



The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives and Records Office

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Learning from the past ~ Living in the present ~ Looking to the future

ORAL HISTORIES FOR CHURCH COMMUNITIES

Oral history interviews are an effective way to capture the memories of involved individuals in church courts (i.e., congregations, presbyteries, synods). You will likely be able to rhyme off a number of people that played a significant role in the development and life of the church. They may be past/present: ministers, missionaries of our national church, Sunday school teachers, professors, long-time and faithful members of a congregation, involved young people, or national church committee members—just to name a few examples. The Committee on History encourages this work, and the Presbyterian Church Archives collects select oral histories for researchers' use.

Interviews provide a unique historical record and recollection of a period in time. They offer the added

element of voice and personality. As audio recordings add to the regular administrative and historical records

collected in the Archives, they are especially important when there are no other papers in existence relating to that individual or situation addressed in the interview.

A completed interview will result in an audio recording, hard copy transcript of the interview, and all necessary forms relating to the interview, issues of ownership, and future use of the recording. Securing a good quality photograph of the interviewee can add a helpful dimension to the overall product.



Basic Steps and Principles

Getting started: This work can be done as an individual effort, or you might gather a few people together who are keen to take on this project with you. A group can serve to both foster enthusiasm and share the responsibility. You may wish to form an actual Oral History Committee. Either way, you need to know who the responsible authority is (church session or presbytery clerk perhaps) to monitor the following steps.

Approve a budget: Oral history need not be an expensive venture as the most important products required would be: portable recorder/player with a good microphone (digital – about \$100), supply of new tapes (if analog), and a supply of batteries. Bring a reliable camera to capture photos of the interview.

Draw up a list of interviewee names: Determine your list of candidates to interview. Perhaps you feel an urgency to interview someone because they are in their senior years, or perhaps they are about to relocate a distance away. You may wish to prioritize your list of

names in some way. Keep in mind the youth in your congregation as they can be valuable members of your Oral History Committee as well as possible candidates for interviewing!

Create necessary forms:

Letter of Introduction – this is created by the sponsoring body or the interviewer and explains the oral history project, the sponsoring body, the parameters and goals of the project.

Interview Cover Sheet form – this is completed by the interviewer and details names of interviewer and interviewee, place and date of the interview, etc.

Interviewee Registration form – this is completed by the interviewee and includes full name and contact information, as well as contextual information.

Release form – this is signed by the interviewee and explains that an oral history becomes a public record and releases the Presbyterian Church Archives from any liabilities regarding availing it to researchers.

Note: If the product is both audio and video, then both aspects would have to be included in a release form.

Research the interviewee:

You will want to do careful research on the life of your subject before the interview. If needed, the Presbyterian Church Archives may be able to provide or suggest resources to facilitate your research.



Provide a copy of the

questions: Formulate your list of questions for the interview ahead of time. A copy of these should be given to the interviewee beforehand. The interviewee will come better prepared and feel more relaxed with a process that may be unfamiliar to them. The interview can include some general questions and also ones relating more specifically to the person's church background.

Suggested general questions:

- What is your connection to the church? For example, lay, ordained, professional church worker, etc.
- What positions have you held in the church? Ask for details about each one.
- How do you feel the church has changed in the years you have been a Presbyterian?
- What are some memorable events that you can recall in the life and history of the church?

Time and place for the interview: Establish a workable date, time and place of meeting for the interview. Make sure it is a quiet place with adequate protection from outside noises and general distractions. This suitable location could be within a public building or a private home.

Equipment: There are a number of digital recording options available. Although analog tapes are still welcome in the Archives, the digital version offers a cleaner end product and is more versatile. Check your equipment prior to the interview time. Make sure you know how to operate all the functions and can set the timer/counter, bring extra

batteries, and perhaps a second power cord, and extra tapes if analog.

Interview style: Do not guide the conversation. Watch out for your own bias entering the interview. That said, you can gently move the conversation along when needed, especially if things get too side-tracked or pauses are prolonged.

Your questions may prompt the following types of answers as you conduct the interview: narrative description, a chronology of events or factual details.

Be encouraging as they share their stories. Ask clarifying questions as needed and allow for times of reasonable silence between responses.

Remember:

- provide drinking water for both interviewer and interviewee so that voices can remain limber. Consider offering a light refreshment after the interview, if appropriate.
- one-on-one interviews are the easiest to manage and more specific in nature.
- a one-hour interview is average in length while two hours can be allotted, if needed (or set a second time to meet).

Post-Interview

- Check tape to ensure quality. It is best to do this while the interviewee is still present.
- Label the recording at the time of creation. Label both hard copy and digital with the names of both parties, date, location, etc.
- Create a written transcript. This is best produced as soon as possible. Offer a copy of the transcript to the interviewee so they can make necessary corrections and additions.
- Store the original product in Presbyterian Church Archives.

References:

There are a number of helpful guidelines to creating oral histories offered online. Please feel free to contact the Presbyterian Church Archives for any questions or further assistance.

