

RECORDING YOUR CHURCH'S HISTORY

1. KEEPING RECORDS

Whether or not we are considering writing a history of our local Church it is a really good idea to try and keep accurate records of the life of the fellowship. This doesn't always seem important at the time, and for some people it is a tedious chore, yet without such records future generations will never know what were the issues in late 20th and early 21st Century Baptist Churches. This means that we need to make records of the CURRENT life of the Church and properly store them. We also need to treasure those earlier records that might be preserved on the Church premises which may seem of little value to us but which may be of enormous value to future historians.

It may, incidentally, be worth a quick flick through your Church safe or some cupboards to see if any old letters or minute books have been tucked away. One Church discovered the old papers in its safe actually contained pre-1830s Birth Registers and letters from Charles Haddon Spurgeon! As a rule of thumb, try to throw nothing out until its value has been established. Tatty, faded Sunday School or Band of Hope minute books, Pew Rent manuals or finance ledgers etc can all provide some fascinating information to the knowing eye.

Such records are probably not best kept on the Church premises. They are subject to fire, theft, water damage and human fickleness. Far better to deposit them in the local County Record Office where they will be properly protected and preserved, and where they will be properly appreciated. There are some real horror stories of ancient Church records being kept in the homes of Church officials and being thrown out after the sudden death of the individual concerned.

One passing observation: future historians should have a much easier job than previous ones. Typed or printed minutes will be much easier to read than the hand-written records that many of us have had to plough through. It should mean that less information is missed because of the illegible script of some minute-taker.

2. WHY BOTHER?

Writing down the History of our local Church is well worth doing. The story of the past matters. It honours the men and women who helped to found Baptist Churches and who sustained the cause often through difficult times. It keeps their names and their achievements alive. But more than that: there

are lessons to be learned from the past. We can understand the origins of certain practices or rules that shape the current life of the Church. We can be inspired by the sacrificial example of our predecessors. We can be touched by their total commitment and dedication to their beliefs. Conversely, we can often see mistakes that were made, and can learn from them. And we can sometimes discover patterns emerging in the life of a fellowship. Disputes and arguments in the present day can be mirrored in similar disputes a century earlier.

Ultimately, a proper assessment of earlier Non-conformist life will rely upon good local studies to illustrate or challenge assumptions made by historians. Information unearthed in local Church studies can make a major contribution to our knowledge of the wider faith scene of the time.

3. WHERE TO BEGIN AND THE SCOPE OF THE WORK

This will depend in part on the age of your Church. The History of a Church that is fifty years old will be fundamentally different from that of a Church that is two hundred years old. Are their records going back to the beginning of the cause? Has someone put a Chapel History together before? How reliable is it? Do you plan to plough through copious minute books or are you going to rely on secondary sources? Are you going to bring the study up to the present time? If so, are you going to use personal recollections or only written evidence?

These are all questions that will need to be considered before setting out. Crucially, how long do you want your study to be? Is it a general account that covers the salient events or will it be a more detailed account trying to unearth some hidden knowledge? How much time have you got to spend on the project? What are your own limitations with regard to writing up such a project? Don't bite off more than you can chew. Make sure that the project you begin is within your capabilities. Enjoy the piece of work, don't let it become a chore or a burden!

If possible try to set your History in the wider context of your community. What external factors were responsible for shaping the growth or decline of the cause? Issues of population movement, employment, housing (even social class!) might impinge on your story. Do social issues cross over into the life of the Church and vice versa?

4. SOURCES

An earlier study can often provide the basic framework around which you can base your own. But in truth there is nothing quite as helpful as early minute books. Find out where these are kept. They will usually be somewhere in the Church building or deposited at the County Record office or similar archive. But in addition to these sources there is also a wealth of places to obtain supplementary information:

- a) Association Records, the Baptist Magazine or the General Baptist Repository will contain valuable information on membership size and the names of the ministers of the Church. You might often find other invaluable information such as details of the Chapel opening or a special service etc. Do note that the official membership numbers will only provide an approximate guide to the congregation size which will include children and non-members.
- b) Baptist Union Handbooks/ Baptist Directories are a great source of information. Not only will they provide further statistical data, but they also contain obituaries of ministers which can be very helpful if you want to find out more about a specific individual. Older BU Handbooks also contained an architectural section with splendid artist's impressions of the major chapels of the time.
- c) Most Associations will have archives, and a word with the archivist about your project might reveal some useful avenues to pursue. Likewise the Angus Library at Regents Park College, Oxford, will not only carry back copies of Association and Union records but may have additional information about specific ministers or key lay people.
- d) Local newspapers can be a rich mine of information. The key with newspapers is to be fairly specific about the event you want to find out about. Inductions of ministers, chapel openings, anniversaries, temperance or slavery debates, and scandals (!) will be well covered. But make sure your search is focused on a particular event or narrow period otherwise you can endure fruitless hours of tedium. Most Local Studies Libraries will give you access to past newspapers, and will guide you about the best ones to explore.
- e) Local Studies Libraries are well worth getting in touch with. The staff may well be aware of past issues in your locality, and where this touched the life of your Church. Social and secular

Histories of towns, villages or communities frequently include research which has a bearing on particular Churches and can provide some illuminating and unexpected perspective. Local Studies will also have Census material which again can be very useful if you are interested in an individual family.

- f) Photographs are a wonderful source of information as well as an excellent accompaniment to any Church History. Many of the older Church members will have photographs of their younger days in the Church. An appeal for old photographs can often reveal some absolute gems. It can also raise people's interest in the finished product. Digital processing, scanning photographs and other forms of computer wizardry can improve the quality of even old and faded originals to make them serviceable.

- g) Oral history can be another valuable method of research. While people's memories can often prove unreliable on certain factual matters, they can be a mine of information in answering those questions for which there is no longer any documented evidence. What were the services of worship like? What did you do in Sunday School? What was the preaching like? How did you celebrate the Festivals? Interviewing and recording individuals or groups of people can prove very useful. Making contact with those who no longer attend the Church could even prove to be a valuable missionary opportunity as well. Ultimately you will need to make a decision how much weighting you are going to give to this oral record in the final form of your Church History.

One special appeal: do try to list and index the sources you use in drawing your work together. This could be extremely useful for later historians who may wish to pursue further lines of enquiry you have opened up.

5. PRINTING AND PUBLICATION

Whether your 'History' is six pages long or six hundred, there will be an issue about printing and cost. While you may like to explore the whole area of On-line publishing, ultimately more people will access your work through a printed medium. Once you have an idea of the scale of your work it would be worth asking two questions:

- a) How many copies of your 'History' should you produce? This is a difficult one. Experience dictates that we always overestimate how many people will be interested in our final product. There is little value having boxes of books sitting round untouched for years on end. On the other hand, it would be a shame if the print run was too small that copies were no longer available after six months. If your work is done well then there will be lasting value in your research, and having copies available for a few years is no bad thing. Unless you are part of a large Church then a print run of between 200 – 400 copies is probably about right. Reprints are always possible if you have a good master copy.

- b) What format do you want the finished product to take? What do you want it to look like? This will in part be dictated by your budget. For small volumes of 20 pages or less then it might be easy to run off the booklet on your computer. This will inevitably keep costs down; although be warned. Unless you are very proficient in this department the stress of laying out, running off and binding all these copies might outweigh any financial savings. A much less stressful solution might be to take the finished product down to the local digital printers who would probably do the whole job for you in a matter of a few hours. For larger volumes it is probably better to talk with a larger printing firm. They would be able to help you not only with layout but also with the cover of the book. At the end of the day these matters often need some professional advice. If you have put years of work into the content it might as well look right.

6. BUDGET

There will inevitably be a cost in producing your History. You may be willing to bear the cost yourself if the project is modest. Your Church might even be willing to cover the costs, and it would be worth having a conversation with someone about this at an early stage of the process. Or it may be that you look round for some sponsorship of the book. There may be one or two people who would have a vested interest in contributing to such a History. The other issue relating to this is a decision whether you will be charging for the booklet/book, and if so, how much. A realistic price could go some way to covering your costs, or could be part of a fundraising strategy for some cause. Asking for

advanced orders would be one way of determining the popularity of your book and would act as a guide to the number of copies to produce.

7. MARKETING

It would be a good idea to have an eye on the marketing possibilities for your book. The market for Baptist History in this country is VERY small and you need to maximise your potential sales. One way of doing this is to time the publication of your project with some milestone in the life of the Church – an Anniversary or Reunion for example. A captive audience is more likely to buy from you on the day! Have a Launch, and produce flyers in advance to promote the event. Prepare a press release and cultivate a link with a local journalist who might be willing to cover the Book Launch. They might even want a photograph of you! Local newspapers will invariably be happy to promote local interest stories. Many papers will have a ‘Bygones’ section which will be very glad of the information. Don’t be afraid to contact Local History Societies and wider Baptist networks all of whom will have some interest in the finished product. More substantial publications could receive reviews in either the *Baptist Quarterly* or the *Baptist Times*. You might even try approaching local booksellers in your locality to see if they would like to stock your book. They usually have local history sections and might be quite happy to provide an outlet for you. Remember, when it comes to selling History books you will often need to be proactive!!

8. IN CONCLUSION

“Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past.” (Deut.32:7) There is a Biblical mandate to research the past. Unfortunately, we are in danger of losing our History. As fewer and fewer people have any understanding of Baptist roots then the interest and awareness of our predecessors’ struggles are fast disappearing. There is an urgent need to re-tell some of these stories before the information and the interest is lost altogether. Writing History may be a minority sport, but it is one that is well worth doing. Do it well and do it carefully. Don’t be put off because you feel you don’t have enough wider knowledge. Keep within safe parameters, and don’t stray into areas that reveal your ignorance. Remember that in the limited field of your study YOU are the expert. Be the detective who unearths the stories that have lain hidden for all these years. Above all – enjoy the project. It should be great fun!