The Struggle of Church Archives for Respectability

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CHURCH archives are virtually as old as those of any other institution in America, but from the aspect of respectability church archives and depositories are only now coming into their own. In the colonial period, although some ecclesiastical institutions maintained archival collections quite "religiously," the general practice was to preserve ecclesiastical records insofar as they were of value to a parish, a missionary, or the officials of a movement or denomination. Thus, when one attempts to define church archives and depositories, he is confronted with many difficulties at the outset. To my knowledge, no such definition has been devised, and most depositories specializing in church records have gone on the assumption that they will collect any items that portray the development, growth, and outreach of their organization.

Further difficulties in defining church archives are encountered in efforts to isolate ecclesiastical from secular historical records. Church records are eagerly sought. Thus, for example, State or local historical societies frequently have been concerned about the proper preservation of religious records originating in their States. The earliest and most valuable records in a county are often those of an ecclesiastical institution or parish. Even as it is difficult to distinguish between religious and secular history, so it is difficult to isolate strictly ecclesiastical source material from the secular. For the mass of material we call church records and church archival materials enters variously upon almost every area—social, economic, genealogical, governmental, frontier, geographical, and local. Shifts in population, agricultural history, land settlement, Indian history, and many other subjects are closely intertwined with the history of the church, either local or regional.

We submit that church archives are in a struggle for respectability. American churches present a somewhat uniform pattern

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in the developmental stages of their archives programs. Initially, as a rule, an elected church official by virtue of his office (perhaps that of secretary) was held responsible for the safekeeping of records that required special care in view of prospective use. But, as the collection grew and its immediate practical value declined, it may have been transferred to the library of the nearest or the largest theological seminary of the denomination. There, unless an individual faculty member was particularly interested in the collection, it probably was not extensively used.

Simultaneously with such "official" depositories, personal collections were begun. These had their roots in personal or family interests. Somewhere along the line a "historical society" probably was organized, and this fought for its life against financial limitations and the general lethargy of the denomination's membership. In the course of the struggle for respectability, which includes the gathering of respectable collections and a respectable use of the collections for respectable historical purposes (not for propaganda or to meet a crisis but from an intense desire to ascertain *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*) church archives came of age. After this began the systematizing of collections, coordination, and a worthwhile collecting and service program.

Even while this struggle was going on, the crusaders for historical collections were acquiring not only archival but also library and museum materials. In other words, they looked upon the denominational records collection as consisting of any materials that would contribute to the story of their church. In this respect historical collecting within the denominations parallels somewhat that of secular agencies, except that many church institutions have not reached the point of absolute separation of archives from their other collections. Thus the interests of church depositories are not primarily restricted to archives. Interests of church recordkeepers go beyond the specialized scope of professional societies such as the S. A. A. (heresy!), the American Theological Library Association, the American Society of Church History, the American Historical Association, the American Association for State and Local History, and the National Museums Conference. They dabble in all of these, and consequently may have become jacks of all trades and masters of none.

Deterrents to the growth of church archives may have been shortages of funds, manpower, facilities, or equipment. With one or more such shortages, the trend to develop respectability would be gradual at best.

In addition to the difficulties sketched above, we may name several others. If these problems are pinpointed, a solution for them may be found more readily.

Among the first is the need for a better training program. As already indicated, the average servant of church records cannot easily get his training from any one of the existing professional organizations. By the very nature of his collection and by the demands made upon him, he must be extremely versatile. There is no postgraduate course except that of intense specialization in certain areas to the detriment of others. Conferences and workshops of the various professions frequently discuss the training of a professional worker on governmental levels but rarely consider the broad interests and requirements of those who serve in the area of church records. Membership in professional societies and extensive use of professional journals, as well as participation in the annual meetings, have definite advantages but cannot meet completely the needs of the ecclesiastical recordkeeper. Not only is he confronted with a broad directive to operate library, archives, and museum; but the fact that he serves a specific denomination tends to make him a specialist's specialist. Even such matters as a subject classification system can be tremendously difficult for him because he must constantly adjust to the esoteric terminology of his group and the literature under his care. Thus, filing systems, inventories, and guides will vary from collection to collection; and he is forced by necessity to gain his experience as he becomes more intimately involved in the total operations and services expected from him. In the pursuit of his tasks he frequently asks himself whether he is fish, flesh, or fowl, whether he is museum curator, theological librarian, or church archivist.

For practical reasons, the scope of his collection may not be thoroughly and adequately defined. But even a formal definition is likely to be based upon the available facilities, the financial resources, and the archivist's power to persuade the "creators of records" to turn over their materials to the official archives. As a general principle, the scope of the collection of any church records depository should be neither too broad nor too narrow but should be oriented primarily to the group it purports to serve. The sponsoring organization that underwrites the cost has a right to expect the depository or archives to meet the needs of the denomination.

Newly established denominational collections frequently tend to be far too inclusive. Apparently the management feels that it can earn respectability by reporting huge quantities of materials rather than by putting emphasis upon limited, narrowly confined, intensely

valuable, and apposite collections. The questions that must be answered whenever material is offered to a religious historical institution, are: Is there a more logical place for this material? Will the average research historian be looking for it in a denominational archives? Does it actually pertain to the work of the sponsoring church?

Another danger confronting many church archives is that they can tend to become ecclesiastical attics. Anyone and everyone who has materials, even when of questionable value, seems to feel—for reasons of family pride, personal interests, or what have you—that they ought to be transferred to a public institution when he can no longer care for them adequately. This problem is serious when such materials have been accepted with the obligation of continuous care and preservation.

The absence of a workable records management program in ecclesiastical administration adds to the confusion. This may result in a huge accumulation, so horribly confused that it may take years to separate the wheat from the chaff; or—and this perhaps happens more frequently—*ad hoc* and other church functionaries may destroy their papers after their jobs have been completed. The church archivist ends many a day in frustration!

The complexity of the church archivist's problem is indicated by the type of records he must have available in order to serve his clientele. The following list is typical:

1. Parish or congregational historical materials, including general church histories, published histories, and parish records and other materials that relate the story of a local congregation in its environment.
2. Biographical sketches of the clergymen, teachers, and lay leaders of the denomination, printed or manuscript.
3. Reports of official conventions, official minutes of boards and commissions, committee reports, mission reports, and the like.
4. Manuscript collections, especially the correspondence of the members and leaders of the church, sermons, special reports and observations, journals, and diaries.
5. Serial publications. (Since churches have been voluminous publishers, the collection of serials can sometimes take on enormous proportions. Among Lutherans, well over a thousand serials above the congregational level have been published in America during the past 250 years, yet a church archivist-historian must make real efforts to acquire such resources.)
6. Church books, whether published or in manuscript. (The agenda, liturgies, formularies, catechisms, hymnals, instruction manuals, Bibles, and prayer books produced by the denomination must be included for historical reference purposes.)
7. Maps and photographs used or issued by the workers in the denomination.
8. Commemorative medallions, coins, and medals.

9. Other museum pieces. (Paraphernalia used by traveling missionaries, communion vessels, altar furnishings, and other church-related items become source material for a proper study and evaluation of the church's work.)

In short, paradoxical though it may seem, the church archivist-historian must become a specialist and yet remain a jack of all trades. The management and support of individual church archives frequently vary as much as their objectives, scope, and activities. A recent survey indicated too small a budgetary allotment among several of the major American Protestant denominations; some even receive no official financial support whatever. This problem cries for solution. Naturally, a wide divergence of scope, operations, techniques, and management results from this unhealthy condition.

The management of collections varies from denomination to denomination. Some depositories have been fortunate enough to develop policy-making boards responsible to denominational conventions or assemblies. Others have the unenviable position of serving as adjuncts to theological libraries or to boards uninterested in archives. Not many denominational collections have progressed to the point where a full-time executive, with an adequate staff, services the entire collection. The growing trend, at least among Lutherans in America, attaches the department of archives to the governmental function of the church, through either the president or the secretary.

Because control varies, management and responsibility are somewhat hazily defined, and as an unfortunate consequence depositories do not receive adequate support for maintenance or service. As an adjunct to another denominational program, one cannot expect the archival and historical emphases to develop and expand as they should.

Reporting is important in conveying information to the constituency in order to create a better understanding of the work, to win additional friends and supporters, to demonstrate that church archives are of service, and to obtain additional archival materials. In order to reach out effectively—and no archival collection can operate in a vacuum or without constant use—we suggest the following coverage in a report to the constituency of the church or operating body:

1. Report on the general and/or specific objectives of the archives, historical library, and museum. Indicate what you are attempting to do.

2. In demonstrating these objectives, report convincingly that your organization is the only one endeavoring to carry out these services.

3. In the proper time and place, spell out the philosophy underlying archival and historical work: a loyalty to the heritage, scriptural injunctions admonish-

ing proper transmission of the Gospel, references to any transitional movements, and utilitarian purposes.

4. Report in detail on services rendered by the institution. Among the services one might list: research, counsel and advice, the gathering and supplying of bibliographical data, extension services, microfilm services, and museum work.

5. Refer to the scope of the collection and the materials and literature desired, and give a general idea of what is currently available.

6. Do not overlook references to the capabilities of the staff.

7. It would be ideal to issue at intervals special reports on accessions—summaries rather than complete and detailed reports.

Where should these reports be made? An annual report, at least, is required at the convention or assembly of the parent organization. In our case, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod meets in triennial convention, and the major reports to our entire church body are therefore made triennially. Where annual conventions are held, the reports should be transmitted annually. (The serial publications of the church in periods between conventions are excellent media for interim reports, feature stories, queries, and special requests for materials.)

A detailed general report should also be rendered to the fiscal board of the denomination, where most budgetary allotments originate. Of course, if your institution has a sponsoring society with membership, possibly even a historical publication such as ours, reports should be made to the members. Such a society is naturally helpful in consummating work, enlarging the collection, and doing local scouting at the grass-roots level.

Conferences and meetings of clergymen and of women's or men's groups serve as excellent targets for reporting. The archivist can well use these meetings as sounding boards for new projects and prospects and may even find financial help there. We Lutherans conduct conferences or workshops for our church's district historians and archivists every three years. Although these tend to become rather technical in their approach to services rendered and to problems of gathering and organizing materials, their reporting potential is outstanding. Such regional archivists serve as the liaison between the parish and headquarters. Finally, one should not overlook the avenue of correspondence in reporting. I believe that the greatest good will can be created through personal letters as well as personal contacts with visitors.

Thus collecting, preserving, and utilizing church historical materials becomes an extremely personal matter. It's a big job—this struggle for respectability—but it is one of the most gratifying and enjoyable areas of work.