

# CELEBRATING CONGREGATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES

## WHY CELEBRATE?

Celebrating a congregational anniversary is an opportunity to recalling the good things that have happened in the past, and look forward to the good things that will happen in the future. Lutheran congregations got their start on the faith and hope of those who first organized them. And, like the people of Israel at Passover, we too want to celebrate God's continuing love and kindness for us. Celebrating a congregational anniversary helps express the reasons we trust in God. It speaks to us not just as single individuals, but as a group, sharing the goodness and greatness of God within a congregation.

Observing a congregational anniversary is a little like celebrating a birthday. You do it because you love and respect the person whose birthday it is. A congregational anniversary provides all kinds of opportunities for remembering, renewing, refocusing, rededicating and reaching out. It gives us the chance to place ourselves and our congregation into the larger context of the community, the country and the world.

Exactly how a congregation celebrates may depend on the nature of the congregation. Perhaps it was a congregation originally founded by German wheat farmers on the plains of Nebraska. Or one founded in Manhattan by Dutch Lutherans in colonial America. Or one by Norwegian lumbermen in the forests of Minnesota. Or one by Finnish miners in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Or one by Slovak steelmen in Pennsylvania. Celebrating an anniversary gives you the chance to recall and renew those roots.

It's also a good time to examine the mission of your congregation. (See <http://www.elca.org/questions/Results.asp?recid=8>) There's no question that congregations need to rebuild all the time. They need new ways to meet changing conditions, new ways to integrate young people and old, new approaches to situations in the community. Pausing with an anniversary celebration, you can take a close look at what people's expectations are of the congregation. It's like taking a time out in a football game-giving you a chance to regroup. and figure out the next play.

Consider writing a congregational plan, a goal. Perhaps you'll get inspired by the events connected with the anniversary, such as supporting a new mission or holding a drive for any other worthwhile cause. The very process will make your congregation and those who belong to it stronger and more active. As your congregation gets involved in anniversary activities, members will acquire an ownership in them -- taking a personal interest in their development and success. If, for example, you print an anniversary booklet, people will look through it with care for the names of their grandparents, perhaps even for their own.

So a congregational anniversary is not something vague that happens hundreds of miles away. It's here and now. It's you and me. It's real. It's involvement. It's rededication. And that's what makes it all worthwhile and what convinces many people to get personally involved.

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## PLANNING YOUR ANNIVERSARY

How successful and enjoyable your anniversary will be depends mostly on how well you plan. Early and thorough planning is essential. Details will come as you think and talk about what you want to do, but try to get started at least two years before the event itself, especially if you are planning a year's worth of events.

What many congregations celebrate most is of course a major anniversary of the group -- a 25th, a 50th, a 75th, a 100th. A few Lutheran congregations in the eastern part of the country date all the way back to the first half of the 1600s, and quite a few to the 1700s. It's not always easy to tell exactly when a congregation was born. Was it when eight people gathered for worship in a sod shanty? When a visiting Lutheran pastor performed the first service of communion? When the first congregational building was dedicated? Usually the official date is the one registered with the church body to which the congregation belongs. Don't rule out congregational celebrations other than congregational birthdays. There's good reason to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a pastor's ordination or perhaps her/his service to your congregation -- or the 50th anniversary of a building ...

Get a committee together. Advertise your hopes and plans through the congregation's bulletins and newsletter and bulletin boards. Ask for ideas. Get people talking. Involve the congregation: men, women, youngsters, older folks, the choir, and of course, the pastor. Talk to neighboring congregations or to relatives about how they celebrated at their congregations. There's a wealth of experience and joy out there in the Lutheran world if you bother to tap into it. Half a dozen seminaries (<http://www.elca.org/theologicaleducation/seminaries/>) have taught seminars about celebrating anniversaries and writing congregational histories. Many church colleges (<http://www.elca.org/colleges/find/>) and high schools have, too. Ask one of the historians there.

There's probably someone at your synod (<http://www.elca.org/synods/regions.and.synods.html>) who can be helpful, as well. Church bodies themselves can assist through their archives (<http://www.elca.org/archives/regsyn.html>) and historical institutes. Above all, involve as many people as possible, inside and outside the congregation. Get all the organizations in the congregation involved, perhaps each with specific projects.

Then it's time to start focusing on events themselves, not forgetting worship, music, fellowship, displays, writing a history, publishing support materials, arranging publicity, gathering photos and historical documents, inviting guests, and anything else you want to do.

## **CELEBRATING CONGREGATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES**

### **CELEBRATING THROUGH WORSHIP**

When the people of Israel had safely passed over the Red Sea, they celebrated with song, dance, praise and antiphonal readings. Moses and Miriam sang a long psalm of praise, with such words as, "I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously." (Exodus 15)

Christians have always responded with thanks and praise for what God has done for them, either at anniversary time or when there was some other cause for celebration: the end of a war, rain in time of drought, a wedding, construction of a new building, and so forth.

Congregational anniversaries can be celebrated with a single rally or service, or with a series of activities perhaps spread out over a year. You might focus on the founders of the congregation, on pastors and teachers who have served, on the different organizations within the congregation and what they have done, on Christian education, on ministry to the community, or on foreign missions.

Don't neglect the ethnic background of your congregation. You might want to consider a whole service in German, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish or other language used in worship in the past. You might prefer to provide the original flavor, for example, by doing every other verse of a hymn or the Lord's Prayer or Apostles' Creed, in a foreign language. Keep in mind that listening to long Scripture readings or a sermon in a language one doesn't understand requires more patience than most churchgoers are now used to.

You probably can find some of the liturgies that were used 50 or 100 years ago. Hymnals, orders of worship and catechisms that were used when your congregation was organized reflect the wide variety of Lutheran forms used in almost every church body over the years. Many of them were considerably different from those we use now. Old pictures may show how the pastor once dressed -- perhaps in a black frock coat with winged collar and black tie. If the pastor wore a robe, common among many Lutherans, it probably was a Geneva gown, not a cassock and surplice.

To do the preaching, you may invite former pastors. Also make an effort to invite friends and relatives who have moved elsewhere. One Indiana congregation sent off more than a dozen young men to the seminary in a 40-year period. That's a great testimonial to the role model of the pastor who had served them all that time. The congregation solved its problem of which pastors to invite back by choosing the first three.

Perhaps you'd rather have a guest speaker from the synod staff, or a missionary, or perhaps a historian from one of the seminaries or church colleges. Any of these people could perhaps share a sense of what belonging to the church was like when it was first organized.

# **CELEBRATING CONGREGATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES**

## **CELEBRATING THROUGH MUSIC**

Ever since Martin Luther imported choirmasters and organists from Leipzig, Germany, to teach churchgoers in Wittenberg how to sing the hymns and liturgy, the Lutheran Church has been known as the singing church. Once an official from Rome wrote that Luther won more people for the Reformation with his music than with his sermons.

Doubtless there's a significant place in your anniversary celebration for music. In the services themselves, you may want to refer back to earlier hymnals or orders of service and use again much of the same music that was common at the time the congregation was founded. Perhaps you'll find the program from a choir concert or organ recital and be able to repeat it with your present choir and organist. Consider inviting guest artists.

To get people interested in music, conduct a poll to discover their favorite hymns. Break it down by age, to see how the tastes of the 70-year-olds differ from those of the teenagers. If you have a bell choir, have it focus on older hymns. The tradition of bell choirs is probably more British than continental, but a bell choir is colorful and can always be put to good Lutheran use. The anniversary can provide a spark to organize a new children's choir or other ensemble. In an earlier age, when almost everyone learned to play a musical instrument, congregational bands were common. Often these bands featured brass instruments, used to introduce hymns or for special music. Bands with stringed instruments also were common. In Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach had bands play antiphonally from different parts of the congregational and different balconies. That's how he had the Christmas Cantata performed when he first came there, with scattered groups of instrumentalists and singers. In some American congregations, the band played in almost every congregational service, except perhaps during Advent and Lent. If the congregation had a picnic grove, common in Midwestern Lutheran churches, they often played there during the summertime.

Since congregational anniversaries are a time of celebrating history, you might also want to pick four or five solidly Lutheran hymns and explain how they came to be written, how they related to the times, and what they mean for us now. Consider hymns by Martin Luther, Paul Gerhardt and Philipp Nicolai. They can then be sung as part of a congregational service, perhaps with a vocal soloist or violinist. The congregation could join in for a verse or two. Or, you could tell the story of the hymn in the congregational bulletin or in a newsletter.

## **CELEBRATING CONGREGATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES**

### **CELEBRATING THROUGH CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES**

The number of things you can do culturally and socially to help celebrate an anniversary is almost endless. What you decide on as you involve different people and organizations within the congregation can reveal a rich quilt work of who your people are and what they like to do. For at least one of your heritage Sundays you'll want to include some kind of celebratory eating - a potluck, a catered dinner, or some kind of common meal together. From the time of the Old Testament, eating together has been a bond of friendship and hospitality. One meal of ethnic foods that might have been served when the congregation was formed; in good weather, consider going outdoors for an old-fashioned ice cream social. Maybe the youth would like to provide lemonade and coffee after worship.

Some congregations have encouraged people to come dressed as their ancestors might have been, or to sew costumes based on old pictures. Some have encouraged beard-growing. Some have driven to church in a horse and buggy or a classic old car.

If your congregation has a cemetery, you might focus an event around the old burial grounds. For example, publish a map of the burial plots. List some of the more unusual or oldest inscriptions. Have a cemetery walk and let a history buff tell something of interest about a few of the people buried there.

Other congregations have sponsored a display of old photographs. These are useful not only as a way to involve many people but to provide the congregation with the chance to make copies of some of the best photos for its archives. Photos might be of former buildings, committees, Sunday school teachers or festival services. They could even depict the way of life or homes of the families who were active in the congregation's early years. Other kinds of displays might also be interesting. If your community was a farming one, consider pictures of threshing machines, harvest crews and binders. Actual farm implements would generate interest -- sickles, scythes, draw knives, dehorning tools, braces and bits.

Displaying anything of the vintage of the congregation's founding might be interesting -- perhaps the old set of communion ware, children's toys, catechisms, Bibles and hymnals, old wedding certificates, Christmas ornaments, etc. One congregation found enough old ornaments to decorate a Christmas tree the way it would have been 75 years earlier, complete with real candle holders and candles, as is still the custom in some churches even today. (But, as a safety precaution, it would be best not to light the candles.)

Such displays of archival materials and photos are opportunities to invite community members into your building and then providing them with more information about the congregation's current ministries.

For entertainment, you might want to consider a skit or pageant about church life when the congregation was founded. There's plenty of room for humor and costume in such a skit, but don't overlook the problems the congregation faced, either. Heating, lighting, traveling, cooking -- the members probably faced all kinds of problems we don't consider today.

The "charter members" or significant families, vital to the beginning of your ministry, might want to display family pictures or genealogies. One congregation used a family picture which showed a country congregational wedding, where family and friends had gathered scores of baskets of wild daisies to fill the chancel. Go to the congregational archives to see what you can find. Perhaps you'll find a list of weddings in the early years of the congregation's history. Or you may discover a call to an early pastor offering, for example, a salary of \$400 per year plus a house, use of a horse and buggy, four cords of firewood and 40 bales of hay.

Perhaps you can even dig up some old children's games to keep the youngsters busy -- games their grandparents knew well, such as mumblety-peg, kick the can, marbles, hide and seek and captain-may-I.

## **CELEBRATING CONGREGATIONAL ANNIVERSARIES**

### **WRITING A CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY**

Think of history not as history but as a story. If the one you write isn't interesting, people won't read it. It's true, you do need to gather some historical facts: who the first preacher was, whether the site was donated, who put up the building, and so forth. But you also have to put your congregation into the bigger Lutheran picture. For example, was yours one of those congregations on the prairies that developed around the time of the Civil War? Were the members recruited from the Rheinland or Hessia by some American land company or a railroad developer? Did the settlers homestead or did they buy their land for a dollar or two an acre?

If yours is one of the older congregations in Georgia or the Carolinas, for example, chances are it was first started by the Salzburgers. They were Lutherans who were pushed out of Austria by a series of Catholic archbishops at various times in the 1600s and 1700s. Many fled to Berlin, East Prussia and Scandinavia. But many others also wound up in America.

If yours is one of the older congregations in Pennsylvania, perhaps you have a strong tie with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who came to America in the 1740s and helped organize the many scattered flocks of Lutherans into the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

Perhaps yours is one of the Lutheran congregations started by the Swedes along the Delaware or the Dutch along the Hudson, dating as far back as the 1600s. Scores of these old Swedish congregations turned Episcopalian when they could no longer get pastors from Sweden -- like the famous Old Swedes Church in Philadelphia.

Maybe your congregation had its roots in the gold rush in California. Or the Klondike. Or Colorado. Maybe your congregation's founders came over with the Saxons to Missouri in the 1830s.

Try to place your own congregation into the historical picture of the times. How? Check with your county and state historical societies. Talk with a local librarian. See if any of your members have old diaries or genealogical charts. Browse through the congregation's archives. Read E. Clifford Nelson's "Lutherans in North America" and relate what was happening in your congregation to what was happening in neighboring ones.

Try to get a feel for what people did for a living. How they heated their homes. Whether they provided the pastor with a horse. Look at pictures in the library. The more detail, research and human interest you can mix into your history, the more worth reading it will be. Look for stories like the big blizzard that kept all but two people from showing up at church, or the lame horse that forced the pastor to hitchhike 15 miles to preach at his second congregation.

Perhaps you should start by making a list of important names and dates -- pastors, places and buildings. Who started the congregation? Why? Where did the members come from? Look for old photographs of people and places and include them in your printed history. Did the congregation ever relocate? What festivals were celebrated? What happened at Christmas and Easter? Did the congregation have a cemetery? What languages were used and when did they change? How long did the congregation remain independent? When did it join a church body? In the course of its history, how many church bodies did it belong to?

Pretend you're writing the history only for those who are now members, but include enough names and dates and pictures to make it of permanent interest. Review it with your pastor and a half dozen others whose judgment you value. Let the text age a few weeks so you can recall some of the things you overlooked.

Discuss layout, design and typeface with an artist or somebody at a local press who often does this sort of thing. Decide whether you can afford a four-color cover, or at least two-color. Get cost estimates. The more graphics you use, the more it will be read. Some people look first at the pictures and then read the text. Try to get the history in print and circulated to your members at the beginning of your anniversary year.

Send press releases to radio or television stations, the local newspaper, to the synod office and The Lutheran (<http://www.thelutheran.org/template/index.cfm>). Be sure to send along a copy of the history, perhaps highlighted or marked with stick-on tabs marking activities you think might be of general interest.

Send copies of your history to the people who handle archives for your church body for their permanent records. In fact, before you get too far in your original research, you might even write them for photocopies of anything that may be in their records about your congregation. Often, they know things that may have been forgotten locally.

Good luck. Remembering and writing down the past can be plenty of fun for everybody involved.

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## MORE IDEA STARTERS

What can you expect when you celebrate a congregational anniversary? Luther College in Decorah, Iowa (<http://www.luther.edu/>), operates a Center for Congregation Heritage Studies. The center polled 70 congregations which held such celebrations. Many of the responses to the poll follow, along with other ideas which may prove helpful for your celebration.

- ★ We contracted with an artist for a wonderful watercolor of the old church building.
- ★ We were surprised to have letters of congratulation from the President of the United States, the governor and the mayor.
- ★ Start planning three years ahead of time, better yet, five years.
- ★ I would have liked a confirmation reunion included. But by the time we considered it, there wasn't enough time to gather the addresses.
- ★ We donated our special offering of \$21,000 to help a newly-formed congregation in Georgia.
- ★ The anniversary was great as a teaching aid. It inspired us to look to the future and do greater mission work inside our own congregation. We now have 100 Hmong in a special association.
- ★ An amazing thing happened in the area of stewardship. Before the anniversary we never met our budget. Since then, we've always exceeded it.
- ★ All highlights of the anniversary events were videotaped and edited to a presentable length.
- ★ Children wore T-shirts they had painted with celebration ideas.
- ★ An anniversary mother-daughter banquet was held; the program covered the history of women in the congregation.
- ★ A banner was made for each of the seven congregations merged to form the present congregation. A monthly celebration was held to commemorate each congregation in a special way.
- ★ An "open mike" program was held in which charter members and others told of personal memories.
- ★ The Luther League presented a large birthday cake designating a "Birthday Year of Love."
- ★ The driving force behind the anniversary year was the \$150,000 Thankoffering. It truly stretched our giving to meet the goal, but it allowed us to do significant things.
- ★ Our last event of the centennial year was a five-block walk from the church building to the high school for the festival service -- music, costumes, banners and handbells.
- ★ Prior to Easter Sunday, we provided every home in our community (over 4,200 people) with a paper banner proclaiming, "He is Risen." We requested they be put on display in a window, etc. A letter accompanied the banners, telling of our anniversary.