

ORGANIZING A CHURCH HISTORY

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"How shall I organize my church history?" is a question that plagues every writer. There is no set answer. Each history has to be organized according to many variables. Length has much to do with the decision. A five to ten page pamphlet will obviously be presented in a totally different way from a hard-bound history of some two hundred fifty pages. This essay will address the question for the book length history.

Anything running more than about twenty-five pages ought to be divided into chapters. For a history that covers as much as twenty-five or more years, the division into chapters should be made. For any history of half a century or more it becomes imperative.

Material can be divided topically or chronologically. The topical arrangement should be used only for shorter spans of time. One chapter might be devoted to Sunday School, another to Woman's Missionary Union, and yet another to music. A writer would want to use the topical arrangement only if there is reasonable continuity and unity within the whole period. The topical arrangement should not be used to cover long intervals of time. The reader will find it confusing to retrace the same time span chapter after chapter. The organization of chapters by topics does not allow the reader much opportunity to relate what is happening in one program at the same time that something else is happening in another.

The preferred arrangement is chronologically arranged chapters. Sometimes this is best done by pastorates or by groups of pastors. The amount of time covered by one chapter should be determined according to the amount of material, the changes that occur within a given period, and external forces (such as war or depression). Within each chapter, a number of specific topics should be taken up, usually in about the same order chapter after chapter.

In each of the major church histories that I have written, I have struggled with the question of organization. I find that a tentative organization of material made at the start of research usually changes by the start of actual writing. I have occasionally written several chapters, been dissatisfied, and discarded them in favor of a different approach.

Let me suggest a possible outline which no one should follow slavishly, but which might be a good starting point. List all of the pastors in order with their years of service. Unless some other grouping is more obviously dictated, bracket them into segments of about ten or fifteen years, without dividing a pastorate. If a pastorate runs much longer (such as twenty-five or thirty years), you might want to follow this same pattern but deal with this pastorate in two or more chapters, topically arranged.

Within each chapter, cover the entire gamut of church life. I would suggest beginning with a biographical sketch of the pastor. Tell something about the work of the pulpit committee in finding him and convincing him to come. Follow this with information about membership statistics, church organization, and so on. For example, does the new pastor introduce a change in the frequency of the church conference, its time of meeting, choice of a moderator? Did he introduce the church council idea? Who were the church officers (church clerks, treasurers)? How many deacons were there and how often did they meet? Were changes made in method of election, length of term, responsibilities?

Next, you might want to tell about worship services and practices, including revival services. Move next through the various program organizations of the church and follow the same sequence in each chapter: Sunday School, Training Union, Brotherhood, Music, and WMU.

Vacation Bible School is traditionally a function of the Sunday School and should be discussed in connection with that. WMU is composed of a number of mission "organizations" by age groups. In succession, you will want to discuss these, using the proper nomenclature for the era. Current names are Baptist Women, Baptist Young Women, Acteens, Girls in Action, Mission Friends. At other times, there were WMS, YWA, GA, RA, and Sunbeams.

So little activity takes place in an organization during some decades that it might be better to bypass any reference to that period. Avoid saying "YWA activities were the same as in the preceding pastorate."

Add information about other activities as they occur: Boy Scouts, library, recreation, special ministries such as mission work with the handicapped, Vietnamese, or prisons would fall into this category. A major building project (either constructing a new building or renovation or enlarging an older structure) may so dominate the church life that a discussion of the project might follow immediately after the pastoral sketch. When a pastoral relationship terminates through controversy, it is usually best to put it at the end of a chapter as a logical transition to the next pastorate.

The foregoing outline obviously applies more readily in recent times than one hundred to one hundred fifty years ago. However, it is a format that would be useful as a starting point for any time. I have found that putting headings within chapters as I move from one major topic to the next makes it easy for the reader to find a subject of particular interest chapter after chapter.

Material at the back of the book should include lists of pastors and other key officers, assuming that reasonably complete lists can be reconstructed. An index will make the book useful to other researchers and will assure repeated reference to the book. Each writer (often in conjunction with the history committee) must decide how much documentation (footnotes), if any, to use. As a professionally trained historian, I find that footnotes come naturally, and I know that they add enormously to the credibility of the history. If your history is based on a large number of sources, you may want to use some kind of documentation to impress readers with the amount of work that you did! Remember, however, that most church members are turned off by footnotes. That is why I normally place them at the back of the book.

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