

CONGREGATIONAL HISTORICAL REVIEW

HOW THE PAST CAN GUIDE THE FUTURE



When Emory Fellowship, a United Methodist congregation in Washington DC, began listening to their community they immediately recognized a dire need for affordable housing. As the listening process gained steam, Pastor Joe Daniels did a historical review of the congregation and noticed something interesting. Elizabeth Proctor Thomas, a free black woman in the early 1800's owned 11 of the acres that the church now owns. She utilized this land to provide housing for free black people and runaway slaves in the years leading up to the Civil War. This connection to the past breathed new life into the church's vision of offering affordable housing to the Brightwood community. Now the church owns and manages 99 units of low-income housing and a community center that houses vital community programs.

What stories from your church's past and/or your community's past could speak to and guide your present vision and mission?

GETTING STARTED

Talk to a local historian: Your church might have someone who is already the designated church historian. Tell them what you are up to and ask if they would be willing to help. If your church doesn't have someone like that then look beyond the church to a local historical society, local university, or local library. Find a partner who knows what they're doing and your process will be easier and your discoveries far more comprehensive.

Gather historical documents: Look for as many relevant historical resources as you can find. It's easier to start with secondary resources (a book or article someone has written about the wider history of your church or community), but be sure to look for some of the original documents and firsthand stories as well. An archivist or librarian can be a huge asset in this process. Your denominational body might have an archivist who can help you through this.

Talk to older church members and community members: Firsthand interviews are solid gold. Ask older church members and community members if they would be willing to share their memories of the church and its ministry in the community. See if they are willing to let you record the conversation for posterity.

Look for patterns and important stories: As you do your research look for patterns. Is there a pattern of caring for youth? Has your church been fearless in starting new churches? Are there remarkable stories that the present congregation needs to hear? Find connections from the past to the present. Compile your findings as a listening team in a brief report to share with the congregation.