

Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Conducting Interviews

A successful interviewer is able to engage the interviewee in conversation. His interviewing style is unobtrusive, straightforward and sympathetic. He is a good listener. Interviewers need to put the interviewee at ease, to listen carefully to what they say, to respect their opinions and to encourage candid responses. They need to guide without leading.

SOME GROUND RULES ARE:

- Be prepared. Learn as much as possible about the informant before the interview.
- Construct meaningful but open-ended questions
- Do not interrupt responses
- Follow up on what you heard
- Know your equipment as well as possible or have a media professional assist you if possible
- Remain relaxed and unhurried. Let the interview run giving the informant plenty of time to roam about
- Take with you any aids of memory
- Be prepared to abandon the script (questionnaire) when necessary
- Pick up on any promising lines of inquiry
- Use flexibility and imagination
- Ask questions that invite the informant to talk
- Avoid the rigid inflexible style of interview. The strategy of the interview is the interviewer's responsibility
- If audio/video equipment is not available at the specific location the interviewer will take notes
- Ask as few direct questions as possible
- Have a clear idea on advance of what the informant may tell

Preparing for an interview

- Familiarize yourself with the personal, professional and church life of the respondent as much as possible in advance of the interview. Read any published sources available. Other relevant material may be found in scrapbooks, letters, photographs and by talking with other family members and colleagues. Research also helps the interviewer supply information the interviewee may have forgotten.

How Many Questions Should Be Prepared for Each Interview

- It is safer to have too many questions than too few
- Avoid asking the type of question that elicits a brief answer, such as “ye” or “no”
- Interviewers should seek longer and more interpretive answer. Some examples are:
 - Can you tell me about...
 - That sounds interesting...
 - What did you think/feel about that...
 - Tell me all about...
 - Can you describe the to me..
 - Cue words are “explain”, “expand on”, “discuss” or “compare”
 - That is really an important point. Can you expand on that...
 - Can you give me a running commentary on...
- Do not ask more than one question at a time. Some respondents just don’t have much to say. Others will surprise you with the volubility, the depth of their recall and their articulateness. In these cases the interviewer may wish to return for another session until the subject matter has been exhausted.
- No interview should last more than two hours. The respondent as well as the interviewer may become distracted and fatigued.

Setting Up Interviews

- The interviewer may initiate contact with a letter, phone call or electronic means.
- The purpose of the interview should be stated up front as well as the fact that the MARSTON MEMORIAL HISTORICAL CENTER AND ARCHIVES is the sponsor of the Program. It should be explained that the tapes will be sent to the Center for use in research.
- Explain the legal release that the interviewer will be asked to sign
- It is especially important for older interviewee to have your name, address, phone number, the purpose of the interview and the scheduled date in writing.
- Pre-interview sessions are discouraged to avoid losing the spontaneity and candidness of unrehearsed questioning.
- Schedule the interview at the interviewee’s convenience

Where Should An Interview Take Place

- It is not of great importance where the interview takes place. It can be in a home, a church, in the media studio or some other venue which is a convenient place in which to set up equipment. (All extraneous noises will be picked up on the tape) An attractive background should be planned. Lighting should be checked with a media specialist if at all possible.

Should Questions be Arranged Chronologically or Topically

- For some interviews the entire life story will be relevant; for others the focus will be on events in which the interviewee participated. Biographical interviews usually proceed

chronologically

- Jumping right into the main question is not the best approach. Avoid making the first question too abrupt. Establish the historical setting and make the interviewee comfortable.
- Use open-ended questions to allow the interviewee to volunteer their own accounts.
- Use more specific questions to elicit factual information
- Keep in mind that interviewers are not restricted to asking questions.
- Statements of fact, concise restatements of what the respondent has said, brief observations and comments can stimulate responses from the interviewee as well as inject more spontaneity into the discussion. Mixing occasional comments among the questions provides some relief and can prevent the interview from sounding too much like a cross-examination.

Should Interviewers Use a Questionnaire as Such?

- Since we are dealing with a group of people with a common identity within the F.M. Church, interviewers should not use the sequence of topics attached as much as is appropriate and as much as possible to give some commonality to the project. Because different interviewers are working for the same project we include a list of topics about which to ask. (See list enclosed)
- AFTER THE CORE TOPICS OR QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN COVERED EACH INTERVIEW WILL HAVE A SPECIFIC FOCUS ACCORDING TO THE LIFE, EXPERIENCES AND OFFICES HELD BY THE RESPONDENT. YOU AS THE INTERVIEWER, WILL CONSTRUCT (YOUR OWN) QUESTIONS FROM THE ABOVE LIST OF CORE TOPICS, FOLLOWED BY THE QUESTIONS YOU HAVE CONSTRUCTED FOCUSING ON THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PERSON YOU ARE INTERVIEWING.
- Individual interviews will have their own unique experiences that no questionnaire can anticipate. One must be willing to deviate from the prepared questions whenever something unexpected and interesting develops. Oral history frequently addresses neglected areas of knowledge about the respondent. Interviewers must set out to listen.

Videotaping Oral History

- Oral and video tapes impart the same information but video tapes provide an extra dimension. The facial expressions and body language captured by video reveal an interviewee's personality.
- The setting in which the interview takes place can add color and content.
- Videotaping usually requires the use of camera(s), lighting equipment and possibly crew if one is available.
- A videotape interview may intimidate some interviewers. Video specialists recommend that interviewers explain the equipment to respondents if they are unfamiliar with it. Interviewees should be urged to look at the camera, which should be placed off to one side.
- Listening carefully to what is being said and thinking ahead to the next question. Interviewers also have to consider how they themselves appear.

Timing Is Important

- Timing is a crucial element in conducting any oral history. Interviews take place at a point when the interviewee is appropriately reflective. A visual record of significant person at the end of their life should do justice to the stories they can tell of their youthful years

Confidentiality.

No interviewer will propose a question or introduce a subject that would involve disclosing confidentiality, nor would any interviewee (respondent) be encouraged to make any statement which he/she would not wish to be made public. Our goal is to stay within the lines of propriety and good taste. Our wish is to document and be able to retrieve relevant information.

In Summary

- Interviews should record candid information of lasting (historical) value.
- Interviewees should be selected on the basis of the relevance of their experience within the Free Methodist Church.
- An interviewer should strive to prompt informative dialogue through challenging and perceptive inquiry. He/she should be well acquainted with the person being interviewed and, when possible, research appropriate services related to subjects about which the interviewee can speak.

(Compiled by Louise B. Campbell for
the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives)

SEQUENCE OF TOPICS FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

(The interviewer will identify himself, record the date and place of the interview)

- Begin by stating that the purpose of the interview is to document the biographee's life life and the history of the Free Methodist Church.
- Informant's name and present address
- Birthplace/parentage/siblings
- Childhood experiences you would like to discuss
- Education (public, college, university, seminary/other)
- Conversion
- Marriage/family/children
- Call to the ministry, mission field or other service to God and to the Church
- Ordination
- Professional activities/secular work
- Early years in ministry/intervening years/retirement
- Offices held in local church/ in annual conference/general Church
- Interesting people you have met
- Travel
- Writing (books and other works you have authored)
- Your mentor(s) in the Church
- Events in the life of the (FM) Church that have most impacted your personal, spiritual life and experience
- Significant events in the history and life of the Church which you have witnessed and/or been a part of

- What do feel has been the genius of the Free Methodist Church?

- At this point in the interview the interviewer will move to the questions which he/she has prepared focusing on the specific denominational service of the respondent (*as a Bishop, pastor, missionary, academician, churchman/woman, etc...)covering areas which have not been covered above.

*If you are interviewing a bishop or member of his family, check to see if the Marston Historical Center has his papers on file in the archives. If possible, you may wish to visit the Center and/or ask for reference assistance by phone or Email.(317 244 3660) E mail: history@fmcma.org, fax: 317 244 1247

A further note: The interviewer will decide which of the items in the sequential list above pertain to the person being interviewed as some of them will not be appropriate for every respondent. It will be up to the interviewer to decide which topics pertain and which are in good taste.

A very special THANK YOU for contributing your time, expertise and interest to this important project further documenting the history of the Free Methodist Church.

Prepared by Louise Campbell
for the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives



MARSTON MEMORIAL HISTORICAL CENTER

Free Methodist Church of North America

Committee on History and Archives
Sub-committee on Oral History

LEGAL RELEASE FORM

I, _____ do hereby give to the Marston Memorial Center by way of the Committee on History and Archives of the Free Methodist Church of North America the video tape(s) and any other recordings as well as any transcripts of my interview(s) conducted on _____ by _____.

I authorize said committee to use the tapes and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the research, historical and educational objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift, I voluntarily convey all legal title and literary property rights to said committee as an unrestricted gift as well as all my rights, title and interest in copyright which I have or may be deemed to have to said work.

It will be deposited in the Archives of the Marston Memorial Center and any other designated depository.

I herein warrant that I have not assigned or in any manner encumbered or impaired any of the aforementioned rights to my oral memoir. The only conditions which I place on this unrestricted gift are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Signature _____

On behalf of the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives I accept the oral memoir of _____ for inclusion in the Free Methodist Archives in the _____ of the Marston Memorial Historical Center.