

## THE CALLING AND CHALLENGES OF BEING A LOCAL CHURCH HISTORIAN<sup>1</sup>

TED A. CAMPBELL

Being a local church historian is no insignificant vocation. The Bible itself is a narrative of God's acts with the people of Israel and with the people who became the early Christian community. As church historians, we have the sacred responsibility of continuing that narrative of God's work into the stories of our own congregations. The holy apostle St. Luke, author of the Gospel according to St. Luke and of the Acts of the Apostles, was a church historian, and the Acts of the Apostles is the prototypical work of church history. St. Luke himself functioned as good historians do, considering carefully the sources of his history and then putting his account in good order (Luke 1:1-4).<sup>2</sup> In joining the ranks of church historians, you join an illustrious company that includes at least one of the holy apostles, many of the saints of the Christian ages, and a host of lesser-known figures who faithfully recorded the narrative of the church in their regions and in their times.

Now, just so you'll all feel at home, the ranks of church historians also include a few jerks and scoundrels, and many, many bad writers. Trust me, I know. And don't get to thinking that they were bad writers because they were not professional historians—far from it. Being a professional historian does not automatically confer the divine gift of being able to write well. Again, trust me on at least this issue: I know.

I am a professional church historian and proud of the fact. I am a member of the American Society of Church History, founded in 1887 by Philip Schaff, and I do deeply appreciate the contributions of my professional colleagues who, under pressure from universities, crank out scholarly volumes from university presses with long footnotes. But professional church historians are a relatively late historical development and they remain only a small minority of all those who are involved in collecting sources and telling the narratives of Christian communities. Let me tell you about two non-professional local church historians whose work has deeply influenced me.

The first was a man named Lockwood Prentice Cammack, Sr., who died in 1972 in Beaumont, Texas. He was professionally an employee of the Western Union Telegraph Company and served as shop manager for the Beaumont and Houston offices of Western Union. He was from a long line

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture originally given a South Central Jurisdiction archivists' meeting on Friday July 11, 2008, at Lon Morris College in Jacksonville, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> See the references below on Luke and parallels between his historical writing and that of the ancient historian Herodotus.

of Methodist lay people from Mississippi and Texas. He was a member and steward of the Rosedale Methodist Church near Beaumont, a church that became St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Beaumont in his lifetime. In the late 1960s, the folks at First United Methodist Church in Beaumont were working on a history of their church that was subsequently published as *Cornerstones: A History of Beaumont and Methodism*.<sup>3</sup> They asked folks from each of the other United Methodist congregations in Beaumont to contribute a short history of their congregation for this volume, and the folks at St. Luke's naturally looked to Mr. Cammack to write their history. He began working on this, but fell ill and was not able to complete it.

It was taken over by a second non-professional church historian, a fellow member of the St. Luke's congregation who had been born as Verda Odessa Williams. She was professionally trained secretary who worked for the Wayne Brown Insurance Agency, and she completed the brief history of Rosedale and St. Luke's UMC. She also participated in place of Mr. Cammack in a signing ceremony at First UMC Beaumont where all the authors signed copies of their essays in the volume when it was released. I know because I drove here her there. She was my paternal grandmother, Verda Campbell, and her collaborator, Lockwood Cammack, was my maternal grandfather. So although I can say, with the prophet Amos, that "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son . . ." (Amos 7:14), I am the proud *grandson* of two local church historians, and I dedicated my book on *The Religion of the Heart* to the memory of these two non-professional local-church historians who were my predecessors in this vocation.

Whether you are a professional historian or not, you join an illustrious company in this calling. But I would warn you although that being a church historian can be described as a kind of vocation or calling, on the other hand it can be described as a kind of disease or illness. Of course they don't tell you this until after they have nominated you to be your local church's archivist or historian, but it is important to diagnose this vocation or illness and to ascertain whether you may be already showing symptoms of it. So (with apologies to Jeff Foxworthy), I offer you here my own list of symptoms of church historianship under the general rubric, "*You might be a local church historian if. . . .*"

1. The first criterion, and one of the most clearly diagnostic, is this: **if you keep piles and piles of junk and paper around your house or your office and you regard this junk as critical historical treasures, you just might be a local church historian.** Other people may think we're trashy, but they don't get it. What we know is that every one of those pieces of paper is going to be a landmark historical document someday and every one of those supposedly junky items is going to be a priceless historical artifact or relic for future historians. In sophisticated historical circles, we call this junk

---

<sup>3</sup> Rosa Dieu Crenshaw and W. W. Ward, *Cornerstones: A History of Beaumont and Methodism* (Beaumont: Historical Committee of First United Methodist Church, 1968), 202-203.

“material culture objects.” We can’t bear to get rid of our piles of stuff. In fact, if you go so far as to keep your piles of junk in chronological order, then I have to break the news to you that you are indeed a very sick case, and you might as well just go ahead and do the Ph.D. and join the American Society of Church History and get it over with.

2. A second criterion is this: **if you’re constantly pulling over while driving so you can read historical markers, you might be a local church historian.** Just ask my wife. Church historians are at our job twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and that includes when we’re on vacation. We’re always on the lookout for history.

3. A third criterion: **if you tramp around churches to take photos of their cornerstones, or of grave markers in their cemeteries, you might be a local church historian.** We know that cornerstones are likely to reveal critical historical information, and we become students of the mysterious inscriptions they are likely to bear, like the letters “M.E.C.S.” A similar criterion probably applies to folks who go poking around in local church cemeteries.

4. Fourth criterion: **if you can list at least four pastors of your congregation in chronological sequence, you might be a local church historian.** This one is not a definitive trait, but Methodist church historians delight in lists like this and in fact Methodists as a group can be described as more than a little bit obsessive-compulsive about keeping statistics and lists of preachers and other officers. We always kept the statistics in the past to prove that God was genuinely at work in our churches because they were growing, and these days our statistics are proving to be more embarrassing. But Methodist church historians are usually folks who are accustomed to keeping lists.

5. A fifth criterion: **if you’re the person around your local church to whom people get referred if they ask about historical details, then you just might be a local church historian.** Somebody asks about when the steeple on the church building was put in, you know, and they say, “Well I don’t know, but ask Mrs. Jeffers.” Congratulations, Mrs. Jeffers. “When you least expect it, you’re elected.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps only one or two of those criteria apply to you, perhaps you are only in the early stages of this disease, so you may need a little push. You may be thinking, well, “I’m just an archivist,” but what is the point of archives if not eventually for writing history? A local church archivist can be defined as a local church historian who hasn’t started writing yet. The local church history bug may well be one of those conditions that is incurable but treatable, and I offer you my own best advice as to how to live with it, that is, how to be a good local church historian. I will now break down the challenge of being a local church historian into seven particular challenges we face in the calling or vocation to be a church historian.

---

<sup>4</sup> A tagline on the “Candid Camera” television show in the 1950s.

## 1. The Challenge of Telling the Truth

The first challenge we have is to tell the truth. This is what good historians from time out of mind have done: they tell the truth. Facts matter to us. There's a different standard for novelists. According to Mark Twain's character Huck Finn: "That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."<sup>5</sup> That's the novelist standard, but that won't do for church historians. We have to tell the truth.

The apostle and evangelist St. Luke, for example, began his account of the gospel with a straightforward claim. Many others, Luke acknowledged, had

undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Luke also "after investigating everything carefully from the very first" undertook "to write an orderly account" (Luke 1:1-4).<sup>6</sup> There does not appear to be any hidden meaning in this that wants deep probing. Luke simply claimed that he had looked at the evidence "carefully" or "accurately," and on the basis of this evidence he proposed "to write an orderly account." He told the truth.

Other historians began with similar claims. Herodotus began his history of the Peloponnesian War with the claim that he had set forth what he had learned "by inquiry," and his text shows consistently how he sifted through sources, rejecting what he considered to be spurious or misleading.<sup>7</sup> He told the truth as best he could know.

Sometimes telling the truth as an historian means being careful about what you say and how you say it. If Mrs. Johnson reports that Rev. Snodgrass kept the parsonage like a pigsty, you know that may or may not be true. Actually it may or may not be relevant to your history, but if you decide it's relevant, then do you write, "Rev. Snodgrass kept the parsonage like a pigsty"? Or do you write, "*Mrs. Johnson reports that* Rev. Snodgrass kept the parsonage like a pigsty." The second one probably carries more of the truth. What you're reporting is what Mrs. Johnson said, and you're taking responsibility for exactly what you know: you know she said that.

Telling the truth may also mean admitting what we don't know. There will be gaps in your history. There always are, because our sources are limited. The challenge is to tell what we do know, and be honest about what

---

<sup>5</sup> Since I'm not following the novelist standard here, then no, of course, Huck Finn didn't say that. Mark Twain put that in his mouth: Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library, 1979), the beginning of chapter 1, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:1-4; all references to scripture are to the NRSV unless otherwise noted; cf. Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 15-22; G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of Saint Luke* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican, 1963), 41-44.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 1:1 (in A. D. Godley, trans., *Herodotus* rev. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1926] 1:2-3, cf. x-xvi).

we don't know. Stating matter-of-factly what we don't know may challenge some future historian to take up a topic!

Sometimes telling the truth in a congregation is uncomfortable. When my family arrived in Rockville, Maryland, in 1993, the congregation of the Rockville United Methodist Church was beginning a year-long celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of that congregation in 1844. Or so they said. There was a historically Black United Methodist congregation just three blocks away, and members of the Rockville United Methodist Church said, yes, we gave them that building when we moved out of it. But when I started poking around I discovered that that the Jerusalem-Mount Pleasant congregation was in fact the original Methodist Episcopal congregation founded in Rockville in 1844, and the congregation of the Rockville United Methodist Church had originated in 1860 as a white secession from the original Methodist Episcopal congregation. They formed a congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, that took the name "Rockville Methodist Church."

Our congregation had taken not only the name but also the history of the earlier Rockville congregation, and that was painful to say, but you have to tell the truth.

## **2. The Challenge of Documenting Your History**

In the second place, we face the challenge of documenting our histories. Twenty years from now, it won't matter much if you write a beautiful history of your congregation, and you believe it's all true: if the history is not documented, there will be no way for anyone to know whether it is true or not. When I say "document your history," I mean not only that you should use standard formats for reporting about your documentation (and you should), but more importantly, you should inform your readers as to how you know about the truth you are reporting. That's the really important point: you deliver not only the truth about history in your narrative, but you show how you know these historical facts. However you do it, that's what we mean by documentation.

Documentation usually means that you attach notes—footnotes or end-notes or in-line references—to what you write. For the church historian, these notes are "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."<sup>8</sup> And the grace is conversation. Notes show the reader that you are not just giving a monologue full of your own opinions, you are entering into a dialogue with sources that inevitably represent the records and views of other persons. A footnote (or an in-line reference if you choose that system) is a sign of dialogue. When I as a professor read a student's paper that goes on for three or four pages without notes, I grow weary, because the student is

---

<sup>8</sup> The traditional definition of a sacrament from the Catechism of *The Episcopal Church Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 1977), 857. Methodists are more likely to know the phrase from the traditional ritual for marriage which describes the wedding ring as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

just giving a monologue. *Blah, blah, blah . . .* they're talking into space. But when they start using notes—*ah!*—then I “feel my heart strangely warmed.”<sup>9</sup> Now they're talking to someone: a conversation is going on, and this is much more interesting. The truth is that we as historians often read notes before we read anything else. The notes reveal quickly and clearly what sources a writer is using, and with whom they want to be in dialogue.

So far as you can, you should use standard formats for documentation, like those in the *Chicago Manual of Style* or Kate Turabian's classic (and much shorter) *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. The point of using standard formats is to honor your readers by not requiring them to learn your own quirky system of documentation. One or two standard formats is enough for most of us to master, so it's best to stick to the standards. However, the most important thing is not the standards of documentation, but it's the delivery of consistent, useful information about your sources. If you cite a book, you need to state the title, the author or editor, who published it, and when it was published. I encourage my students, and I would encourage you for the same reason, not to cite internet sources unless they are themselves extraordinarily well-documented, and most of them are not at this time. They seldom have good bibliographical data like printed books almost always have. Use the internet as a way to get to other resources, but cite internet sources only as a last resort.

Part of the work of documentation is simply keeping good records of your work. If you interview someone, make sure you note when and where you interviewed them, record their words accurately, and be sure you have their permission to report their views. If you quote from a book, be absolutely certain that you write down the quotation accurately and indicate exactly what words have been quoted. Failure to do this got a major US historian in trouble a few years ago when it was discovered that some of the words she published were actually a quotation from another author. Her failure was at the point of keeping records, because she had written something down on a notecard, failed to identify that it was quoted, then saw it months or years later and presumed it was her own words. So be very careful in keeping records that will help you document your work.

Now having discouraged you from citing internet sources directly, I do encourage you to utilize a variety of sources, and to document them. Talk to the old-timers in the church and record their memories of the congregation. Encourage people to bring photos of the church one Sunday, and see if you and others together can identify when the photos were taken, what they show, and what they reveal about the church at a particular time. Go to the county courthouse or land records office if it's not in the courthouse. Courthouses and land records office turn out to be enormously important sources for documenting when properties were acquired, when buildings were built. Collect a variety of media like photographs, audio and video recordings, and

---

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *Journal* for May 24, 1738; in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journal and Diaries* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988-2003), 18:214.

consult with specialists in different areas of media who can help identify date ranges for particular types of film or for particular media for audio recordings. The point is to keep good records so that you can document your history, and readers will understand how you came to know what you report to them.

### **3. The Challenge of Using Primary Historical Documents**

The third challenge is a particular and central part of documenting your research, but this is what separates real historians from dabblers. Dabblers just read what other historians write and give their book report on it. That doesn't get you very far. You can't just read what other people wrote; you have to dig deeper. Local church historians have to become collectors of primary historical documents, and in doing this they can enlist the support of a committee to help with this central task.

**“Primary historical documents” are documents from the periods we’re studying.** If you’re writing about the history of Bugtussle Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1930s, you have to study something from Bugtussle Methodist Episcopal Church that actually dates from the 1930s. You don’t just study what some other historian wrote about Bugtussle Methodist Church in the 1930s, you have to find and use the Bugtussle documents from that period.

If that sounds a little daunting, there’s a wide range of primary historical documents available to study in a local church. Consider:

- **Minutes of church meetings** and other church records count as primary historical documents as long as they’re from the period you’re studying.
- **Annual Conference Minutes** count as primary historical documents. The Conference minutes should record every year which ministers were appointed to the circuit on which your church was located, though let me warn you against trying to describe who the “pastor” of a congregation was prior to the 1880s. Local church historians always want to give lists of the pastors of their congregation, but here’s the problem: Methodists didn’t have “pastors” assigned to individual congregations in that time, and it was only from about the 1880s that Methodists began appointing pastors to “station charges” as opposed to circuits with multiple clergy.
- **Church cornerstones and other inscriptions** can count as primary historical documents.
- **Legal documents and public records** such as the courthouse documents mentioned above count as primary historical documents.
- **Photographs** can count as primary historical documents, though sometimes they require specialized expertise to determine, for example, the age of the photograph.
- Similarly, **audio and video recordings** can count as primary historical documents for a congregation for specific eras.



- **Personal diaries, letters, and family records** also count as primary historical documents if they are from the period and location you're researching.
- **Oral accounts** such as we gather in oral history research can also count as primary historical documents.

A committee on local church archives and history can be immensely helpful in the work of finding and documenting historical sources for the congregation. The group as a whole can brainstorm about where records are likely to be found. Individual members can take on particular challenges, for example, collating various hand-written or typed minutes of church council and committee meetings, or making a trip to the courthouse or the district or conference offices to find and make copies of documents related to the congregation. In fact, I'll argue, this is likely where the committee can make its best work, not as likely in the area of writing the history (see point 7 below).

The important thing here is to ground your research in primary historical documents or narratives, and don't settle for just reading what other people have written on your subject. It's a big challenge to find and use primary historical documents, but it's what makes for excellence in historical research. Don't be a dabbler. Dive in!

#### 4. The Challenge of Utilizing Available Resources

A fourth challenge is to **utilize available resources**. Let me begin by giving you a few of my favorites. First, in the area of standard Methodist reference materials, one of the very best and least known of resources is the *General Minutes*, published annually by each Methodist denomination since early in the 1800s. The *General Minutes* are not to be confused with the minutes of General Conferences; they are a compilation of the minutes of all the annual conferences in a denomination, and since early in the twentieth century they have included an alphabetical index of all the clergy listed in them. So by using the *General Minutes* you can avoid having to search meticulously through each annual conference journal for specific years, and you can easily track clergy as they move across annual conference boundaries, etc. The *General Minutes* can also be a genealogist's dream-come-true, except that they only list "itinerant" clergy, not local preachers, local deacons, and local elders. And a lot of Methodist ministers in the past were "local" clergy who were not listed in annual conference minutes and thus are not listed in the *General Minutes*. Nevertheless, they're a terrific resource. Beyond the *General Minutes* are the annual minutes and journals of each annual conference, but the *General Minutes* offer the easiest access point for searching them.

Second, another good general resource is the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, a large two-volume work published in 1974 by the United Meth-



odist Publishing House.<sup>10</sup> This will give you a background, for example, on Methodism in “Michigan,” or “Dallas,” probably not smaller cities or towns. It also has articles on bishops and important Methodist leaders.

Third, learn to utilize annual conference histories, state histories of Methodist churches, and local church histories. There are some good histories of Methodism in particular states and regions,<sup>11</sup> and most annual conferences have some version of a history of the annual conference, even if these have a tendency to look like high school annuals. There are some local church histories of very high quality (like the *Cornerstones* volume on Methodism in Beaumont, Texas, to which my grandparents contributed) and these can inspire you in your own work, give you some ideas, and they just might reveal something about the local situation you will be studying.

The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church and local branches of the United Methodist Historical Society have a variety of resources available for your use. The United Methodist Archives are located in an excellent facility at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, and they do field inquiries from local congregations. I would issue only one word of warning, and that is to note that the UM Archives do not actually contain the records of all the predecessor denominations of the UMC: the archives of the Methodist Protestant Church are held at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and many archival materials from the United Brethren and then the EUB Church are held at United Theological Seminary in the Dayton suburb of Trotwood, Ohio.

## **5. The Challenge of Contextualizing Your History**

A history without context is just a chronicle of events, and a chronicle of events reads like a telephone book: this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened, etc. To make your history come alive, you need to contextualize it, to **place it in contexts where it can be understood against its environment**. So the historian is always working at multiple levels, looking at the very particular material about her subject, and then “backing up” a bit to look at the larger contexts in which this material appeared. Contexts are regional as well as national (and international), contexts can be from broader secular history as well as the broader history of a denomination.

Let me illustrate this with reference to my grandfather Cammack whom I have mentioned above. He told me one time that there was a “Northern” Methodist (that is, Methodist Episcopal Church) congregation in his part of Beaumont, Texas, in the 1920s. I filed this away in my memory for decades, until one day in the 1990s I was in the archives at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and I picked up the *General Minutes* of the

---

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 2 vols., (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Walter N. Vernon, Robert W. Sledge, Robert C. Monk, and Norman W. Spellmann, *The Methodist Excitement in Texas: A History* (Dallas: Texas United Methodist Historical Society, 1984).

Methodist Episcopal Church (what Southerners called the “Northern” Methodist Church), and sure enough for three or four years running in the 1920s there was a “North Beaumont Mission” listed in the Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Why? Well how about this: Beaumont in this very period was going through its second oil boom, and folks from northern states like Pennsylvania were moving there and wanted a church of their own. It makes sense that in this context, a Methodist Episcopal mission was seeded in Beaumont. Further research showed that it was not unusual in this time and place: the founder of Port Arthur, Texas, near Beaumont, was Arthur Stillwell, a New York native who became a railroad developer and founded the First Methodist Church of Port Arthur as a Methodist Episcopal (“northern” Methodist) congregation. Similarly, Woodville, Texas, an hour north of Beaumont, had a Methodist Episcopal congregation founded in the early 1900s by a Michigan-born lumber magnate who was Methodist Episcopal and did not want to identify with the local congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Context can reveal rich meanings—sometimes hidden and surprising meanings—behind local church histories like these. So here are some ways to face the challenge of contextualizing your history.

Be aware of developments in broader political and cultural history. Review a book or at least an encyclopedic article on a particular period you’re studying. If you’re writing on Methodist churches in the 1950s, take a look at David Halberstam’s book on *The Fifties*.<sup>12</sup> You might be thinking, well, I lived through that, and I remember those times. But a book like Halberstam’s will bring a great deal to mind that you may have forgotten. Another way to do this is to look at one of the standard chronologies, like *The People’s Chronology*<sup>13</sup> or the *Timetables of History*, and these are now available freely online.<sup>14</sup> A resource in this area with specific reference to Methodist history is Rex Matthews’s *Timetables of History: For Students of Methodism*.<sup>15</sup>

Be aware of your local history. Work on knowing what was going on, not only in the United States, but what was going on in your area in particular periods. The fact that oil was discovered near Beaumont, Texas, on January 10, 1901, had an enormous impact on the history of that area, and it affected all of the churches in the area, and led to the phenomenon of Black as well as White northern Methodists moving to that particular area in that particular time. But to figure that out, you have to know the broader history of the region.

You also need to know your denominational history. At the very least, you need to know the basic chart of Methodist denominational divisions and reunions. Was there a Bugtussle United Methodist Church in the 1930s? Of

---

<sup>12</sup> David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard, 1953).

<sup>13</sup> James Trager, *The People’s Chronology* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Grun, *The Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events, Based on Werner Stein’s Kulturfahrplan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Rex Matthews, *Timetables of History: For Students of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

course not. The bewildering truth is that in the 1930s it might have been the Bugtussle Methodist Episcopal Church or the Bugtussle Methodist Episcopal Church, South, or the Bugtussle Methodist Protestant Church or the Bugtussle United Brethren Church or the Bugtussle Evangelical Church. It makes a difference. To return to my Beaumont example, if you were to think of all the Methodist-related churches in Beaumont simply as “Methodist” without distinguishing the Methodist Episcopal church from the dominant Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in that area, the story told above about a Methodist Episcopal Mission in northern Beaumont would not make sense. And it’s important to know this history of divisions and reunions so, for example, you don’t refer inappropriately to the “Bugtussle United Methodist Church” in 1963, five years before the United Methodist Church was formed.

Denominational histories will help contextualize what was going on and make more sense of these denominational divisions and unions. Is your church one of those (like First UMC in Houston, Texas) that has little rooms in the back that can be closed off with partitions? You may have what we call an “Akron Plan” church building, an architectural form that was first developed at First Methodist Church in Akron, Ohio, in the 1860s and which became enormously popular in the late nineteenth century. Denominational histories can offer this kind of general context. The most recent history of The United Methodist Church is *The Methodist Experience in America* by Russell E. Richey, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Kenneth Rowe (Abingdon Press, 2010), and a shorter version is entitled *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Abingdon Press, 2012).<sup>16</sup> There are some excellent essays on particular eras and movements in Methodist history in the older three-volume *History of American Methodism* that was published back in the early 1960s.

You also need to be aware of regional denominational histories, including local church histories in your area. *The Methodist Excitement in Texas* (1984) is a good place to start for Texas Methodist churches, but there will also be histories of your annual conference, and the histories of other congregations in your area can be very important for setting contexts.

## **6. The Challenge of Organizing Your History**

A sixth challenge is that of **organizing your history**. History has to take a form, and a historian ought to be a good story teller, even if what we tell is what we know to be the truth and not just “mainly” the truth. The challenge of organizing our history, however, is not quite so problematic because we have a great default option, and that is simply chronology. Start by organizing your material in chronological order, then utilize a different scheme if you really need to. Chronology is the way mother nature organizes history, and it’s not nice to fool mother nature. I often get annoyed with historical

---

<sup>16</sup> Russell E. Richey, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Kenneth Rowe, *The Methodist Experience in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010); and the same authors, *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

writers who are telling me about the 1940s and then they jump back and say, “Back in 1925 . . .” and I think: “Why didn’t you tell me that back *then*? Not here when you’re dealing with 1942.” Follow the chronology and sooner or later your material will more or less organize itself into sections and maybe chapters if it’s a book-length work.

You may have to adopt another scheme if your subject is complex; for example, if two institutions eventually merge to form your congregation, then it’s appropriate to tell one narrative, then back up and tell the other. It is also appropriate to pause at points and give your readers appropriate background information on people and events that will figure in your history. But chronology will inevitably be the overall organizational scheme for a history, and it’s the right place to begin.

## 7. The Challenge of Writing Your History

Finally, we face **the challenge of writing history**. By leaving this to the last, I do not mean at all that writing is the last thing that you do. Please hear this carefully: *one of the worst mistakes you can possibly make is to suppose that you can **first** do your historical research and **then** write your history*. This is an almost certain guarantee of failure. I had friends in graduate school 35 years ago who said they were going to do their research first and then write their dissertations. They’re still working on their research.

Here’s why that idea doesn’t work: *There is no end to research*. My strong advice to you is: begin writing right now, today. Put your pen to your paper or your fingers to your keyboard this afternoon and start writing. Just write something down. You may change it all later. There is a quotation often attributed to Ernest Hemingway but never documented so far as I can tell, so this is probably just a piece of accumulated folk wisdom. I hope you’ll pardon me for quoting this in a Methodist context, but it really is relevant. The saying is: “The first draft of anything is shit.” You just have to start writing. Write with a pencil if you need to convince yourself that this isn’t permanent, but start writing.

Writing is the test of research. You never really know if you have done enough research until you start writing. So start writing. This may seem contrary to everything I’ve said about telling the truth and documenting what you claim, and so forth, but it’s not. The process of writing is when you get honest, when you tell the truth, when you realize what you know and don’t know, when you realize what other research you really need to do, what documentation is still lacking in your project. Again, *writing is the true test of research*.

What do you do when you get stuck in your writing? Here are three suggestions. First, move on. I just put three asterisks (\*\*\*) at a point I know I need to return to, or at a point where I need to go back and document a quotation, and I keep on writing. Second, if you’re stuck, focus on a different topic, work on it for a while, and then return to your topic. Often when we’re stuck it’s our minds that are stuck in a rut and after doing something

else for a while, we can see the earlier problem more clearly. Third, talk to someone or read something. It's amazing how just talking—even if the other person has no advice at all—can clarify the problems we're facing in writing. The same is true of reading in a related area and then coming back to your research with a fresh perspective.

Do you remember the concluding sentences in *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White? "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."<sup>17</sup> That's especially appropriate if you know that E. B. White was not only a good writer, but also a teacher of writing. He was the co-author, with Orlo Strunk, of the classic little book on *The Elements of Style*. I keep a copy by my bedside and read it just for inspiration. Imagine that: a really well-written book on the art of writing well! Observe how others write historical narratives and pay attention to how they develop their narratives. What do they do that gives a narrative life and interest? Go and do thou likewise.

One specific piece of advice on this matter: I strongly urge you not to write in committees. Committees are notorious for bad writing. Almost any individual can write better than a committee. Sometimes folks think that if they divide up a project and each of the five members of a committee takes a chapter, they'll have a book in no time. That is also almost guaranteed to end in failure, or (more likely) in one member of the committee doing five times as much work as it would have taken to write the whole history herself while still crediting all the other members of the committee.

And so I solemnly say unto thee, write thine own history. Put your name on it. If someone else wants to approach the topic different, then your response should be, "Sorry. This is my work. You go write your own." Don't let a committee hoodwink you into doing their bidding. If you work with a committee, you need to secure their solemn oath that you will have the freedom that an author needs to write your own history. If it comes out under your name, then you are going to be responsible for it, not the committee. If you work with a committee, the committee needs to empower you to write your own history.

## Conclusion

That's a beginning. This is what I have said. You are joining an illustrious fellowship as a church historian. We welcome you to this fellowship and hope we can help you as you can almost certainly help us. Each of you has unique gifts and perspectives to bring to the challenge of being a church historian. I have exhorted you to **tell the truth, document your history, use primary historical documents, utilize available resources, contextualize your history, organize your history, and write it well**. So start writing . . . right now!

---

<sup>17</sup> E. B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (New York: Harper, 1952), 184.