether starting from scratch or simply adding a few more facts to a well-developed narrative, the result of assembling the elements of a church history can be revealing.

Shared below are a few ideas for gathering and organizing information to enhance the existing history of your local church…or help you get started.

In general, the names of people, types of programs, and a list of special events are important sources of information for building an historical account but the building or buildings also reveal part of your story. Historical discoveries can highlight a sense of who and what has served to define your church’s identity through the years, but a list of dates and people is generally of interest to only a few. Uncovering facets of your mutual life that served to form or transform the worshipping community you have been and seek to be is vital to a more dynamic and engaging history.
A General Outline

Each of the elements identified in the list below, as well as others not named, offers a focal point for deep exploration. Select one or two of the topics for particular attention to start. If your resources permit it, select additional subjects for exploration and create a plan. Gathering tangible artifacts like photographs and worship bulletins can be helpful. Stories intermingled with artifacts make for an appealing walk down memory lane. Look for resources beyond the parish to help you tell your story and ask questions as your inquiry unfolds (e.g. What made this event significant? What does the long (or short) list of pastors serving at our church tell us? What elements of our Lutheran heritage influence our practices today? What contributed to our passion for the work of ______? How has our past shaped our future?).

Here is a list of possible organizing topics:

- Pastors and Associates in Ministry
- Music Program(s)
- Worship Ministries
  - Altar Guild
  - Acolytes
  - Ushers and Greeters
  - Communion Ministers
  - Readers
  - Intercessors
- Physical Plant and Property
- Lutheran Heritage - Affiliation(s) when formed - affiliation(s) today
- Education | Formation - Curriculum / Teachers / Children and Youth
- Celebrations - Anniversaries, Renovations, Retirement of the Mortgage
- Organizations Within (Women’s Group, Prayer Group, Men’s Group, Book Club, etc.)
- Numbers - Financial and Human
- Mission and Outreach
- Community Connections - Events in the Community Affecting the Church
- Synod Connections
- National - World Events and the Response of the Church
Engaging Our Story is About Tomorrow!

Compiling information and assembling the various bits and pieces that have contributed to your congregation’s common life is a great beginning but the Engaging Our Story initiative invites and encourages so much more. Equally important and revealing are discussions around such questions as:

- Where did we come from?
- When has God’s presence felt very near?
- What has disturbed us through the years?
- When in our common life have we demonstrated faithfulness to the creative act of God?
- In what ways have we remained constant and how have we changed?
- Why do people come to our church?
- What/who has sustained us through the years?
- What have people in the wider community said about us?
- What is our purpose?
- When have we felt distant from one another and maybe even from God?
- How has our life together expressed convictions about Christian unity, social justice, hospitality, the centrality of hope, care for others, and prayer?

A Simple “How-To” Using One of the Organizing Topics

Your up-to-date story can serve as a framework for organizing small group discussions that are topical and/or time specific. For example:

- Generate a list of significant events that have happened in the wider community over the lifetime of the church.
- Select three to five of those events; write each one of the events on a large sheet of paper and provide newspaper articles to help people recall details.
- Place the sheets of paper on the wall or on separate tables.
• Select and modify two or three questions from the list above that seem related to the topic or create your own.

• Assemble small groups and invite conversation based upon the questions identified. Mixed groups across ages and genders can be fruitful; youth are generally more responsive when they are not alone.
  
o Ask the group to write down common responses on the large sheets of paper.
o Have the groups rotate to the next topic after 10-15 minutes.

• Summarize the comments and solicit general statements from the entire group that respond to questions of identity and purpose (e.g. What was disturbing/uplifting about the event? What was our church’s response to this event? What did our prayers during worship say about our life in relation to this event? What might our response to this community event say about us? Were we changed by this community event? etc.).

• Work with others to assemble the notes from the gathering and share them with the entire congregation.

These types of questions seek to explore a deeper, more reflective response that can yield a more nuanced understanding of the life of the church in the lives of its members. Sponsor several topical sessions over the course of several months and your church may discover new insights to guide, affirm and direct Engaging Our Story.

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