

How to Write a Local Church History
by C. Roy Fortune

Introduction

Writing a history of your local congregation can be a daunting task, but it is also a very rewarding one. Your excitement and enthusiasm will increase as you discover things about your congregation even the oldest members have forgotten or never knew. Little can compare to the thrill of touching materials that were handled by the “great old saints of yesteryear.” Telling stories that no one still living remembers can be very rewarding.

“Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel.” (Gen. 28: 18-19a) Just as Jacob wished to mark the spot where he wrestled with God, so we too need to remember the times of great blessings but also of excruciating pain. Times when we knew God was still guiding us even though He seemed far away. Your church history should show a balance of both good and bad times.

Writing the history of your church can encourage a congregation to keep on working for the Lord in spite of hardships. “Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name.... Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” (Psalm 103:1-5) Taking heart by reading what the Lord did for their ancestors can rejuvenate Christians to make greater efforts to win lost souls to the Kingdom.

Remember that your spiritual ancestors were once your age. Your descendants, should the Lord tarry, will want to know everything about how you lived and how God answered your prayers. If you leave them a good record of your life as a servant of God they will not need to do as much digging as you have had to do. However, they will write your history in their own way. Every generation re-writes history according to their own ideas. You can never discover the absolute truth about your ancestors. You can only interpret their life using the tools you have. Only the Bible contains absolute truth.

First Steps

1. Approach your pastor and inform him of your interest in creating a history of your local congregation. He will no doubt approach the board to get their approval to appoint you as the official church historian. If you already have a plan in mind you may present it to the pastor at this time. However, it’s best to get his approval before you do a lot of work. No doubt, the pastor and board will want to monitor your progress. It is they who will give you the final approval to publish your work.
2. Write up a plan of what you wish to include in the history. If possible establish the categories you wish to use, how long the booklet will be, and who is going to help you. If you are in a small congregation you no doubt can do most of the research and writing yourself. However, in a larger congregation you should form a committee and assign each member certain tasks. The following ideas and

questions are meant to get you thinking. Develop a history that fits your particular congregation. Your congregation is unique from every other PAOC church in Canada. Find the way that your congregation is unique. It was founded by Anglicans, Baptists, former slaves, wealthy businessmen, or a dear old sister who traveled for many years before a congregation was formed on that spot where she prayed. It was built in a special geographic location. It birthed five pastors and two missionaries. Women have always been the main leaders, etc. How people were willing to let God's hand help them shape the events and activities of the congregation as they sought His guidance, should form a large part of your report.

Getting Down to Work

1. Meet with your committee or at least with a few other people who are interested in helping you research and write the history.
2. Ask the pastor for a few minutes during Sunday morning announcements to briefly explain your plan. Ask members of the congregation to loan you pictures, letters, stories, etc. which may be of use in your history. Be certain to assure them that you will take good care of their precious treasures. As you collect these treasures place them in a file folder – one for each person supplying you with documents- and write their name clearly on the file. This will most likely ensure that you safely return all borrowed property.
3. Decide the main concept of your report. In writing Church history the events, attitudes and people mentioned should always show a change taking place throughout the fifty, seventy-five, or one hundred-year-span you are examining. Ask yourself questions such as: What was the congregation like then? Who were the main people involved? What did they believe about themselves and their faith? How did they show their faith? Next, ask those same questions about your congregation today. How has it changed? Try to suggest why it has changed. What has drawn people to this particular congregation over the years? Don't be afraid of dealing with church splits and other unsavoury events. It is not your purpose to expose members of the congregation or pastors who sinned, nor to embarrass present-day members whose ancestors were involved in scandals. But to ignore such events is not honest. They can be mentioned in a way that will not embarrass anyone.

Find some concept that best describes the changes your congregation has gone through. Possible concepts are: "God's Goodness to Bethel", "Love in Action: the Story of God's Grace", "Hard Times Don't Last, but God's People Do". Decide whether your report is going to be chronological (in order as the events happened) or topical (events are dealt with in categories). If you follow a chronological order divide the period you are examining into three or more sections dealing with the early years, the middle years, and recent years. If

you

follow a topical approach you should include such topics as the early years, the church building, worship, membership, community involvement, the role of women in ministry, youth, music, men's fellowship, etc.

A Possible Outline

1. Introduction

State the committee's purpose in writing this history. Include the names of the people who loaned you materials or granted personal interviews. Thank the pastor and board for their permission and support. Also thank any archives, library, or museum who contributed to your work. To claim someone else's work as your own is plagiarism.

2. The Church's Setting

Give the exact location of the present church building. Briefly discuss the buildings that came before this one. What did they look like? How much did they cost to build? Who built them? How long did it take?

If you have access to it include a copy of the original deed. Whose signature is on it? What difficulties did the church fathers have to acquire the property?

Discuss some of the geography of the area. Is it located downtown in a large city? In the country? In the suburbs? What effect has the surrounding neighbourhood had on the growth of the congregation? Did most of the congregation come from this neighbourhood? Where do most of today's congregation live? Why? What role did a bus ministry play in the development of the congregation?

Were there any environmental problems the congregation had to deal with, such as heavy snow in winter, mud in summer? How did the "old saints" deal with these obstacles? How does the present congregation deal with them?

3. The People

a) Pastors and Other Paid Employees

Give a list of the pastors with their dates of service. Include assistant pastors, paid musicians, caretakers, etc. In what other Pentecostal or other denominations had these people previously served? The founders of the PAOC came from many denominations. The fact that they came together from such varied theologies and cultures to form a new denomination is in itself a wonder.

If you have access to early church records, find out how much the pastor was paid in 1911? 1930? 1980? How did early pastors exist? (Produce given by farmers, food provided by congregation, etc. The

pastor had to work at manual labour to support himself.) Find out from an elderly pastor or member what it was like to live through the Depression.

b) Members of the Congregation

Who were the board members in the beginning? Who are the board members now? How has the role of the board member changed? Is the pastor still “Chairman of the Board”? Who were some outstanding board members? What special things did they do?

Who were the original Sunday school and week-night teachers? Who are they now? Did anyone of them develop a special program? How has working with children changed over the years? Why? How did the hard-working volunteers lead precious children and young people to the Lord?

When did Women’s and Men’s ministries begin? Who were the leaders? How did these ministries operate in the beginning? How do they operate – if at all- now?

What is the history of the treatment of young people in your congregation? When did you first get a Youth Pastor? Did your church have a Christ’s Ambassadors group? Who lead it?

What was music like in the early days of your congregation? Who lead it? What instruments besides a piano were used? When was the organ introduced? Who were the musicians? How is the music different today? Who are the worship leaders? When did the choir begin? How does the choir function today?

In the early days what denominations did the members of your congregation leave to join the Pentecostals? Why did they join? Where did most of the converts come from in the 1970s? Where do they come from now?

4) Major Events

What major events took place in this congregation? Arrivals and departures of pastors and other leaders, births, deaths, rallies, camp meetings: how have those events changed over the years? What are the major events in today’s congregation? Do tent meetings, evangelistic crusades, and male quartets still draw sinners or is their purpose mainly to encourage the saints? What new ways of presenting the gospel are being used?

Most of the events you observe in the history of your congregation were not events at all, but long, step-by-step changes. You didn’t notice these changes happening until one day you realized that things are different and either you like the change or you don’t.

Discuss with your pastor any changes that happened in the beliefs of your

congregation. Has the theology changed in any way? Did the congregation always belong to PAOC or did it start as a holiness or charismatic church? How does the preaching today differ from that of early days? How is the worship different? Is there still any emphasis on the imminent return of Christ? On speaking in tongues? On holiness?

4. The Congregation and the Community

What contact, if any, did the original members of your congregation have with the community they lived in? Did any of them suffer persecution for their beliefs? What were relationships between your congregation and your community like in the 1970s? In 2003? Why do your people look outward instead of inward and upward as their ancestors did? What community events does your congregation take part in? Is anyone on the city council or school board? On local or district committees? What plans does your congregation have for reaching the community for Christ?

What social events does your church sponsor? Does your church take part in city-wide crusades, etc.? Who leads such committees?

5. Conclusion

Draw together all the main ideas you have discussed in the history. Try to analyse what happened and why. Suggest why your congregation has changed and prospered under God's leading. Explain your optimism for the future of your congregation.

Doing Research

You have already asked the members of your congregation to submit documents to you. Continue to collect these documents and store them carefully over several months.

Conduct as many personal interviews with older people in the congregation as possible (see Appendix A). Ask their permission to record the interview. You may have to assure them that you are the only one who will listen to it. However, many older people are quite pleased to talk about the early days in Pentecost and do not mind if everyone hears it. To many it's a badge of honour to recall the "good old days" when God moved in wondrous ways.

In archives and museums research the families of the original members of your congregation. Their ancestors will be listed in Canadian Census results up to and including 1901. Genealogists are arguing for the release of the 1911 Census. These records will inform you where the people lived, who was in the family, what their

religion was and often the occupation of the father. The 1911 Census would allow you to discover the religion of your church founders before they became Pentecostal.

It is very interesting to compare in chart form the various charter members of your congregation. You will also no doubt discover that many of these people were related. When one family got saved and filled with the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues, they usually convinced parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins to join them. These early communities were usually very tightly knit.

Don't forget to check with your district office and with the PAOC Archives in Mississauga, Ontario. They have a wealth of information on many of our churches.

Publishing Your Masterpiece

Early in your research decide approximately how much it is going to cost to publish a copy for each family in your congregation plus many more for former members and friends. Please send a copy to the PAOC Archives at National Office. Discuss with your pastor how you are going to raise the money for publication. The board may underwrite you until you have sold enough copies to recover your loses. The board may even be generous enough to pay for all publication without charging the members for copies.

Assign someone on your committee to examine in detail the costs of publication. Ask them to research the cost at several publishers. The cheapest publisher may not be the best. Look for quality. You want your work to last in print for a long, long time. Be sure to publish your work, including the photos, on acid-free paper. The value of photographs is immeasurable. Have each photo digitized for the best results.

Presenting the Final Copies to the Congregation

When your final copies are about to published plan a church supper when you can present your work to the congregation. Make this a well-advertised affair, preferably on the anniversary of your congregation. Invite former pastors and other staff members as well as former members. Place several tables side-by-side in the room where you plan the presentation. On the tables place displays of your work: copies of documents (enclosed in plastic), lists of former and present members, the original Minutes book (if available), copies of letters from former pastors and former members, original Bibles, hymn books, and other memorabilia. On the wall, on Bristol board, mount pictures depicting the chronology of your congregation. You can display all the pictures that didn't make it into the book. Place the pictures in clear plastic envelops before mounting them on the Bristol board. Remember you will need to return these pictures to owners in the condition you received them.

If possible trace the ancestry of a half dozen of your founding families. Show how they are related. Trace these relations on white Bristol board and mount them on the wall behind the tables. Be sure to include all present-day members who had ancestors in the church.

Questionnaire for Interviewees

Name: _____

Address: _____

Church as a child: _____

Other churches attended: _____

1. How long have you lived in this city?
2. Were your parents members of a PAOC church?
 - a) If so, which one(s)?
 - b) If not, when did they become Pentecostal?
3.
 - a) What is your best memory growing up Pentecostal?
 - b) What was your worst memory growing up Pentecostal?
4.
 - a) If your parents weren't Pentecostal when did you join the church?
 - b) How old were you when you joined the PAOC?
 - c) Why did you join the church?
5.
 - a) Do you have relatives who attend this congregation?
 - b) Did they have anything to do with you becoming Pentecostal?
 - c) Did your family have anything to do with them joining the congregation?
 - d) Did any of your relatives enter the full-time ministry?
 - e) Who were they and where did they serve?
6.
 - a) Did anyone in your family accept the Pentecostal beliefs and then leave the denomination?
 - b) If so, what reasons, if any, did they give for leaving Pentecost?
7.
 - a) Describe the Sunday morning service when you were a child.
 - b) Describe the Sunday evening service when you were a child?

- c) As far as you are concerned how did those services differ from those of today?
 - d) What week-day programmes did you attend as a child?
 - e) What week-day programmes do you attend now?
8. a) What roles did you play in the church in the past? Sunday school teacher? Board member? WM? MF? Music? Other?
- b) What roles, if any, do you play now?
9. a) How has the concept of Missions changed during your lifetime?
- b) Have you ever done Missions work in Canada or abroad? If so where and for how long?
10. a) Were you ever involved with the Latter Rain Movement or other such organizations?
- b) If so, what did you learn from that experience?
11. a) Who were some of the “dear old saints” you remember from years ago?
- b) What was so special about them?

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Date Completed</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Got pastor and board's permission to do project.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Established a committee to help you.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Assigned each member of the committee a task.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Asked congregation to submit their information and photos.	
<input type="checkbox"/> All oral interviews have been conducted and recorded.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Church history data gathered.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Narrative sections written.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Photographs mounted and labeled.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Pastor and board approval for final copy obtained.	
<input type="checkbox"/> The final document has been sent to the printer's.	
<input type="checkbox"/> All activities for the distribution of the project have been completed.	
<input type="checkbox"/> The display of all documents and pictures not included in the official project has been mounted.	
<input type="checkbox"/> A copy of your church history has been sent to the PAOC Archives in Mississauga.	

Bibliography

Many guides, books, and pamphlets can assist you in preparing and writing your local church history. These include guides in research, conducting oral interviews,

and writing up and publishing the results of your research. American and British sources can be most helpful, but Canadian ones place the information in a Canadian context similar to the one you want to use in your project.

There is a great deal of information available in books and pamphlets as well as on the Internet. The Church of England's "Researching the history of your church" at http://www.churchplansonline.org/research/research_p1.htm is most useful. "Writing Congregational Histories" (an American site at <http://www.bible.acu.edu/crs/wch/index.html>) suggests that written words are a way to interpret a congregation's behaviours. This site discusses planning, doing research, publishing and preserving materials. The *Nazarene Archives* at http://www.nazarene.org/archives/resources/writing_history.html suggest that special occasions like a church anniversary offer "opportunities to reflect on our past and to project our hopes for the future."

Other sites even offer workshops on writing congregational history. For a thorough treatment of this subject, see <http://www.dishistsoc.org/WritingHistory.htm>. Your local genealogical society will no doubt offer seminars on writing local history. Universities sometimes offer courses in local history for those who really want "to get into it."

Magazines such as *The Christian Chronicle* out of Nashville, Tenn. offer helpful articles such as Ted Parks' "Want to preserve your church's past? Here's how to do it" which appeared in the January 02, 2003 issue. *The Pentecostal Testimony* and other Canadian publications contain a wealth of information but little or nothing on how to write church history. Newspapers, however, may not be of much help since early Pentecostal churches in Canada seldom were mentioned in the newspapers unless something unusual happened. Our spiritual forebears seldom got involved in their community.

In a Canadian context both the Alliance and Presbyterian churches offer helpful material. From its Canadian Bible College the Alliance Church presents *Writing a Local Church History Paper* at http://www.online.cbcccts.ca/preview/aht/hoc_chur.html. The Presbyterian Church in Canada too suggests how to get started, research, write, and sell your local congregational history. This site <http://www.presbyterian.ca/archives/history.html> asks many pertinent questions.

The following books may also prove to be helpful in researching and writing the oral history of your congregation. That is, the interviews you wish to conduct with older members of the congregation.

Allen, Barbara, and William Lynwood Montell. *From Memory to History: Sources in Local Historical Research*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

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Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Like It Was: A Complete Guide to Writing Oral History*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1988.

Fletcher, William P. *Recording Your Family History: A Guide to Preservation with Videotape, Audio Tape, Suggested Topics and Questions, Interviews*. New

York: Dodd, Mead, 1986.

Ives, Edward D. *An Oral Historian's Work* (videotape). Blue Hills Falls, Historic Film, 1988.

Your local town or city library will no doubt be able to suggest many more resources. Also check with neighbouring churches to borrow a copy of their latest church history.