

GUIDELINES FOR PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The Need

Every local church should be keeping a record of its history! In the past, Brethren in general have been little concerned with records. In the early years of our history this is understandable, for there was as little formal organization as possible. The Brethren were more a movement than a denomination. However, as time went on various individuals undertook to preserve as much Brethren history as they could. Notable among these in the nineteenth century were Abraham Harley Cassel and Martin G. Brumbaugh. Other individuals, particularly those serving in the free ministry, kept diaries and other records in relation to their church work. Such diaries and records often were handed down in families and many of these records were inadvertently destroyed. Some are still in existence, and when the present possessors come to realize their importance to the denomination, they frequently deposit them in the Brethren Historical Library and Archives at the General Offices in Elgin, IL. This is encouraged, for the Brethren Historical Committee is eager to preserve these old records.

Dozens of Brethren churches existed in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries for which no known written records are extant. Many current churches do not have records for their early years. Even though each church had its part in the growth and development of the community and the denomination, the record of that contribution has been lost. This booklet is intended to give guidance to local churches in preserving their history and to encourage them to a continued effort in this endeavor.

Why preserve records? There are a number of reasons. Knowing about our heritage helps in developing a more complete understanding of the Church and its mission. It provides a needed perspective on today's world and its problems. We need to know about the persons who labored before us to bring the Church of the Brethren to the place where it is today. Historians need records in order to write intelligently and accurately. Persons planning for retirement often need religious records for verification purposes. Individuals researching their family history look to the church for records.

Procedure

- I. Select a church historian.** Either a person or a committee may be designated to carry the responsibilities for historical preservation. [If a church has a librarian, the duties of the librarian may be combined with those of the historian.] Most churches have members interested in history. Persons chosen should have a "sense of history" and an aptitude for organizing materials. Their responsibility

includes the collection, dating, organization, and keeping of records and other materials. *It should be clearly understood that all materials are the property of the church.*

- II. What to keep.** It is difficult to prepare a comprehensive list of the kinds of materials to preserve. Not all churches will have everything on the following list, and some churches may have unique items not included here. The following list should help give a feel for the kinds of things that should be kept:
- A. **Official documents** related to the ongoing activities of the congregation
 - 1. **Deeds, other legal documents**
 - 2. **Minutes** – council meetings, commissions, committees and other active groups within the congregation
 - 3. **Records**
 - members by name, date received into membership, date and reason for removal from roll, any name changes
 - ordinations, baptisms, weddings, deaths
 - church, church school, Bible school attendance
 - annual statistical reports, year-end financial statements
 - transfer of membership letters often yield new information about churches
 - 4. **Publications**
 - weekly worship bulletins
 - newsletters
 - bulletins, programs for special events
 - directories
 - announcements of special events
 - 5. **Correspondence** related to church program or activities
 - B. **Related information** on the life of the church and its members
 - 1. **Photographs** taken in connection with special events or collected from members. Identify people, places, dates, events with a label on back of photograph. Prints of digital photos should be preserved.
 - 2. **Clippings** – Be sure to date and identify publication
 - 3. **Any written or printed history of the church** and of any of its activities. Materials used and/or donated in preparation for a history should not be destroyed. They are primary source materials. Copies of the written history should be sent to the district and national archives, local libraries, and historical societies.
 - 4. **Electronic and digital material produced by the local congregation.** If records and publications are stored on CDs or DVDs, hard copies should also be maintained.
 - 5. **Biographical material, information about special events, achievements, and honors attained by the ministers and congregation.** Maintain copies in local congregation and send copies to district and national archives.

6. Artifacts connected with the history of the congregation.

- III. Other materials.** The foregoing pertains to materials of purely local congregational interest. There may be records or materials discovered that would have wider denominational significance. Membership letters of transfer may yield information about previously closed churches unknown in denominational records. Diaries, letters, sermons, pictures, family records, clippings, books by or about Brethren, or other items may provide information useful to the larger church body. The Brethren Historical Committee is very interested in receiving these kinds of materials for deposit in the Brethren Historical Library and Archives at the General Offices, which the Church of the Brethren has designated as the official depository for the denomination. The Committee is also interested in building a representative collection of Brethren plain clothing. Before you dispose of these or similar items, contact the Brethren Historical Library and Archives, 1451 Dundee Avenue, Elgin, IL 60120-1694. Ph: 847-742-5100 or 800-323-8039 (x294), 847-742-6103 (fax). For the email address see the website at www.brethren.org/bhla.
- IV. Cataloging and Storage.** It is important to find a safe place to store the records. Legal documents and older records should be kept in a safety deposit box. Designate a place where records can be kept together, free from dampness, extremes in temperature and preferably in a fire-resistant file or room. A vault would be best. Make duplicates of the most valuable records for accessible use and copying. This helps extend the life of the paper records. Information on how best to catalog and store materials is available on-line under "Preservation." Local city or college librarians are usually willing to assist. The state historical societies, and sometimes the county historical societies, have resource people available to help with cataloging and storage information. They often offer workshops available to the public on caring for paper records and photographs.

GUIDE TO PREPARING A CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY

The Need for Local Histories

The Bible includes much historical material and its writers were very history-conscious. In the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy this history-consciousness was highlighted: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations." This concern for the preservation of the historical record continued into the New Testament, especially with writers like Luke. Thus, our Judeo-Christian forebears included historians who recognized the value of preserving the historical record. Today we need to see that the past life and events of our local congregations are preserved for future generations.

The history of the local congregation ought to be written when there is a time of particular interest, such as an anniversary or celebration of the construction of the building. Any significant event in the life of the congregation may be commemorated with a written history, which thus preserves an analytical record of the events that have taken place in the intervening years. Another appropriate time for the preparation of a history would occur whenever a capable person is available and interested or whenever some group in the congregation, such as a church school class, is interested in sponsoring the preparation of a history. Finally, someone--perhaps the pastor, moderator, or board chairperson--ought to alert the congregation when the appropriate time has arrived for the preparation of a written history.

Securing a Person to Prepare the History

Before looking for someone to prepare the history, recruit a committee of individuals who have a specific interest in the history of the congregation. This committee should sponsor the project, including working out details with the writer. More than that, however, it should assist with locating pictures and drawings, arranging for or conducting interviews, and possibly carrying out research of various kinds. Most important, perhaps, is that with a strong supporting committee it is easier to secure a writer.

Obviously, securing a writer may be the most difficult part of the whole project. In most congregations there are individuals who have the ability to carry out such a task. An important part of recruiting a person for the job is assuring the person that there is strong support for the project, hence the need for a committee. Also, the congregation ought to be prepared to cover expenses such as travel and secretarial assistance and to provide an honorarium or a salary according to the particular situation.

Gathering Material

The first and most important place to gather materials for the writing of a congregational history is in the records of the congregation itself, including council minutes; committee, commission and board records; church school records, Sunday worship bulletins, programs of special services such as dedications; newsletters; records of baptisms and of membership; financial records; deeds to property; lists of ministers and ordinations; and records of special interest groups, such as women's fellowship, men's activities, and youth programs. Every effort should be made to retrieve church records that may be in the hands of individuals, for they are the property of the church and should be in the church's care.

Cemetery records, including gravestones, may be very helpful, especially in determining when some of the deceased members of the congregation lived. In some situations the cemetery records may be separately maintained because of local and state laws regarding the incorporation of cemeteries. A different perspective on the life of the congregation may be secured from the private diaries and records of both ordained and lay leaders of the congregation, whenever such records are available.

Particularly in cases when local congregational records have not been very well maintained or are not available, there are many other resources available to the researcher. The District Conference minutes are usually available either in the district office or at the Brethren college in the area. These records can help to determine organizational changes in the local congregation. The Brethren colleges, Bethany Theological Seminary, and the Brethren Historical Library and Archives at the General Offices in Elgin, IL, have collections of Brethren periodicals. The *Gospel Messenger* (now *Messenger*) for many years down to the 1960s included a section of local church reports, which in the case of many congregations provided an interesting insight into their activities. While checking Brethren source material, be sure to look for the annually issued *Directory* and *Statistics* (at times called *Yearbooks* or *Almanacs*), which contain information on membership statistics, pastoral leadership, lists of all the ordained and licensed ministers in the denomination, and other data.

Many kinds of resources are available apart from Brethren material. Local newspapers, for example, may provide information regarding special meetings and events in the life of the congregation. City and county histories and family genealogies frequently include sections on the religious life of the area, but some of these materials are not always trustworthy and must be used with considerable caution by checking the information against other sources. Legal records in the county courthouse may be helpful in providing land records to locate the early Brethren settlers in an area; marriage records also may help to identify early settlers. One problem in using such records is finding the appropriate ones because in most states the area of a local congregation was

located in several different counties over the years. In other words, as the population increased a county was subdivided and that process may have taken place several times. A careful study of the decennial census reports may provide both a general perspective on the Brethren congregations in a county or state and specific information on the location of known Brethren families.

One kind of historical source which should be used with considerable caution is the personal interview. Obviously, interviews with long-time members may have considerable value both in providing leads for further research in terms of certain events and in helping to fill in certain details about events which are otherwise obscure. Caution needs to be used, however, because the human memory is prone to modify the recollection of past events on the basis of later developments. For example, if a new financial program was undertaken with much optimism and hope and then failed, the human recollection of the whole development may indicate (after twenty years) that the program should not have been started in the first place because it had very little chance to succeed. Whenever possible, the results of the personal interview should be checked against available written sources, such as minute books, personal letters or diaries, newspaper accounts, and *Gospel Messenger* reports--in other words, the records that were made at the time of the event.

Finally, in terms of gathering material for the history, look carefully for any kind of visual material, including drawings, photographs, maps, and charts. Photographs may add greatly to the over-all appeal of the completed history. It seems desirable that the committee established to supervise this project should outline the principles guiding the selection and use of graphics in the history.

Writing the History

Finding and gathering material related to the history of the congregation is necessary to the success of the entire project. It is also important that one be able to utilize effectively the material that has been located.

With the rapid expansion of electronic media, the methods of making research notes depend upon the equipment available to the researcher. It is still necessary that the researcher take careful notes in some form. Typing material on research cards is helpful. Scanning or photocopying material is one of the best ways, especially if the material is from a source that cannot be removed from a library, such as old periodicals or rare documents. An exact copy with notation of source and location of the original is needed when writing the history later.

Digital cameras, scanners and copy machines are useful when visiting a home and making copies of material the individual may not want to loan. These exact copies help when referencing material used to write the history. A good rule to remember is to copy all of the material pertaining in any way to the congregation.

In that way there can be no question about the use of the material in the written history.

Laptop computers are light, easy to carry, and can be used almost anywhere. Tape recorders or other hand-held digital equipment can be taken with you to record your notes and/or used in interviewing persons about the history and events of the church. Digital cameras help with recording short interviews and pictures. It is important to get a signed and dated permission note from the owner of the material or the interviewee, before proceeding with copying or interviewing. When doing an interview always record the date of interview, name of person being interviewed, age, location, and the name of the interviewer. Leaving your card with the person visited may yield later remembered data.

Be sure to document the sources used. Include author, title, place of publication, publisher, date, volume, pages, and location (library, archives, etc.). This information will be essential in compiling the footnotes or the bibliography. The completed work ought to have one or the other, if not both. In other words, a writer has an obligation to provide enough information about the sources to enable someone else to find the material that has been used. Answering the questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how help guide the writing of the history.

Develop a careful outline of the material based on the research notes. This outline can be arranged chronologically or topically and will help guide the historian in writing the history. Often congregational histories are divided into time periods covering the years between important events. Each time period includes information on a number of important topics relating to activities within those years. Information on congregations with a shorter life span could be arranged topically with emphasis on special events, focus, and reason for organization.

Once the outline is prepared, the writing of the history should come easily because the research notes should fall into place according to the outline. Some degree of selectivity usually becomes necessary, since all of the information gathered through research cannot be included. Very few history books ever include everything that is known on a given subject; so do not attempt such coverage in a congregational history. Include all events that are really important in the life of the congregation, while at the same time; include enough of the everyday activities to give an element of reality and humanity to the history.

The congregational history might begin with data about the area in which the congregation was located at the time it was established. Following such an introduction, discuss the first Brethren settlers in the area, including their names, background, and reasons for coming. Describe the leadership of the group and the transition (if the congregation is old enough) from a free ministry to a professional ministry. Indicate where these early settlers met for worship before they built a church, and tell about the building of the first church.

The building and remodeling of churches are always important events in the life of a congregation. Of related interest is the financing of such programs, as well as the entire stewardship program of the congregation. Also vital are changes in the congregation's life including patterns of dress and actions of congregational council meetings. Do not hesitate to relate problems that developed and how they were handled.

In a wider context, indicate the relationship of the congregation to the society and neighborhood in which it was located. Were there special problems? Contributions? Controversies? Wartime situations? Important social developments? Relationships with other denominations? In what district and denominational activities was the congregation involved?

The events and activities listed in the two preceding paragraphs are not to be considered all-inclusive, for in the final analysis the amount of material available, the interests and expectation of the local congregation, and the training and ability of the writer will determine the final result. Asking for help from others can point the writer to additional resources.

It is hoped that this guide will provide encouragement for more congregational histories to be written. Resources available on the internet offer a myriad of ideas and methods of writing. Using the topics "writing church histories," "guides to writing," or "telling the church story" provide help and ideas.

Other sources include:

McKee, Wilma. *Heritage Celebrations: A Guide to Celebrating the History of Your Church*. Revised and Updated. Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press. 1993.

Muir, Gladdys E. *The Historical Function of Local Church Librarians*. Elgin, Illinois: The Historical Committee of the Church of the Brethren, 1957.

"Guidelines for Preservation of Historical Records in the Local Church"

Prepared for the Brethren Historical Committee by Herbert Hogan and Gwendolyn Bobb (1979). Revised for the committee by Jane Davis (2008).

"Guide to Preparing a Congregational History"

Prepared for the Brethren Historical Committee by Roger E. Sappington (1979). Revised for the committee by Jane Davis (2008).

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