

Section D

HARVESTING HISTORY

In 1801 a tired, dusty rider reined in at the church where Transylvania Presbytery was meeting. He had ridden many days to Kentucky from the Wabash River settlement of Vincennes. Presbyterians had moved there, he said, from Pennsylvania and Kentucky to receive land grants in the Indiana Territory. There was no church, though, no preaching, no opportunity to receive sacraments. All the neighbors were French Roman Catholics and Indians. The priest was the only school master. Send help.

A pastor was dispatched the next year and organized the first Presbyterian church in what was to be Indiana. The first child he baptized was the son of the governor of the new Indiana Territory, later U.S. President William Henry Harrison. The first worship services were in the beautiful new territorial mansion.

That's a great story, which has been told and retold by the Presbyterians of Vincennes, Indiana. There is one problem--the tradition is an odd mixture of fact and fiction. The name of the first circuit-riding missionary changes, depending on which old book is read. The territorial mansion wasn't standing in 1802. The first missionary, a Great Awakening revivalist named Robinson, arrived in 1805. He may or may not have baptized any of the many Harrison children, but his first worship services and baptisms were evidently in the long house of the Piankeshaw Indian village. No church was organized until a few years later.

The story of the first presbyterian work in Indiana illustrates a few of the pitfalls of working in history. Yet, there are great rewards for the wary harvester of the grain of the past, if he separates out most of the chaff and grinds it carefully into a tasty repast for the people of God.

The primary work of the church historian in the PCA is to collect today's grain to store for later. The past is a secondary consideration. It is primarily a domain inhabited by those who have studied how to put facts into context.

Unfortunately, most well-written church history is now being produced by those with basic assumptions a conservative evangelical can't accept. That doesn't mean we can't benefit from their work, but they sometimes have a colored perception of reality. A conservative evangelical also has that problem, but so few conservatives bother with popular church history, that there is no balance.

CHURCH HISTORY AND THE HISTORIAN

The following pages introduce the collection and writing of church history. The tips are for those tracing the story of their congregation from its beginnings and before. More complete and helpful guides are listed in the Sources and Resources section.

What church history is. . .and is not. . .was defined this way by Dr. Joseph Hall, professor of church history at Covenant Theological Seminary:

Church history is not a recounting of antiquarian data concerning a long-lost institution in the past.

Rather the history of the church is the study of a divinely-instituted, living organism in which God's grace has worked, is working, and shall continue to work until Christ comes. The church, as the body of Christ (true believers in Christ and their children) is an organic whole.

As part of that organic whole we should be interested in what great things God worked in the lives of our fathers-in-the-faith, as well as in the mistakes they made. Since God has chosen to work in and through human vessels we shall see in the church a mixture of God's grace and human error. Our diligent application in studying the church should enable us both to appreciate the work of God's grace and to mark human errors.

With corrected vision, therefore, we shall better be enabled to serve God in the contemporary church.

This is a high calling and it means the historian must not make the facts serve him. He serves the facts and attempts to place them on a framework which makes sense to those around him.

According to PCUSA historian Douglas Brackenridge, a true church historian has certain character traits:

1. **Honesty.** Be fair with the facts at hand. It doesn't honor God to sweep things under the rug.
2. **Curiosity.** Ask questions and don't settle for obvious answers. Look around and consider the context.
3. **Humility.** No one knows everything. Everyone makes mistakes. Willingly accept correction and grow. Listen to criticism, evaluate it objectively, and accept or reject it.
4. **Simplicity.** A historian doesn't have to be complex, abstract, or obtuse. Write so people can understand.

Add to this the wisdom of one college journalism professor. A journalist, he said, approaches everything and everyone, including himself, with a healthy skepticism.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE HARVEST

Before starting historical research, realize that your honesty will not take away your basic assumptions of life. Every historian has them. What a Christian expects to find in history is different from what a Marxist expects to see. This is a sign of God's spirit working in us. We should be aware of our assumptions, however, and use them with caution. As Dr. Hall observes, not all we find in our fathers' lives will be glorious. Their church was not perfect, nor their lives.

Expect to see how God worked together all things for good to those who love him. Expect to find little ways events were guided toward their ultimate end, His glory. Not every fact will clearly prove these expectations. Don't make them fit a preconceived idea. The expectations will be fulfilled in ways never expected. Learning how history works is learning unexpected ways God works.

SOURCES TO HARVEST

Return to that frontier Indiana missionary. The first church founded in the Indiana territory still exists, a congregation of the PCUSA. How did they trace their true history?

In their historically-minded community they had quite a few pieces of the puzzle. Histories had been compiled for the area and the state. As noted, traditions had been passed down and written. There were books about frontier life in general.

These are called secondary sources. They are secondhand. Most of what is available to study long-ago events is secondary. Secondary sources are valuable. Even erroneous traditions include truth or tell something about the people. Historical accounts written by modern historians are probably well researched.

Keep in mind, though, that whoever produced a secondary source did not live in the minds of those who lived the events. Be skeptical, therefore, about what assumptions and prejudices the teller brings to the account. He may be blind to important aspects of the society and customs because he is wired to behave differently. That story of the coming of the missionary moved from the Indian village to the governor's mansion. Why? Was it because the story tellers had too much regard for a rich and famous former resident? Were they downplaying former Indian inhabitants?

The people in this church were blessed that the town had the territory's first newspaper. A newspaper is a secondary source. Modern Christians are rightly skeptical of journalistic accounts as sources of truth. But if a newspaper prints that so-and-so is preaching in Sam Ewing's barn. . .or at the "Presbyterian stand," it's probably accurate. That goes for 1806 or 1976 newspapers.

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The best and most wondrously frustrating sources of history are primary sources. These are records and accounts generated by the people involved. Some uncovered in the Indiana research were:

- Presbytery minutes for Transylvania Presbytery.
- Session minutes for the church, though the earliest were missing. Minutes of other churches also helped.
- The Rev. Mr. Robinson's personal diary and account of his mission trips before presbytery.
- Letters and personal writings of the members and court records of their dealings, including an early deed for the church property, which was donated by a member.
- Personal writings of those outside the church, particularly the Roman Catholic priest.
- Minutes of Vincennes University, a college founded by the first full-time Presbyterian minister.

It is easy to see how such records helped. It doesn't take long to find their limits, and frustrations, too. Hours of sneezes in dusty courthouse papers can uncover a single helpful entry. The historian can pore over letters of men who had to know a lot more than they ever got around to telling. Information now desperately needed just wasn't worth mentioning.

Another maddening practice of our fathers was to refer to "Mr. A" or just "A." This is particularly common if the reference wasn't complimentary. Some did it as a habit. A few were such awful spellers they might as well have stuck to initials.

You may see why we suggest putting off updating a church history until there has been some success in recording the current events. Research has killed more than one enthusiast. This is why some churches pay an experienced area historian to collect and write their story. Know, however, that this can cost several thousands of dollars.

Research does get easier, after awhile. Once the list of source cards and notes begins to grow, and original questions have been answered or replaced by other questions, the history harvester has a crop that is worth laboring to produce.

Two other sources must be mentioned at this point with some cautions. These are photographs and miscellaneous artifacts.

Today we take photography for granted. It is an accurate tool for recording our way of life. An historian is well-prepared who has a variety of candid and posed photos of the church at work and at play. Of course, the historian can take or collect only pictures which show one side of church life or show a limited group of members. These may mislead the future in the same ways old photographs have misled naive modern historians.

Photos have a bad reputation for accuracy--not undeserved. One reason is that early in this century talented, idealistic photographers set out to raise social consciousness by depicting the ills of society. They made fantastically beautiful pictures of the grotesque lives of the mistreated. Their skills reached a height by the Depression. Unfortunately they had little regard for accuracy. Their pictures were staged parodies of reality.

Most old photos are not exactly slices of life. Pictures once were rare, special occasions. A family assembled their prized possessions to show. Such pictures now catalogue what a family owned. Others were taken in studios and showed what people wished to own but didn't. Paintings are often idealized representations of the people shown and their lives.

It was custom to look serious in paintings and photos. One reason folks look so grumpy, though, is that they sat perfectly still for long minutes, their heads held in a brace, during the exposure. Their clothes were not what they wore every day or even to church. They may have been borrowed. As technology improved a family might ask that a picture of a baby be added to the scene, standing in for a dead child. In paintings it was a simple matter to paint in dead children.

As the Kodak camera brought snapshots to the world and better films made photo taking in lower light possible, people could show off more of their surroundings. They tended not to waste pictures on what we call candid, though. They were staged representations of the face people wanted to remember and show.

Old photographs show something of what people owned and valued. Street photos show the look of a neighborhood or building. It is interesting to meet face-to-face with people of the past. Clues are there for the knowledgeable, wary student about habits and lifestyles. The watchword is never to take a photo at face value, or to consider it a primary source of information.

Artifacts also have dangers and potential for informing. A quilt or lace cloth which has been carefully stored away can tell something of the interest people had in a valued possession. The Archives' prized pieces include a worn Bible given by Chickasaw Presbytery to a young licentiate and carried by him as he preached to the southern troops during the Civil War revivals. Books are good for showing what passages were considered important to underscore and read often enough to show wear. Furniture shows the craftsmanship a workman might have lavished on his church or the kinds of materials at his disposal.

Keep in mind, though, that an unknown piece might have come from someplace else. It might have had little importance to the church. Putting too much stock in artifacts will mislead.

KEEPING A NOTEBOOK

Nearly every researcher has known the horror of organizing notes and suddenly realizing they had forgotten the source or page number.

Acknowledge, in the text or footnote, or informally (as this book is doing) in a bibliography, sources of information. Quotes must be acknowledged. Unpublished sources should be noted in history writing so the reader can judge their reliability.

This means keeping good notes. Some people put everything on notecards. A notebook is usually sufficient. For each set of notes made there should be a concise bibliographic entry. The rule of thumb is that it should be good enough that someone can take your bibliography and retrace the research, finding what you found.

Bibliographic entries should note such things as:

- Minute books.** List the complete name of church or organization, the page number if available, and the meeting date.
- Microfilm files.** List as much information from the documents as possible, plus identifying label data on the microfilm and its location.
- Courthouse records.** Note the name of the book, the journal's designated name and code numbers, the court or agency, the page number, and where the records are now located.
- Archives records.** Most Archives provide a suggested form of bibliographic entry. Follow this pattern.
- Published works.** This is mostly what you will need for bibliographic entries. There are very exacting guidelines for proper scholarly papers. The standard work which covers most contingencies is by Turabian and is noted in the bibliography and in the Sources and Resources section. Generally the rules are:
 - a. Indent a footnote and make a hanging indention for a bibliography entry.
 - b. Begin with the author's or editor's name, first name first in a footnote, last name first in a bibliography.
 - c. After the name place the book, underlined, or periodical article titles in quotes. Underline names of periodicals.
 - d. Give volumes and number designation on periodicals and multi-volume works. Note the city where the work was published, the name of the publisher, and the year of publication.
 - e. List page numbers where the material was found.

ORGANIZE

Everything you write is arranged or organized in a package, whether a four-page WIC annual report or a 150-page church history. Even chaos is a form of organization. There are two kinds of organization to consider:

1. How different parts fit into the whole.
2. How each part or section is arranged.

There are three ways to organize the entire project--by form, by topic, and by time sequence.

The PCA Archives has recommended a simple form organization for annual histories: Start with statistics for the year. Add a narrative of happenings. End with photos and other exhibits.

The Arden, N.C., church history outlined earlier is a little different. Some basic statistics are an introduction. The report stresses the big news of the year. Each major happening is covered as a unit. Exhibits and statistics are fit in as needed. Then come segments on more routine aspects of church life. Photos are placed at the end. This is a topical arrangement.

The third overall organization, time sequence, sounds like a report of meeting minutes when it is used for a short church or WIC history. But it can be very effective for a larger work.

If you are organizing a comprehensive church history the organizing schemes might fit this way:

- Form.** This is a digest-type format. All statistics are in one place. All lists in another. All narrative is lumped as one segment. It is ideal for a pamphlet or a brochure. It can be boring for a book.
- Topical.** This studies the church as a collection of parts and treats each part alone. All about Christian Education is in one chapter. All about worship is in another. The weakness is a loss of the relationship between them.
- Time sequence.** There are a few ways to do this. A popular framework is to look at the history of the church as a series of pastorates. One segment covers the three-year tenure of Rev. X. The next covers the 17 years Rev. Y was there. Another way is to look at the church by decades. A third is to subjectively divide into periods. The years the church was starting. . .growth years. . .war years. . .Depression years. . .stagnant years. . .This frame imposes the view of the writer on the history, but it is honest. We know where the historian stands.

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ORGANIZE, continued

More important is how each segment hangs together. Catchy titles, sharp photos and colorful charts won't cure dull copy. That goes for the annual church history just as much as for the lengthy account. Making it interesting is the trick.

Suppose you want to share great news with your neighbor. Over coffee you breathlessly begin: "Oh, wait until you hear! Marge got up this morning. She had breakfast and brushed her teeth. She started cleaning that dirty place on the floor where her little Angie spilled the catsup last Thursday. No, I'm wrong. It was Wednesday. Anyway, she started feeling a little funny. Her husband took her to the hospital. The doctor checked her over. Then they wheeled her away. It's a girl."

Would you tell the story that way? If so I hope you are never my neighbor. Write down your church history narrative as you would describe it over coffee.

Start with a summary or a lead statement. Be specific: "Marge had a baby girl this morning!" Imagine what questions would immediately come to mind: "How's Marge doing? Is the baby all right? How much does she weigh? . . ." In a logical sequence, provide the answers. Writing is communicating with others--talking on paper.

So follow these guidelines for writing each section:

1. Ask yourself what is the most important thing you want to say. Say it.
2. Think who is going to read what you are writing. Will it be important to them as well. If not, what would make it more meaningful.
3. Don't take 300 words to say what can be said in 30. Add words only to give examples or to give clarity and avoid confusion.
4. Choose simple words and short, crisp sentences and paragraphs. Cut out flowery and unnecessary words.
5. Keep asking who will enjoy and learn from what you are writing. If the only people who come to mind are your mother and a professor back at the alma mater, rewrite!
6. In building each chapter or section try to follow the advice given to most homiletics students: Say what you are going to say (lead); say it (body); then say what you said (summary).
7. It also helps a writer to remember the pastor's wife who occasionally flashed a hand-lettered sign at her husband in the pulpit. The sign read "KISS!" One woman told the pastor she admired the affection and support his wife gave him. He explained that the sign was actually a reminder to him to "Keep It Simple, Stupid!"

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ORGANIZE, continued

Douglas Brackenridge, the church historian quoted earlier from a lecture at the Presbyterian Study Center/Office of History, Montreat, NC, used the chart below to illustrate another organizational idea.

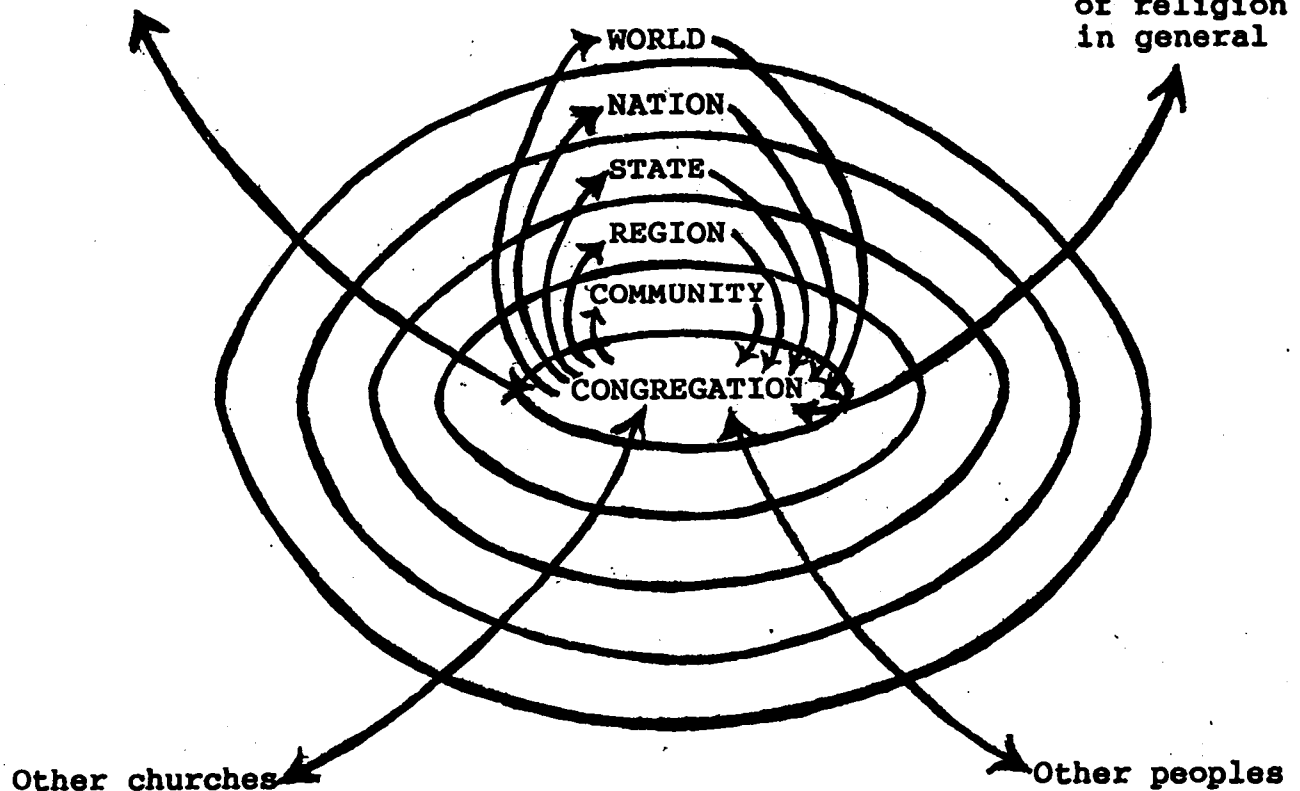
No church, especially no Presbyterian church, stands alone. Its story is one of interrelationships. The story of that Indiana church would not be truthful without mention of how the church related to the territorial government, to French and Indian neighbors, to its far-off presbytery, and to the world at large.

This is the reason for the section on putting your church into its historical context. The records of a church of the 1940s may make no reference to the war. Yet in 1947 a memorial was unveiled to honor husbands and sons who had died. The pastor had to drop a ministry at another town in 1943. Was it because of gasoline and tire rationing? The war made a large impact on that congregation, but it may be hard to uncover it.

Notice in the drawing that, as salt and light, the church should affect, as well as be affected. If all impact is inward, there wobbles a troubled congregation:

**Theology and
Biblical purity**

**The state
of religion
in general**



FINISHING THE MANUSCRIPT

Writing is frightening work. After collecting an annual history for a year or researching for a couple of years for a comprehensive history this project has become a part of you. Words must be carefully chosen. Organization is a struggle. The process has become a part of who you are as a person.

The hardest, most selfless task of all is to let your baby go, putting it into the uncaring hands of an editor.

Every history, whatever its length, should be edited carefully by someone with a good command of language and a sharp eye for detail. It is better to find someone outside the church. An outsider will be less apt to take things for granted. He will know when something isn't adequately explained or doesn't sound right. Asking another person who knows the church is a good idea to catch factual errors the outsider wouldn't spot.

Prepare a clean, double-spaced manuscript for the editor. Leave wide margins for notes. Tell the person doing the work exactly what this manuscript covers and who its audience will be. A qualified editor will know if you have said too much for a brochure or too little on some subject for a comprehensive church history.

Allow plenty of time for this process. Go over the suggested changes and overall critique with the person. If you disagree with some of the judgments say so. The work is yours. But hear out the reasons for the changes. You may be too close to the project to see a weakness.

Go over the edited copy and see if time has cast a dimmer over something you have said. Then rewrite. Two or more rewrites may be necessary to hone a sharp edge on the material.

GETTING INTO PRINT

Many options are open in the area of inexpensive publishing with the advent of the word processor and "desk-top publishing" systems. The printing format you choose will depend largely on the audience, purpose, and price.

Paper costs and printing expenses have risen drastically in recent years. Even that friendly printer in the church may become less affable if you expect him to print your brochure, pamphlet, or book at a ridiculous bargain. As soon as you know the length and number of pieces of artwork which will be in the book, take it to several printers for price estimates. Have them advise on ways to cut costs. Be prepared to scale down your plans in the face of hard economic reality.

HARVESTING HISTORY, page D-11
GETTING INTO PRINT, continued

This handbook is reproduced inexpensively. It is typed on our aging word processor and photocopied on a good-quality machine. The copy paper was purchased at wholesale cost. The cover features an old engraving, which reproduces rather well on a good copier. Most artwork is in the form of drawings, which also copy well. The larger type was produced on a word processor and enlarged to the right size.

From this book you can see for yourself the good and bad sides to photocopying a book. A professional appearance is sacrificed to get the cheapest product possible. Otherwise it wouldn't be possible to produce such a manual. Most of you, its audience, are more interested in information than a pretty face.

On the other hand, if this book had been designed to sell a product, or introduce a church to an uninterested neighborhood, or if it was designed for businessmen accustomed to seeing slick paper and four-color printing, it would have been totally inadequate.

It is possible to print a church history very inexpensively. The book can use graphic design techniques, such as bold face type, drawings and the like to be made more attractive. But know the limits and realize that some people may be offended by something of less than optimum quality.

Notice that there are no photos in this book, to avoid the expense of "screening." To screen a photo means a graphic arts print or negative is made of the picture, reducing the image to a series of dots. Pictures in the newspaper or a book are not pictures at all, but an optical illusion of dots. Neither a copier nor a printing plate can reproduce the shadings of a photo. If your printed history uses photos, even if reproduced on a copy machine, the best result will come from ordering screened prints from a printer.

If your church has a desk-top publishing computer, you can easily screen photos for use on a copier.

The most expensive part of having a pamphlet or book professionally printed is the cost of typesetting. This is the wonderful boon of new word processor typesetting programs, which can produce pages that are "camera ready." That means all a printer has to do is make to make plates and put them on a press.

Printing expenses are increased by ordering odd-sized or high-quality paper. Using two or more colors of ink also can drastically increase the price. Most reputable printshops will help hold costs to a manageable level. Usually it is a good idea, though, to ask several shops for a cost estimate and samples of their work. Pick the best and come to a firm price understanding.

HARVESTING HISTORY, page D-12
GETTING INTO PRINT, continued

If the printshop does any typesetting make sure you see page proofs. Go over them CAREFULLY for errors. Any errors you don't catch during this proofreading are your responsibility, not the printer's. Don't make changes in the copy after it is in type. You will be charged plenty to have type reset.

If possible, find out when the printing will be done and drop by at the beginning of the run for a last check. Also oversee binding. If you don't think the printer or binder has lived up to his agreement, let him know, and he likely will try to redo something or make an adjustment in price. A printer's business depends on satisfied customers. If you work closely with the printer he will try to satisfy you.

SUMMARY

This section has tried to pull together several aspects of getting church history from raw facts hidden out of sight to a finished printed form. This discussion has been an introduction, and the finer points will have to come from more intensive books. A few are included in the Sources and Resources section.

Know, however, that you will never learn how to pull together a church history from this or any other book. Neither will you learn how to write an interesting account about what is collected. A little of that comes as a gift from God. Most of it means just working hard.

This handbook is designed to make the job as easy as possible. We will be looking for changes to make the work easier still. Research and writing, though, are never without struggle. That is what makes the well-done finished project more of an accomplishment the church can enjoy.