

HOW TO PLAN A CHURCH ANNIVERSARY

by

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of Oklahoma

March 10, 2010



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Introduction

The proper planning of a church anniversary or major event requires long and careful consideration. Such church events can be a tremendous blessing to the church, or if poorly planned, may result in a negative and difficult experience for those who attend. If the church hopes to create a positive occasion and beneficial results, careful planning is essential.

The basic planning requires a church to consider the typical questions. What is the purpose, and why is this event being planned? How will it take place, and who will be responsible for achieving the specific goals? The following chapters will cover these matters and much more.

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Chapter I

What Is To Be Planned?

While the following material has a church anniversary in mind, it could be adapted to other events such as pastor's anniversary, retirement occasion, or dedication of a new church building.

1. **Start with a general planning committee.** This committee should be formed very early. This will require budgeting at least a year before the event occurs. Sometimes churches budget a portion of the event two or three years ahead. A General Planning Committee should be formed and made up of all the basic leadership divisions of the church. This might not include chairpersons of all committees, but would include the pastor (*ex officio*), deacon chairman, finance committee chairman, the directors of Sunday school, Church Training, women's ministry, youth minister, minister of music, and children's coordinator. Two or three at-large church representatives might be added for various reasons. The point is, this general committee, no matter if it is made up of four or fourteen members, will need to be a good cross section of the church body so no entity or segment of the church population is overlooked in the planning.

For example, if the committee is made up of all older adults, the plans often overlook the teenagers and children of the church. The event should include and minister to them as well as the adults. If children of visiting families are bored or overlooked, don't expect that family to return at a later time. Also, if the

committee is made up of mostly the pastor and men of the church, the wives will later let you know what you did wrong, and the event will suffer for lack of foresight. Get some women on the General Planning Committee.

In addition, specific committees will be needed to see that each task of the general committee is accomplished. It is essential to know what person on this general committee, and the other committees, will be responsible for seeing that each planned item is accomplished. Accountability and reaching the goals by previously set deadlines is essential. Do not elect a chairperson of the General Planning Committee who is not aware of this important matter.

2. **Specific Committees.** In addition, specific committees are needed to accomplish the General Planning Committee's goals, which will vary with each church. Usually a church will need: a.) A Contact Committee to find, contact, and get commitments from those being invited to attend; b.) A History Committee to

research, develop, and product an acceptable church history; c.) A Decoration Committee to create and set up displays and photos of the church history; d.) A Facility Committee to determine where each event will occur and what space and accommodations will be needed; e.) A Program Committee to develop the basic events, and to product a guideline for getting these occasions accomplished; and f.) A Meal Committee to plan, provide, and carry-out the usual all-church celebration event.

In many churches (less than 100 in attendance) some of the duties of the committees may be combined. For example, the History Committee may also serve as the Decoration Committee, and work with providing a bulletin sized hand-out on the day of the celebration. In every case, there must be coordination and reporting of the various committees to the General Planning Committee at reasonable and acceptable times. No committee must be allowed to slide past an acceptable deadline. If a committee chairman is meeting with the General Planning Committee to give a report and is asked how their work is coming, that person should never be allowed to simply say, "We're working on it." There must be a specific report of progress, or your work will be held up by this one committee at a later date.

3. **A Church History.** A good church history will need to be prepared for any major anniversary. This will require extensive research and may be expensive to produce. Chapter VII of this writing will give more details on this matter.
4. **The Decoration Committee.** This committee may use banners, posters, quilts, attractive displays, or whatever to present the history of the church in a unique fashion. Some displays may be put up in advance to help build interest in the event. The church may increase the size and number of displays (or change them) as the date approaches. Protect all display items. Be sure to identify by a card or other means the name of the donor or lender. Keep valuable items safe from pilfering or theft. If possible, store as much of the displays as possible for future usage.

One church had five large display boards at their 50th Anniversary. Each board represented ten years of their church history. They had copies of old minutes, WW II ration letters, old photos, and other mountable items. The boards were carefully stored in an air conditioned storage room and needed only some minor re-taping for the 75th Anniversary 25 years later. This saved the church much time and trouble in the later preparation and research.

5. **How The Celebration Takes Place.** What will actually happen and how the celebration could take place will be considered in the lengthy section V.

6. **Thoughts.** Several ideas of what a General Planning Committee might consider were presented in a clinic led by Wynn Anne Hook, Special Event Planner, for the BGCO. Some thoughts from that clinic have been interpreted to include the following:

Be visionary: Determine what will attract people from the time they pull into the parking lot until they leave the church after the event. This might require parking attendants. A newly mowed lawn and trimmed bushes is essential. Clean and beautifully painted hallways and bathrooms are necessary.

Know Your Target Group: Who do you want to reach with your event, and how will you present your church in their eyes?

Have a Time Line: Weekly meetings (or logical time frames) may be necessary to insure that progress is being made by each committee.

Advanced Planning: The sooner you begin planning for each part of the celebration, the better it will be.

Communication: Make sure all committees are informed as to their specific duties and how those tasks might interrelate with other committees. Always keep you committees (and the church people as needed) informed of the progress toward the event.

Stay in Contact With Specialists: If you deal with people outside the church, such as caterers, audio/visual folk, electricians, table rentals agencies, linen or tableware suppliers, motels for guests, and other people, make sure you have a specific contact person from each entity that can be reached when needed. This person must be one who can accept responsibility for their company, and is known to get things done properly.

Keep Records: All pre-celebration dealings, as well as those during the event time and after the event, must have good records. You never know when a payment or matter dealt with three months earlier will suddenly appear as needing further attention. You will also want to know who attended and who didn't. Records will help you with possible church outreach in the months ahead.

Evaluate: After your anniversary, take the time to evaluate all aspects of the event. Again, good records will alert those at future major occasions (a retirement, staff anniversary, etc.) of the ways they might improve the upcoming celebrations.

7. **Things Not to Do.** Dr. J. M. Gaskin, former long-time historical secretary for the BGCO, in a 1983 four-page handout entitled *Planning For an Anniversary* shared his views of some important things not to do in planning. They included the following:

1. Don't try to do it without money.
2. Don't wait too long to begin.
3. Avoid mixing the Historical Celebration with a Promotional Plan. (Editor: For example, don't use the celebration as a fund raiser or other building promotions).
4. Don't make it an "entertainment" occasion.

5. Don't plan too much for the occasion, (nor) make your schedule too crowded and cramped so as to make too many worthy projects fail for lack of sufficient time.
6. Don't expect your published history to pay for itself in sales.
7. When presenting history: In a book published, oral account, taped essay, (or) pageant, don't be afraid to include conflicts and controversies—but, naturally, use discretion in doing this as to names of persons, and unimportant personality conflicts and clashes.

Special Note: Again, don't short change your event due to finances.
Plan well in advance.

Chapter II

When Will This Take Place?

1. **The Date.** An anniversary is usually planned close to the actual day and month the church began. Exceptions can be made, especially if the beginning interferes with a major holiday when people might be gone. Other churches have moved anniversary dates out of the winter months when weather might cancel the whole event.

One church was formed on July 6th, but, over the years, moved to a mid-July Sunday due to the 4th of July events. It is essential to get the date on the church calendar as soon as possible. This should be at least one year before the actual event so funds may be included in the upcoming budget.

2. **Research The Date.** It is important to know what year your church began. One church called (in 2009) to confirm that 1909 was their starting date. Simple research through the first associational annuals revealed the church had begun in 1901 and they missed their 100th anniversary by 8 years.

In this case it was suggested the church either establish a time to celebrate their beginning based on other events, such as the first church building, or when the church joined the association, or the church could wait until the 110th anniversary which was only two years away.

It might be of interest to note that information submitted by churches to the older associational annuals (now called the Annual Church Profiles) might not always be correct. One church showed five different starting dates in the older annuals. This was apparently due to older records being written in pencil, unclear

numbers in date writing, and the church (in some years) being dated by a new building rather than by the actual starting date. Also the church may have closed for a few years, but due to a lack of any written church history, this could not be confirmed. In your research, be sure you know the actual year the church began.

3. **What Days are Involved?** While almost all churches select a Sunday as “thee” big day, some churches have gone to a two or three day observance. In planning, if you have a Friday or Saturday celebration as well as a Sunday focus, it is best to plan events that will not take away from the Sunday attendance. Some churches have scheduled a revival either prior to or after the celebration date.
4. **The Annual Church Profile.** Your annual church profile sent in each year to the association and Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) only lists the year of your organization. It does not state a month. If the church wants help in receiving certificates or planning aids, they must notify the Historical Secretary of the BGCO as soon as possible stating the specific dates of the occasion.

Special Note: The Historical Secretary of the BGCO needs to know as early as possible exactly when your celebration will take place. Owing to office schedules, all requests for certificates of recognition should be received no less than four weeks before your event.

Chapter III

Who Is Coming To The Anniversary?

Actually the question should be: Who do you want to come?

1. **Contact Committee.** For major anniversaries the Contact Committee must work long and hard at contacting every former staffer and member, and all guests. Don't overlook older former members who moved away several years ago. Many still have contact with someone in the church.

Go to the older Sunday school departments and ask by name about those you haven't been able to locate. Your church people will be the best source of information regarding former members.

2. **Contact the BGCO.** Don't hesitate to contact the BGCO in Oklahoma City and ask about former staffers. The music department and executive offices usually know where those people are and often have present contact information. Try entering their names on the "search" of your home or church computer. Many folk can be found by this simple process.

3. **Consider Your Guests.** Don't overlook guests. For major anniversaries, state legislators, district representatives, and county commissioners often agree to attend. Some remember the area from times passed, and you are their people. They want to meet people. The pastor is often asked to develop a cordial personal letter when inviting these public representatives.

The Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO) will often be contacted to see if representatives can attend. The historical secretary of the convention, for example, wants to come. That's a part of his position and he is interested in your church. He will not know to come unless you tell him of the event and extend to him a personal invitation.

One church in Oklahoma City, that ran less than 100 in Sunday school, contacted seven neighborhood associations, and representatives from every association came (as well as the mayor of Oklahoma City and two state representatives). Another church, far out in the country in western Oklahoma, averaged 10 in church, but had a state senator and a county commissioner show up. Never hesitate to invite guests. The worse they can do is to tell you they are already committed on that date. All special guests must be invited well in advance. It always seems to amaze some church folk that a former pastor or guest is booked eight to ten months prior to their special event.

Norman W. Cox, formerly with the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, once stated, "It is customary to invite to the celebration the former pastors who are still living, and all the sons and daughters of the church who have become ministers or other church workers in church related vocations. All special guests should be recognized. Some of these individuals may be used on the program."

In addition, many churches will recognized their former deceased pastors by inviting the children and grandchildren of those pastors for this special occasion. This committee must use every possible avenue to assure that all interested persons are contacted and invited.

Chapter IV

Where Will The Event Take Place?

1. **Consider Your Facilities.** The usual response to the title question is that the event will be at the church and in the sanctuary. This may be a short sighted answer. Many of your church areas may be needed to accommodate the folks.

If you are planning a meal (which is almost always done), you will need an adequate area other than the sanctuary. If you expect guests to bring children, decisions will need to be made concerning when, where, and how, will the little ones be accommodated?

The Facility Committee will have to answer those questions well before the event. This committee will have to work closely with the Meal Committee in the arranging and conducting of the Anniversary Meal. In addition, while

some committees can finish their work prior to the actual event, this committee must be available during the celebration to assure that the previous plans are carried out in a satisfactory manner.

2. **Locations Are Important.** If the number attending overflows the church building, careful pre-planning is needed to provide alternate areas for use.

One church that had seating for 150 in the fellowship hall, put up a covered tent area outside to provide for 100 extra guests just in case that occurred. Both the church and the tented area were unexpectedly overflowing. Over 300 people attended the meal. Careful planning is needed to make everyone comfortable.

Chapter V

How Will The Event Take Place?

1. **A Simple Format.** The simplest and most common observance includes a Sunday school hour, morning worship service, noon meal, and an afternoon celebration service. Much must be considered even in this simple format. Others either have no Sunday school or no afternoon session. To leave out either of these two events will not usually enhance your occasion.

2. **Sunday School.** There is no greater tool for reaching the lost than the Sunday school classroom. While a few churches skip the Bible study hour on this occasion, others realize the fantastic potential of the time. Some churches begin with a light breakfast before Sunday School, or plan a special fellowship during the time.

Planning is essential. Who is preparing or providing the breakfast, donuts, or snacks? How much will be needed? What's the cost and who's paying for it? What will be the time format of a special Sunday school hour? Will the departments have enough chairs?

One church had six guests show up and all the classroom chairs were occupied. No one offered to get them a chair until it was obvious the visitors felt out of place. If you had been a guest, would you come back to that church?

3. **A Sunday school Emphasis.** An emphasis prior to the anniversary, can build to a record attendance. While many churches want to skip this hour, it must be considered. Don't do like many churches and only focus on the morning worship service. Sunday school is important!

Would you like to double your Sunday school attendance? One church that ran less than 100 had 240 in Sunday school by a unique campaign.

A large gold framed document was prepared for their 75th anniversary which stated in special lettering:

*Be it known to all who attend the 100th anniversary on (date entered):
The following people were in Sunday School attendance on the
75th anniversary on (date entered).*

Those who attended five weeks straight in Sunday school (including the anniversary Sunday) had their names scripted in gold lettering. Those who attended four of five Sundays were in silver. All others, including guests, were in black. The names were added after the event and the document was placed on display in the golden frame.

It seemed like everyone wanted their name on that document. Many people commented that they wanted their small children listed as having been in church on that date. The beautiful document has been proudly displayed since the 75th Anniversary. Even now, some are talking of the 100th Anniversary coming in a couple of years, and how they will want to be there again. The number of prospect names received was about 30 percent of the number that attended. Some members, who had quit attending, decided they now liked the church and began coming.

A good follow-up visitation brought others into the church. The end results were better than a typical revival. Again, some churches use the anniversary as either the starting or culmination of a revival.

4. **The Morning Worship Service.** Most churches rely on the obvious. They often asked former staffers to take part. Others simply introduce all former staffers in the morning worship service and allow them time to speak or sing in an afternoon celebration. The more former staffers you get involved in the celebration, the more former members show up and attendance increases. Please bear in mind that former staffers may be obligated during the morning worship service at their own churches and might more easily be able to attend an afternoon celebration.
5. **The Meal.** You must have a good Meal Committee working on this event. The meal will often make or break you occasion. Often this is the least planned and most chaotic event of the day. Will the meal be catered, prepared by a church cook staff, or be a potluck? What will be the cost? How will it be served and who will do it? How much seating is available and still will provide comfort?

If catered: You must book well ahead of time and set a budget. Some caterers add hidden (and unexpected) costs after quoting a price per meal. They may charge for plates and service ware, or add a standard gratuity not formerly mentioned. Ask about everything, and get it in a written contract.

If you cater, do you turn away guests who heard of your anniversary, but were not aware of the need to purchase tickets in advance of attending the meal? Will they stay for the afternoon service if they are told they have to leave the church to obtain a meal? What is the image projected by the church if guests are not invited to stay for the meal? It is far better to plan for possible extra folk (and cost the church a little more) than to turn them away from the church.

Most caterers will bring approximately ten percent additional food and just charge by the number of plates used. Your church will have contracted for a certain expected number, and may have to pay for any extras used. Most guests won't mind paying, rather than having to find a place to eat, if it looks like you have provided plenty of food and room for them.

Discuss with the caterer what happens to unused food. For larger crowds you can usually ask the caterer for a lesser rate per meal.

If a church cook staff prepares the meal: Much of what was just considered also applies here. Will the cook staff be volunteer or paid? Will you plan for a ten percent overage? What's the cost per plate and who will collect the funds?

If a potluck is used: Many churches pick up the cost of the main meat(s), drinks, and plates and settings. Always ask members to bring abundance in

potluck fashion.

If you use either a cook staff or potluck, always have a contingent plan if you run short on food. Know where to get additional food quickly.

Many churches purchase, or have on hand, large 46 ounce (#10 cans) of food that can be opened and served quickly. Those responsible for the meal should observe and be aware of potential shortages well ahead of the time they are needed.

Never ask people to wait while the church prepares more food. **Never** use cooks who are known to be late in the presentation of the meal.

- 6. Comfortable Seating for Meals.** Don't cram the seating too closely together. If you anticipate your area will not accommodate the number who will dine, have alternate options ready. Additional seating may be available in classroom areas. You may direct one group to the display areas (maybe with coffee, tea, or Kool-aid available), while the others enjoy their meal. Then after 25 – 30 minutes the second group will be asked to enter the eating area, and the first group (at least those who have finished) get to see the displays. How a church determines to divide the groups will vary.

Be sure those waiting to eat have plenty with which to occupy themselves. Picture displays, a tour of the church, a prepared video (that will not be seen during the services), or other attractions may be provided. Some churches provide excellent displays by asking members to bring old articles or memorabilia from various years which represent the history of the church. One church used old church photos along with WW II newspaper articles to provide a great viewing area. Another used quilts and old farming memorabilia to perk the interests. Good planners will let their minds run rampant to come up with great ideas on displays.

- 7. Meal Serving Lines.** It is essential to have plenty of serving lines with a church prepared or potluck meal. If possible, allow people to get their food from both sides of the serving tables, and provide, a minimum, of one serving line per 40 people.

Caterers who use a set menu and serve each plate themselves can move folk much faster when compared to elderly people who have to choose their food and prepare their own plates. Two or three elderly folk can hold up a line by an extra ten minutes. Be aware of their needs for assistance. Good hospitality is essential when dealing with any group of people.

Many churches have a serving area manned by volunteers who fill the individual's plates as members go through a single line. This may work at a regular Wednesday meal time, but is never efficient at an anniversary meal. Remember the maximum for efficient service is one serving line for every 40 people. Even well organized caterers are aware of this matter and will gladly

provide more lines. The sooner the people are served, the quicker the caterer can begin to pack up and leave.

Chapter VI

Why Have This Event?

The usual response is, “We are having this event because this is our anniversary.” While this is true, every function of the church should be bathed with prayer and planned with purpose.

1. **How Can This Event Minister To People?** Many churches plan events about themselves. A missional-minded church will plan events to reach outside their walls.

One man from out of town attended an anniversary and sat at the meal surrounded by a family that used to attend, but never joined. As the conversation progressed, the guest was able to point out the happy spirit he was seeing in the church people, the advantages of Christian fellowship, the way the church aids families, and the joy of being in church. As a result, the mother decided to accept Christ and join the church. Only the Lord knows the subsequent results.

This visitor had a missional mind. A missional-minded church is one that provides fellowship within the church, but also sees the need to reach beyond the church itself. Many churches spend 90 % of their budget on church activities that minister only to the congregation. A missional church will attempt to reach a 50-50% status in reaching within and without the church.

The anniversary celebration is an excellent example of reaching out to the community by getting them in the building. Every church planning committee must examine ways to use this occasion as a ministry tool as well as a church event.

2. **Think On Church Growth.** Even on an anniversary celebration Sunday, the **Sunday school** can be a place to get people involved in a small group setting. This is one of the best ways to minister to people. A **fellowship meal** is also a good place to encourage guests to attend regularly. Likewise, **the worship service** on this special occasion should magnify Christ, the faith of the forefathers, and the possibilities of the future.

A **guest book**, provided for historical reasons, could serve as a source for the names and addresses of all attendees. Sheets from a guest book should be at every regular entrance, and should be manned by someone assigned to see that people register. The pages can be reinserted into the main guest book at a

later time. The local people now become prospects. **A follow-up** on visitors can be used by the outreach teams. The point is that every aspect of this day must be enjoyable, beneficial, spiritual, and missional.

A church history should be written (or at least provided from previous anniversaries), and will emphasize the faith, love, and concern of members, past and present.

The visitor to the church must feel welcome, accepted, and loved by the church. Each committee must ask themselves how they are accomplishing that goals.

Chapter VII

A Church History Is Important!

1. **When is The Best Time to Write a Church History?**

The first anniversary of the church presents the best time for a basic well-written history. This first history should reflect why the church was started, who was involved, and who the major leaders were that influenced the group. It must tell of the early struggles that usually occur such as finances, meeting places, and which early leaders showed the greatest faith. While some historians insist that negative and divisive major conflicts of the past should be included in the history, this writer believes that such matters, if included, should be stated only in very positive forms. While you cannot simply dismiss history, you can present it in a fashion that will not be harmful.

One church split over a marital problem between a woman and two men and how the church should have handled the situation better. Each group thought they were seeking God's will in their direction and decision. One faction emphasized forgiveness, while the other a need for a high moral standard. The group that left the church, in a very positive fashion, simply stated they were led by the Lord to begin a new work that would focus on reaching people for Christ in another area of the town. Would God's work benefit if the affair had been discussed openly in the church history?

A record of all church leadership, Sunday school workers, and even non-church folk who helped in the church start, should be stated. Oral histories (using the latest technology) will prove invaluable 40 to 50 years later.

2. **Major Anniversaries.**

Every tenth anniversary a new church history should reflect and record the events, human interest stories, and victories seen through the work of the church. It is extremely important to realize that facts and numbers may be used, but they do not reflect the faith, love, and struggles that occurred.

A good church history must be one with human interest stories, compiled from many sources, and written by someone with excellent writing skills.

Unfortunately, many churches wait until their 50th or 75th anniversary to see the need of a church history. Often, by that date, older records, events, joys, and people are lost in time.

3. **Good Church Histories.**

A good church history should begin with a minimum of ten pages prepared well before the first year anniversary. Add a minimum of five pages every fifth year. Once the history is published on a major anniversary, the church can use these footnoted editions as a historical source for subsequent writings. Older notes may be condensed in future editions, since the sources are available from the earlier works. By using previously recorded materials, countless hours are saved in research

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4. **Documentation is Essential.**

Was the information received orally, and what was the date of the information? Was the material from local newspapers, the *Baptist Messenger*, court records, other neighboring church histories, or from a period book in the local library? If your church was started by another church (the mother church), you are probably in their church history under “mission start” notes. Names of founding members can often be found that had previously been undiscovered.

One church in Oklahoma City discovered, 75 years later, their church originally had tennis courts on the back of their property. That fact was only found by researching the mother church’s history.

5. **What Will be The Written History’s Format?**

Will pictures be used, how many, and how will you get the best quality? In what form and size will the history be published? What will the cover look like, and what binding will be used? Again, many churches seek the cheapest way to produce their history and the end result is often a poor quality record. This only serves to let the readers know the church didn’t care enough to prepare properly. It may also reflect on how much the church might “care” for them if they consider joining.

NOTE: The companion book to this writing is entitled *How to Write a Church History*, and is much more extensive in covering the matter of writing a good history for the church.

Both this booklet and the one on writing a church history are available by contacting the Gaskin Baptist Archives, Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, 3800 N. May, Oklahoma City, OK, 73122. Telephone (405) 942-3800, Ext. 4117 or 4112.

The cost for this booklet is \$2.00 plus \$1.00 postage. The *How to Write a Church History* book (46 pages) is \$3.00 plus \$1.00 postage. Both books are available by e-mail at no cost. To receive the e-mail copy contact esheldon@bgco.org or fsheldon@bgco.org.

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