

A Guide to Collecting Oral History for Local Covenant Churches

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A Guide to Collecting Oral History for Local Covenant Churches is available online at the Covenant Archives and Historical Library website, www.northpark.edu/brandel-library/archives and at the Covenant website, CovChurch.org.

Printed versions are available through CovBooks.com, or if Internet access is not available, by calling 800-621-1290.

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Introduction

Gathering the stories of your congregation is an important way to document your church's history. This guide provides direction as you begin to collect stories from members of your congregation. Your experience may even lead to an oral history collection project that will enrich the holdings of your church's archives and overall preservation of the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

This booklet is designed to be used with *A Guide to Archives for Local Covenant Churches*. Both resources are available online at the Covenant Archives and Historical Library website, www.northpark.edu/brandel-library/archives and at the Covenant website, CovChurch.org. Printed versions are available through CovBooks.com, or if Internet access is not available, by calling 800-621-1290. Additional resources are listed on pages 9 and 10.

Developing an Oral History Project

Oral histories are valuable pieces of knowledge that are as unique as the individual telling his or her story, while also representing larger communities by virtue of the deep cultural competence those individuals build over a lifetime. The recorded interview is the resulting record of collaboration between interviewer and interviewee—between collector and narrator—at a given moment in time. The completed work should include a recording of the interview, a transcription or summary of the conversation, and forms documenting the details of the interview along with oral history agreement forms collected at the time of the interview.

The oral history process is substantially different from large surveys and statistical perspectives on human study. Simply stated, oral history gives depth while paper surveys provide breadth, and each has limitations in arriving at “the truth.” Oral history's strength as a research tool lies in each interviewee's remarkable cultural competence and the interactive nature of the interviewing process. Each person knows so much about a host of different topics; the interviewer just needs to spend enough time and ask the right questions to tease it out. This being the case, a relatively few number of oral history interviews will accomplish a great deal. Ten good interviews can easily do the work of a thousand completed paper surveys. But because we are really comparing apples to oranges, oral histories to statistical surveys, it is best to realize that the two approaches complement each other and can be used very effectively together.

Oral history projects can focus on a number of themes, including theological or doctrinal issues, build-

ing projects, changes in church leadership, the service of groups in the church, spirituality, family history, biography, or the planting, merging, or closing of a church. You might consider developing such a project during a special event, such as an anniversary when members naturally reflect on founding days or specific decades.

As you prepare an oral history project, focus on your goals before choosing the people you will interview. Age, gender, occupation, education, social class and associations, ethnicity, and lived experience are all factors influencing the interviewee and what he or she will offer. Like a conductor of a symphony, the interviewer tries to shape the overall sound of the project, but the individual performers will always make their unique voices heard. The greatest control the interviewer has over the outcome is in choosing those voices in the first place.

Some choices are obvious. If your goal is to learn about the growth of female leadership in the church, then you will want to talk to women who were part of that development. Historical perspectives are usually best reflected on by older people with the relevant experience, while younger people may talk about change and perceived customs and practices. To accomplish diversity in the oral history project, you will need to interview many different people with varying backgrounds and experiences.

Location and Environment

Find a location where a private conversation can take place. This may be in a public space—a café or the church fellowship hall—or in the privacy of the interviewee's home. Try to be aware in advance of what kind of surrounding noises may compromise the recording and choose your space accordingly. A loud conversation at the next table or a lawn mower outside could be distracting or even blot out parts of the interview.

Consider whether you want to interview individuals or more than one person at a time. Interviews with a married couple or people from two different generations or a group with a shared experience can be highly productive because of how collective memory engages the topic and how individuals provide differing viewpoints. Be mindful, however, that some people might feel less comfortable in a group setting. One-on-one interviews have the advantage of going more deeply into one person's view of the past and provide a clear record without the social dynamics of a group interview. You need to decide which type of interview best serves the goals of your project.

Preparing for the Interview

A typical oral history interview will take one to two hours. While some may be shorter or longer than this, most people are able to sustain an interview for sixty to ninety minutes. Keep in mind that you can ask for a follow-up interview or get responses to specific questions later by phone or email. These segments of the collecting process may then be added to the paperwork that you produce to accompany the recorded interview.

Be prepared with a clear set of questions centered on one or two themes. If the interview is too far-ranging the resulting information may lack depth, or the complexity of too many different topics may exhaust the narrator.

Approach a topic of interest generally and then follow with more specific questions.

Ask different kinds of questions to elicit a full range of answers. For example, ask broad questions that will prompt narratives (Can you tell about the time when...), questions that will prompt definitions (What does “worship” mean to you?), questions of chronology (What year did it start? What happened next?), questions to identify people and places (Who else was there? Where did you live then?), summarizing questions (How would you describe the main accomplishments of that committee?), yes/no questions (Did you attend the wedding ceremony?), to name a few possibilities. A variety of question types will make the experience of the interview livelier, while it also accesses responses appropriate to the goals of your project.

As much as possible, prepare for the interview by reading non-oral history sources (church reports and histories) so that you can bring knowledge of the topics you anticipate the narrator will cover. This will help you develop productive questions and it will add perspective to the information being shared in the interview. As a general rule, give the narrator the freedom to lead the interview into areas she or he finds relevant, areas that you might not have anticipated. After all, you want to gain insight based on the unique experience of the narrator. You will need to be prepared to redirect the conversation if it gets sidetracked far from the intended purpose of the interview. One way to do this is to say: “Going back to what we were talking about earlier, I wonder if you can elaborate on...”

Rapport

The interview takes shape because of the rapport established in the interview context, so it is very important when conducting oral histories to be aware of how you as the interviewer influence the outcome. But try not to feel overwhelmed by this reality. Collecting oral history tends to be an enjoyable and enriching experience for people on both sides of the microphone. Most often an easy rapport develops naturally.

A few things to keep in mind:

1) Be conversational and light at the beginning and end of the interview to help the narrator feel at ease. Full-on intensity from start to finish can be perceived as rude or aggressive, so begin with light small talk before you launch into the focus of the interview.

2) Show your interest in the interview through your body language, facial expressions, and verbal responses. Sit up straight, maintain good eye-contact, and take delight in interesting information when appropriate. For example, you might remark, “That is fascinating!” or use other affirming phrases when the narrator emphasizes something in the course the interview.

3) Participate in the conversation primarily by listening. Your role as interviewer is to ask well-informed questions, not to speak at length on things that you know about. The interviewer should be a facilitator for the narrator to speak on the topics of interest in the oral history.

4) Allow for silences during the interview. They give space for the narrator to think and develop his or her points. There is often a much greater advantage to let silence foster more telling than to force a constant exchange of talk.

5) Silences can be helpful, but be prepared with verbal cues to encourage the narrator to elaborate where necessary. For example, “Can you tell me more about...” or “What did you mean when you said...” are phrases that will draw out a fuller response when needed.

Release Forms and Other Paperwork

While the oral history interview has some features of a private conversation, it is important that you make it clear to the person you are interviewing that recorded history is by definition not private. You are collecting the oral history so that other people can make use of the information.

Avoid any confusion by explaining how the interview will be used, and where other people will gain access to it (whether in a church archives or other repository). Bring an oral history release form for the person to read and sign. To make the interview available to researchers both the interviewer and interviewee should sign the release.

In addition to the release form, two other forms are important to your project and should accompany any oral history that you conduct: an interview cover sheet and a life history form.

The interview cover sheet gives basic information about the collector and the narrator, giving contact information for both, and of the setting of the interview—date, location, and other details of the environment and atmosphere. For example, if you are meeting in someone's kitchen and other family members are coming in and out of the room, or adding comments, then include that in the summary. It will help those listening to the recording understand the social context and will explain the background noise. Fill out and attach an interview cover sheet to the recording of the interview.

A life history form details at a minimum the following information about the interviewee: name, address, telephone and email, birth date and birth place, occupation, marital status, name and birth date of spouse. Depending on the collecting project you may want to include lengthier sections, for instance a listing of different places the person has lived, education, work history, church and other memberships. The goal is to help researchers in the future understand all relevant contextual information about the person giving the oral history.

The recorded interview will be most useful to researchers and be ethically handled by a third party if the collector and narrator's intent are made clear and the narrator's basic information accompanies the recording, wherever the oral history is subsequently stored.

There are samples of these three forms at the end of this guide. They are also available online at the Covenant Archives and Historical Library website at www.northpark.edu/brandel-library/archives.

Choosing Equipment

There are many high-quality digital recording devices on the market today. The advantage to digital recording is the sound quality and ease of moving the recording between different media. Also, when copies are made the result is a clone of the original without any sound degradation. The disadvantages center on the proprietary software used to listen to the interview on computers, which may become obsolete fairly quickly, and the fact that equipment to play back the interview is not universal. It is not known how long compact discs may last in long-term storage—they do not yet meet any archival standard. An external hard drive is probably the best storage for interviews. If you do use a digital recorder, it is very important that you upgrade the media storage as new technologies become available.

Analog equipment, most commonly the audiotape recorder, also has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include the long-term use of the tape-recorded interview as a standard in oral history collec-

tion. Most sources will refer to audiotapes as the main media to record interviews. The equipment for recording and playback are universal, but copying from original tapes does decrease sound quality. If properly cared for, original tapes can last for twenty to forty years.

For a full discussion of media choices when doing oral history, see Sommer and Quinlan's online guide, "Capturing the Living Past: An Oral History Primer," listed under "Resources" on page 9.

Whatever device you choose, spend some time before the interview familiarizing yourself with its functions. Know how to set the timer or counter, and make sure the batteries are fresh or bring a backup cord. If you use an audiotape recorder, bring more tapes than you think you might need. Digital recorders have limited space as well; make sure you know how to download the file to your computer to free up space on the recorder. It is best to use a digital file that is non-proprietary, which means that the file is commonly accessible and does not require licensed or purchased software to access. Check the three letters at the end of the file to see what type it is.

- Audio file types best suited for long-term preservation are: AIFF (.aiff, .aif) and WAV (.wav) files.
- Also acceptable are: MP3 (.mp3) and MOV (.mov) files.
- File types not recommended are: AAC/MPEG-2 (Advanced Audio Coding; .aac), Real Audio (.ra, .rm, .ram) and Windows Media Audio (.wma).

Transcribing the Interview

Transcribing the recorded interview is a laborious but highly valuable part of the oral history collecting endeavor. Researchers can find and synthesize information from a written transcript much more efficiently than they would by sitting down and listening to the recording from start to finish. This is not to say that the original recording does not have its unique worth as a record of the past, but the written transcript is an important resource of what is contained in the interview.

Anyone who has done transcribing knows that interpretation is involved in translating the oral utterance into written form. The ideal is to write a verbatim record of precisely what was said in the oral history interview, and then also be consistent with how you deal with unfinished sentences, interruptions of thought, missing or garbled words, and all the other imperfections of the oral narrative. Reflect as closely as possible how the oral history actually sounded by inserting parenthetical notes on laughter, shouting, whispering, etc. This gives a full sense of the context of the interview. Transcribing is a time-consuming task, but a written document of the interview is very important for understanding the oral history in its entirety.

Keep in mind that a transcript of the entire interview may not be necessary. If the interview is about the church choir and the narrator digresses and spends ten minutes talking about a renovation to the church kitchen, you can summarize that section. Be sure to use the time counter on the recording device to mark when that section began and when it ended. The kitchen renovation may be just what later researchers are looking for, so they can go back and transcribe that part themselves. You, at least, have assisted in notating everything that is on the recording, while transcribing the relevant information for your collection project.

If the person who does the transcription is not the person who did the interview, then it is important that the interviewer read through the transcription to check its accuracy, give context, and help with explanatory notes.

For guidelines and a sample of a transcript, see “Workshop on the Web” (Baylor University) and “The SOHP Practical Guide,” (Southern Oral History Program) listed under “Resources.”

Archiving the Interview

Within the paper archives of your church, find or create a box designated to oral histories. Each interview should have its own file folder or envelope. The completed work would include a recording of the interview, a transcription or summary of the conversation, and forms documenting the details of the interview along with oral history agreement forms collected at the time of the interview. *A Guide to Archives for Local Covenant Churches* gives detailed directions for archiving the recording and/or transcription of the histories you collect.

Resources

The following publications and websites give guidance for collecting oral histories. The organizations listed are active in managing and training others to manage archives and conduct oral history projects. Visit their websites to learn about new approaches, programs, and current publications.

Books

Dunaway, David K., and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. 2nd ed. American Association for State and Local History Book Series. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996.

Ives, Edward D. *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*. 2nd ed. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Sommer, Barbara W., and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2009.

Online Resources

Baylor University Institute for Oral History. “Workshop on the Web.” Accessed January 18, 2012. <http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=23560>.

Shopes, Linda. “Making Sense of Oral History.” History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web. Last modified March 31, 2006. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

Sommer, Barbara W. and Mary Kay Quinlan. “Capturing the Living Past: An Oral History Primer.” Nebraska State Historical Society. Accessed January 18, 2012. http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral_history/index.htm

Southern Oral History Program. “Interview Forms.” Accessed January 18, 2012. http://www.sohp.org/site_images/csas/Forms.pdf.

Southern Oral History Program. "The SOHP Practical Guide." Accessed January 18, 2012. [http://www.sohp.org/site_images/csas/practical_guide_\(Apr-2009\).pdf](http://www.sohp.org/site_images/csas/practical_guide_(Apr-2009).pdf).

Organizations

Oral History Association, oralhistory.org

Southern Oral History Program, sohp.org

Story Corps, storycorps.org

About the Covenant Archives and Historical Library

The Covenant Archives and Historical Library contains the administrative records of the Evangelical Covenant Church and North Park University. Collections include the correspondence, minutes, and reports of various denominational and university departments, as well as the records of numerous Covenant churches, pastors, and institutions. Of note are microfilmed records of 355 Covenant churches founded before 1930. Personal papers of individuals include manuscripts, correspondence, diaries, oral histories, and other documentary material. In addition, the Archives has extensive collections of indexed photos, audio and videotapes, and microfilms that document the activities of North Park and the Covenant Church. The Historical Library, a collection of approximately 3,000 monographs and periodicals, includes the published works of the denomination, Covenant authors, and Swedish-language newspapers relating to our history. Much of the material written before 1930 is in Swedish.

Individual member church records are collected and made accessible only when a congregation ceases to exist or is unable to care for its own records. Transfer of records must be arranged in advance by contacting the Archives.

The Covenant Archives was created by official action of the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church in 1935. The Archives has been housed at North Park since 1953. Originally located on the second floor of Nyvall Hall, today it is part of the F. M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections in Brandel Library. Its mission is twofold: to provide access to the collections and to ensure they remain available in the years to come.

Covenant church pastors, staff, and archives committees are encouraged to contact the Archives with questions or concerns about their collections.

Patrons are welcome to use the Archives by appointment. If you have any questions, or wish to make an appointment to visit or research, please contact the staff.

Covenant Archives and Historical Library

F. M. Johnson Archives and Special Collections

North Park University

3225 W. Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60625

Phone: 773-244-6224

Email: archives@northpark.edu

Website: www.northpark.edu/brandel-library/archives

Oral History Release Form

Church name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal code: _____

Subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth in this agreement, I, _____, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the church archives the information and audio recorded responses, and printed transcription of the recordings, (hereafter referred to as is “the donated materials”) provided during the interview conducted by _____ on _____ (date) at _____ (location).

This donation covers all present and future copyright interests in the materials, including the right to reproduce such materials in audio, print, video, and/or on the Internet, to distribute copies to the public, to perform or display the work publicly, to prepare derivative works thereof, and to have others do so for research purposes.

I agree to public use of the recordings and transcripts under the following conditions:

- No restrictions
- Closed for a period of _____ months/years, as of the date of the interview
- Open to researchers at the discretion of the archives

I hereby give the archives free access to the recordings and transcripts, and reproduction of the interview, with the understanding that the donated materials are to be used as source materials by researchers who receive permission to access the collection by the archives. I understand that the donated materials and works reproduced from it are not protected by archival or scholar’s privilege (because no such policy exists).

The archives agrees to furnish the interviewee one audio recording copy of the interview.

Interviewee’s signature	Date
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I accept the license and materials donated above on behalf of the archives, subject to the terms, conditions, and restrictions set forth above.

Interviewer’s name	Title
Interviewer’s signature	Date

Oral History Interview Cover Sheet

CHURCH INFORMATION

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal code: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

INTERVIEWEE'S INFORMATION

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal code: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Age: _____ Gender: _____

INTERVIEWER'S INFORMATION

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal code: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Age: _____ Gender: _____

Collecting medium (audiotape, digital audio recorder, video recorder, written notes):

Brief description of collecting situation (date, place, social environment, people present, time, and length of session):

Life History Form

GENERAL INFORMATION

Name of Interviewee: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal code: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Date of birth: _____ Place of birth: _____ Gender: _____

Spouse's name: _____

Children's names and years of birth: _____

EDUCATION

WORK EXPERIENCE

CHURCH INVOLVEMENT
