

The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

CONGREGATIONAL TIMELINES



This resource is made possible by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Visit www.studyingcongregations.org for further research and resources.



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About Studying Congregations

StudyingCongregations.org is the premier resource for understanding religious congregations in the United States. A collaborative project of leading scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, history, and practical theology, the strategies, resources and tools you will discover at StudyingCongregations.org have been designed specifically for theological educators, future religious leaders, and anyone else who wants to go beyond the received wisdom to discover what is happening in religious gatherings today.

This resource is offered to you as a gift of the Congregational Studies Team, an informal research group that has led the way in researching US congregations. Their work is generously funded by The Lilly Endowment.

One powerful method for better understanding the shared oral history of a congregation is through a Congregational Timeline. This historical look at the space and place of the congregation, and the congregants in the discussion, helps to locate the congregation in the greater stories of local change, denominational change, as well as national or global issues.

GETTING STARTED.

1

Get started by inviting a diverse group of people from the regular attenders and members to an afternoon or evening reflecting on the past. Invite ten to thirty people who vary in terms of level of involvement, length of involvement, and responsibility within the congregation.

2

As you begin the process of going through the timeline, explain the exercise and how it will fit with the congregational study. Once the overarching issues are discussed, the exercise may begin. One or two participants should record facts about the congregation above the line. Below the line should be reserved for facts external to your congregation (such as changes in the community, state, or country).

3

After considering each participant's place in the church's history, it's useful to talk about important dates for the congregation as a whole, and marking them above the line on the large timeline. What sorts of important congregational experience should be placed on the map? Examples may be new clergy or staff members, building improvements or changes, educational program shift, and any controversial changes in the life of the congregation.

4

Next, begin brainstorming important events in the community, region, denomination, nation, and world, outlining these changes below the line. Ideas may include political changes, wars, natural disasters, demographic shifts in the community, closing factories or industries, recessions, and other times of unrest. Spend most of the time on local issues, but don't neglect applicable larger patterns.

Continue to add topics until everyone feels the timeline is sufficiently complete. You may want to leave up the timeline, with a short written explanation of the exercise, in a common area for a few weeks, allowing the rest of the congregation to see and add to it.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS.

It's useful to start by encouraging participants to begin by working through their own memories of their experiences in the church community. The following list may be a good place to start:

When did you/your family begin attending?
Initial the appropriate time on the timeline.

What are your first memories of the congregation?
Share them with the group.

Reflect on one or two significant moments each participant has had in the life of the church, such as reaching out for aid after a loss or life change, attending a mission experience, or joining a new bible study.

SOME TIPS.

- * Encourage participants in their attempts to remember and elaborate on events. One person's memories may help jog another person's memory.
- * If your group is larger than 15 people, it might be useful to have everyone work to construct smaller timelines on the legal paper, either individually or in small groups. This will allow for more participation, and perhaps more nuance and history than may be covered in the larger group.
- * Different colored markers may be useful in examining distinctions, such as changing pastoral staff, educational initiatives, building projects, or other important recurring themes from the timeline.
- * Don't be concerned about chronology -- this is a brainstorming activity, and memories are not always chronological.
- * Discourage single individuals or groups from dominating the conversation, particularly those that are seen as "local experts" by others in the group. Everyone's memories and experiences are valid, and all participants should be encouraged to speak openly.
- * Audio recording the exercise may be helpful for later use.

EXAMPLE TIMELINE

Timeline for Mendocino Presbyterian Church, 1958-1976*

Location	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966
Congregation	Rev. Higginson arrives	Full self-support 1st since 1931	Rev. Higginson retires Rev. Hsu arrives	Youth Fellowship folds	Rev. Hsu leaves for UPCUSA position
Community				L. Redford begins MHS teaching	
Region & State	"Pat" Brown elected governor	Sonoma State College opens	Mumford Fair Housing Law passed	Free Speech Mvt at Berkeley	Ronald Reagan elected governor
Nation		Freedom rides in the South JKF elected	Cuban missile crisis	Beatles Tour US Civil Rights Act passed	
World					

Location	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976
Congregation	Sanctuary centennial Experimental worship	Membership bottoms out at 124 Kearneys (affluent couple) joins the church	Rev. Kimmerly (arrived in '67) leaves for new pulpit. Interim pr's anti-war sermon disrupts xmas musical	Attendance soars New hymnals purchased	Membership exceeds 200 Weirs (UPCUSA) visit from Lebanon
Community		Mendocino placed on Nat'l Register of Historic Places	Mass conversion at "The Holy Land"		Alt. public high school opens
Region & State	Strike at SF State	Gov. Reagan re-elected		Jerry Brown elected governor	Jim Jones People's Temple in Ukiah
Nation	MLK assassinated Bobby Kennedy assassinated		Nixon re-elected; goes to China	Nixon resigns	Jimmy Carter elected President
World		Allende elected in Chile	Xmas bombings of N. Vietnam		Civil War in Lebanon

* Adapted from "Figure 2-1" in Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley and McKinney, eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Abingdon Press, 1998), 44-45. *Used with permission.*