

The United Church of Canada has long recognized the importance of an archives program for preserving the record of the church's achievements and for meeting its administrative needs. Oral histories are unique records of personal experiences that are often not reflected in typical administrative written records of organizational activity. Oral history interviews with individuals tell us the details about what happened, how it affected people and communities, and what it was like to live through those times.

Below are guidelines for conducting oral histories, suggested equipment, and whom to contact for help.

### Basic Steps for Conducting Oral History

#### Before the Interview

- Produce a target group of interviewees and identify a clear theme. Having names enables enough contact time in advance to do background research on your subject and tailor interview questions.
- Send Introduction Letter and Biographical Form to members of the target group. (See the Oral History Starter Kit for a sample letter and form: [www.united-church.ca/local/archives/on/women](http://www.united-church.ca/local/archives/on/women).)
- Create files for each oral history participant, and accumulate any photos or clippings.
- Test recording equipment and ensure any questions about operation are answered. If possible, practise interviewing family/friends in advance to become comfortable.

#### Day of Interview

- Set a time in advance, and secure a quiet space where you won't be disturbed.
- Ensure recording equipment is in working condition, and set it up in advance.
- Have interviewee sign forms giving permission for the recording.
- Provide refreshments.
- Average an hour for the first-time interview; if it is not working out, you can end it quickly and politely. If an hour is not enough, you can take a break and resume or reschedule a follow-up interview.
- Give your interviewee time to answer questions at her/his own speed. Try to refrain from guiding the person's answers.

#### Post-Interview

- As soon as possible, review audio files and label them appropriately.
- When time permits, transcribe the audio file.
- Mail a copy to the interviewee and allow him/her to add corrections or more detail. Add annotations to the transcripts.
- When transcripts are finalized, ensure legal/consent documents are sufficient for access and use.
- Deposit in the Archives.

### Equipment Suggestions

- Audacity® is free open source software for recording and editing sound. It can be downloaded to a laptop and used with a microphone. [www.audacity.sourceforge.net](http://www.audacity.sourceforge.net)
- Olympus produces several digital voice recorders in the \$35–\$300 range. [www.olympuscanada.com](http://www.olympuscanada.com)
- A Samson USB microphone can be used with a laptop and recording software for quality sound for about \$80–\$100 (pricing varies by vendor). [www.samsontech.com](http://www.samsontech.com)
- Camcorders are available in many brands; Canon and Panasonic are two popular ones. Keep in mind they require microphones to capture audio, and consent forms should be adjusted to reflect use of video recording.

### Depositing in the Archives

The original recordings should be deposited in the Archives. In the case of analog recordings, the original tapes should be deposited along with a digital copy. The interview should also be accompanied by consent forms, transcriptions, and any gathered biographical data.

Transcribing the interview is preferable, particularly to give a copy back to interviewees.

Visit the Archives' Making Room for Women webpage for a more detailed Oral History Starter Kit, including sample forms. [www.united-church.ca/local/archives/on/women](http://www.united-church.ca/local/archives/on/women)

Contact your Conference Archives for more information about current Oral History projects and how to get involved:

[www.united-church.ca/contact/archives](http://www.united-church.ca/contact/archives)