

WRITING THE HISTORY OF YOUR CONGREGATION

These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city. Esther 9:28

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF WRITING PARISH HISTORIES

Elaine E Bolitho 12 April 2005

There is more to writing a book than writing a book! Attitude, research, writing, editing, layout, design, illustrations, printing and marketing are all important.

Attitude

When writing about God's work and God's people it is an ongoing joy to know that God journeys with me, as I share and tell the events through which the forebears travelled with God.

Research

This is the key to a successful history. The biggest frustration is to discover that vital records have been destroyed by fire, flood or carelessness. Wearing my 'Super Sleuth' hat is something I thoroughly enjoy. Identifying the sources and then settling in for long sessions of slog yields surprises and patterns. I prefer to tackle the written sources first, and then, with that information recorded and collated I'm better prepared to identify people whose stories could flesh out the basic skeleton, and to ask them relevant questions. These interviews are always a delight – something to look forward to on days when difficult-to-read handwriting yields rather dry content.

Written research often provides keys to unlock stories which people have tucked away in their memories.

"Can you tell me about the Bible Class ski-trips when Mrs Watson was the leader?"

"What do you remember about the new hall being built?"

"What was it like at church when the men were away at the war?"

"Can you tell me what it was like having parish leaders imprisoned as conscientious objectors?"

"We've still got the birthday chair – can you remember using it?"

People who can see that you know something about where they've come from and are interested in their stories are generally more responsive and one memory sets off another.

Photographs are another useful source of information. People will tell the stories about their pictures and sometimes produce other memorabilia – a membership ticket, a badge, a handbill advertising an event, or an insightful letter.

It is also worth writing a letter to the editor of local papers, telling about your project and seeking information and/or pictures from readers. This yielded stories of 1905 Ngaio Sunday School pupils walking over barely cleared land, tickets one was given and wartime information about her brother. Earlier, a reader unearthed sufficient material for a whole chapter I hadn't known I would write!

Writing

For me, this is the most creative and rewarding phase. The biggest challenge is deciding what to leave out. This arises first when preparing the outline of the book – will it be told chronologically or thematically? I generally opt for themes within an overall chronological framework. Then within each chapter come the challenges to keep the overall story clear; choose personal stories to highlight points and help the flow of the book.

Another challenge is how to mention people's names. People love to read their names in print – and this really helps to sell copies – but in choosing stories to highlight, some diplomacy and sensitivity

to local issues is also needed. Lists of names soon become boring. One way round this is to include appendices at the back of the book listing, say, ministers, elders, organists and Sunday school superintendents. Another trick is to use a page of a significant register as an illustration – the handwriting adds interest. Where many items have been gifted to a parish, these can be presented in the appendices as a list of "Our treasures" summarising items, donors and reasons. Although some will obviously be included in the main story, a thorough list can ensure that no one is left out.

A timeline is another helpful device, giving a ready-reference potted history and a framework for the whole story. An index is a useful addition to any history – so long as it is accurate. Computer programmes make indexing easier, and the entries are made when the writing and layout is complete.

Editing

I always edit my work in progress, checking for clarity and what can be said more effectively in fewer words. Reading aloud is another essential test. But it's easy to read what I think is there rather than what is actually on the page. It's vital to have others read the text. If it's not clear to them, it won't be clear to the target audience. My most recent editor has been a joy to work with – making entertaining constructive comments about grammar and what doesn't work. He pointed out that because a chief source of information for past ministers was obituaries, they all sounded alike and too good to be true – we needed more human interest stories about them – mannerisms, playing football, collecting stamps, taking the youth group tramping or whatever. Some editors prefer to work first with the raw text and then to go over it again when the layout is complete – others prefer to edit text and layout together.

Layout and design

Watching a project change from A4 pages of text into a well laid-out book is

a joy. This phase includes making pages the right size, choosing the font and size for text, chapter headings and subheadings, as well as deciding how and where to insert pictures, table of contents, index, bibliography and appendices.

Illustrations

Discovering illustrations can be a great joy. I like to gather a selection of these in the course of research, have them scanned and then, working with the layout person, fit them into the text when the whole book is written. Pictures need to be relevant to the story. Their captions can repeat a snippet of text, be simple labels or complement the story. I prefer the latter, and to use something which I haven't been able to weave into the main text. For example, "Mrs Florence Shepherd's 1940 senior Sunday school class. Every year she took her girls by train and tram to Island Bay to play, swim, and enjoy toffee."

Printing

People see the printers' work first before they read the content, so choosing a good printer is vital. Several quotes are needed. In my last project the printer and I were delighted to find that his 'printers' chapel' was actually an earlier church in the parish I was writing about!

Marketing

Right at the beginning of a project a vital challenge is to identify the target readers, to write for them and also to work out how to sell books to them. When a book is tied to a coming event, the mail out list is an obvious starting place for sending a pre-publication offer. A \$5 or 20% saving appeals! Incorporating the book launch in celebratory events is another good sales ploy. Local papers often like to run stories of local authors with new books. I keep a list of everyone from whom I seek information in relation to the book and make sure they get a chance to buy a copy. Sending a book to regional or national church papers can result in good reviews leading to extra sales.

The biggest joys?

These have to be finally holding a printed copy, saying "Thank you God"

and having people share their pleasure in reading the book.

PREPARING HISTORY A MAJOR TASK

Bryan Atkinson - EDITOR
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Levin.

History tells us who we are, and perhaps it is this truth which made preparing to write a history of a 100-year-old church such a daunting task.

There is a fearsome amount of research, checking and interviewing to be done. And having obtained the information and put it into type, there remains the task of editing it and weeding out those items which, while they have a place in history, are probably not entirely suitable for such a publication.

One of our difficulties has been the past celebrations of such times as the 25th, 50th and 75th anniversaries have been more or less ignored by the historians. Of the many people who have contributed to the work of the church over the years, we fear but a few have been named. Of the others who have quietly and faithfully given of their time and service to Christ, we know of them only through the success of the ventures they undertook in the name of the kingdom.

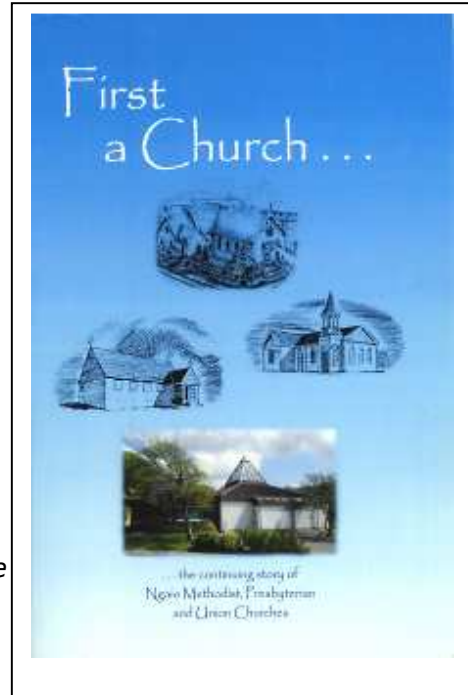
Many organisations within the church have grown because people of faith have heard the call and answered it. In particular, the women's groups have worked away, raising money for Missions, supporting house groups and Baptismal rolls. Ultimately, the book we have produced is a mix of hard facts and some fascinating recollections culled from early documents and recent interviews. A number of people have been able to write their own accounts and these have proved invaluable, giving us an insight into the past.

TIPS FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL PARISH HISTORY

Elaine E Bolitho 12 April 2005

The Ngaio Union history *First a Church* is an example of one tied to celebrating a special event. December 11 2004 marked 100 years from opening the first Methodist church on the present Union church site. During 2003 this Wellington parish formally decided to celebrate the centenary and commission a parish history – to tell the stories of the century and relationships which brought local Methodists and Presbyterians together.

Tip: *Start early – allow plenty of time for all stages of producing a book. A year is the minimum, two years better. (Material had been gathered for the Ngaio project over the previous ten years, and even so a full year of full-time work was needed to produce the book.) The quality of the research determines the quality of the content of the book and more time may be needed for this phase than for writing. Adequate time also needs to be allowed for editing, and for liaising with the printer through the final stages.*



The Ngaio parish drew on their publishing experience, having launched *The Vision Restored* in May 2003. That told the story of the Cashmere Methodist Community Centre and how funds generated in its demise were channelled into a new hall for school and community at Cashmere Avenue School. As Ngaio Union is Cashmere's legal successor, proceeds from the land sale are held in trust for parish capital expenditure, and this account funded printing both the Cashmere and Ngaio Union books.

Tip: *Look at how the project will be funded – is it a stand-alone project, or does it link to another event? Is there a sponsor who would subsidise the cost? Research/travel expenses, author's honorarium or royalties and printing are the major costs.*

The parish members included people with research, writing, layout and editing skills. Dr Elaine Bolitho, whose nine publications include land stories for the Methodist Church, was commissioned to research and write both Ngaio's books. Parish members donated layout, design and editing skills.

Tip: *Savings can be made if the parish has people competent in word processing, image manipulation and layout as the printer can then be presented with a file suitable for printing without additional work. Otherwise the printer will need to scan pictures, do the layout, etc.*

Tip: *Editing is vital to provide clarity and an independent opinion on the content. As the barest minimum another person with a good knowledge of grammar must read and comment on the script.*

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A contract was drawn up covering conditions, honorarium, expenses, copyright etc and a committee set up to cost and oversee the project; agree on content and size of book; come up with a timeframe for starting/finishing writing, editing, printing etc; consider quotes from printers; handle sales etc.

Tip: *When working out the selling price of a book, aim to cover all costs when half the print run is sold. Include in the cost the books to be given without charge – two to legal deposit, three to the author and a chosen number of review copies.*

Tip: *Books in A5 or A4 format are cheaper to produce because paper is cut more economically than for odd sizes. The larger the print run, the lower the unit cost of books, but no one wants to be left with mountains of unsold copies. Around three hundred is reasonable, and reprints can be negotiated with the printer.*

Tip: *Book the printers' time well in advance so that printing and binding are completed in good time for your planned launch date.*

The writer was given free access to all local parish records. These papers and pictures were augmented by research at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Onslow Historical Society, Presbyterian and Methodist Archives. The on-line Presbyterian Register of Ministers was a very useful source for information on former ministers. (As Ngaio Methodist archival information had been gleaned whilst researching other projects in the same circuit, a research trip to the Christchurch archives was not needed.)

Tip: *Exploring parish land titles back to their beginnings through LINZ and into the Maori ownership is a very worthwhile exercise. See Allan Davidson's article for other places to research.*

In the course of reading minutes, correspondence and reports, lists were made of former ministers, leaders of women, youth, music and administration (with dates) and a timeline was prepared showing key events in the life of the parish. Networks of parish family relationships were traced. Reading notes were recorded on the computer, and later copied into files of subject matter. This material formed a very useful frame of reference when interviewing long-standing and former members of the parish. These yielded further stories and pictures. One contact frequently led to another.

Tip: *Talking to people is a vital source for histories. Be innovative.*

** Trace former ministers and members, talk to them and/or their children.*

** Talk to current members and minister(s).*

** Talk to people who are no longer members.*

** Talk to long-time community residents to see how the community views your church.*

** Talk to members of organisations which have met in your church.*

If you can't see people in person talk by telephone – this gives far better results than writing. It can be helpful to ring first to introduce the project and arrange a time to talk and give the subject an idea of what you would like to talk about. Be prepared for surprises.

All this material had to be distilled into a coherent story. It emerged as a book including the intertwined stories of

* how first Presbyterians and then Methodists met at Crofton House

* how the Khandallah Presbyterian Church developed and then in 1944 birthed the Ngaio Presbyterian Church

* how the Methodist Church formed, opened its first church in 1904 and continued to thrive

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- * how the Union Church came about and continues to operate
These stories were set into the local, national and international context, with particular reference to issues of war, peace, ecumenism and social change. When the first draft was complete, it was read and commented on by the minister and parish secretary. In the course of writing, the A5 book grew from the planned 172 pages to become 272 pages.

Tip: *Printers work with multiples of eight pages, so the final tally needs to divide by eight. This includes the title page and its reverse (called the verso) with publication details and the ISBN number obtained from the National Library.*

Tip: *Including a barcode opens the door to retailers stocking your book, and to larger papers and magazines accepting review copies.*

Ngaio chose to have books digitally printed, so while extra pages cost more, increasing the number of pictures did not further increase the cost, as it would with conventional printing. Having the whole book, including the cover design, prepared within the parish and presented as a PDF file on CD ROM to the printers' specifications, kept costs down too.

Tip: *While it is easier for writers to work in a word processing package, the files are likely to display and print out differently on another computer. Printers prefer PDF files which are stable and easier for them to work with. Word processor files can be converted to PDF.*

Marketing the book as part of the centennial celebration mailout with a pre-publication offer of \$20 attracted sales. The President of Methodist Conference launched the book on the opening night of the centennial celebrations and the author signed copies.

Tip: *Tie the book launch to an enjoyable event/gathering which people will want to attend. Plan well ahead if you want a VIP present.*

After the centennial weekend, the book's price rose to the recommended retail price (RRP) of \$25. Four months after launch fewer than 30 books remained of the 300 printed.

Tip: *Meeting the legal requirement of providing two copies to the National Library can result in further orders once the book is on their national listing.*



WRITING A PARISH HISTORY

Some Basic Guidelines

Allan K. Davidson

In an attempt to make these notes as accessible to a number of denominations the terms 'national', 'regional' and 'parish' have been used when describing different governing bodies in the church. In writing about the ministry of the local church the term 'minister' is used.

1. Why a Parish History?

The parish is an important unit in the life of a Church. It is where individuals and families find and express their sense of belonging within the body of Christ. Parish life is rich and diverse, inheriting traditions from the past, attempting to minister in the present. While not the centre for people's life, as in past generations, for many people the parish is an essential part of their identity. Telling the story of a parish is an important way of honouring the mothers and fathers in faith who in their day attempted to be faithful to the gospel as they understood it. As inheritors of the past, with some knowledge of our history, we in our own day can better understand the present.

2. What kind of Parish?

Parishes vary considerably – from the large single city church congregation, the suburban community church, the provincial town church, the rural parish with a number of preaching places and congregations. Seeing the parish within its wider context and against the background of the community in which it is located is important if the history is to try and see the parish as part of the world. Finding local history resources – town, rural and provincial histories, are important for providing this setting.

3. What kind of History?

A decision has to be made on the scope of the history to be written and published. This can vary from the small anniversary pamphlet through to the solid book. Look at what other parishes have done and see if they provide a model for the kind of history your parish wants to write. Remember that a lot of effort goes into researching and writing a history and that once it is done there is not usually another opportunity to do it again for a long time. It is therefore worth producing the best possible history you can. Taking account of the big events in New Zealand (for example the First and Second World Wars and the Depression) that impacted on the whole society helps provide a backdrop for the parish history. The local church is part of the wider community, so, for example, the growth of youth activities and the setting up of new parishes after the Second World War reflect the increased birth-rate and the mood of society at that time.

3. Who should write it?

History research and writing requires more than enthusiasm. Someone who has a flair for patient research and has the ability to tell a story through writing in a lively way is desirable. In telling the story of a parish there is a need for a sympathetic understanding of the past and yet a critical awareness of the way in which people relate to one another.

4. Where do you begin?

Parish histories are best written with the approval or support of the leaders in the parish. This means that the writer can gain access to parish records and have the full support of people in the parish. If the parish commissions someone to write their history then a formal agreement should be drawn up. If it is being done on a voluntary basis some recognition of the work being undertaken should be given. It is useful for the

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writer to set out their aims and objectives and to keep the governing body informed as to progress.

5. What are the resources available?

One of the first tasks in research is to try and establish what the resources are that will be helpful and where these are located. These include:

- a. Parish records – minute books of the various governing and management bodies in the parish, Women’s Organisations, Youth Organisations, Marriage Registers, Baptismal Registers, Correspondence, Financial Records, Annual Reports, Burial Records.
- b. Parish material – copies of newsletters, orders of service, photographs, clipping files, plans of buildings, hymnbooks.
- c. Parish people – hold some records of their own such as photographs, certificates and prizes won for church attendance. In some cases the researcher will be able to find collections of private papers that are still retained by family or deposited in a library. Published biographies and autobiographies of parish members are of particular help.
- d. The use of “oral history” is an important way of discovering aspects about the life of a parish. There are important protocols that should be observed in undertaking oral history (see the “Code of Ethical and Technical Practice” on the National Oral History Association of New Zealand website at: <http://www.oralhistory.org.nz/Code.htm>)
- e. Former Ministers and Parishioners – try to identify who they are.

Write to them giving them a list of questions asking them to write down or record on tape their memories. (Note the issues raised in the Code referred to above.)

- f. Community resources – local histories – newspapers are an important source with their weekly notices of services and their reports of church activities. Statistics from the national five yearly census figures provide an interesting basis of comparison with parish statistics. The electoral rolls can provide interesting data on the employment of people within the parish.
- g. Regional Church records – minutes and correspondence of the regional church bodies have some information relating to the life of parishes. They also provide insight into the work of ministers and lay representatives from the parish on a wider stage.
- h. National Church records – The published proceedings of national church bodies along with the Church newspapers give an indication of the issues which the Church was dealing with at a particular point in time. It is helpful to see the parish story against the wider trends influencing the denomination.

Parish records are often held by the local parish. In some cases they have been deposited in a local, regional or national repository. It is important to identify where these records are located and to check with those who care for them what conditions surround their access and use.

6. How do you begin Research?

General reading in local, regional and denominational history is a good place to begin. Having some awareness of the wider historical framework in which the parish fits is something which takes the researcher beyond the "parish pump".

As the researcher works through minute books, correspondence, newspaper records, gathers together the oral memory of past and present members of the congregation a great deal of material is accumulated. Taking these records in an accurate way, keeping a note of where the material has come from is important. Many researchers find it useful to store their information on large index cards (210cm x 130cm). These can easily be sorted later on when it's time to begin writing. Computers are increasingly being used in storing research data. Remember the importance of backing up and printing out a hard copy of your research notes.

7. What to look for?

In researching and writing it is useful to pose questions which then need to be answered:

- When was the parish formed – by whom and why?
- How has the parish changed over the years – buildings, boundaries, membership, organisations?
- Who have been the ministers in the parish – what were their backgrounds – what contributions did they bring to the parish – what part did their wives (and more recently spouses) and their family have in the life of the Church?
- What kind of ministry has the Church given to the parish and the wider community?
- What kind of worship has the Church offered? (Try to find old orders of services, sermons etc.)
- Who are the people who have taken a leading part in the life of

the Church – in the local governing bodies, choir members, Sunday School Superintendents and teachers, Bible Class Leaders and teachers?

- What part have the women's organisations played in the life of the parish and the wider community? Who were the leaders in these groups?
- How important and effective have the youth activities of the Church been?
- How has the Church handled controversy and difference – whether it be over the introduction of organs in the nineteenth century, Sunday observance, prohibition, Bible Class dances, theological debate of the Springbok Tour, differences over sexuality?
- What outreach has the Church had into the wider world – involvement with social services, people going overseas as missionaries, people from the parish offering to be ministers or deaconesses?
- What impact have the changing tides of economic, political, social, moral and religious change had on the life of the parish?
- How have ecumenical and church union developments influenced the life of the parish? (In Union and Co-operating parishes it is crucial that account be taken of the history of all people involved in the parish)

8. How do you put it all together?

Having done the research and found out a great deal about the parish and its people the difficult task of writing up the story now confronts the writer. Be prepared to write several drafts before the final text is ready. Access to a word processor or computer can save a great deal of time in this rewriting. The size of the text will in the end be determined by

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printing costs and what people are willing to pay.

Most parish histories follow a chronological approach. Some use the periods served by ministers as a way of dividing up the material. Others tell the history through the various aspects of the parish's life - worship - ministry - women's organisations - youth organisations. There is no one way for writing a parish history. Each writer should see how the material that they have can most effectively be presented in order to tell the parish story.

Look for the human interest story in the parish history, the lively and colourful aspects which offset the more mundane. Try not to see the parish in isolation. Remember that the parish is made up of people who live and work in a wider world. Don't be afraid to deal with controversial aspects of the parish's history. A sanitised version is really a distortion of the reality. Sensitivity, however, is required, particularly when there are people still in the parish who have been involved in a controversy.

Try to see the parish in its fullness. Don't concentrate only on the ministers and leading laity. The Church is made up of

children, women and men who have all contributed in varying ways to parish life - whether it be making cups of tea, doing flowers, mowing lawns, working at the Church fair, painting the parish hall. Try to capture its worship, its buildings, its pastoral ministry, its impact on individuals and the community.

Illustrative material is a key part of any parish history. Photographs of ministers need to be complemented with scenes from the Sunday School picnic, the ANZAC day service, the opening of the new church.

9. Why Preserve the Past?

Without our past we do not know where we have come from. Our history gives us our identity. Preserving the past puts us in contact with our roots. The writing of a parish history, therefore is an important part of reclaiming people's life story. It needs to be undertaken with care and commitment and deserves the support of the parish. The writing of a parish history also draws attention to the important ongoing work of preserving the present story of the parish for a future parish historian. We need to save the records of the present for the future so that others can also know their past.

"The story of St. Paul's Wanganui could be viewed, I believe, as a microcosm of all that has occurred in the wider church. The personalities of its Ministers and members reflect the ways of Christianity within New Zealand society over the last century and a half, while the waxing and waning of the fortunes of the Church are representative of the place of the Church in an increasingly secular society."
(*'Foreword'* by the Rev. Dr. Philippa Horrex, in *Our Heritage Forever... The First 150 years of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Wanganui*, 2003, St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Wanganui.)

HAVE A BOOK LAUNCH FOR YOUR HISTORY

Delphine Turney: Yes we did have a launch.....An after church morning tea with various friends and the local history group etc invited. After Church meant tea instead of wine. Most people bought a book and I signed them. It was a good day, and the launch happened a couple of weeks before the actual anniversary which meant that the 'locals' had copies and the history was being talked about.