

Congregational Timelines



Studying Congregations

Congregational memory helps a church understand its story, its place and the patterns that have shaped its calling.





Getting Started

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.

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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.

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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).

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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.

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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.

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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

Illustrative timeline for a Namibian congregation, 1958-1966*

The Namibia Statistics Agency provides the country's most authoritative population and housing information. The 2023 Population and Housing Census can help a congregation explore population size, age, household composition, language, education, employment, migration, urbanisation, housing, access to services, transport, digital connectivity and distance between communities.

Begin with national information, then move closer to the congregation's actual setting through regional profiles, constituency information and municipal or local development plans. Always record the source and year of the figures you use.

Location	1958	1960	1962	1964	1966
Congregation	New minister	Congregation becomes self-supporting	New church council elected	Youth fellowship begins	Church hall enlarged
Community	New families settle in the area	School enrolment increases	Local clinic expands	Housing pressure grows	New transport route open
Region & Territory	Old Location uprising remembered	Windhoek begins rapid expansion	Drought affects farming communities	Labour movement grows	UN terminates South Africa's mandate over Namibia
Nation / Namibia	Old Location uprising remembered	SWAPO founded	Petitions for self-determination intensify	Political mobilisation expands	UN terminates South Africa's mandate over Namibia
World	Cold War intensifies	Year of Africa	Cuban Missile Crisis	Civil Rights Act in the United States	UN General Assembly Resolution 2145

* The congregational and community entries are illustrative. Namibian historical entries are adapted for contextual use from public records of the United Nations and the International Court of Justice.