

# Financial Sources for Church Archival Programs

By V. NELLE BELLAMY

*The Church Historical Society*

THE term "society" for the purposes of this discussion may refer to what is commonly known as a "historical society" or to a "society of memberships" in an institution. In either case the society is composed of individuals and/or groups who pay membership dues. Patrons may be a class of membership but are also often individual donors of large sums of money. According to the literature published by a number of church archival institutions, society memberships have in the past contributed to the financing of church archival programs. And they continue to do so. The Concordia Historical Institute of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod lists various categories of membership—life member, organizational member, patron member, sustaining member and active member. The recent brochure for the Archives of the Moravian Church has come to my attention. It describes a voluntary organization of interested persons, called Friends of the Archives, who contribute to the archival institution. The archival program for the Presbyterian Church includes the Presbyterian Historical Society and the Department of History of the Office of the General Assembly. The Episcopal Church has designated the Church Historical Society as the official agency of the General Convention for the collection and preservation of historical records of the Episcopal Church. Other examples could be cited.

Financial support from memberships for a church archival program at a national level theoretically has excellent potential advantages. Here is the opportunity to establish a broad base of participation on the part of a large number of individuals who may become personally involved in the activities of an archival-historical program. This not only offers the possibility of discovering documents that might not otherwise come to the attention of an archivist but may also become an important instrument in the teaching function of the church. The Concordia Historical Institute, for example, describes its role as the "Memory of the Lutheran Church."

And yet, if the reliance on membership support for an archival program is too heavy, disadvantages may result. The personal involvement may not be easily sustained. In our highly organized world of Madison Avenue promotion techniques, membership drives and promotion programs require both money and staff for a maximum return. The fact that the public

The author, Archivist of The Church Historical Society of the Episcopal Church, Austin, Tex., read this paper at a church archives workshop, on Sept. 30, 1968, during the Society's annual meeting in Ottawa, Canada.

interest changes with the times must be also considered. Whereas there have been periods when the interest in history was widespread, there are times such as these in which we live when active participation in the social order (or disorder) takes priority. Under these conditions the archives are not where the action is, although the archivist may "be doing his thing." And surely many a church historian in this ecumenical 20th century has been dismayed at the ignorance of denominational history that at times accompanies a spirit of ecumenism and does not always consider the historical differences in the churches. The laymen may not be interested in the history of the churches; and memberships in historical denominational institutions may decline. Finally the greatest disadvantage is that a competently administered denominational archival-historical program is far too extensive to be handled by voluntary members of a society or institution. Only the denomination at its national level is equipped to handle responsibly the records created by it.

Ideally one conceives of the archival-historical program of a church or denomination as based on a combined support—a denominational financial undergirding plus individual or group memberships in a society or an institution. And it is this combination that is described in the literature of various church archival institutions. As one reads the published reports there are indications that the institutions are in some way officially linked with the denominational headquarters and that they also invite members to "join."

For an example, I shall take the archival program for the Episcopal Church. The archives of this church are in the custody of the Church Historical Society, which was founded in 1910 as a group of laymen interested in the history of the Episcopal Church. With little financial resources, the society collected books and manuscripts. Then in 1940 the Church Historical Society by resolution of the General Convention was to be "the official agency of the General Convention for the collection, preservation and safekeeping of records and historical documents connected with the life and development of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, and to foster as far as possible the investigation of its history and the development of interest in all relevant research." As the official repository for the church's historical documents and records, the Library and Archives of the Church Historical Society began to receive money from the General Convention; and in 1959 a full-time archivist was employed. Today the archival program of the Episcopal Church is administered by an archivist employed through the Church Historical Society. This historical society also has members, receives dues, and publishes a quarterly. In checking reported finances for the last 6 years the following figures are evident in two reporting periods. During 1961-63 and 1964-66 less than 20 percent of the total income spent by the society came from its members. And this amount was not adequate for maintaining the membership office and publishing the quarterly. The archives received very little of it.

What does the future hold? Emphasis will be placed on a membership drive with various categories of memberships—patron, sustaining, and subscription. A newly organized group called “Friends of the Archives” has been launched. These will provide a base of interested persons involved in our activities. Also, plans in the making at our national church headquarters at this time include an endowment plus a capital funds outlay for building and equipment. And we believe that this combination of denominational support plus participation through society membership is a good one.

---

### ***Where Did We Come From?***

There has been a persistent myth promulgated in the Synod that archival-historical work is of very recent origin and that it sort of snuck into the Synodical structure through the “back door.” Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Institute traces its formal beginnings back to 1847 when The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was organized. The constitution adopted by the Synod at that time designated the Synodical Secretary as its responsible archivist. It simply stated that the secretary “. . . is to be in charge of the Synodical archives.” The same convention, again, contrary to popular myth, also established the position of chronicler, which has been continued to the present time. The first Synodical archivist was the Rev. F. W. Husmann, who served from 1847 to 1850 and again from 1854 to 1860. The Rev. L. W. Habel served the intervening years from 1850 to 1854. The five subsequent Synodical secretaries who served during the next 60 years all shouldered similar responsibilities. In fact, this provision for the Synodical archives remained in effect until 1917 when the original Synodical constitution was drastically revised. . . .

We are most grateful for the vision which the first generation Synodical founders had in providing for archival-historical interests. While it may be true that things are done a bit differently today than they were a hundred years ago, nevertheless, the work done today is based on the ground work which was laid so well beginning in 1847. The work, incidentally, even at that time, included a records retention and destruction program. You will find the minutes of the 1850 Synodical Convention most interesting, when the Synodical archivist requested that the “Maculatur,” that is, worthless papers in the archives, be destroyed. The convention gave its permission and instructed the archivist to build a bonfire and burn these papers in the presence and under the witness of the members of the Fort Wayne pastoral conference. [Missouri Synod, *Proceedings*, 1850, p. 41] Can one imagine the members of this pastoral conference consisting of about five or six staid and orthodox clergymen sitting around the fire one evening and feeding the individual papers to the flames?

—AUGUST R. SUELFLOW, “From Where to What: Director’s Report to the 14th Regular Meeting, Concordia Historical Institute, New York, 8 July 1967,” in Concordia Historical Institute *Quarterly*, 41:88 (May 1968).