

YOUR LOCAL CHURCH TREASURE



How to record, research and present the story of your local church and its people

LIVING TREASURE

Hidden away in the history of your church is a valuable treasure - the stories of men and women living out their faith as they experience God's grace in their own lives and in the fellowship of their churches. This rich deposit should be cared for, and it should be attractively presented as a witness so that everyone can become aware of God's saving ways.

Although some people may regard them as worthless old books, the records of your church contain the information that is needed to describe how people have served God down through the years in your locality. Unless the church of today conserves these records, the information will be lost, and perhaps no one will ever be able to tell the story of God's work amongst your people.

To know how God has worked in the past and how his people have responded gives understanding, depth and maturity for Christian living in the present. Having historical information readily available means that all those who are part of the church, and especially its leaders, will be enriched by understanding what has happened in the past, and be able to plan for the future more confidently.

Each Christian and each local church is a part of a much larger body of God's people. So the story of each fellowship is linked with many others to reveal the overall pattern of God's sovereign purposes. To grasp this larger perspective gives strength of purpose and confidence.

The Baptist Heritage Queensland (The Baptist Historical Society) is a voluntary society fostering informed historical awareness amongst the churches of the Baptist Union. It presents this Guide to assist local churches by giving information on how to conserve and care for their records and how to use them in producing printed histories. Contact your Society for more help.

GUARDING THE TREASURE

Any church, small or large, creates many records as it goes about its activities. These are the key to its history. As valuable and unique as they are, they can easily be lost unless they are cared for properly. They also need to be managed well if they are to yield their treasure when needed.

The main records consist of minutes, reports, correspondence, financial papers, statistical returns and roll books of all church departments. There will also be newsletters, promotional materials (advertisement, brochures), photographs and recordings (audio and video). Each department or group will generate special records related to its own particular activities—including special events like camps, building openings etc., which should also be collected. Be sure that every effort is made to record and preserve information about a church, and also material from church members (family histories, obituaries etc. and ministers (e.g.. marriage registers), if available. Check local newspapers too for valuable material. Convert all computerised information to printed copy to ensure it can be accessed at any time in the future when technology will have changed.

The church should have specific policies for the making and preserving of records. First, it should be a requirement for historic and for legal purposes that all significant decisions and developments in the life of the church and its various departments are recorded. Present trends towards informality of leadership and administration of church affairs means that often decisions are made on an ad hoc and personal basis. However, unless such decisions and reports of the work carried out by the church are formally recorded by the responsible officers, the information will not be available when needed.

Then, make sure the church has a realistic policy for preserving records as they are created, and ensure that someone specific (the "church archivist") is assigned the responsibility of archiving the records on a regular basis. Set aside enough money, equipment, training and time to allow this task to be carried out properly on a systematic basis. Prepare the records for storage by using basic conservation techniques and seek expert advice (e.g. your local State library) for serious problems.

Store records in a safe, cool, dry area free from vermin and mould in a neat, orderly manner. Group records of a similar kind together and place them in clearly labelled suitable size storage boxes with a list of contents in each, (e.g., "5 church minute books, 1931 - 1965"). Also make a master list of all records, depositing copies with the local church archivist, church office and Baptist Union Archives for safe keeping and for sharing of information. Update these regularly. It may be helpful to computerise these lists for convenience. (The Baptist Historical Society has prepared a "Church Archives Register" form to assist churches with this process.)

Have a clear policy about who may have access to these records and under what circumstances. Remember, good news should be shared, so make the records readily accessible to genuine researchers. Highlight your records by preparing a display or media feature on special church occasions to show their value and attract wider support.

DIGGING FOR GOLD

Presenting the history of your church in written, visual or dramatic form opens up its treasures to the public. Anniversaries, jubilees and church openings are good times for this, but a well prepared printed history is always worthwhile. But first you need to find the information.

Sources include deacons and church minutes, newsletters, annual reports, denominational and local newspapers and other written material, including any previous published histories. Don't forget the printed history and Year Books of the Baptist Union and publications of the Baptist Historical Society. Photographs from the church records, the press and church members can be useful for information and for illustrations. Oral and written material from previous pastors, local families and long serving officers and members is often invaluable, even when it is difficult to find, and in need of much checking. Your local historical society or council library and schools may be of help, as are the State Library and the State Archives in Brisbane.

Use the readily available resources first, and then work out ways of supplementing this material - write to former members and their families; interview long-time local residents who have had contacts with the church; search newspapers and local government files; check with a mother church, evangelist or the home mission department. Be persistent in tracking down hard-to-get items!

Keep accurate notes of information and sources as you go; using standard record cards or a computerised database makes it easy to find and sort your material later; keep tapes of recorded interviews. Double check such important details as names, titles and dates.

In writing your history, take a wide view - relate your church to the development of the local community and the denomination; feature ordinary members and their families as well as officers and the church as an institution; look for the church's underlying principles and the dynamics of its life; don't hide its weaknesses; show its human face.

PUTTING IT ON SHOW

Displaying your treasure is the final step, whether it be a straight-forward anniversary book or an ambitious jubilee tableau. Do it simply and naturally, in a way that portrays the truth about the church and its people. Explain why the church developed as it did, and so give your readers an understanding of faith in action. Give insights into the lives of the congregation and show the impact of the church on the community.

The story can be told chronologically or thematically, or perhaps a combination of both! Make sure everything important is covered, but be careful not to confuse the reader with irrelevant or unnecessarily complicated information. Avoid a mere catalogue of events by dividing the material into logical sections which carry the story through step by step; basic information like dates, pastorates and stages of property development can be summarised in tables for handy reference. An index and references will be useful, especially in larger books. Use good illustrations (photos, diagrams, graphics, charts) to clarify the story and to entertain. Be careful with personal details so as to be impartial, and not to infringe the law. Secure permission, where necessary, to use information and illustrations. Get another person to read through the final draft to check for any problems in style, meaning or fact.

Make sure that the printing does justice to the project. It is worth spending more time to ensure an attractive production, especially when using illustrations; remember, you mostly get what you pay for! Be sure about the budgeting arrangements that your church has adopted for the project before you commit yourself to expenditure. Consult the printer about what you want at an early stage to avoid misunderstandings and disappointments. Take the printer's advice about type faces and layout, and don't try to fit too much onto a page. Double check the proofs before printing.

Get an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) from the Thorpe Bibliographic Services, 18 Salmon St Port Melbourne 3207 (tel 03-9245 7397 fax 9245 7395 email: isbn.agency@thorpe.com) well before printing, and be sure to fulfil the requirements of Legal Deposit which apply to all published materials by sending copies of your completed work to the official libraries (John Oxley Library and Parliamentary Library in Queensland and the National Library of Australia in Canberra.) Send copies also to the Baptist Archives, local historical societies and municipal and school libraries. Placing your work in these and other similar libraries will help make your story accessible to a wide range of readers and so be a vital witness to the gospel.

Finally, work out ways of distributing your book to potential readers. A well-told story should commend the church, and so prove to be a useful tool for outreach.