

ORAL HISTORY:
You can compile them at your church!

Start with a photo

It has no place, names or dates on the back. However, I'm in the photo, and I can remember the names of more than half the people in the picture. Here are preliminary questions to ask:

- Identify as many people as possible.
- What do you remember about the families of any of these people?
- Which people in this photo did you particularly like, and why?
- What kind of group is this? (answer: MYF)
- Who are the two adult leaders?
- Can you name the oldest person in the photo? The youngest? Since the MYF was only for high school students, identifying the oldest and youngest will help date the photo.
- If you've figured out the date, and remember the group, can you recall anyone who missed getting into this photo?
- What kind of event was this? (answer: a retreat)
- Where did the MYF go on retreats? (answer: either the Palos "Y" cabins or Lake Geneva. There's a lake in the background, so this is at Lake Geneva.)
- There are more girls than boys in the photo. Was this typical?
- Were any of the people in this photo dating at the time? Did any end up marrying?
- Do you know what anyone in the photo did after graduating from high school (and MYF)?
- What did the MYF usually do on retreats? Was there a program?
- What songs did you sing on retreats?
- Did the MYF have fund-raising activities to pay for retreats? If so, what kind?
- What was a typical MYF meeting like?

Now you can move to more general questions that get into the history and identity of the congregation.

- Were there other activities in the church, such as Sunday School or choir, in which people from this photo were involved?
- Everyone in the photo is white. Was the congregation at that time all white?
- What about the neighborhoods and schools from which the congregation came?
- How does this photo compare with the racial/ethnic make-up of the congregation today?
- If the congregation is different today, can you remember the process or history of how that change came about?
- What was Sunday morning worship like during this period?
- Who was on the church staff when this photo was taken?
- Do you remember any significant events in the life of the church during this period?
- Who were the powerbrokers in the church at the time, and what made them powerful?
- Who had no power in the church, and why?
- Is anyone from this photo still part of the congregation today?

Start with a space

Sit with the person being interviewed in the sanctuary, another room in the church, at the parsonage, or, if the church owns a cemetery, there. The questions will vary somewhat according to the location, of course.

- How long have you been part of this church?
- Who was the pastor when you joined?
- Do you remember any other people who were on the church staff?
- Who else in your family has been part of this church?
- What significant 'rites of passage,' such as baptism, confirmation, and weddings, have you or someone in your family experienced here? Describe what you remember of these events: sponsors, attendants, preparation, congregational and family roles, how the place was decorated, what music was used, etc.
- How has the appearance of this church/room/parsonage/cemetery changed over the years?
- Do you think these have been changes for the better, or worse?
- Who made the decisions regarding the change in appearance?
- Who fought against those decisions?
- Do you remember something humorous that happened here? Describe it.
- Is there a particular story connected with this space, that is part of your church's oral tradition? (For example, a burglary or fire, how the congregation paid off the mortgage, a visit from the bishop or a famous person, etc.)
- One ministry or activity we had here years ago but no longer have, is _____.
- I think the reason we no longer have it may be _____.
- Is there a 'treasure' or particularly noteworthy item in this space? (Example, a very modest building with a gorgeous Tiffany glass window.) Tell the story of the treasure.
- How are you using this space differently from years ago?
- What needs to happen for this space to be used more effectively, in your opinion?
- What is your happiest/saddest personal memory in this space?