

# PRESERVING CHURCH HISTORY

By **R. Steven Norman III**

**Y**our church has asked you to write the history of your church for the homecoming. Sarah, the church secretary, has given you a stack of records that include church bulletins, old minutes, some photos, and newspaper clippings. You look through the pile and ask, “Where do I start?” “How do I write a church history?”

This article will guide you through the process of researching and writing a brief history of your local church.

## Step One – Gather Information

The first step is to gather as many records about your church as possible. There are three categories of records to collect: internal records, denominational records, and public records.

*Internal records* include clerk’s reports, board meeting minutes, correspondence, photos, church bulletins, funeral and wedding programs, church newsletters, council minutes, blueprints, video and audio recordings, etc.

*Denominational records* include the *Adventist Review*, *North American Regional Voice*, union papers, constituency reports, and obituaries. Some of these are searchable at [AdventistArchives.org](http://AdventistArchives.org). Additional records may be at your conference office.

*Public records* include property deeds, building permits, city directory list-

ings, newspaper articles, news clips, plot plans, census records, etc. All of these and more are available from your local courthouse, library, city or state archives, and newspaper offices.

Oral histories are another way to gather history. Former pastors and older members have stories to tell that can help interpret some of your findings. They will also provide personal insights that add context and warmth to your written history. Sometimes they will give you leads to other helpful persons or resources. Other interesting people to interview are church officers who can provide historical information about various organizations in the church, and members who have interesting conversion stories.

Be sure to carry a video or audio recorder with fresh batteries or power cord, a camera, two writing pens, a notepad, and your list of questions to the interview.

An “I Remember When . . . Day” is another way to glean history from members. Ask the members to share their memories about various church activities and events. Arrange to video or record their memories for preservation and use with your history. Ask everyone to bring any scrapbooks, photos, and other items related to the church’s history for display.

Often a congregation has worshiped in several locations. Visit and photograph each of these sites. Note the con-

**Gather old records; Interview church members and leaders; Share what you find!**

struction of the buildings, was it brick or wood? What was the floor plan? Was it a church building or storefront? Was it located in an urban or rural area? If there was a church cemetery, which members are buried there? Much can be learned about your congregation as you follow its pilgrimage to its present location.

## Step Two – Survey Your Records

Review and inventory your records so that you can have a good intellectual control of your records. The survey will also reveal gaps in information, raise questions to answer, and provide leads to other areas of research.

Organization is of utmost importance as you gather the records. Keep your records in a portable filing system. Also, keep a handwritten or digital journal where you can make notes, as well as plan and track the progress of your research.

## Step Three – Create a Timeline History

The first outline will be a timeline history. Your timeline will give you a grasp of the chronology of your church, and serve as the skeleton for your writ-

ten history. You may base it on the succession of pastors that have served your congregation, but you should also include important denominational, local and world events such as wars, natural disasters, and social movements such as women suffrage, the civil rights movement, etc. These will provide an understanding of the historical and social context in which your congregation lived.

## Eleven Important Sources for Church History Information

1. Church Members—photos, stories, records, audio and video recordings, etc
2. Court House Records—deed, plot plan, former owners of property, etc.
3. Local Newspaper—articles about the church and its people
4. Church Records—clerk’s record books, clerk’s reports, members, pastors, officers, baptisms
5. [AdventistArchives.org](http://AdventistArchives.org)—church publications
6. School Board Chairperson—school pictures and history
7. Former Pastors—handbills, notes, photos, memories
8. Local Library—city and county histories, newspaper articles, city directories
9. Church Secretary—church bulletins, funeral programs, wedding programs
10. Local Conference Office—clerk’s reports, constituency reports, tithes and missions statements
11. [ASDAL.org](http://ASDAL.org)—Links to many Adventist historical repositories and resources.

If you choose to, you can publish this as an illustrated timeline history until you can write the narrative history. This timeline can be used on your church website, or published in a brochure.

## Step Four – Write Your History

Now you are ready to write the narrative history of your church. Start by trying to find a theme that conveys the story of your church. Some common themes include “We’ve Come this Far by Faith,” and “Reviewing the Past, Facing the Future.”

Your narrative should include stories that show God’s work for and through your church. After all, it is God’s church. You will also want to include the contributions of each pastor and list some of the members who joined during their ministry. Be sure to list all of the charter members.

Organize your history in a chronological or a topical format. The chronological format will work well in most cases. However, if you are doing a comprehensive history of your church the topical approach may be better. The topical approach will have chapters that deal with the pastors, the buildings and their architecture, the worship style and how it has changed over the years, conversion stories of members, evangelistic outreach, the church school and its teachers and alumni, etc.

It is appropriate to include a memorial page that lists all deceased members. Gather this information from the clerk’s records.

When you finish writing, it is wise to submit your manuscript to knowledgeable persons for review. This phase of your work will require patience and the

willingness to accept constructive criticism.

## Step Five – Illustrate Your History

*Photographs*—People love to look at pictures. Choose photos that will help tell your story to include with your history. Photos provide many clues to the past. They show what former churches looked like, how people dressed, and helps you remember events and people.

*Statistical Charts and Graphs*—An interesting way to handle statistics is to present them in graphs or charts. Some statistics that you might choose to include are membership and tithe growth

## Step Six—Publish and Preserve Your History

You are now ready to publish your manuscript so that it can be shared with your church, community, historians, and other interested persons. There are several options available to you: a book, the history section in a souvenir book, a brochure, as a history page on your church website, a PowerPoint slideshow, or a DVD presentation. Select one or two formats that will meet the desires of your church and its budget.

If you publish your history in a book or pamphlet, be sure to distribute complimentary copies to your conference office, local libraries, historical society, and the state and local archives for preservation.

## Step Seven – Celebrate Your History

Plan to celebrate your history with an annual homecoming. You may also schedule a 25th, 50th, or even a centennial anniversary. These celebrations provide opportunities for one generation to commend God’s work to the next generation. The telling and re-telling of our memories of God’s work in our lives preserves our faith and the knowledge of God from generation to generation. (Psalm 145:4; Judges 2:10) ▼



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