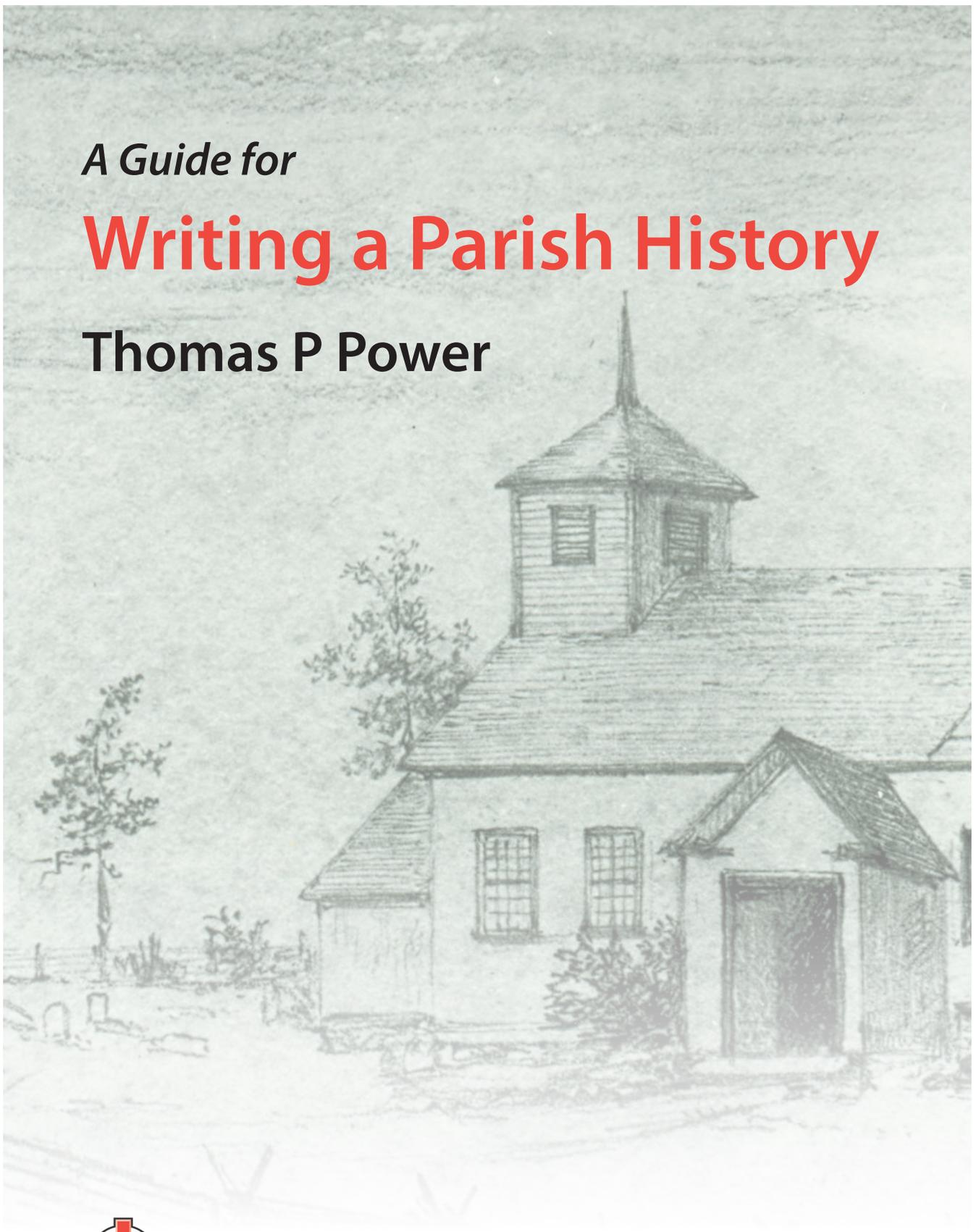


A Guide for

Writing a Parish History

Thomas P Power



The Anglican Church of Canada

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The Anglican Church of Canada

General Synod Archives / Canadian Church Historical Society
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Introduction

We are encouraged to listen to God speaking to us. God has spoken to his people in the past. By recovering the record of how, when, where, and to whom God spoke, we can recover meaningful instances of God's action in the Church in the past, which in turn can be a resource in the present and for the future.

Compiling a parish history can be a formative experience for a faith community. It not only serves to chronicle that community as it has evolved in times past, but it also situates its condition in the present and, in many cases, positions it for the future. When approached in this way a parish history can act as the genesis for future mission and growth. To be a successful enterprise, the compilation of a parish history involves certain key stages, entails the consultation of various sources of information (print, electronic, oral), and gains expression in a variety of completed formats (print, web, video). It is the aim of this guide to provide advice on how to compile a parish history from start to finish.

Get Organized!

To get started on your project you will need to identify a group of individuals who want to be associated with the task and who are willing to give time and effort to it. This working group will define the goals of the project, decide on its budget, conduct the research, and guide it through to publication. Decide who will be responsible for research, writing, publication, and the budget respectively. The composition of the group should reflect the different skills and abilities of church members. A key task of the group will be to define the goals of the project by answering some key preliminary questions.

Key Preliminary Questions

It is important that you or your team pose and answer some key foundational questions at the outset. These answers will provide indicators as to your motivation, which in turn will influence the nature of documentary sources you will consult, the selection of details you record from these sources, and ultimately the kind of history you produce.

- **Audience:** Who is your intended audience for the parish history? Who do you want to read it?
- **Purpose:** What is your goal in compiling a parish history? What do you hope it will achieve?
- **Timeframe:** What time period does the history aim to cover? For instance, is it the last one hundred years or fifty years? Is there an earlier parish history that you need to consult?
- **Authorship:** Is there to be a single author or multiple persons? How will a team of volunteers be organized, and tasks allocated? Who will do what? People with appropriate gifts or a willingness to learn should be recruited.

- **Approval:** Have you received approval from the vestry or parish council to proceed with the writing of the parish history? Has membership of a committee devoted to the project been advertised and approved? Has an expectation been created that regular updates of progress will be provided?
- **Advertise:** Make a general announcement in church bulletins, newsletters, diocesan newspaper or on the church website, that you are embarking on the project. Church members may have custody of material they have retained over the years, e.g. service leaflets, photographs, newspapers cuttings. It would be important to be able to consult or copy such material. If you use it (e.g. photographs) in the final work secure the owner's permission and give acknowledgement.
- **Budget:** Has a budget for the project been devised and approved?
- **Sources:** A preliminary investigation should be undertaken to determine if there are enough source materials and documents to justify writing a parish history. If so, where are they located? Are they accessible? What kinds of sources will you need?
- **End Product:** What do you envisage as the end product? Is it to be in print? (If so how many copies will be in your print run?) Is it to be purely an oral history? Are there to be glossy images? Is it to be published on the church website only? Is it to be a video recording published, for instance, on YouTube? If your prime motive is to inform would it be better and cheaper to insert a paragraph in the weekly service bulletin on some historical aspect?
- **Existing History:** It is always best to start with what you know. Is there an older parish history in existence? Ask your priest or contact your local public library. If you are having trouble locating one, contact the John W. Graham Library, Trinity College, University of Toronto. It holds the largest collection of parish histories in Canada. There may be a copy for your parish. Contact: ask.grahamlibrary@utoronto.ca

Also, the Thomas R. Millman Historical Reference Library at the General Synod Archives (GSA) has a historical reference library which includes parish histories, biographies of clergy and bishops, annual reports of missionary societies, history of First Nations people of Canada and native language materials. See: [Search • Archives of the Anglican Church of Canada](#)

Answers to the above questions should serve to devise a plan that contains research tasks assigned to individuals and a timeline for the completion of the project. This may need to be adapted as you proceed, but it is necessary to have one at the outset.

Motivation

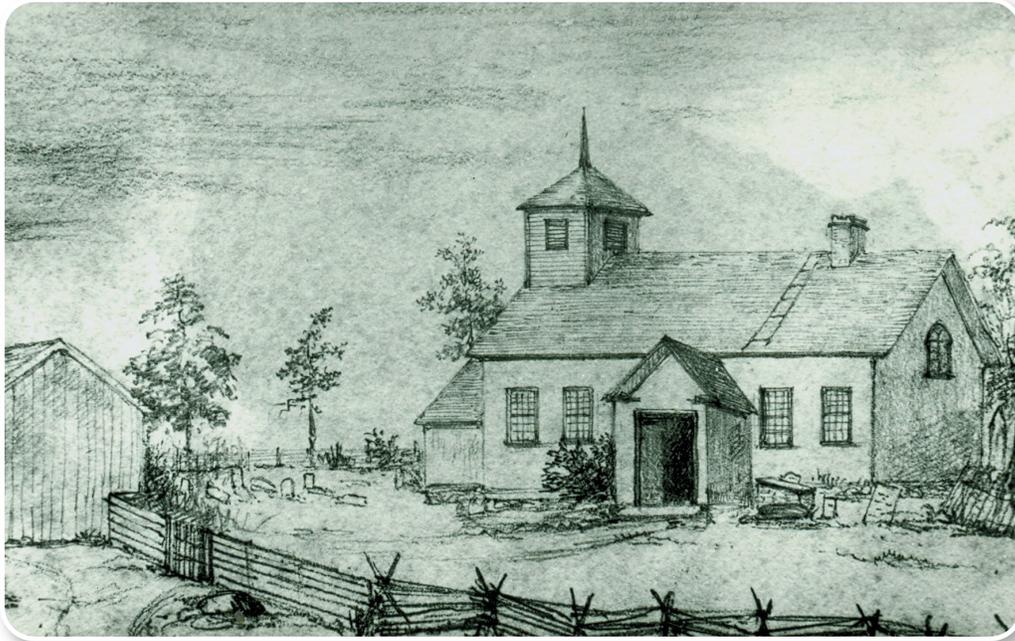
At the outset knowing what your intention is in writing the parish history is important. Having a vision is going to determine the sources you use and hence the end result you will achieve. It is possible to be inspired by verses such as: “Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them.” (Psalm 111: 2).

Whatever the source of inspiration, a degree of enthusiasm, excitement, and expectancy should prevail as the research team sets about the task that lies ahead: i.e. uncovering and telling the story of what God has done in your parish in times past.

The following may be among the motivations:

- There is an anniversary that needs to be marked in some way and the compilation of a parish history might seem appropriate.
- There is no existing parish history and so there is a need for one.
- There is an existing parish history, but it needs to be updated and extended.
- The church is closing and there is a need to mark that event in some meaningful way.
- There is a need to document the church’s past for the benefit of future generations.
- There is a need to compile a church history for the benefit of the current congregation so that it can provide context for its church life today.
- There is a need to understand how struggles were overcome in the past as a way of confronting current ones. (See further below *History Audit: Building on History*).
- There is a need to understand how the parish positioned itself in the past for mission and how this can be learned from in the present with a view to the future (See further below *History Audit: Building on History*).
- Compiling a history of the parish would act as a way to bridge the gap from the past experience of the church to its future.

Old sketches or photos show historical setting of the parish



P7547-5
Church of St. John the Evangelist, South Cayuga, Ontario, built in 1843.



P7525-72
St. Paul's Bloor Street, Toronto, Ont., 1909

History Audit: Building on History

Instead of a conventional parish history as such, the focus in conducting a history audit of the parish or church is that something can be learned from the past experience of a church community so as to better position it for mission in the present and future. For such an approach, an appreciation of broader societal movements is necessary.

In general terms, an examination of church history demonstrates that broad movements like emigration and urbanization (and its concomitant, religious pluralism), for instance, happened in the past just as they continue today. In the past the Church responded to such movements through church building and church planting. How was this achieved? What factors influenced decisions that were made? Answers to such questions can be helpful since in the midst of such trends as urbanization and secularization there is today the challenge of planting churches also. It is here that the option of the history audit of a parish can prove helpful.

You may decide that your work should have a specific focus and end result: i.e. mission. If this is going to be your purpose, then it is important to be aware of the Building on History project conducted between 2009 and 2011 by the Diocese of London (UK).

Here is the project's website: <https://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/building-on-history-project/index.html>

The purpose of a history audit would be similar to that of a community or church/parish audit except that it would seek to reveal patterns and themes in the past experience of the church that might be recurring. Such might encompass topics such as the following:

- a musical or choral tradition
- the location of the church over time (why were churches built where they were?)
- finance
- worship styles
- lay leadership
- children and youth
- outreach
- demographics
- leadership trends
- tragic events
- people of faith and ministry who stand out

Inevitably such an exercise can reveal positive or negative aspects. The point is that such a discovery can either reinforce a strong and vital tradition, it can serve to resolve some issues in the church (so that past mistakes are not repeated!), or it can act as the genesis of a new vision of ministry or outreach. Whatever the purpose, patterns of continuity and change are revealed, there is an

appreciation of historical processes and experiences, and the result is a greater self-understanding in the faith community. History is brought into the present in order to provide perspective in current planning.

In terms of the provision of practical resources for the carrying out of such audits, diocesan and general synod archives will need to make their archival holdings more widely available, known, and accessible (and here the utility and potential of the tools of digitization are significant). From such resources practical projects involving volunteers and theological students could ensue whereby church history could be used to inform the mission and work of the church today. Projects could potentially range from oral histories of church members, genealogy, names of missionaries, to architectural studies, as outlined elsewhere in this guide.

Here are some examples of how a history audit can be of practical use in certain church contexts (with acknowledgements to the Diocese of London, UK):

- A church had difficulty developing lay leadership. The history audit revealed that not only had this always been a problem, but there had been a history of powerful individuals assuming leadership roles for themselves, leaving it difficult for others to come to the fore. The audit revealed power had been passed down from one powerful person to another. Once this systemic problem was named it was easier to explore ways in which more people could assume leadership roles.
- Another church wanted to have an internet café where people could gather socially. While research indicated that the local community wanted such a facility, further research by the church indicated that no one would actually use such a facility because other churches in the area were providing something similar. This might also prove to be the case where other initiatives are concerned, thus highlighting the importance of research and communication.
- The audit then revealed the church in question had historically always had a problem with new initiatives in the local community because of its location. Although close to the main road it was nevertheless secluded, all because the ground on which it was built was purchased cheaply because nobody else wanted it. History revealed that the issue the church needed to address was that of visibility and profile.
- Another case involved a church where there was a high turnover of clergy. None were able to survive more than a few years. The audit uncovered the fact that the founding priest molded the church in his own image, creating large attendances by his charismatic personality.
- The audit revealed that the burgeoning numbers of the early days were a myth, the founding priest's strengths and weaknesses were identified, and the reason why subsequent priests did not last long was indicated by the fact that they were always being compared (unfavourably) with their pioneer forbearer thus creating a standard impossible to achieve and precipitating their departure. Having thus revealed the problem, the new priest had the freedom to act.

Any number of such scenarios could be cited depending on the situation of a particular faith community. Are there ones of which you can think? How can the resources of history be employed to resolve these and lead to a new vision of purpose and mission?

Photographs show original and new buildings of the parish



P7533-115
The *original* St. Mary the Virgin, Lillooet, BC



P7533-116
The *new* St. Mary the Virgin, Lillooet, BC



P7533-117
Original interior of first St. Mary the Virgin,
Lillooet, BC



P7533-118
New interior of new St. Mary the Virgin, Lillooet, BC

Research Process

Whether you opt to compile a conventional parish history, or whether you choose the History Audit, at the outset, it is important to consult some general works in order to understand the general history of Anglicans in your locality and nationally (see *Bibliography*).

Questions

When you set out to consult and record information from documentary sources, some key questions need to be posed and answered at this stage also. The questions posed by John Woolverton are pertinent here:

1. Can you identify unusual and daring events in your parish's past that cut across the spectrum of parish activities?
2. What individuals and groups of people built community and brought reconciliation? In other words, what witnesses were made?
3. What new missionary enterprises were undertaken and in response to what need?
4. Can you relate episodes in the Acts of the Apostles to the history of your parish?
5. What cultural and geographic frontiers were crossed?¹

Answering such questions at the outset of the research process will help to focus your efforts subsequently.

Notetaking

It is vitally important that when you are taking notes from the sources described below that you record such notes accurately, indicate where material is being directly quoted, and that you record the source from which you are making your notes.

Worksheets

You can make productive use of worksheets for the purposes of compiling key information. One can be devoted to clergy: name, biographical details, dates of service, significant achievements. Another can be for buildings: date of completion, distinct features, architecture, additions or changes. Another can be devoted to prominent individuals in the story of the parish: name, dates, contribution, legacy. Worksheets can be added to once additional information becomes available.

1. Woolverton, John F. "Crossing frontiers: theological reflections on the writing of a parish history," *Anglican Theological Review* 69: 3 (1987), 239-256 at 255-6.

Documentary Sources

You will have to consult a variety of documentary sources including church records, diocesan records (see below), legal and municipal records, newspapers, journal articles, and books.

The church itself may have retained some sources like vestry minutes, directories, photographs, newsletters, and service bulletins. The range of current sources is indicated as follows:

- Legal papers
- Property deeds
- Committee records
- Membership records
- Financial records
- Records of birth, marriages, and deaths
- Photographs

Contact current and former church members or clergy for documentation or information they may have.

Non-current materials such as Church Society reports and Diocesan Synod Journals will be in diocesan archives.

General Synod Archives

The archives of the national church are held in the General Synod Archives:
<https://www.anglican.ca/archives>

As well as the records of the General Synod itself, the national body has the following:

- Records created by individuals affiliated with the Anglican Church of Canada who are of historical significance to the national Church. These include clergy and bishops, lay missionaries, and church historians. See here for full list:
<https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/personal-papers>
- Records created by organizations affiliated with the Anglican Church of Canada which are of historical significance to the national Church. These include missionary societies, religious communities, church societies and councils, diocesan and provincial synods. See here for full list: <https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/related-organizations>
- Microfilms of diocesan newspapers, diocesan synod journals, diaries, records of individual churchmen, religious organizations and societies, etc. See here for full list:
<https://www.anglican.ca/archives/holdings/microfilm>

Diocesan Archives

A full list of the Diocesan Archives can be found here:

<https://www.anglican.ca/archives/incanada>

Included are contact information, location, hours of opening, and website (where applicable).

Some Anglican Diocesan Archives have descriptions online via Archives Canada:

<https://archivescanada.accesstomemory.ca/repository/browse?subquery=Anglican>

The publication *Archives of the Anglican Church of Canada (Canadian Church Historical Society Occasional Paper No. 9)* (2019) should also be consulted.

Newspapers

Newspapers are an excellent source of church events such as its opening, the arrival of a new priest, or the celebration of an anniversary. Denominational newspapers were prevalent from the late 1800s onward, including [The Dominion Churchman](#) (1875-1889), the *Canadian Churchman* (1890-1989), and [The Anglican Journal](#) (1990 to date) for the church nationally.

For diocesan newspapers online see: [The regional newspaper network - Anglican Journal](#). Consult individual dioceses for back issues of diocesan newspapers not available online.

In addition, through much of the 19th and 20th centuries, even small communities often had a local newspaper. They can provide valuable information on church events, announcements, advertisements, and illustrations.

Some newspapers have been digitized.

- [Newspapers.com](#) (subscription)
- [GenealogyBank](#)
- [NewspaperArchive](#)

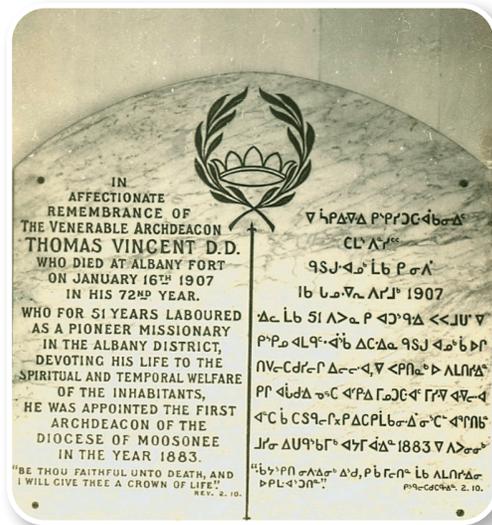
Local Histories

It is important to know about the wider historical development of the area in which the church is located. Churches have played an important role in their communities. Many well-researched local histories will include information on the prominent churches in their area. Was your church built (and the parish established) as part of a broader settlement pattern? If so, there is much to learn from histories of your locality. For these you should check your local public library or university library. Holdings for many of these libraries can be found by search WorldCat.org

Photographs of clergy, along with a brief biography and significant accomplishments while at the parish, enhance the value of the history.



P7514-06
The Ven. Thomas Vincent, 1835-1907



P7514-05
Special Monuments can be featured such as this monument to The Ven. Archdeacon Thomas Vincent D.D., 1835-1907, CMS missionary at Fort Albany and Archdeacon of Moosonee.

Photographs capture the life of the church and its activities



P2017-05-905
Confirmation at St. Mark's Anglican Church, Pikwitonei, Man., [1939?]



P7546-70
Baptism of eight babies at St. Paul's, Main Brook, Newfoundland



P8803-AR-5
Eucharist at St. Jude's Cathedral, Iqaluit, NU

Oral History

You may want to conduct oral interviews with members of the church who have a knowledge of its history. As well as helping you with vital information, conducting an oral history will help to promote interest in the project as a whole.

Preparation

- Prepare your questions in advance and stick to them.
- Provide the interviewee with a copy before the interview so that they have an opportunity to think over their responses.

Questions

Questions might include the following:

- When did you first start coming to this church?
- What age were you at the time?
- Who was the priest at the time?
- Who were some of the other leaders in the church at the time?
- What has it been like for you attending church over the years?
- What are some of your happiest memories?

These and other questions can be used to launch into further conversation.

Method

- Acquire recording equipment. In the recording introduce the session by giving your name, the date, and name of the person you are interviewing.
- Try not to put information or responses in the interviewee's mouth or allow another family member to fill in gaps. It should be free flowing.
- While you want to allow for enough time for the interview, don't make the interview too long: one hour is a good benchmark. However, if you feel more information might be forthcoming, you could ask if the interviewee would agree to a second interview.
- You will have to decide whether time allows for a transcript of the interview to be made.

Caution

- While the information imparted by older members of the congregation may be valuable, it is wise not to accept everything you are told uncritically.
- Your informants may have particular viewpoints or prejudices with regard to an event or person in the church's past.
- You need to keep an open mind for the present until their viewpoint is either affirmed or negated by other information that you come across.
- At least their evidence is to be valued for what it says about the perceptions of church members about the past.
- Responses may be based on church tradition rather than on facts, so some checking may be needed.
- You may realize that as you get closer to the present not everyone will remember an event in the same way. There may be different information on facts and interpretation of what happened especially with controversial episodes in the church's past. This is to be expected. Your task is to be judicious in your assembly of information.

Writing

Approaches

You can adopt either a chronological or a theme format in your narrative.

Chronological

If you adopt a chronological approach you will opt to deal with the different phases of the church's experience from the time of its foundation up to the present or whatever terminal point you choose. The challenge here will be to define the different phases in the church's development so that these correspond to the respective chapters in your book.

- Are the different phases/chapters to be based on the tenure of different rectors?
- Are they to be based on the sequence of buildings that were constructed?
- Are they to be determined by national or international events, e.g. "Life in the parish before World War I", "Life in the parish between the Wars," etc?
- Are chapters in chronology to be decided by the availability of documentary sources? (Whether the final work gives equal coverage to each time period, may be determined by the availability of primary sources.)

Posing and answering these questions will determine whether and how you will adopt the chronological approach to your parish history.

Theme

If it is based on theme then your history will have respective chapters on clergy, buildings and architecture, worship, missionary work, church education, etc.

Organization and Presentation

Once you gather your information, it is time to decide how you will organize and present it. Decide how the information is to be organized in logical chapters and how it is to be presented within each chapter. What information is best presented in appendix form?

The writing up of the history should be done in a structured way. For this, allow yourself sufficient time, perhaps up to a year.

Start with a timeline of key dates in the story of the church (e.g. succession of clergy; when buildings were erected; local and denominational events, etc). This will allow you to see the chronology of the church's development, and it will provide a skeleton outline upon which chapters in the book can be based.

Chapters

Decide if the material is to be divided into chronological chapters. If so, decide what the major time periods will be.

Try to identify some themes that describe the experience of your church in the past. For instance:

- Why was the church given the name that it has?
- What does this say about the aspirations of its founders?

A decision will have to be made as to the style of writing. You may decide you want to simply present the facts with a chronological treatment, supporting statistical information, and a simple linking narrative. Alternatively, you might choose to be more thematic and analytical dealing with such topics as worship, clergy, children's ministry, community, mission, etc.

Decisions will have to be made as to what to include and what to leave out. Given that there may be differences of opinion about controversial occurrences in the church's past, the task in writing must be fair.

You will need to decide on the title of the work, the table of contents, and the chapters. These might cover the chronological survey of the parish from its foundation up to the agreed terminal point. There may be separate sections within chapters on architecture, special events, Sunday school, notable achievements.

Style

In terms of style, make the writing readable and user-friendly. Your writing should be clear and understandable. Sufficient detail should be added so that the reader can easily imagine what is being described. A simple statement of facts is often insufficient in getting people interested in their parish's past.

The best approach is to be simple and clear. The goal is to keep the reader engaged. For this telling a story with an easy flow and explaining matters and events succinctly is recommended.

The challenge will be to produce a work that will be read and enjoyed. To achieve this, two factors need to be kept in mind:

- Try to include stories about individuals and families that will make the work interesting.
- Try to deal objectively with difficult events in the parish's history.

Statistics should be used as the structure around which human interest stories should be written. There may be merit in including statistical evidence in appendices and this task could be assigned to one or several persons to compile. These might include yearly statistics on baptisms, marriages, and deaths; Sunday School enrollment; clergy, etc. Have someone else compile a timeline of key dates.

Attempt to write in clear, coherent paragraphs. The first sentence of every paragraph should introduce the main topic or idea. This approach makes it easy for readers to follow the narrative. Avoid overly long paragraphs by limiting yourself to a paragraph per half page of text.

To undertake this writing task may appear daunting at first. It is best just to get started and get something down. You can worry about grammar and syntax later. Be prepared to revise and rewrite perhaps a few times.

Footnotes

Document your sources: reference in footnotes or endnotes any materials you make use of. To enrich and give authenticity to your text, you may want to quote directly from a source, or paraphrase it. If such are lengthy, they might be inserted in textboxes that stand out on the page. Either way you will want to indicate your source. The level at which you do this will depend on your audience: if it is for internal use then a simple citation is sufficient; if it is for a wider audience, then a more formal citation style would be appropriate. If you use oral interviews their source should be acknowledged.

Bibliography

Compile a bibliography at the end of the book distinguishing between primary and secondary works.

Controversial Matters

Controversial or negative events should not be avoided but should be dealt with fairly and with discretion. Only facts supported by evidence should be included.

Grammar

It is important to write correctly in terms of grammar and syntax. Be concise and avoid wordiness. Here are some resources:

- Grammar Slammer <http://englishplus.com/grammar>
- Grammar Monster <http://www.grammar-monster.com>
- Strunk and White, *The Elements of Style*.

Proofread

Proofread your text multiple times: perhaps involving different people in the task. One person can see errors another person cannot. Have others you trust read the text in draft and have them offer their comments and corrections. Have your manuscript reviewed for grammar and historical accuracy. Be prepared to accept constructive criticism.

Photographs

- If photos are to be included, try to choose good quality ones. If you use them, determine if you need permission to publish them.
- Use images to break up long text and make the book easy to read. Choose images relevant to the text.
- Include captions for any images used.
- Include a mix of subject matter in the chosen images: not just clergy and buildings but people involved in different ministries and activities.

Production

A number of decisions will need to be made concerning the final production and appearance of the work. Some key questions need to be posed:

- What will your budget allow in terms of the quality of the finished product?
- Do you want a large format product, i.e. coffee table size, or do you want the standard 8.5 by 11 inches? Or do you want a smaller format?
- What of the choice of cover? What does the church want as the defining image on the cover of its parish history?

Publishing

Increasingly, the option of self-publishing is a viable option for making a parish history available to the public. The following should be investigated for that purpose:

- [Kindle Direct Publishing](#)
- [Barnes & Noble Press](#)
- [Kobo](#)
- [Apple Books](#)
- [selfpublishing.com](#)
- [Reedsy](#)
- [Lulu](#)
- [IngramSpark](#)
- [Publish Drive](#)
- [Draft2Digital](#)
- [Streetlib](#)

Use

Compiling a parish history should not be an end in itself. Something should be learned from the exercise. As described above, this is the purpose of the history audit. The compiling of a parish history and the general historical awareness resulting from it can be of practical value for the contemporary church, how it understands itself in terms of its past, what it is doing in the present, and how this positions it for the future.

What use will you make of the parish history book after it has been produced?

- new church members
- for evangelism: selections on church website
- slide presentation given at select church events
- video presentation ([YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com))
- use social media to reach the unchurched
- make an easy-to-read synopsis available for distribution to e.g. newcomers, visitors.

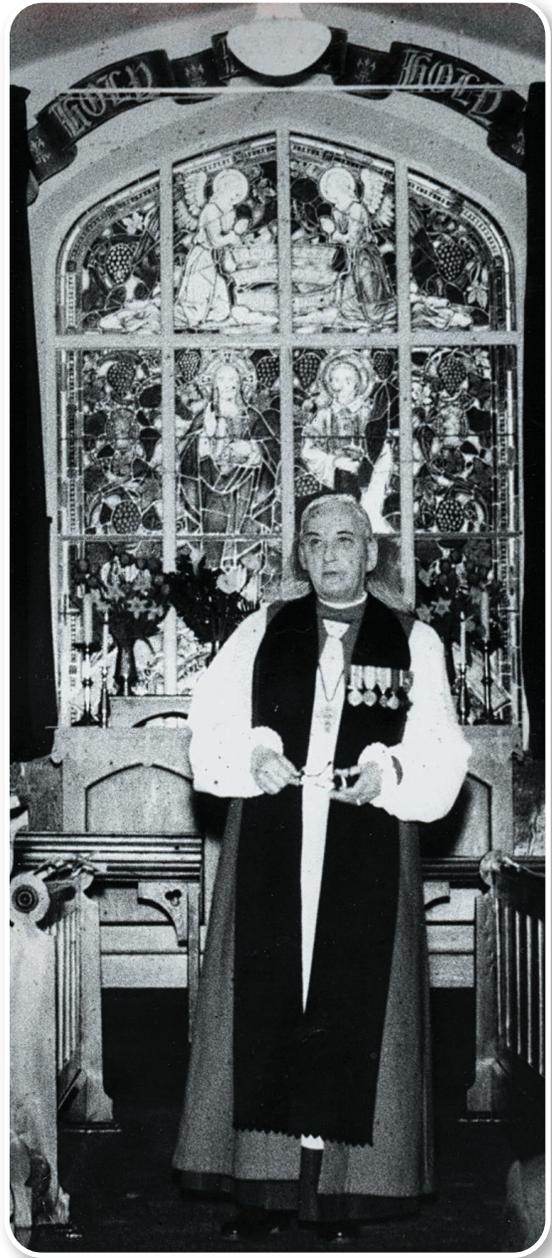
Photographs document special events



P7546-40
The Rt. Rev. R.L. Seaborn, Assistant Bishop, officiating at a breaking of the ground ceremony at Trinity Church, Grand Falls, Newfoundland, [between 1958-1965]



P7542-32
Procession into opening service at Christ Church Cathedral, Montreal Synod, 1965



P7579-89
A visit of the Primate, The Most Rev. Walter Foster Barfoot at the dedication of the stained-glass windows at St. Stephen's Church, East Kildonan, Winnipeg, Man., [Between 1951-1958]

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Archives Canada for online archival descriptions including a few diocesan archives (e.g Fredericton, Huron, Kootenay, Toronto): <https://archivescanada.ca/>

[Inventory to the Anglican Church diocese of Yukon records deposited with the Yukon Archives | Government of Yukon](#)

Other Resources

Frederick E. Maser. [How To Write a Local Church History](#)

The parish history collection of the John W. Graham Library, Trinity College, University of Toronto is the largest in Canada. See a Guide to the collection (<https://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/library/research/theology/anglican-parish-histories>) It demonstrates how to search the library catalogue for parish histories and significant individuals in the Church.

