

Why our church's centennial was worth celebrating

“The history of a church,” one member wrote in an old scrapbook I found, is “an unfolding pageant of life.”

by [Lee Hull Moses](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue
historical photos

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In the hallway between the sanctuary and my office is a tall glass case where we keep historical artifacts from our congregation, an odd assortment of scrapbooks, photographs, and papers collected over the past 100 years. The cabinet is not particularly well organized. Board meeting minutes from 1917 lie next to a newspaper clipping from the 1950s and a worship bulletin from the early '90s. True historians would grimace at the way the papers are stored, and the casual way we rifle through them looking for some tidbit of information or another. The door of the cabinet sticks a bit and has to be jiggled at just the right angle to be opened.

In the week before our centennial anniversary, I spent a good amount of time sitting on the floor by that glass case, reading up on a century's worth of history. I looked through old scrapbooks and commemorative programs from past anniversaries. I read newsletter articles and old bulletins. I even skimmed through those board meeting minutes from the first year. (They were not as interesting as I had hoped—I guess I was looking for a little church drama, but whoever that first secretary was didn't spill the beans.) There are not many pictures of the bungalow that served as the original church building, but still, I could imagine people dressed in their Sunday best stepping up onto the porch and into the sanctuary for worship.

One of the treasures I discovered was a nondescript scrapbook, well made and sturdy, with no title on the cover. Inside, on thick pages slightly browned with age, was a carefully typed history of the congregation, written in 1960 by—as the first page proudly declared—a Mrs. C. W. (Maud Trent) Holshouser. I liked her immediately, both for the way she refused to let her maiden name be lost to history and for this line, tucked into a paragraph about the committee of women whose organizing efforts led to the founding of the congregation: “The men, while not as well organized in early years as the women, always stood solidly behind the women in their undertakings.”

It's not clear what moved Mrs. Holshouser to write this history; 1960 was not a major anniversary year nor, as far as I can tell, an otherwise significant year in the life of the church. But her reverence for the story of this church and its people had me coming back to these browned pages again and again. “The history of a church,” she writes, “like any history, is the history of people—an unfolding pageant of life, with its joys and heartaches, work and play, sacrifice and service, worship and fellowship—a continuing drama played in a setting of hours spent at church and reaching out into homes, community and the world—an endless chain linking closely the past, present, and future.”

We kicked off our yearlong centennial celebration in 2016, on our 99th birthday, with a luncheon after church. We invited people to come dressed in their 1917 best, and I was surprised at how many people took the time to dress up. There were bow ties, long skirts, hats, parasols. On our Facebook page, one church member coined the hashtag #partylikeits1917, which struck me as just the right combination of celebratory and silly.

A year later we held two main celebrations: one on the exact centennial date of our founding—which happened to be Palm Sunday weekend, an inconvenient time for a big to-do—and the other on the weekend of Pentecost Sunday, a perfect time to celebrate the birthday of the church and the ongoing work ahead of us. This made for a whole season of festivities in between: a prayer service at our original location, a walk from there to our current building, an outdoor festival with a bounce house and hot dogs, a big celebration worship service, and a catered lunch. For two months, nearly everything we did pointed to the anniversary and beyond, becoming part of the celebration.

We collected 100 scarves and hats to donate to the homeless day center, 100 packages of diapers and wipes for a family shelter, and 100 canned goods for the food pantry. We made 100 Valentine's Day cards to send to staff at assisted living centers in town. A major fundraising campaign succeeded in bringing the balance of our new endowment fund up to \$100,000, helping to ensure that our ministries will continue well into our second century. All this was pulled off by a powerhouse planning committee that dreamed up big dreams, tended to small details, and prayed for good weather.

There was significant age diversity within the planning committee—as well as at the celebration itself. At any given anniversary event, we had people who remembered the original church building, which we moved out of in 1953. We also had people in their twenties and early thirties, mostly new members without a long-term connection to the church. Our congregation increasingly sees itself as an intergenerational church, and we've mostly gotten away from age-specific programming. Still, I was a bit surprised to see the younger people. We are hardly hip or trendy; we don't have a band or a giant youth program. And one doesn't usually see “celebrate milestone anniversary” among the tips for churches hoping to attract new young families.

When I asked the young adults why they cared about the anniversary, they told me that they want to be part of something larger than themselves. They want to be part of a community that existed before they showed up and that will go on into the future. One woman said she hopes to be around in another 50 years, so she can look back and remember that she was part of this celebration.

We had two babies on the way that summer, and both expectant mothers were at several of the anniversary events. I didn't ask them this exactly, but I suspect that they felt a growing need, as their families grow, to be connected to a community. I like the idea of those moms telling their kids one day that they were at the anniversary in utero. Regardless of age, we all seem to be yearning for a connection to something more lasting, something less ephemeral, than our individual lives. Given the general consensus that millennials are not joiners, and that they are skeptical about institutions like the church, this gives me great hope not just for my congregation, but for the world.

Throughout our celebration, I was struck by the ways we tell the history of a congregation like this one by describing significant changes to the building. A rough sketch goes something like this: the congregation, originally called Elm Street Christian Church, was founded in 1917 and dedicated the first building in 1919. In 1953, we moved to our “new” location and became First Christian Church. The new building sat topless until the steeple was added in 1957. In the mid-80s, the elevator narthex was added; a decade later, the education wing was built. In 2011 we replaced the original steeple, and in 2012 we renovated our entryway and gathering space.

These are key dates in the life of the church, to be sure. We practice an incarnational faith, and buildings literally give us something physical to hang on to, changes by which to mark time. But those dates don't tell much at all about the ministry that was going on here, the lives of the people who were part of the congregation. The building gives us the tangible hold on history, but it really is the “unfolding pageant of life”—to quote Mrs. Holshouser—that makes up the history of the church.

Also tempting is to leave out the difficult parts of a congregation's past: the periods of conflict, the arguments at board meetings, the words spoken in anger, the times when the church should have spoken but kept silent. I have to imagine that in the history of this congregation—a predominantly white congregation in the South—there have been some things we'd rather not claim, some injustices not documented in that glass cabinet with the sticky door.

At our celebration worship service, we said a prayer of confession for the times when we were not welcoming to all, for the times when we did not treat each other with kindness. Such confession does not atone for all the sins of our communal past, but perhaps it served as a reminder that to recognize the history of a people is to acknowledge that we are human, in need of God's grace.

The week after the final celebration, we were all exhausted—but it was that good kind of exhaustion, when you've just done something big and full and wonderful. We sent off a newsletter, with lots of anniversary pictures and a calendar of events coming up. A volunteer took the canned goods we'd collected over to the food pantry. I made some hospital visits and edited the bulletin for the coming Sunday. A group of our young people headed off to church camp. One of the babies we'd been waiting for was born, the first baby of our second century. The Pentecost wind still rushes in, and the work of the church goes on. The pageant of life unfolds.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Worth remembering."