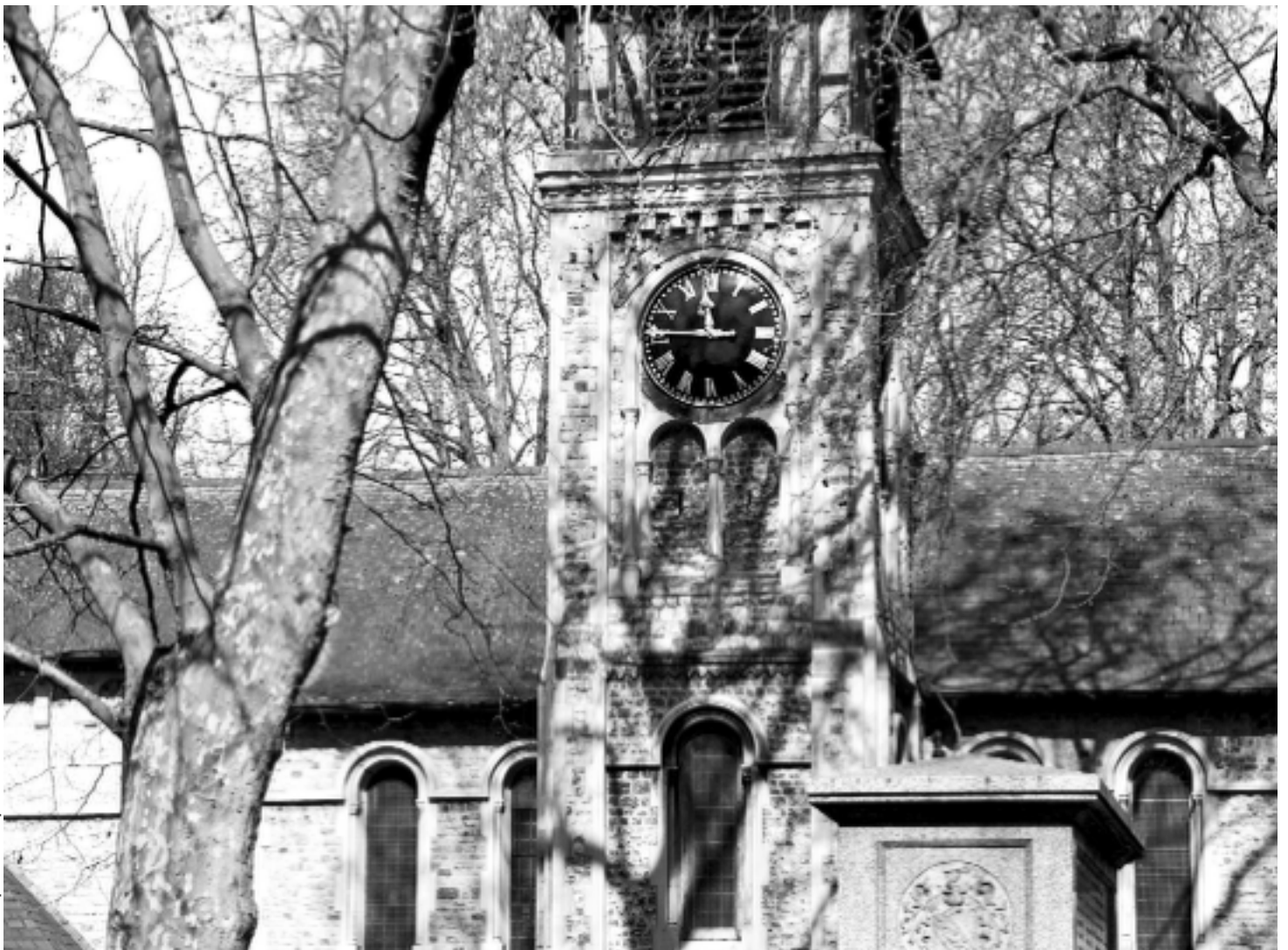


The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

TALKING THROUGH HISTORY



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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.

Understanding who you are today means beginning that story in the longer history of your congregation. You could read lots of old documents or official histories, but it's just as important to know what stories people are carrying in their heads and perhaps sharing at coffee hour. To discover that shared but often unspoken history, a Timeline Exercise is a powerful tool. This exercise invites a collective experience of sharing memories and thinking about the future; and the result is a tangible, visual representation of the stories you tell.

GETTING STARTED.

1

People. A group of 10-30 people usually works well to encourage lots of participation. Make sure it's a diverse group, including both long-time participants and newer folk, young and old, very involved and less so, and representing any other major constituencies in your congregation.

2

Time & Place. If there is a natural time such a group might gather anyway, pick that. If not, choose an afternoon or evening when you can spend at least a couple of hours together. Consider adding a potluck to the event to make it even more convivial. Find a space where there is a relatively uncluttered wall on which you can mount the paper for your timeline and where you can arrange chairs in a semi-circle that allows people to interact freely.

3

Stuff. You'll need paper that's at least 36" top to bottom and 10-15 yards long. A big roll of butcher paper will do, but you can also piece together pages of flip chart paper. Attach it to the wall, high enough to be visible, but low enough to write on. Collect markers in various colors, and different colored sticky notes can be useful, as well.

4

Preparation. Draw two horizontal lines across the length of the paper, one roughly in the middle and the other splitting the bottom half in two. Along the left side, mark the top half "our history," and the other two sections "our community" and "the world." Along the top, mark a starting point on the left--usually the founding of the congregation, but if there were precursor events, you might want to orient the beginning a bit earlier. Then mark off the decades at the top, and be sure to leave space at the end for "the future."

5

Helpers. Recruit one or two people to help record things on the timeline, and designate another person to lead the discussion and encourage participation. You may want to have still another person designated to make additional notes about the dynamics of the group and things that don't make it onto the timeline itself. Consider whether you want to audio record the event, and if so, make sure your equipment will pick up the conversation.

THE TIMELINE EVENT.

Begin by explaining that this is an opportunity to tell stories about what we remember and what has been important in the history of the group. There aren't any experts, since everyone has memories. Reinforce that by having everyone write their name on the timeline at the point when they first started to participate. (You can also use sticky notes for this). If you want to audio record, ask permission before you start.

Start with the earliest periods and work your way through. For each period, invite everyone to remember important events that were happening in the nation and the world – presidents, social changes, wars, scientific advances. Those can go in the bottom section. Also ask people to think about what the neighborhood or city was like at that time – new businesses, demographic changes, new highways. Those notes can go in the other lower section. Don't forget to prompt them for any big religious trends or changes (Vatican II, denominational mergers, and the like). Don't spend too much time on these things, but don't forget them. These memories often help to orient people to the period in question, and nearly everyone is likely to be able to participate.

When you move to talking about your congregation (or other religious group), in each period you can start by asking people who were attending then about their earliest memories. You might also want to ask about significant life events or other ways the congregation was personally important at that time period.

Depending on the focus of your overall study, orient your questions about the congregation's history accordingly. If you're trying to understand ministry to children, be sure you ask about that in each time period. If you're trying to think about changes in worship, be sure to ask about that. But don't be so narrowly focused that you miss the good stories!

As you move through time, add important dates (buildings, staff changes, disasters and the like), but don't worry about precision and chronology. This is more about what we remember than about getting the details right. Encourage people to talk among themselves and compare notes, even argue (amiably, of course) about what happened when and what it meant. The timeline is complete when people say it is – or when you run out of time for adding new things!

Close the event by turning to the future, inviting people to brainstorm a bit about how the next chapters might unfold.

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After the Event

If possible, leave the timeline up on the wall for at least a few weeks. You might even want to invite others to add notes as they look at it. And don't forget to write up notes from the event that can be added to any larger set of data you may be gathering.

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 and you have enough time, break out into smaller groups to elaborate on specific times or events. Notes from the groups, on sticky note paper, can be added to the time line.
- * Different colored markers may be useful in highlighting distinctions, such as changing pastoral staff, new programs or other important events.
- * 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.



EXAMPLE TIMELINE

Timeline for Congregation in Minnesota, 1996–2014*

Location	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
Congregation	Pr. John Dickenson arrives	Sunday school ages reorganized to align public schools	Attendance slump, growing concerns w/Pr. Dickenson; Consultation w/ denominational leaders	Pr. Dickenson leaves, Pr. Pamela White arrives; Contemporary service begins;	Capital campaign to update kitchen & fellowship hall
Community	School referendum passes	Public schools re-organized into K-5, 6-8, 9-12.	Road near church under construction, reroutes traffic		
Region & State	Gov. Carlson re-elected (1995)		Gov. Ventura elected (1999)	Sen. Paul Wellstone dies in plane (in 2001)	Gov. Pawlenty elected (2003)
Nation	President Clinton Re-elected		President G. W. Bush elected	9/11/2001 Attack on U.S.	President G.W. Bush re-elected;
World		War in Kosovo		Afganistan war (2001)	Iraq war (2003)

Location	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Congregation	Work trip to New Orleans; Pr. White diagnosed w/ cancer; Contemporary worship service moved to Sat. PM	Pr. White retires mid-year; Interim period w/ no pastor; Pr. Will Hausmann arrives;	House volunteers cleaning up after floods; Youth group growing, hired youth director half-time (Danny)	Youth director resigns, joint full-time youth director/ christian education seminary student (Jennifer) hired	Community-wide free meal & contemporary service started on Weds. PM
Community	Local manufacturer closes	Second Wal-mart opens, less traffic to downtown	Neighborhood homes condemned, property values dropping	Neighborhood elementary school closes	
Region & State		Tornado in neighboring town - much damage; Gov. Pawlenty re-elected (2007)	Red River Floods, massive damage to area homes	Gov. Dayton elected (2011)	
Nation	Hurricane Katrina (2005)	President Obama elected		President Obama re-elected	
World			Earthquake in Haiti	Iraq war ends (in 2011)	ISIS group in Iraq/ Syria; Opening up relations with Cuba