

# Archives of the United Church of Canada

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*Committee on Archives  
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IT has been asserted that the Catholic Church has always had an historical sense. The *Jesuit Relations* are evidence of this. The Protestant denominations, however, have lacked something of this sense, with the result that precious records have been destroyed. The Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches that now make up the body known as The United Church of Canada were particular sinners in this respect. Their itinerant ministers covered long miles, in every kind of weather, over snow-covered trails or unspeakably bad roads, to visit little congregations or single isolated families. They preached, they baptised, they comforted the sick, they buried the dead, they conducted marriages when that was allowed, which was not always. Their communion rolls, their registers of birth and death were carried with them, in saddle bags if they rode; their letters, diaries, correspondence of every kind remained in pocket or cumbered their living-rooms. Removing to a new circuit, some was destroyed, some carried off: the book filled, the life fulfilled, neither clay nor paper was preserved.

Such living for the day made difficulties for those who came after. A few Methodist and Presbyterian churches became repositories for records in the Maritimes and in the Province of Quebec. Ontario (Upper Canada) preserved a collection of documents at Queen's University, a Presbyterian foundation, and there were also Methodist and Baptist hoards. The Congregational Church, which began in Halifax as early as 1750, had no headquarters office anywhere in Canada until 1919. To quote Mr. H. W. Barker: "in the early days . . . there was no past to consider . . . to keep important papers at home was convenient and the work in hand shut out the generations to come."

Soon after the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925, a standing Committee on Historical Matters was set up to discover, collect, and preserve the historical documents of the

Church. The Committee had little money and did as much, but documents were obtained. In 1932 it changed its name to "The Committee on Archives." In this sign it continued placidly for fourteen years, after which, under the guidance of Dr. Lorne Pierce, its new chairman, it drew up a plan of campaign and asked for the necessary funds. In 1940 a Central Archives Collection had been begun in Victoria University, Toronto. Much had been gathered by successive archivists, but this had been "confined to a small room off the main General Council office, where material was crowded into boxes and on the tops of shelves without any classification or catalogue whatever." The move to Victoria, where for the first time it was brought under professional attention, showed this nucleus to be composed of volumes dealing with Church history (mainly Methodist), with special fields, such as the disputes over Clergy Reserves, and manuscripts, letters, pamphlets, newspapers, diaries, local histories of places and churches, heresies, Indian missions, and hymns.

The present Archives Department at the University is made up of the Archives of the United Church and the Victoria University Collection in Canadian Church History. The two overlap slightly, but tend more often to supplement each other. The whole is cataloged and readily available.

Although the reports of the Committee on Archives, addressed biennially to the General Conference, were concerned almost wholly with the central collection, some work was being accomplished elsewhere. The structure of the United Church is military, if not militant. General Headquarters is at Toronto; Corps is Canada-wide, from Newfoundland to British Columbia: each Corps is entitled a Conference. The Divisions are called Presbyteries; the Battalions are the individual churches. Unlike the Army, however, our numbers vary. The Newfoundland Conference has only six Presbyteries, while that of the Maritimes has eighteen, and the churches are 84 as against 326. The number of Pastoral Charges for the whole Dominion is over 2,700.

These statistics are given as "corroborative detail." Each of the 2,700 churches possesses archival material in the shape of deeds, communion rolls, and registers. In addition, there are closed churches, affected by the merging of the three denominations; there are "lost" churches that served the people perhaps a century ago and have ceased to exist when a little community perished or was transferred. There are many records that are in private hands; there are diaries, collections of letters, and minute books that moul-

der in attics. The Department of Archives has a place for all when found.

Now, as to the actual working of our charge. The Central Collection is at Victoria University, Toronto, and each Conference has an archives library and a historical committee. The Newfoundland library is at St. John's; the Maritime Conference has a collection at Halifax, principally Presbyterian, and another at Sackville, mainly Methodist. The Montreal and Ottawa Conference has its larger library at McGill University, Montreal. Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, houses the small savings of the Bay of Quinte Conference; much Methodist material from this district is safe in Toronto. Also in Toronto is the library of the Hamilton Conference, but the London, Ontario, Conference keeps its own important library, which is in excellent order. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia have libraries of varying value. Problems of storage seriously effect the efficiency of three. British Columbia has two excellent libraries, and there are other collections relating to the Church of that Province: one at the Provincial Archives in Victoria, Vancouver Island, and the other a part of the important Municipal Archives Library in the City of Vancouver.

What kind of material makes up a Church archives library? There is, first, an imposing array of minute-books: minutes of Conference, of Synod, of Presbytery; and minutes of organizations, such as the Women's Missionary Society. Then there are registers of birth, marriage, and death for individual churches and treasurer's reports. Next we find matter that may be classified as history: histories of local churches, and circuits. Then come the personalia: diaries, some of more than local importance, correspondence, appeals to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in England and to the Colonial Committee in Edinburgh. Recently, in 1949, more detailed investigation of a store of books and manuscripts that had been for a century in a Conference library revealed such rarities as a copy of Jones' translation of the *Methodist Discipline* into the Indian tongue; a Scottish student's notes, in Latin, on a course of lectures in logic, 1697; the correspondence of two gallant soldier-preachers, Duncan McColl, 1790-1820, and Matthew Richey, 1820-1850; and a sixteenth century copy of Bale's *Paraphrase*.

The Conference libraries, like Topsy, "jest grewed," for the most part fortuitously and without evidence of method. One or two (London and British Columbia, apart from the Central Collec-

tion) had been cared for, arranged, and made available for reference use before the war. Since 1946, the majority of the other Conferences have come or are coming into line. There is no uniform system of classification or of cataloging. That is something to occupy a committee with far more time and money than we possess. Our aim is to interest the Conferences and their archivists in making orderly collections out of dusty and disorderly heaps: a kind of "grouping practice." Only when this is accomplished in every Province shall we be able to raise our sights.

If the present emphasis rests upon the Conference library it is because that library, in each Province, represents a focal point of interest. It is a collection in being, whatever its condition; and to call the attention of the United Church to possessions of historical value is to make an opening for the discussion of the whole subject. We foreshadow an organization in which the local church will retain its registers in active use, sending the completed volumes to the Presbytery library. Historical data, in the same way, will go to the Presbytery, unless their scope is wide enough to be of use to the Conference. Matters important to the Church in the Province will be passed to the Conference library: matters of concern to the Church as a whole will come to Toronto and have safe-keeping in Victoria University.

For such an organization to be effective, a union catalog is necessary. It is important that an inquirer in Moose Jaw shall be able to discover at once where the registers are of a prairie church in which his parents were married, for that type of inquiry is by far the most frequent. Are they kept by the local church, have they been sent to the Presbytery, are they at the Conference library, or have they gone to Toronto? And why? It may be possible for the General Council to order that all registers earlier than a certain date *shall* be kept by the Central Archives Library. This has been done by the Church of Scotland. In any event, the necessity for a union catalog remains. At the moment, and with the funds at call, such a project seems like that which would send a plane to the moon; but it is possible, if funds are made available, and therefore must be kept in mind. The much larger bibliographical project, now being considered, a *Bibliography of the Religious Life of the People of Canada*, will have its difficulties immeasurably lightened if our catalog is in being. The Church is young: "Time is with us and hands are free." Therefore we hope and press forward.