

Digging in the Attic



Studying Congregations

Congregational memory lives in documents, stories and traces of the past.





Where to Look.

Most religious organizations produce a lot of written, recorded, and often on-line materials each week. There may be service bulletins, newsletters, sermon transcripts, church school and bible study guides, web chats and twitter posts. There are also attendance and financial records, congregational constitutions and meeting reports, and denominational or diocesan reports. All of it can potentially provide clues to your community's history, processes, and resources. Some of it may be systematically kept and easily accessible. And some of it may be scattered and literally in the attic. Depending on what you need to find out, you may get your hands dirty!

Some groups, of course, don't keep much in the way of written records. If that is the case for the group you are studying, interviews and focus groups may be more important. In fact, you might think about helping the group collect and organize scattered records or perhaps even undertake a set of oral histories for them to keep.

If they do keep records, your first step is deciding what information will best help you answer the main questions you are exploring. For example, if you are exploring the changing sources of and demands on the resources of the group, budgets and annual reports are a logical place to look. Decide on a few key indicators (total income from pledges, for instance, or spending on property and maintenance, mission gifts, denominational assessments). Then track down those figures for the time period you've decided is important, put them in a spreadsheet, and recruit someone with skills in working with numbers to produce a report, with a graph that clearly communicates the trends. Looking at budget records in this way can help you see the important values of the community.

If you are exploring how worship or theology has changed over time, orders of service or sermon recordings are invaluable sources. Are they in a storeroom somewhere? If you want to understand how decisions get made, the minutes of a governing board may (or may not!) help you see who has had influence and what values have been taken into account. These records may be carefully filed away, but more likely you'll have to do some asking around to find out who may have them at home.

Twentieth Century Attics! Don't forget to explore the more recent historical archives of your congregation's digital presence through websites and social media. Today many religious communities document key events and announcements online. Often these pages are filled with photos and stories that can help tell the story of the congregation. If you're studying your own congregation, you might also consider how you can archive your current digital communications and preserve them for future generations. Here's a wonderful example from an old archived White House website from Bill Clinton's administration ([link](#)).

Record Your Findings.



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No matter what records you are working with, you need a plan. It's easy to get lost in the archives! Know what sort of information you are looking for, and then make comprehensive notes.

As in other forms of content analysis, start with a set of categories or questions, and add to your list as you read and discover other important themes. If you are looking for evidence of the group's efforts to do good in the world, you might start by looking at each recorded event or program for a) which group or need was targeted; b) who in the congregation was involved; c) what kinds of resources were used; d) where the idea came from; e) any partners that were involved; and f) how long it lasted. You may soon discover that you also need to make note of why people said that this was a good thing to do. And you may discover hints of dissent. Make your notes as systematic as possible so you can compare the same kinds of information across time or across different kinds of programs.

Scan the most important documents or portions of documents, and look for stories that most vividly capture what you are reading. Create a set of notes that summarizes what you have found.