

SHARING YOUR STORY: USING THE ARCHIVES TO WRITE YOUR CHURCH'S HISTORY

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KYLE ROBERTS: Hello. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I am the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Welcome to today's virtual program, *Sharing Your Story: Using the Archives to Write Your Church's History*.

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections to the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those of you joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and our digital archive, which has more than 130,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. Please do check out our website, congregationallibrary.org, to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

At the Congregational Library, we are committed to supporting churches struggling to engage in effective records management. From reference requests to in-person feedback, the archivists at the Congregational Library have long recognized the desire among churches to better understand how to steward their church records and maintain the memories and mission of their church community.

They also recognize the challenge of not knowing where to begin. And thus far, we have sponsored six programs in this series, all of which can be found on the initiative's web page.

Now, this program complements a program that we did in September on *Celebrating Your Church's Anniversary: Tips and Tricks for a Memorable Commemoration*. I thought it was a great program. It brought together folks from Congregational churches across the country who had recently celebrated creative and fun church anniversaries.

This program is really meant to be seen as a continuation of that, to think about how you can use your archive to tell your church history.

Now, you don't have to do it for an anniversary, but I find so many people in our world think about anniversaries as times for looking backwards, looking at the present, and also looking forwards.

So without further ado, let me introduce our speakers today.

Zachary Bodnar graduated with a Masters of Library and Information Science from Simmons University, with a concentration in Archives Management. Prior to his work at the CLA, Zachary worked at the Bellamy Faraday House and Garden Archive, the Vassar College Special Collections, the Harvard Law School Library, and the Harvard Botany Libraries.

Zachary joined the CLA as an Archives Assistant in 2017, helping to prepare materials for digitization through the New England's Hidden Histories project. In 2018, he took on the title of Archivist. His professional interests include metadata collection and management, digital archiving, audiovisual preservation, and archives management.

Billy McCarthy graduated with a Masters of Library and Information Science at Simmons University, with a concentration in Archival Management. He started working at the CLA through a graduate internship, and was hired full time as an archivist in 2018.

Billy is the Head of Reader Services, helping the CLA's visitors with reference requests and facilitating in-person research. Billy also serves as the collection manager for the archives, working with the CLA's offsite vendor to protect and maintain the organization's archival records. Some of his professional interests include increasing access, collection management, processing of complex materials, and facilitating research.

So Zack, I think, is going to start us off in the presentation today.

ZACHARY BODNAR: We are so excited to have you all here today. Today's program is also a bit of a sequel of, as Kyle mentioned to this past September's, *Celebrating Your Church's Anniversary*. So if you didn't catch that event, we really do hope that you'll find time to watch that, too, on the CLA's YouTube channel.

Today's program is a part of the CLA's Church Stewardship Initiative. This initiative includes webinars and workshops, all focused on helping churches develop their own stewardship programs.

We believe that church communities are uniquely positioned to best preserve the memories of their communities and keep the mission of their church accessible for future generations.

The Church Stewardship Program celebrated its two-year anniversary this past October, and the program is still very much going strong.

For those who are interested, every one of our past webinars is available to view at your leisure on the CLA's YouTube page. There's a handy playlist there that includes all of our past programs in chronological order. And we hope that, as you think about stewardship of the stewardship of your church's records, that you go back and listen to these past programs.

And now I turn it over to my colleague Billy to introduce today's primary topic: writing a church history.

BILLY MCCARTHY: Thank you, Zack, and welcome everyone again to *Sharing Your Story* on church histories.

Writing a church history can seem like a daunting task. But we are here today to give you our thoughts and guidance on how to get started.

I am going to first share some examples of recent church histories that we have acquired, discuss who or whom should be doing this work, discuss what type of content to include, and also talk just a little bit about why writing a church history can be a valuable undertaking.

Before we begin, I do just want to give a shout out to my colleague and the CLA's Librarian, Meaghan Wright, who provided Zack and I with a treasure trove of helpful notes on this subject.

So, let's just take a moment to look over a few examples of church histories from our own collection. The four books you see on the screen are some of our more recent acquisitions. And each one takes a really different approach to telling their stories. There is no one true way to write a church history, but I really suggest you look to these examples and others to help get you started.

So as I said, these four histories all approach their subject matter from pretty different angles. Some of the unique features that are in one, but not all four, include a historical timeline. One has a preface that acknowledges gaps in their records. Some do very extensive deep dives into every single minister that ever led the church, while another goes out of its way to list a myriad of policy statements and more.

As you can see just from what I just said right now, you know, there are many different avenues to explore and write a church history. And I would encourage everyone to try and find examples, read through them and use them to help guide you in your future work.

The first big question every church has to answer is, well, who's gonna do the work?

From what I've seen in my time using church histories, the most common route is for a single person to take on the vast majority of this work, with others in the community providing feedback and edits.

Naturally, doing the work by yourself is just gonna take longer. Especially if you need to engage in research or have no previous history to draw from. Thankfully, Zack is going to dive a little bit more into some basic research tips in a bit to help you out.

Finally, if you are taking the task on alone, I really want to impress upon you, do not set unrealistic expectations for yourself. As we all know, life will surely find a way to take up more of your time than you realize. And by imposing restrictions, you can lead to a rather incomplete project.

You know, if you're able to, we would advise, you know, the creation of some kind of historical or anniversary committee that can meet and decide what topics to cover. And to just break up those responsibilities. The committee can work together to identify gaps in knowledge, have someone assigned to search the records for missing information, and serve as editors for one another.

Whichever route you decide to go, just keep in mind a church history will not be created in a day. So do consider setting, you know, reasonable deadlines for meeting certain criteria. If you plan out the path forward from the start, I promise it will benefit everyone in the end.

And one final thing to note. Regardless of if it's a single person or a team, be sure to save your drafts in more than one place. The last thing you want is for some of your just amazing work to disappear due to human or more likely, computer errors. So save yourself the future headache. Keep a copy of your working document on some kind of USB drive, or on a program, you know, like Dropbox or Google Docs.

Let's move on to what I believe are some of the most essential topics to cover in a church history. Keep in mind, this list is a suggestion based on topics we've seen covered in the many histories we have here in the CLA's collection. Some of these topics are just not gonna be relevant to your church story, while others may just be simply impossible to write about because records from that period have not survived. But the more fleshed out, the better. And do not be discouraged if you run into gaps in the story.

So the first three essential topics to cover are going to be a clear statement of responsibility, publication information, and a table of contents with page numbers. So as you can see, the first ones I'm talking about are very much administrative. But they are very crucial building blocks to a good church history.

A clear statement of responsibility should include any person, people, or committee that is responsible for writing the finished product. You know, you always want to call out those who helped create the history and properly attribute them for their hard work.

Publication information is helpful in placing your history in a particular time and place. Knowing the who, the when, and the where, excuse me, can make sense of the gaps in the narrative while serving as really helpful information for future readers, or for someone coming along in the future to write the next history of your church. They can also be really helpful if you do eventually pass on copies of your history to institutions like us. Because that information helps us create proper catalog records.

The last one on this administrative track is a table of contents with page numbers. How the table of contents is structured will be based on how you choose to write your history. Another history I looked at for this talk structured everything chronologically, while another broke everything down by the individual minister. Whichever route you go is totally up to you. But consider a table of contents as 100% required, no matter what.

So we're going to move away from those more administrative content concepts and more towards actual historical topics.

So the first, and probably the most obvious, would be talking about the founding or origins of your church. For almost all of you, this should be the beginning of your story. This provides the starting point for all other events and as I said, should be treated as such.

You know, as part of the founding story, try your best to highlight the important people and events that surround the founding of the church, and really try to avoid having just a single line that says, our church was founded on x day.

Again, if that's all the information you can find in your records, that's not a problem at all. But the more you include, the stronger your histories are going to be.

From there, you'll want to highlight as much of the history of the church as possible through the year of the publication.

And I can tell... I know right away, you know, this can really sound like a monumental task, especially for those of you representing churches that were founded in the early 1700s.

But instead of, you know, getting overwhelmed, I would really suggest, sit down and kind of break up the history of your church into sections, then start to tackle them one by one.

Some ideas of where to make those sections that I've kind of touched on previously, you know, you could do it by your minister, by your church buildings, by name changes, and then by a decade or a century.

Once you've picked a method, I highly suggest you stick to it, as it will be easier for future readers to use.

From my own experience here, I think by decade is probably, or, you know, years is easily the most common. And then going by ministers would probably be the second most common.

The last topic on the slide for, you know, essential topics would be about the history of your church buildings. The church building played a central role in every single one of your stories, and they should not be ignored.

That said, you should really also avoid making the building the central core of your narrative. Zack and I both have used church histories when processing church collections to make historical notes. And we've encountered histories that actually don't talk much about people and events, but instead focus heavily on the building themselves.

And again, the building is important. But the story of those individual people and those certain events are, frankly, much more important than knowing how many windows your second church building had.

The final list of kind of these essential topics that, you know, I wanted to get out here is... starts with a list of ministers and the dates they served. Knowing the list of ministers is tied to basically every other aspect of your church's history. And you should do everything in your power to produce a full list.

As I mentioned, ministers can serve as useful chapters for your history. Especially if you had one minister that lasted for, like, a really substantial period of time.

And like anything else here, it can kind of seem like a daunting task, but stay tuned. Zack is gonna follow up shortly with some excellent pointers about how you can effectively create these lists.

The next essential topic is to include any changes to the name of your church over its history and ideally why that change took place. Name changes are, frankly, pretty common, especially if a church undergoes some kind of merger at some point in its history. And taking the time to discuss the process behind that change and how the community reacted is actually an extremely important piece of the overall puzzle of your history.

You know, was this name change contentious? Was it unanimous or somewhere in between? No matter the answer, it really is worth including.

Another topic that may not be relevant to every single one of you here today, but that would be to discuss if any splinter groups existed in your church that then went on to form their own

individual church community. Highlighting the reasoning for the split is very vital to telling the story of not just both the churches, but also the town or county of your specific area.

You know, were there specific doctrinal disagreements? Or maybe you had a minister that had some pretty particular views that not everyone in the community agreed with.

Regardless of what happens, it's definitely something to highlight, if applicable.

Moving a little bit from more, away from about specific topics, I did want to take a second and highlight that every good history should have a bibliography with citations. You know, without these, how can future readers verify that what is written is an accurate description?

Some of the older histories in our collection, I say, they make some pretty bold claims about the church but don't really do anything to prove their statements are accurate. So by properly sourcing the words to the records, the narrative will be much easier to believe and confirm.

And as an example, if you want to claim that a particular event happened for X or Y reason, if you can point to a specific set of meeting minutes that back up your narrative, all you're doing is just strengthening the history overall.

And if you were relying on older histories to help inform your own, I do encourage all of you to not just accept everything written down as gospel unless they're also properly sourcing the document.

The last item for the list of essentials, you know, that I want to highlight here would be any kind of photos, maps, diagrams, and such, you know, related to the various people, activities, events, and church buildings in your history.

Visual mediums really enhance the narrative by not just telling, but also showing. I encourage you all to add these into the overall narrative whenever possible.

You know, some of you might not have photos, and that's totally fine. But if you do, I encourage adding them.

So that really quickly was just a list of some of the essential topics that I think all of you should cover in a church history.

So, now that I've gone over kind of what I consider these essential topics for a good church history, I just want to very briefly touch on some of these, like, kind of, added bonuses that you should consider if at all possible.

So first would be discussing the arrival of Congregationalism to the area before your church was founded. So for instance, if your church was, say, the second or third Congregational

church to form in your area, adding just a little bit about what existed beforehand can be pretty helpful in setting the stage for the creation of your own church.

If those earlier churches no longer existed, it might be difficult to find any information. But if you have anything that you can add, I'd consider it as it would be quite valuable.

Next would be just a very short history of a church from which either your church broke or vice versa. If that splinter church eventually reconciled with your own church, or there was a merging into a union church, then you're gonna call that out in your main narrative.

But if that splinter church closed at some point or still remains open today, having just a tiny little bit, maybe in an appendix, I would say can be considered pretty helpful. This is especially true if you consider the people in your own local community since both those churches play a role in influencing the town in the area.

Again, no need to go overboard. So just a couple of paragraphs there can really round out your own histories.

Another added bonus would be documenting the various auxiliary groups as part of your church if they're not already added into the main narrative.

So the best example I can give would be, you know, Sunday schools. If you had a really robust Sunday school program, consider adding some information about how that program evolved or you know, maybe failed over time.

This particular area relies pretty heavily on having records survive for those particular groups. So some of you just simply might not be able to. But if you have the records, I encourage you to give it a shot.

So this last bonus topic is actually one I didn't even think about until I wrote the script for today's talk. And that would be having a minister, kind of, just write a reflection, right at the end of your narrative. I think it really serves as kind of a nice bookend because you've been reflecting on the past, but then you can have your minister give some words of encouragement for the future.

And I know there's... I'm sure some of you or all of you have all these additional topics you really want to cover. And by all means, add in what you feel will make the best history possible. At minimum, try to make sure you hit on all the essential topics I mentioned before, and future readers will surely thank you for all of your excellent work.

So the last area I just want to briefly touch upon, is discussing why it's so important to have a church history. If you're joining us today, chances are I don't need to convince you. But I at least wanted to note things from our perspective here at the CLA.

So the main reason is that a history preserves the church, its mission, and its community for future generations to learn and be inspired by.

You know, this is especially true if your church does have to, unfortunately, close in the future because the history encapsulates all those wonderful memories, events, and actions of a church.

You know, I've learned about dozens of amazing communities from across the US that I would never have known about before because of these histories. And I'm grateful to all of those that took the time to write these histories. Because otherwise I would have missed out on these wonderful stories of triumph, acts of service, and perseverance.

You know, these histories serve as really vital documents for historians engaged in all manners of research that are just not available anywhere else.

You know, similar to my first point, these histories can be shared with churches, up and coming generations of members, and connect them to the people and events that they might not know about.

And some of you will be working with histories made up at a previous anniversary. And by making your own, you know, you're setting up the future writers that will come down and make a new history in 25 or 50 years.

And finally, I figured I'd throw in just a little bit of a selfish one, and that's archivists like me and Zack, we really use these histories as our way to write historical notes when we're processing collections for finding aids.

And several of the histories I've written will be filled with all this excellent information up until about 1960. And then I have to write, and then they continued to exist through today. And that's because there's just no information available to us.

So the more that's available for us, the more we can do to help future users of our church collections.

So with all that out of the way, I'm gonna take a step back and toss it back over to Zack.

ZACHARY: Thank you so much, Billy.

So when writing your church history, you can already probably guess that a large amount of your time is likely to be spent within the archive, looking at the primary sources your church has produced from its founding, possibly even before then, all the way until today, and tomorrow.

As a library and an archive, we fully support and encourage this kind of primary source research. It's our bread and butter, and we hope it'll be your bread and butter when creating church histories.

In this section, we want to take some of the topics Billy covered and provide some ideas for where you might uncover information about those topics. Before we look into some specifics, I do want to cover some basic research tips and rules for using archival sources.

Perhaps most of this is common knowledge already, but I think it worthwhile to go over some of these that I've listed here. First, no food or drink when working with your archival materials. Probably that's a given. But the archivist in me just needed to make sure that that was said. After all, no food and drink in the reading room is probably the first rule of every reading room I have ever seen.

A big and important tip, though for doing research is one that will help you fight against a pitfall that we find rookie researchers fall into often, which is you don't need to read every single document, nor do you need to read every word on a single page. Focus instead on the sources and materials which are the most relevant to your present research needs.

For researching history, if you're researching the founding, just focus on those oldest record books. If you're focusing on researching an auxiliary group, just focus on the records that they created and not necessarily looking at every page of financial records.

You really don't need to look at everything to understand the full, the whole picture. If you do read everything, it just, it leads into many rabbit holes and can lead to research projects that never end.

Another key researcher tip is to always make note of where you found a particular bit of information. Something every researcher has done, myself included, often we do it more than once, is we look through research notes only later to realize we forgot to write down the reference. Writing down your source of information at the moment you find it will save yourself a huge headache later on.

Finally let others know what you find in the archive. Even if you cannot place every story you find or every anecdote you see in your church's records into the church history as it's published, there's still no reason to not share those stories with your community.

So do share them. Your community will appreciate hearing these stories and these anecdotes. And hopefully those stories will encourage others in your community to use and see those records themselves.

Now let's look again at some of the topics and history sections Billy has covered with an eye towards where you might look within your archives to find the information you need.

So, your church is founding, whether it be 400 years ago or 40 is an incredibly important starting point. In terms of records, you probably want to be looking at those oldest church record books. These will likely contain the records of meetings that resulted in the gathering of your church.

For churches in New England, you can also look at the oldest parish records. These are records that are often more financial in nature, often related more to the town at large of the parish society, but can in the earliest records, often contain information about the founding of the church.

Your church's founding legal documents, if they exist, are also a good place to look.

Similarly, you might look at the original bylaws and confession of faith for your church. These are often in those earliest record books. However, they sometimes are also printed separately or kept in a separate document somewhere. So that's also a really good place to look at what the founding of your church actually looked like and especially what were those initial doctrines of faith.

For churches out West, it's really not unlikely that your church began as part of the work of the Home Missionary Society or one of its equivalents, or it was started as a satellite of a larger institution, like a college or university. In those cases, there will likely be correspondence between the people in your community and the society, or the missionary society or perhaps even the ministers, likely a missionary minister who helped found the church. And those correspondence or documents may enlighten the who and the how of your church's founding.

If your church separated from another church, there are likely to be plenty of records discussing in great detail why such a split was necessary. Some of those debates might be held in the records of the original church, so don't hesitate to reach out to them.

Finally, your church community is part of a larger town, city, or county community. Look at those town histories and the archival resources kept at your local history society or library. You might be surprised how often town history and church history intertwined, especially in the founding of a new church.

So your modern history is just as important as your oldest histories, and sometimes the sources for modern history can seem so much more overwhelming compared to the sources for your oldest. It's the newest, and oftentimes in record keeping, we've just been keeping more and more stuff the later on we get.

Still, your bread and butter isn't going to change very much for research.

Your church or council meeting minutes and annual reports will likely be the most reliable source of information from the modern era, the 19... the late 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

If looking for stories of communities within the church, look at the photographs that you have, or perhaps even more importantly, look at the records of your church auxiliary groups. These especially these can, these auxiliary groups can tell you a lot about how your church and the communities within your church gathered together.

Newsletters, bulletins, and orders of services can be useful, especially where gaps exist in your church's records or annual reports. They are also useful if you're interested in what kind of programming your church is supporting, or promoting, or having, especially as those kinds of programming often is coming to that church in reference to a question that was asked or events that are happening around it at the local or international levels.

Another place to look is correspondence and documents relating to how your church interacted with many of the rights movements and wars that occurred throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

A lot of upheaval, especially at the national and international levels in the 20th century, and church communities had to interact with that in some way. So these are definitely going to be points in your story that you might want to focus on and bring to the front.

If your church was around in 1957, it is also likely that it discussed... possible that it discussed whether it would join the United Church of Christ, which had just formed, or not. That discussion and the results of it could very much answer questions about why your church looks the way it does today.

The chronology of ministers is a common theme in church histories, and one which the CLA itself has a lot of resources that might be helpful to you.

Within your own records, meeting minutes, search committee reports if they exist, and installation and ordination service programs might have a host of... most of the information on how new pastors were received and what excited them about being at that church. Similarly, retirement service programs or funeral sermons might help answer the story of your minister's last years at your church.

However, especially when there are long periods where supply pastors filled the pulpit, creating an exact timeline of ministry can be really difficult for churches. That's where the Congregational Library & Archives might be able to help.

The CLA has close to a complete collection of Congregational Yearbooks, including yearbooks from the main three denominational branches that exist today. Many of these

yearbooks have been digitized and are available on the Internet Archive. And we link to them quite a bit in our... on our website and in our catalog.

We also on our website have the Obituary Database that draws extensively from these yearbooks, that database.

Taken together, these are two resources, which can help you to research the ministerial history of your church. And they are absolutely things where if you have questions or gaps in your knowledge, reach out to us. We might be able to help point you into the direction of where the resources are to help you.

Your building is as much a part of the story of your church as the people who create your church's community. Building history can often be found again in meeting minutes and annual reports, but it's also found in building committee records or for the New England churches that are quite old, your parish records.

If there was a parish society in your past, architectural drawings will be a source of information, especially as they come directly from the architects themselves.

Similarly, you might look at proposals from architectural firms and construction companies to better understand how a building was built, or how it was renovated.

Similarly, for New England churches, you can also look at pew records and pew plans. These are records that are usually technically financial in nature, but tell a story of how churches financed themselves and their upkeep, how churches... where families were sat in those. And if you're interested in going deep diving, they also tell the story of the financial status of those families.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on name changes. If there was an official change to the name of the church, hopefully it'll appear on legal documents. However, the rules for reporting such changes are inconsistent across time and geography. So that's not necessarily going to be the be all, end all of where to look for when a church officially changed a name.

Even more confounding, sometimes the official name of your church can be different than the name that's used most colloquially.

Town histories and, if any exist, former church histories might be helpful in identifying when names changed. For town histories, the CLA, at least for New England towns, has a lot of town histories. So we're another resource for you there.

Your church's bylaws, confession of faith, and/or constitution should also theoretically state the official name of the church, somewhere in one of those documents, at least. So tracking

how your bylaws or constitution have changed over time is a good way to track how your church's name has changed over time.

Finally, names often change due to mergers, separations, or federating with another church community. So look into those histories if any such events occurred with your church, as they may well be the answer to when a name change occurred.

The past is often a very messy thing. And we want to spend some time here to discuss that simple fact. And it is a fact.

Sometimes when confronted with information that conflicts with our worldviews, our first instinct is to run away. That's pretty much how humans are wired I'd say.

However, when writing a history, it's important to not follow that instinct: to acknowledge the past, even if it feels contradictory to your present, or is perhaps unflattering in light of modern sensibilities.

So, to begin this discussion, I want to at least at a relatively high level, go... discuss the concept of reparative history, which is also often called restorative history.

So what is reparative history?

Well, here's a definition. It is a theory, a method, and a practice all in one. It draws on the principles of restorative justice to meet the needs of historically harmed communities by examining the past to understand the root causes of historical harms. It is a collaborative and community-based practice and methodology that works to find the best path forward. It is a methodology that works with diverse voices to make public history a practical tool of justice, meant to confront systems of harm that have existed and often still exist.

Now, I'm no expert in reparative history. It is a topic that is often talked about in archival circles. It is a part of how we think about doing archival work, and it is part of a much larger discussion that's happening in the world of museums and public history. But I'm not an expert myself, so I don't want to go too deep into this particular framework.

However, I think it's still important to understand some of the basic principles of this reparative framework, which is, the basics of the framework are depicted here on this slide.

At its most basic level, the framework asks someone to identify a harm, however that harm is defined, and then to work collaboratively with those who have been harmed in the institution at large to find a way to confront them and learn from that harm.

The biggest takeaway, really, is that when this kind of work happens, it is collaborative in nature, and it requires reaching out to the wider community, whether that be your church community or the wider community that surrounds that church.

In your church, this might mean bringing to light aspects of the past that might be uncomfortable to think about to that wider community so that together you can understand how your church got from point A to point B in the now.

In the end, the relationship forged by addressing past things that you, we find uncomfortable can lead to much stronger relationships now than if these pasts are left, are buried.

Almost all of what I've shown in these last few slides is derived from the work that the Center for Restorative History at the Smithsonian has put out. They have helpfully put out an easy to digest guide to restorative history and also produced a number of webinars about the topic. If you were interested in diving into these topics, at a much more deeper level, I really do encourage you to visit the Center for Restorative History's website. It's really good, and it helps you to think and to ask some questions.

Now with some of this background out of the way, I want to talk more practically about what to do when you find some bit of your church's past that conflicts with your church's present beliefs and principles.

And you will find something.

The way we view the world now and the principles we hold dear today are very different than what we find in the past. But even if we don't agree with the past, it is deeply important to understand it and confront it.

And it's important to note that these moments of uncomfortable history don't always need to be earth-shattering, but can even feel amusing in today's moment.

A series of disciplinary cases resulting from children visiting the circus in Vermont in around 1820 for example, is a more amusing example than I can think of, of a past that might feel weirdly uncomfortable today.

But some anecdotal evidence of how church histories might have historically ignored aspects of their past is found in church splits. I've read many late 19th and early 20th century histories in the course of my work here at the CLA, and often they gloss over how a split in the church community came to be. Often this information is relegated to a sentence or two, maybe more if the church eventually reemerged. But still, the root cause of those splits is so rarely plainly stated.

But the reasons for those splits matter as they help to define the church and its community long after the split occurred.

The story of your church is a journey, and you need to understand points A, B, and everything in between to understand today.

Without going into too much detail, we at the CLA have seen firsthand some uncomfortable moments of history within church records.

We don't toss them. We archive them, describe them, and make them accessible.

That's our work.

So you found a bit of uncomfortable history. Perhaps something from my above example or something else entirely. It doesn't really matter what it is because the first step is always the same. Don't discard or hide that bit of history.

Instead, bring that history to your community and use it to understand your community of today and how it grew from that moment in the past.

Listed on this slide are some basic questions that might be... you might be able to use to guide those community discussions.

Certainly it isn't an exhaustive list, and I don't think one can exist because every church community is very different.

But it is a start, which is really all we can ask.

History is messy work, often filled with far less objectivity than we'd like. But it's important to do this work and to do it with an open mind.

And on that note, we bring today's presentation to a close. Thank you so much for joining us.

Now, with the time remaining, let's bring Kyle and Billy back on the screen and answer some Q&A questions.

KYLE: Great. Thank you so much, Zack and Billy. That was fantastic. A great start.

I think this is definitely the kind of program that people are going to be watching multiple times, when the recording is shared, just because there's so many elements to it.

I wonder if you might just, you know, to kind of get us going, and we have questions are kind of rolling in as people are writing them. Talk a little bit about...

So say my church, you know, on the North Shore of Massachusetts is about to start writing its history. And I'm not finding any records anywhere in the church building. What would, you know, and say I called you up at the library and asked, well, what does the CLA have for me?

Where might you point me to start thinking about things that we might have at 14 Beacon that might fill in that story if the records are missing at your home church.

BILLY: Sure, I can take that.

So here at the CLA, we have a really wonderful subsection of our collection called the local church history files. And they are mostly, they're mostly concerned with anniversaries. They also include histories.

And they're sort of just... in lieu of having archival collections, we really still want to have representation of Congregationalism across the United States.

So while our archives can be pretty heavy in, you know, the northeast and in the Chicago area, our 17.11s is what we call them, the local church histories, cover I think every single state at least once.

So definitely just reach out and ask. We are happy to just let you know.

And often, you know, we also have scanning that we can do. So if you are, you know, in a church in, you know, California or something, you know, we'll be able to help you out there.

And then more obviously, if we have some of your records, just reach out and ask. Because you might be a newer member of the church, or, and you just might not know that records were deposited with us x number of years ago.

So, yeah, if you reach out, we can just let you know everything we have, and go from there.

KYLE: I would, you know, underline some of the things, the records you were talking about, those missionary society records.

So the records of the Connecticut Missionary Society recently came into us a couple months ago, and there are dozens, if not hundreds of missionaries' letters back from all of these towns in western New York, in the Midwest, you know, that are all talking about the very early moments, both of the church's history, but also the town's history.

So, you know, a phenomenally rich resource that is just manuscript. So you're not going to find it on the, you're not going to find it by googling, right? It is, you know, a kind of unique resource that is here.

So there's a great question here that an anonymous person asked.

You know, I have a pretty, you know, I feel like I can kind of understand my town's history. But I don't know anything about the history of Congregationalism. How do I, you know, how do I think about the concepts and the principles and all of that?

What advice would you have for somebody who, you know, kind of understands what happened in their town, but not necessarily the larger, you know, denomination, that their church is part of?

ZACHARY: Our pithy answer is to read a book by Von Rohr.

So there is, that at least goes up to around 1957, a book by Von Rohr that, he's the author. Kyle can probably tell me what the actual name of the work is because I just call it Von Rohr in my day to day.

But it is a very good history of Congregationalism and how Congregationalism has changed over the centuries. Also just reach out with a reference question.

It's one that we get often.

There's a few more basic resources on our website that help answer the question of what is Congregationalism, as well as bibliographies that point to other resources.

KYLE: So, great question here from Barbara Blodgett, asking about publication.

And I wonder if you might talk a little bit about what are the different publication avenues that people should explore for once they finish their church histories.

ZACHARY: So admittedly, this is not an area that I am familiar with really very well at all.

From the church histories we see, they are often, to a degree, self-published. If there is a local publishing house or semi-local regional publishing house, sometimes they go through those. But these are often very much limited print runs, single edition. And that kind of is it.

It's a really good question, but one that unfortunately I don't have a lot of info for. Billy, if you have anything to add.

BILLY: Yeah.

So in doing the research for this, it seemed to actually be pretty common that someone in the actual church community happened to know a publisher or a local printer. And that kind of, that tends to be one avenue.

The other is, depending on the size of your final product, you don't have to go through a publisher.

You can... so they, I don't know what you'd actually call them, but you can kind of just buy those thin black bindings and then just attach them to pieces of paper and just create your own version that way.

I know there are some ways to do spiral bound. You know, through, you know, through self-publishing, through like Amazon, just like buying the resources yourself and having, like, a craft day or something.

And, you know, you can also, at the end of the day, if it's a PDF digital version that people just print out, there's nothing wrong with that.

I, you know, don't get your head stuck in the fact it has to be a published paperback edition. For most of you, don't worry about that. Just having the product, I think personally, matters way more than how it looks physically.

Obviously, having a nice, beautiful paperback would be nice. But for most of you, just printing things out in PDF and putting them in a binder, I think is absolutely more than enough.

KYLE: Yeah, I think the... I love your answers to that.

I think it's easy for us to, right, fast forward ahead to say, you know, that my church history is gonna look like this monograph. But we see every day, church histories published on the church's website, right?

You know, it doesn't have to be 150 pages long. It can be, you know, ten pages long and live there.

Billy, as you're saying, you know, it's very easy on our websites to just have a PDF that you can download from there. That way, you're kind of saving the environment for some folks who, you know, who would prefer to read it electronically.

There was a great example of a church, and I'm blanking on their name that published their history over the course of their anniversary year in their newsletter once a month. So they took, you know, chapter one in January and worked it all the way through.

And what a fantastic way to get people kind of, you know, waiting for the cliffhanger, right? Waiting, you know, what's gonna happen next as they're reading through it.

So really be creative. There are a lot more self-publishing options out there now than there used to be.

But those are good things to keep in mind.

Also, you might want to think about the denominational publishers like Pilgrim Press, which is the original Congregational publishing house and now part of the United Church of Christ. You know, it doesn't hurt to reach out to them, and ask them as well.

So it's nice living in this age where there are so many ways of doing this.

I would like to make a pitch, which I know both of you would make. After you write this history, please send us a copy. That copy will go onto the shelves. It will be, you'll be able to find it in the catalog. It will be become part of your permanent record here at the Congregational Library.

And, Billy, as our Head of Reader Services, I wonder how often do you get inquiries for histories that we don't have copies of or that weren't written?

BILLY: More often than I'd like the answer to be.

Like I said, we have our local church history files. And they can often have something in them.

But I alluded to it in my talk where, they usually all end in 1950 or 1960. So there's this just huge gap of information just missing.

And we get really often people coming in who just want to learn more about where their family went to church, to just be, put it simple. Or people trying to learn more about the town they grew up in.

A church history really, really illuminates all of these stories that you simply cannot find elsewhere.

KYLE: Great question here from an attendee saying, and this is on the topic that you were talking about, Zack, about kind of sensitive subjects.

What do we do with sexual affairs material, especially when the parties are still alive?

In one of my churches, a pastor slept with a member and the story was never told. The members who were involved are still alive.

So what are their privacy rights that we need to think about, or?

ZACHARY: Yes.

So for very recent, relatively recent situations where people are still alive, the general rule of thumb, even in the archives is to keep it but have restrictions on when those records become available. And that is probably a similar vein for writing your own church's history.

These are records that are kept. But they don't, they don't, they... When parties are still alive, there are usually privacy concerns so that they don't... there's usually an embargo on that story being told is the simplest way to probably put that.

BILLY: And I would add to it, you know, as I mentioned, like, some of the, some of the work you're doing is not just for yourself, but it's gonna be for the person doing the next bit of writing.

For a situation like this one, I would honestly suggest writing the story, or the the story down in some form and function. Not publishing it, but keeping it in a file in your archives that will be passed on to the next historian when the parties are no longer involved.

And if you are writing it from the perspective of [organized] "by minister," you know, you can just say this minister left under, you know, unfortunate circumstances or whatever version of the English you want to use.

But absolutely avoid naming anybody. That would be, that would be bad, and a big problem.

KYLE: What about using video recording of people offering their history of a period or persons?

I found it easier to have them speak and then answer questions than to write. So where does, is an oral history a possibility here?

ZACHARY: Yeah. We support oral histories.

Oral histories are probably their own topic in general. There's a lot of nuance to how to do an oral history, or what best practices, I should say, are for oral histories.

But it is definitely something that we encourage people to think about as an avenue for tracking down church history.

And it's often something we talk about in our programs here is asking your current members who are alive to tell their stories, help identify people in photographs, or to get their understanding for how things have changed over time.

BILLY: And I would add just a follow up. I would actually consider oral histories distinctly different. I recognize that it can be easier to listen.

But like anything else, when it comes to digital technology, whatever version of the recording, whatever format you're using, is not gonna survive. You know, there are, there will be issues.

So I would say not only do an oral history, but transcribe the oral history in some written format.

You don't have to spend hours repackaging it into a neat history. But at minimum have a transcript written down and note who, when, where, and then potentially why if it's part of a larger program.

KYLE: And I'm reminded, as you say that, right? Patricia Vondal's great oral work, her history of the Chelmsford church here in Massachusetts, where she built it around oral histories, but used those transcriptions as kind of the published version.

So Michael Moore asks, you know, our church is celebrating our 300th anniversary next year. We have one closet in our church library that has all of our records.

Good that they're all in one place. That sounds good.

Most seem to be records of baptisms, weddings, funerals. But I would guess there are some unknown treasures there, too. Would you be open to our sending you three boxes, which you might go through to identify what might be important for digitized records?

So I think it's a good question there about how do you, how do you kind of figure out what to digitize when you're, when you're doing this work of preparing for your history?

ZACHARY: As we have said in past programs, there will be a future program about digitization.

However, the short version is digitization is for access. And so we never generally suggest churches do a digitization project by themselves, but to do it as part of a larger, community-driven project that will help make those records accessible to a community that wants them accessible.

I would say Michael, reach out to us via email, and we can help answer the more specifics of your question via that way.

KYLE: Karla Todd Barrett asked, do you only keep records of Congregational churches?

What about Episcopal churches? Do they have their own archives?

BILLY: Yes, I assume so, and I think Zack and I are both frantically looking to see. Yes. So.

ZACHARY: The Archives of the Episcopal Church.

BILLY: Yes, and it looks like they are in Austin, Texas. And there is a phone number to contact.

So I would say reach out to them directly, and I'm sure that they can help you further.

KYLE: Yeah. So for our friends from other denominations, each denomination has its own archive of some sort, but they collect different things.

So if you're a Presbyterian church, for example, watching this, the Presbyterian Historical Society is in Philadelphia. You can reach out to them.

And they would have a sense whether they have the material, or they might likely be able to point you to where the material is.

We are, we're a little funny, right, as Congregationalists in that we don't mandate that all church records come to our library. Many do, but we also try to keep track of if they go to a local historical society or to another place that... where you can end up finding them.

Well, this has been a fantastic resource. Thank you so much, Zachary and Billy, for taking your time today.

And, we look forward to seeing all of you at a future program. We're excited for that.

And also, keep your eye out for workshops. We'd love to have you come in here and work in person. It's a great chance... where else are you're gonna learn about archives and also play with legos at the same time? So.

BILLY: We try to have fun here.

KYLE: All right. Take care, everyone. Thanks so much.

ZACHARY: Thank you all so much for coming.

BILLY: Thank you.