

WOMEN'S HISTORY EXHIBITS

Exhibits are a way to illustrate and interpret the lives of women in the church. Letters, photographs, a pair of gloves, newspaper clippings, ticket stubs, an old bulletin, and church minutes combined with effective interpretation can tell a woman's story in a fresh way.

Where can I find items to display? Look first in the church archives, but go beyond that. Members of the congregation may have items to share, and the local library or historical society may be willing to lend materials for an exhibit.

What stories can I tell? Choose a theme based on your audience, materials available to you, and the space you can use. Make use of the Heritage Sunday resources developed by the General Commission on Archives and History. Also remember that Women's History Month is celebrated nationwide every March. Contact the National Women's History Project, 7738 Bell Road, Windsor, CA 95492 for resources.

Here are some ideas for exhibits:

1. Show what churchwomen were reading at a specific period (perhaps at the time of the church's founding). Use Bible translations, hymnals, devotional literature, local newspapers, denominational materials, popular novels.
2. To give an idea of women's involvement in the church, portray a week in the life of a woman (real or fictional) in the church's past - attendance at meetings, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, serving at a potluck dinner, and so on.
3. Develop a photo gallery of church leaders' portraits with labels that ask intriguing questions about each person (have the answers close at hand). For example, "I organized the first woman's missionary society in our church. Do you know who I am?"
4. When doing an exhibit about a missionary from your church, place her activities in the context of the history of the region she served, whether Chicago in the 1890s, China in the 1940s, or Appalachia in the 1970s.
5. Follow an active member throughout her life with baptismal and membership records, meeting minutes, Sunday school pins, references in bulletins, newspaper articles, photographs at different ages.
6. Create a Hall of Fame from persons nominated by the congregation, with photographs and biographical information.
7. Explore the ways that secular history has affected the church. For example, what do records reveal about the church's reaction to the women's movements of the 1920s and 1970s? Possible sources include minutes of women's organizations, membership lists of boards and agencies, sermon titles, liturgies, memorabilia from the congregation (a NOW pin, a voter registration card), articles in the secular and church press.

CELEBRATING WOMEN'S HISTORY IN YOUR CHURCH

According to the dictionary, to "celebrate" is "to hold up for public acclaim" or "to observe a notable occasion with festivities." When we celebrate women in church history, we commemorate, honor, praise, and lift up their names and their achievements.

Ten ways to celebrate

1. *Honor a specific woman's name and memory.* One way is to name a room in the church or a church organization after her. Another is to develop an awards program that honors her memory. For example, an award named after a woman who became a missionary could be given to the Sunday School student who raises the most money for missions.
2. *Consider a "woman of the month" program,* with articles in the church newsletter each month for a year. You could supplement the articles by sharing women's stories in the worship service and discussing them in the Sunday School.
3. *What about a Women's Hall of Fame?* Accept nominations from Sunday School classes or the entire congregation. (This can be expanded to include women in the Bible and/or women in United Methodist history.) The "Hall" may be an actual photo gallery in a hallway or a classroom, or it may simply be a photo album on display in the fellowship room, with biographical information accompanying the photographs and illustrations.
4. *Make women's history a part of the worship service.* "History Minutes" are a way to tell some of the stories you are learning. If you are lucky enough to have letters or diaries from some of the women in your church's past, read from them. Have a special Sunday service focusing on women's heritage - sing hymns written by women, discuss the work of women in The United Methodist Church, and commemorate the service of women in your church.
5. *Encourage Sunday School classes to study women's history.* Children can interview women, participate in a poster contest, or do research and submit entries for a Hall of Fame. Teens and adults can participate in discussion groups. Classes can adopt an historical figure, do research, and present a special program.
6. *Prepare an exhibit, slide show, or videotape* on the contributions of women to your church's history. Use the artifacts available to you to create a visual record of the past.
7. *Oral history is a way to make a long-lasting contribution to women's history.* The women in your church have stories to tell, and oral history interviews can capture their history. If you undertake an oral history project, don't forget the men! Their stories, perspectives, and insights are part of the picture, too.
8. *Share the story through drama.* Living history, reenactments of past events, one-woman dramas drawn from letters and diaries - all of these are ways to bring the past to life.

TELLING WOMEN'S STORIES THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

An oral history project is an exciting way to preserve the personal stories of women and men and give them the chance to tell you "what it was really like." Thanks to modern technology - tape recorders and video cameras - future generations will hear people's words in their own voices, with the shading, nuance, and emphasis that give language its emotion and richness.

How to begin? First, know your church's history. With good preparation, you can ask pertinent questions, untangle inconsistencies, and confidently guide the interview. It is also important to be well informed about the history of your town, your region, and the country so that you can put questions into historical context.

Next, recruit your interviewees. Don't limit yourself to women or to the elderly. All church members have a perspective to offer on the roles and contributions of women.

Start by asking easy questions, such as name and date of birth. Ask one question at a time, and give the interviewee plenty of time to respond. Be an active listener; pick up on what gets said and ask follow-up questions. Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer, but remember that you are in charge of the interview - don't let the conversation get sidetracked. It is valuable to hear individual stories; it is also helpful to hear different peoples' answers to the same questions. Allow your interviewee to talk about the negative as well as the positive; you want a full picture of a situation, not "happy history". Try to strike a balance between personal reminiscence, opinion, and fact.

The interview process is a sensitive one. The person you interview may reveal more than s/he intended; it is good to feel so comfortable that you both forget the tape recorder is on, but make sure that the interviewee is aware that the conversation will be preserved for others to hear. Avoid "off the record" comments.

There are many other components of a good oral history interview. Fortunately, a growing number of colleges and historical agencies offer training. Contact your state or county historical societies and libraries about workshops. Develop your own library of resources, which should include the titles listed below, available from the American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Ave. North, Nashville, TN 37201, (615) 255-2971. Write or call for a free catalogue.

Baum, Willa K. Oral History for the Local Historical Society. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987.

Baum, Willa K. Transcribing and Editing Oral History. Nashville: AASLH, 1977.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN UNITED METHODISM

General American Women's History

Evans, Sara M. Born for Liberty; A History of Women in America. New York: The Free Press, 1989.

Woloch, Nancy. Women and the American Experience. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

General United Methodist History

Ferguson, Charles W. Organizing to Beat the Devil; Methodists and the Making of America. New York: Doubleday, 1971.

McEllhenney, John G., ed. Proclaiming Grace and Freedom: The Story of United Methodism in America. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983. *will be reissued under another title*

American Women's Religious History

James, Janet Wilson, ed. Women in American Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1980.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford and Keller, Rosemary Skinner, eds. Women and Religion in America (3 volumes). New York: Harper and Row, 1981-1986.

United Methodist Women's History

Born, Ethel W. By My Spirit: The Story of Methodist Protestant Women in Mission 1879-1939. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1990.

Campbell, Barbara E. In the Middle of Tomorrow. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1975.

Fagan, Ann. This is Our Song: Employed Women in the United Methodist Tradition. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1986.

Magalis, Elaine. Conduct Becoming to a Woman: Bolted Doors and Burgeoning Missions. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1973.

They Went Out Not Knowing...An Encyclopedia of 100 Women in Mission. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1986.

Thomas, Hilah F., Keller, Rosemary Skinner, and Queen, Louise L., eds. Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition. Volumes 1 and 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981-1982.

To a Higher Glory: The Growth and Development of Black Women Organized for Mission in The United Methodist Church, 1940-1968. New York: Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church.