

An Effective Acquisition Program for the Religious Archives

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WHO should take the initiative in setting up specific archival policies for the religious archives, including acquisition policies and programs? The answer would seem to be that the suggestion should come from the person or persons in the religious denomination who have had the most experience in working with manuscripts and other forms of records. Such a person might be a church historian or an experienced archivist. One would guess that not all members of a church historical committee would be sufficiently informed in this area to be able to act wisely without expert advice and that such a policymaking body would seek the help of professionals in the field, who might be among their own number or who might be archivists of business firms or governmental agencies. If the denomination acts through committees that have church-wide authority, then the historical committee, or its counterpart, should be responsible for collecting and preserving the records of the church and for setting up the policies governing these activities. It may, however, be necessary for concerned individuals, among whom might be trained archivists, to take the initiative by prodding their historical committees into action. For example, the historical committee of which the writer is a member existed 30 years before it drew up a set of "Rules and Regulations for the Archives of the Mennonite Church." These were adopted in 1941 and slightly revised in 1948 and in 1961. It was through the vision of one member of the committee that this set of guiding principles came into being, although records had been accumulated for many years previously, without much design or strategy. The rules, however, covered only the ownership, control, and use of the archival materials that in one way or another had come into the possession of the historical committee. There had been no policy statement on what types of records were to constitute the archives of the denomination. Consequently the committee prepared a list

The author, Executive Secretary and Archivist, Mennonite Historical and Research Committee, and church news reporter for the *American Archivist*, read this paper on Oct. 6, 1965, at the Church Archives Workshop of the 29th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, in New York City.

of "Recommended Policies Regarding the Retention and Disposal of the Records of Officers and Committees of the Agencies of the Mennonite Church." This statement was adopted by Mennonite General Conference in August 1953, and thus it became the official archival policy of this denomination.¹

The statement of policy contains at least two points that should appear in any similar declaration of other church bodies. First, it makes clear that any officer or committee member of a church agency is a steward of the records he creates while acting in his official capacity; such records are not his personal property but rather belong to the church agency he serves. Second, not all records are equally valuable, and church committees, agencies, and officers should have guidance on what kinds of records may eventually be discarded and which ones must be carefully preserved.

These two points are well covered by the new policy statement prepared by the Commission of Archives and History, composed of members of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church, working under the assumption that the two denominations may merge. The statement's section on "Archives" declares that the bishops, general conference officers, general boards, commissions, committees, and agencies of the United Methodist Church shall deposit official minutes or journals in the archives and shall transfer correspondence, records, papers, and other archival materials from their offices to the archives when they no longer have operational usefulness. The document goes on to describe in detail the types of records that are archival materials.

When once the two points are established, the archivist becomes more than a beggar, for he can act with authority in calling in the inactive files of church agencies. Nevertheless, he still faces the problem of educating the church so that the two points will be understood, accepted, and acted on. Publicity materials must be prepared for pastors and church leaders, reminding them of the policies, reporting the progress being made, and persuading them of the truth of a statement conspicuously displayed in the entrance hall of the archives of the Concordia Historical Institute: "To know nothing of the past is to understand little of the present and to have no conception of the future."

This writer in collecting "Church Archives News Notes" for the *American Archivist* during the past several years has asked all church archives listed in the *Directory of Religious Archival and Historical Depositories in America* to submit to him samples of

¹ The statement is printed at the end of this article.

their publicity materials. It is his judgment that the regular releases from the Information Service of Concordia Historical Institute² are the best and most effective employed by an American church archives. The occasional lengthier releases prepared by August Suelflow, the institute's director, are also noteworthy. Among them are such articles as "The Ideal Congregational Archives and History," "Compiling a Congregational History," "What Is Archival-Historical Material?" "The Congregational Archivist," "Gathering Biographical Sketches of Pastors and Teachers," and "When You Reach Retirement." What is being said here is simply that there can be no really effective acquisition program unless the historical committees and archivists succeed in educating their constituencies on the value of preserving records and of depositing them in places where they will be protected and made accessible.

It must also be emphasized that, regardless of the excellent regulations that general conference agencies may have adopted concerning the nature of archival materials and the obligation of all agencies to transfer their records to authorized archives, the archivist remains the key figure in the organization. First of all, he must have thorough understanding of his denomination's history as well as familiarity with its organizational structure as it now exists and as it was in the past. Only by having this understanding and familiarity can he be aware of the gaps in his holdings and therefore take initiative in searching for lost records and in reminding delinquent officers and organizations of the need to send their records to the central archives. An archivist many years ago related to the writer his experience of searching through the attics of eastern Pennsylvania for several weeks and finding there rich archival and historical library materials. After the writer conducted a long search for the earliest secretary book of the Mennonite General Conference, it was located in a basement in central Illinois. It had become musty there, but fortunately the mold had not destroyed its legibility. An effective acquisition program is based in part on the ability of the archivist to serve as a detective who is persistent in his pursuit of clues leading to the solution of the mystery of lost valuables.

But what if the denomination is not structured in such a manner as to make possible the establishment and enforcement of standard practices relating to archival deposits? In such a case the responsibility rests upon concerned individuals to establish a society to preserve the records of the denomination. Education and persua-

² 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis, Mo. 63105.

sion through church periodicals, publicity releases to pastors, and periodic addresses before district and local meetings of the constituency must be used when there can be no rules to insure the preservation of the priceless records that otherwise might be lost or completely destroyed. It has been this writer's experience that many families and organizations were grateful when the archivist offered to accept records that they no longer wanted but that they could not in good conscience destroy. Some of these contacts with such families or organizations can be made by mail; others must be made in person.

The church archivist must also be vigilant to obtain the private papers of deceased church leaders—the diaries, journals, sermon notes, and private letters that are not agency or board properties. Often the tendency is for the sons and daughters to divide these mementos among themselves, thus breaking the unity of the collection. Often the third generation will have no interest in preserving the records. The best solution to the problem would appear to be to persuade church leaders to bequeath their personal papers to the archives of their denomination, either by will or by personal letter that can be used after their death to prove their wishes. Others are willing to turn over to their church archives the bulk of their papers at the time of their retirement. The archivist's actions should not be so precipitate as those of many tombstone salesman, but neither should he wait very long to inform the family of his interest in the deceased's private papers, lest the family should dispose of or divide the records. The writer recently had an unhappy experience in this regard. A certain woman had a church record book, which she prized highly and with which she was unwilling to part. Shortly after her death the writer approached her children concerning the book. Not one of them had any idea of what had become of it, and after weeks of search they reported their failure to locate it. Perhaps it was disposed of with wastepaper and other “junk.”

This paper has presented the case (1) for a clear denominational policy on what constitutes church records, (2) for a program of publicity and education to make church constituencies records conscious, and (3) for archivists who not only know their church history and structure but will take the initiative in tracking down records and in persuading families to deposit important papers in responsible depositories. No attempt has been made to delineate the particular kinds of agreements that should be made between the donor or depositor and the archival agency. That is a topic that merits another paper.

RECOMMENDED POLICIES

Regarding the Retention and Disposal of the Records of
Officers and Committees of the Agencies of the Mennonite Church*A. Introduction*

This statement of policies was prepared because of the action given below. Item 42—General Council Minutes, Nov. 14, 15, 1952. H. S. Bender spoke on records of boards and committees for the Archives. *Action 39.* Moved, seconded, and passed that the Historical Committee study policies covering the definition of what constitutes official church papers and documents; recommend principles for bringing together of these materials into the Archives; that these findings be presented for consideration at the spring council, 1953.

B. A Policy Regarding Records

In the past our church agencies have not defined their policies in regard to the records of their officers, committees, and other persons who have had a part in the work of the agency. In some instances difficulties have arisen. Records have disappeared which should have been retained. One cannot say that the loss was willful. Rather, it was the result of a lack of awareness of the value of the records. Families have clung to records created by a deceased relative, when these records were more properly the property of a congregation, a conference, or a board, and were essential to the history of that agency. Occasionally a board officer or committee member has retained records because he honestly believed they were his personal property.

A person holding an office in an agency of the church acts as a servant of the church, not as a private individual. Our major boards are incorporated, hold property, and have legal responsibilities. Their major work is performed by committees, chief of which is the executive committee. These committees have specific responsibilities defined by the constitution or official agency, which brings the committee into being. They use the letterhead of the agency, or sign correspondence in such a way as to denote their official relation to the agency. In a large commercial agency, men in similar positions would have offices in a central location in space provided by the agency. Many of the officers and members of our incorporated boards maintain their offices in space which they themselves provide, frequently in their own homes. Does this accident of the location of records change the nature of the records, so that they become private records of the individual rather than the records of the corporate group? Should it not be true that any records created by an individual acting in the name of the corporate agency, or using the official stationery of that agency be the property of the agency, and the matter of the retention or disposal of these records be determined by the agency in an objective manner, aside from any personal interests which might prejudice their treatment? And should not records of unincorporated agencies be considered in the same light?

As a committee, we maintain that an office in any agency of the church, from the major boards down to the smallest local organization, is a steward-

ship to be held in sacred trust. The distribution of official letterheads for such an agency does not provide the steward with free stationery for his personal correspondence, but lays upon him the obligation to use it only when he speaks in the name of the agency whose imprint it bears. At the same time it requires of him that he maintain the records of that agency as the property of that agency, subject to the control of that agency. The only exception would be when an official wishes to write unofficially or privately, but then he should so mark his documents and should not use official letterheads.

When these principles become the accepted principles of our various agencies, the role of the Archives of the Mennonite Church takes meaning. A sense of stewardship of records as outlined in the preceding paragraph will result in problems of records storage, particularly of the records created by a person no longer in office. Adequate records storage involves protection from theft, from fire, and from damage from light, heat, moisture, vermin, etc. It also requires the filing of the records in such a way that they be available when they are needed. These services are specialized services not available in the ordinary home and usually not in our institutional offices. Mennonite General Conference has established the Archives of the Mennonite Church for these very reasons. The sense of stewardship of records demands it. The degree to which the Archives can serve the agencies depends in part upon the agencies and the individuals who create these records. We propose the above principles as guides to a general policy regarding records. The following section outlines recommendations regarding the retention and disposal of specific types of records.

C. Recommendations

Records of the secretary

Keep:

Constitution and by-laws in original and revised forms, including preliminary drafts of the original and its revisions and a copy of the charter.

Minutes of all meetings with complete set of records attached. Deeds; records of bequests, annuities, and endowments (some of which may be in the file of the treasurer).

Correspondence, except routine matters which do not give important information, such as routine notices calling a meeting of the agency or its committees.

Publicity releases.

Promotional and informational pamphlets.

Discard:

Routine notices of coming meetings.

Question: Proxy notices.

Records of the treasurer

Keep:

All books of final entry, particularly ledgers.

Certain books of intermediate entry, such as journals from which ledger entries are made, provided they give information not readily available in the books of final entry. (For instance, a journal might give a chronological history of the financial activities of the agency, which would be difficult to reconstruct from a ledger. Pledge slips might serve as an index to journal entries.)

Correspondence which gives information not available in the books of entry.

Records of bequests, annuities, and endowments which are in the files of the treasurer, rather than in those of the secretary.

Discard:

Canceled checks, check stubs, requisition slips, pledge slips, statements, invoices, receipts for payments made and received. Keep for — years and then discard, provided entries have been made in the treasurer's books of final entry, and these records of the treasurer have been properly audited. Samples might be kept at stated intervals.

Correspondence of a routine nature, for instance, covering letters accompanying statements, payments, and receipts.

Records of other officers:

Keep:

Correspondence, except routine correspondence as above.

Records of committees

Keep:

Minutes and reports.

Correspondence, except routine correspondence as above.

Personnel records from the files of any officer or committee:

Such records might well be filed in personal folders under the name of the person. In cases where personnel records are kept by various officers and/or committees, it would be well to authorize the merging of personal folders upon transfer to the Archives of the Mennonite Church, so that the complete records for a given individual might be available and so that duplicates might be removed.

Caution:

All records which are required to be kept by the laws of the United States, the state, or any other political unit in which the agency operates, should be preserved for the period of time required by such laws.

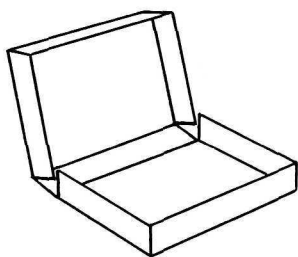
All records which protect the legal rights of the agency, its employees, or its patrons should be preserved.

Transfer to the Archives of the Mennonite Church

The records of the agency, committee, or officer should stay in the working files of said agency, committee, or officer, as long as the records are active, that is, as long as they are referred to so frequently that the agency, committee,

or officer would be handicapped by the fact that they had been transferred. When they are no longer active in this sense, they should be transferred to the Archives of the Mennonite Church, particularly in those cases where the files are not located in a fireproof building. At the time of their transfer they should be accompanied by clear statements regarding the use that may be made of them, unless a statement covering the first transfer in a series of continuous transfers has been filed with the custodian of the Archives. Such statements should make clear to the custodian any restrictions regarding the use of these records by the officers or committees of the agency making the deposit as well as their use by research scholars and others who might request to use them. The custodian will be responsible for the care and use of these records according to rules and regulations adopted by the Historical Committee of Mennonite General Conference in the light of any restrictions which might be imposed by the depositing agency. Materials to be discarded should be removed from the files before their transfer, except by special agreement with the custodian of the Archives.

—Adopted by Mennonite General Conference, Aug. 1953.
Official Minutes, 1953, p. 64-67.



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