

Creating Oral History for The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Vision:

To interview various representatives of
The Presbyterian Church in Canada in order to gather and preserve an
oral history reflective of the denomination.

To develop recorded tapes and transcripts as a permanent resource for
researchers to access through the Presbyterian Church Archives.

To develop a process by which congregations and presbyteries are
encouraged to develop their own oral history projects.

Who will be interviewed?

Former missionaries, national staff persons, theological professors, retired clergy and denominational educators, and lay people who have been long-standing members of national committees.

How are Interviews Accomplished?

Oral history is accomplished by interviewing a candidate and taping the conversation. We understand that this can be intimidating for some people. The interviewee will receive a list of questions to be asked during the interview beforehand. Interviews will last about one hour, on average. If a longer interview were required, then two separate interviews would likely be done in order not to tire the interviewee. The interviewee may want to make notes on the questions that will be asked, but a prepared response to each question is not desired. It is better to have a free flowing conversation using the questions as a foundation for the hour-long session.

The interview should be done in a quiet room that is as sound-proof as possible. Prior to the interview, check to ensure your tape recorder is working and take along back-up supplies. Do a test run with the interviewee in order to ascertain voice quality and consequent volume level.

It is desirable for the person interviewed to prepare a written autobiographical piece prior to their interview. This exercise will help them to recall people and places they have experienced and will want to talk about during the session. The Archives will benefit as the biographical detail will make the interview a more complete entity and will also provide details from which to catalogue the tape recording more fully and accurately.

What will happen to the Interview Material?

The taped interview will be transcribed to paper. The tape and transcription will be catalogued and will become part of the Oral History collection in the Presbyterian Church Archives. Prior to accessioning in the Archives, a copy of the transcript will be given to the interviewee to be read and edited. The materials will be the property of the Archives and will be governed by Archives policy. Interviewees will be informed as to what kinds of restrictions they can put on these materials. Both the Church and person interviewed must be comfortable with the signed agreement and conditions therein.

What Responsibilities does the Church have to the Interviewees

1. Interviewees shall be informed of the mutual rights of the interviewer and interviewee in the oral history process, such as editing, access restrictions, copyright and the disposition of all formats of the record.
2. Interviewees shall be informed that they will be asked to sign a release. Interviews shall remain confidential until interviewees have given permission for their use.
3. Interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with the interviewee and such preferences and agreements should be documented for the record.
4. Interviewers will work to balance the objectives of the project with the perspectives of the interviewees. They should be sensitive to the diversity of social and cultural experiences, the implications of race, gender, ethnicity and age. They must set a relaxed atmosphere and encourage interviewees to respond in their own style, keeping in mind their first language of preference. Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of enquiry with the interviewee and not accept vague responses.
5. Interviewers should guard against possible exploitation of interviewees and be sensitive as to how researchers might use their interviews in future. Interviewers must respect the right of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects.

What Questions Should You Include?

Interviewers will be expected to have done enough research about their subject to know the outline of their life story, and something of the historically significant events and processes with which they were involved.

Interviewers should also allow the interviewee to move beyond the prepared questions when appropriate. The following are samples of very general questions.

Sample Questions for Denominational Leaders

1. As you reflect on your history as a leader and the development of your leadership, what were the significant events and people in that process? Who mentored you as your leadership skills developed?
2. How did the denomination begin to recognize your leadership and what steps did you take as you moved into denominational leadership?
3. What have been some significant decisions and processes that you have been part of as a denominational leader?
4. Reflect on how The Presbyterian Church in Canada makes decisions. What is your experience of how the Church decides things?
5. When did you sense it was time to leave your leadership role?
6. What changes have you seen within the denomination over time?
7. What advice would you give to tomorrow's leaders?
8. Additional comments you would like to make?

Sample Questions for Retired Missionaries

1. Did you hear God's call to be a missionary? When did your interest in mission start? What fed it? Who was influential in helping it grow? How do you maintain your enthusiasm for mission work?
2. How was your mission destination decided for you? What were your first impressions of the country?
3. What kind of work did you do there? Did the nature of that work change over the years? If so, how?
4. What was your relationship with the nationals in your mission country? Did that relationship change over time? Were you involved in training nationals to assume the management of the mission work?
5. How did the Church support your work - financially and personally? Did you feel supported? What did the Church do well/what could it have done better? How were you received when you were on deputation and what role did you assume?
6. What was the adjustment like coming back to Canada.
7. Do you have any special stories about mission life that shed light on being a missionary?
8. Additional comments you would like to make?

Sample Questions for Retired Theological Professors

1. As you reflect on your development as a teacher, what were significant events and people in that process? Who mentored you in your life?
2. How did the denomination begin to recognize your teaching role and by what process did you become a teacher of ministers?
3. What have been some of your significant academic interests? Why were you drawn to those fields of research?
4. Reflect on how The Presbyterian Church in Canada trains people for ministry? What is your experience of how the Church trains clergy?
5. What changes have you seen within theological education over your time? What improvements would you suggest for future?
6. What advice would you give tomorrow's teachers?
7. What is one area of Church polity or expression in which you have changed your point of view over the years?
8. Additional comments you would like to make?

Sample Questions for Retired Ministers/Diaconal Ministers

1. How did you hear God's call to be a minister/diaconal minister? When did your interest in ministry start? What fed it? Who was influential in helping it grow?
2. How have you kept your sense of call alive? How have you dealt with the discouragement that are an inevitable part of ministry?
3. Where have you served? Briefly describe the congregations you have served. What did you learn from the congregations you served?
4. What things have you done in your ministry - locally in your community, in your presbytery, synod or at the Assembly level? Which of those experiences were particularly significant to you and why?
5. What is your experience of a Presbyterian form of government?
6. What changes have you seen in ministry over your time?
7. What advice would you give tomorrow's ministers?
8. Do you have any special stories about your life that shed light on being a minister?
9. Additional comments you would like to make?

Sample Questions for Lay Leaders

1. As you reflect on your development as a lay person within the Church, what were the significant events and people in that process? Who has mentored you?
2. How did your congregation begin to recognize your gifts? By what process did you become a leader in your congregation, presbytery or beyond?
3. What things have you done in your ministry - locally in your community, in your presbytery, synod, or at Assembly level? Which of those experiences were particularly significant to you and why?
4. What is your experience of a Presbyterian form of government?
5. What changes have you seen in our Church over your time?
6. What advice would you give to tomorrow's Church?
7. Do you have any special stories about your life that would shed light on the nature of the Church?
8. Additional comments that you might like to make?

The Presbyterian Church in Canada – Agreement Relating to Oral History Interviews

1. The interviewee will be asked to review this agreement before the interview begins. Once the interview is completed and has been transcribed the interviewee will be asked to sign this agreement.
2. The interviewer will provide the interviewee with a range of possible questions ahead of time but is not limited to those questions, or obligated to ask all the proposed questions.
3. Both the interviewee and the interviewer reserve the right to end the interview at any time.
4. The transcript of the interview may be edited to eliminate non-word verbalizations. The interviewer may add editorial notes to indicate additional explanations.
5. The Presbyterian Church Archives will be the owner of the copyright on the interview in all formats once it is completed and transcribed.
6. The Presbyterian Church Archives will make the interview available to any researcher requesting access to the material. Interviewees can place some restrictions on access to their interview - an example would be to restrict the materials from becoming part of the public record until 10 years after the subject's retirement.
7. The Presbyterian Church Archives will provide the interviewee with a personal copy of both the audio interview and a printed transcript of the interview once this agreement has been signed.

Interviewer on behalf of The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives

Interviewee

Witness

Date