The past isn't past: The weight of congregational history

by Margaret Bendroth in the February 9, 2010 issue

Who cares about history? I think about this question a lot because of my job as director of the Congregational Library in Boston. My association with this venerable Yankee institution, a large collection of things both important and inexplicable, means I'm often invited to churches that are celebrating anniversaries. It's the part of my job I enjoy the most—bringing words of greeting from long-dead Congregationalists whose memories are stored away in our climate-controlled archive.

I have been around long enough to recognize a congregation's collective dread when they're told that a historian is going to give the Sunday sermon, so I do a little advance research and come prepared with a few names and anecdotes from the congregation's particular story.

The more I have read congregational histories, the more I notice something that is hard to talk about: contemporary congregations seemed to be living out the sins of their ancestors. In all kinds of odd and sometimes humorous ways, congregations are all haunted by the past.

I began musing about this in earnest after visiting a mid-sized church on Cape Cod. The pastor had done a wonderful job pulling together a detailed narrative of the past 300 years, and I read almost the whole thing in one sitting. As I laid the book down, however, I began to feel obligated to pass on an urgent word of advice to this pastor and to any who followed him: *Do not under any circumstances go near the water*. His predecessors had drowned with depressing regularity, not just in the ocean as one might expect, but in lakes and rivers, sometimes falling off boats and sometimes just disappearing in the midst of a swim. If I were going to serve a pastorate there, I'd come with a life preserver.

I visited one 350-year-old church that had a semipublic history of sexual scandal. I also knew that it had been organized in the early 1600s under somewhat dicey

circumstances, with a pastor exiled from Boston under the shadow of heresy. As the years passed, the church seemed to regularly skirt the edges of propriety. After reading that congregation's history I wanted to put the library copy back on the shelf in a plain brown paper wrapper.

I am exaggerating a little bit to make my point. I do not mean to suggest that some kind of weird determinism is at work. But I do believe that the past plays an important, often unarticulated role in creating the present-day realities of religious institutions. Memories survive in different ways, sometimes as a deep undercurrent of sadness or disappointment, sometimes as a tendency toward suspicion of outsiders or as resentment of authority.

The past can work in positive ways too, inuring a centuries-old congregation against panic or despair. All this suggests the importance of understanding the institutional DNA of a place—that broad set of predilections that shape (but do not determine) a church or a denomination's life course.

The daily demands of congregational life don't usually allow for critical reflection along these lines. In many churches, awareness of history rarely goes beyond a memory of old grievances. Many of the groups I visit have relatively little understanding of the origins of their congregations, let alone the origins of the denomination they may still claim. One consequence is that in the course of my visits to churches I regularly come across old record books, the painstaking labor of years—sometimes centuries—stuffed into boxes and left in unheated closets or packed away like relics, left in no one's particular care.

On the denominational level, historical awareness is often boiled down to a list of important "firsts" or various progressive stands on social issues. This string of successes is important and inspirational, but it can also become a way of disowning past sins and errors that are still folded into current realities. Most denominations end up with a baseball-trading-card approach to history—they highlight singular achievements but don't explore larger complexities. I suspect this aversion is one reason why the historical memory of mainline denominations seems to stop somewhere after the Civil War and pick up again in the 1960s. The long intervening decades, marking mainline Protestantism's glory days and its deepest crises, are virtually unknown territory.

What would happen if churches took their histories seriously? What if they found authentic footing in their particular past, not just in their theological traditions of origin, but in the deeper social and cultural soil from which they've grown? What if mainline churches decided to undertake a critical appropriation of their own history, as they have already done with biblical scholarship? Thoughtful observers like Diana Butler Bass have talked of the need for "re-traditioning," building new practices and new ways of connecting to history as a source of congregational vitality. I suspect, however, that mainline churches have some difficult emotional territory to traverse before those practices will ever have much of an effect.

Some of the reasons why history is a daunting subject for mainline Protestants are baldly practical. Many of them are offspring of multiple ecumenical mergers, and they draw from multiple denominational bloodlines. Specific remembering, especially about simpler times with fewer obligations and fewer strings of adjectives, can hint of disloyalty. This often means that historic denominational institutions—like the Congregational Library, for instance—are left in historical limbo, banished like an old girlfriend from the memory of an earnestly faithful husband. Many mainline churches in small towns and cities are hampered by their de facto status as the community church, a semipublic space that hosts the local Boy Scout troop and the Red Cross blood drive, maybe even the town meeting. Unlike smaller sectarian groups with very specific brand labels, many mainliners have long since lost any compulsion to explain themselves to anyone, historically or otherwise.

The relative absence of memory among mainliners distinguishes them from evangelicals. Conservative Protes tants are a diverse group drawn from a variety of theological and denominational sources, and they are justly famous for epic disputes on matters both social and doctrinal. If they have one common bond, something that draws them together under one cultural roof, it is a collective memory of loss. Once the appointed custodians of American culture, the ones who set both the moral tone and the political agenda, evangelicals came up hard against the secularizing forces of the early 20th century. In their story, told so well by a growing cadre of evangelical historians, the culture wars of the 1920s pitted a rising fundamentalist faction determined to battle for the "faith once delivered for all the saints" against an entrenched and determined liberal bureaucracy.

The conflict ended badly for the fundamentalists and they were routed from leadership, but their defeat soon became the stuff of legend. In the mid-20th century, they embraced their new role as religious pariahs, turning old grievances

into entrepreneurial energies that fueled a massive campaign of institution-building. Though direct conscious memory of those confrontations may have died, their legacy, in all its present-day complexity, lives on. It's often said that winners are the ones who write history, but it's the losers who remember it most often—and the most effectively.

A few hundred years ago, a society's "rememberers" were not ink-stained wretches in academic libraries but important, idealized figures. Deep connection to the events of the past was a privileged status, a sign of piety and character. As David Gross writes in *Lost Time*: *On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*, the seers and sages who told those old stories were by definition people who possessed unique spiritual gifts. In the days before printing presses and copying machines, remembering required special focus and mental discipline—qualities long deemed essential to carving out the life of the soul. Not surprisingly perhaps, the great saints of Christian hagiography were notable for miraculous feats of memory. St. Francis, it was said, could recall every event in his life since childhood; St. Anthony could recite the entire Bible after simply hearing it read aloud. Remembering was also associated with creativity—in Greek myth Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was mother of the Muses—because knowledge of things past was the stuff of authentic inspiration. The very act of recollecting great words and deeds was inherently ennobling.

Modern society, however, rewards forgetters. Better to drop it and move on, the self-help books advise; let bygones be bygones, make a fresh start. And so we teach children to improvise and innovate—we reward the ones who create something brand new, who think "outside the box" and are free from old regrets and superstitions. We are suspicious of memory, and for good reason: we recognize how history can be put in the service of fanaticism and greed—and how allegiance to the past has so often choked off the wind of the Spirit.

When formal seminary education was first offered in the early 19th century, students did not take any church history until their final year. Biblical studies and theology were fine for introductory students, so the reasoning went, but history was far too fraught a subject for rank beginners in divinity. A long view of the past would invite students to reconsider everything they thought was sure and to begin to reason on a vast and relative scale. History challenges the idea that there is only one truth and only one way of seeing things, and it challenges the assumption that the church is always a fountain of virtue, always stretching after the example of Christ. Perhaps those old curriculum designers knew that memory is a dangerous

thing and that we should not engage our ancestors lightly.

In the end, we avoid history, I suspect, because it forces us to come to grips with our finitude. The past is the realm of the dear and not-so-dear departed. I sometimes contemplate with awe the fact that every item in our archives is a living connection with someone now on the other side of mystery. The library is full of books by people whose arduous life work survives only as a tiny blip of an obituary notice in some obscure publication. In my work, I pause now and then to say their names aloud, not to summon their spirits but to give the universe a chance to hear an old and beloved combination of words one more time.

Engaging the past is something more than a sudden encounter with Great Aunt Harriet in the upstairs bedroom. Critical reflection on all the stuff of history, the good as well as the bad, is a source and a sign of institutional vitality. Congregations that understand their origins and how their spiritual DNA has quietly shaped their course over the years are richer and more textured communities than they would be otherwise. Denomi nations with long and intricate association with their past are more sure-footed, more three-dimensional than those content just to skim off a famous name or two now and then.

God may be “still speaking,” as they say in my denomination, the United Church of Christ, but that same God is also the Ancient of Days, loved and sought by generations of people who walked this earth many years before any of us came along. Those now voiceless men and women once owned and inhabited the earth we now enjoy; they contemplated the same horizon of hills and sunsets that we do; they toiled along streets that we walk on. They demand our respect, our thanks and our willingness to remember them with honesty and grace, never losing sight of what they might still be saying.