

Writing a Parish History

Some Basic Guidelines by Allan K Davidson

This article was written before the ready advent of websites and the like. However, AHS believes that this article's content and guidance is still very pertinent.

See also Geoff Haworth's Book Review (on this website) in which he reviews Noel Derbyshire's *Serving the Community: The Story of Pukekohe's Anglican Parish*. Geoff highly recommends this book as an example of a well-researched and well-written parish history.

In an attempt to make these notes 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.

4. 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.

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

6. 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 e.g., 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 e.g., 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. Perhaps most important are their memories. The use of "oral history" is an important part in discovering the life of a parish. 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) 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.
- e) 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. 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.
- f) 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.

7. 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 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 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.

8. 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).

9. 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 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.

10. 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. Therefore, the writing of a parish history 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.