



Stewardship, Theology, and Archives

Introduction

Probably what follows is more in the line of personal reflection upon archival work and practice than it is a systematic inquiry into archival theory. Yet, I feel this is important nonetheless, since systematic inquiry arises out of reflection upon what we mean by what we say when we talk about what we do. By this is meant what do we as archivists say about why we do what we do. A step beyond that raises the question as to how does that fit into the larger picture of the organization which supports us.

For several years, I have been thinking about what it might be that makes religious archives different from their secular counterparts—about what distinguishes them, if indeed there is anything which distinguishes them from business archives, or government archives, or college and university archives. But perhaps it might be more precise to inquire as to whether there is a foundation to religious archival work which sets it apart and makes it different from other types of archival work. I don't believe that this is merely another unnecessary "sacred/secular" distinction. So I have been working on a theological foundation for religious archival work as a means of answering these questions.

Archival Foundations

First, let us consider what this foundation is and how it might come to bear on our collection policy. Let's also be certain that a common definition of archives is held by those of us engaged in this inquiry. My

This chapter is from two addresses delivered at the Society of American Archivists and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archivists annual meetings.

basic definition is Jenkinson's definition of archives, namely, that a document is an archive when it "was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors." [Jenkinson, p. 11]

Thus, it follows that an institutional archives is developed first of all for the institution which it serves and then only secondarily for other users. That being the case, a religious archives exists primarily to serve the religious institution from which it receives its existence. So, all of its practices must be consistent with good archival management as well as be consistent with the theological foundation upon which the religious institution is established.

From the Jenkinson definition I think it follows that archival policy must be consistent with the policy of the institution. It certainly is possible for an organization to give birth to an agency within itself which ultimately works at counter purposes with the establishing institution. But this generally will result when institutional policy begins to become greatly misguided, and the agency takes on a "prophetic" function. The archival program usually grows out of an organizational philosophy which recognizes the need to save at least some of its own documentation—to preserve its memory.

My own interests in this undertaking received their initial impetus with the necessity to justify the expense of a major archival program for the denomination. So the theological basis upon which my work is established arises out of my own Calvinist background and experience, but, in principle, I believe that it is applicable to any religious institution.

The Sacred Trust of Remembering

Orlando Tibbetts wrote a delightful little book for local church pastors entitled "How to Keep Useful Church Records". In it Tibbetts maintains that careful record keeping is one of the most important aspects for a successful ministry. He says church records (and here he refers to the local congregation) are "remembering instruments". This puts record keeping and record preservation in the historical context of the Old Testament and God's command to Moses to preserve His words for His people.

In fact, he maintains that records management in the congregation is a ministry and a sacred trust which is essential for its well-functioning and continued growth. With this in mind I will list several theological assumptions for archival preservation in a religious institution and use those as the foundation for the development of the

collection policy.

Our assumptions regarding history relate closely to our religious perspective and vary only a little from tradition to tradition. It is essential that we, as religious archivists, take the time to focus our thought upon the theological assumptions upon which our individual work rests in order to put it clearly in the context of the continuing ministry of our respective institutions.

Theological Assumptions

We start with some basic assumptions about the relationship between God as creator and the world as His creation. In the Reformed tradition we acknowledge that God controls history. By his grace he is directing the experiences of His people through that control. We acknowledge a movement toward an end. That end is the full establishment of God's kingdom. The records which we preserve in the archives are the records which document the unfolding of God's plan for his creation as witnessed to by our respective traditions. These primary documents of our individual heritages were preserved because they witnessed to God's revelation to his people, and here I am specifically referring to the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Church. Our present Christian archives document the faithfulness of a particular people's response to that revelation. Without the careful preservation of these records we have to continually guess at that faithfulness.

Thus, we can begin to see some "higher" reasons for preserving documentary evidence of the work of our religious institutions beyond those "secular-cultural" reasons we might normally pull out to explain the reasons for saving historically valuable material.

Along this same path, we believe that God reveals himself within the history of his people. By his presence in our history he has ordered and sanctified history. History, as seen, for example, within the Christian church, has a purpose, we recognize God's salvation history. Thus, even before we begin any historical research we share some common assumptions about what history means. How can the presence of God be recognized in history unless we carefully preserve those records which document the course of our journey as a called people?

Here we are preserving the records of a journey, which offer what we might call a "road-map" of our spiritual course. We need to be ever mindful that we are documenting the true path, and those times when we have strayed from what we perceived to be the true path.

So, recognizing that God reveals himself within history and that he controls and orders history and the experiences of his people, it follows that God interacts with his people within the events of human

experience. For example, when we examine the personal records of a significant religious leader, we are able to discern the growth and development of a distinct religious personality. The archives provide assistance in understanding the way in which a person came to know his or her God and how the religious tradition formed the world and life view of the individual. Here's one area of documenting the "person in the pew."

Documenting Faith Development

Those records which we collect also serve to demonstrate the faith development of a religious institution. Appraisal standards for religious archives have to take into account the evidential value created records offer for this aspect of institutional faithfulness.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, leaders certainly saw the necessity of preserving certain records which later became a sacred canon. This is true of virtually all religious movements. But, as we move closer to the present, we find that oftentimes the need is less and less expressed to preserve these records. Yet as religious archivists we stand in the line of men and women who first saw the need to preserve the traditions of the faith.

In jest, I have often referred to my office as the Office of Tradition Maintenance, Chronicle Collection, and Preservation of the Acts of the Disciples. While this mouthful seems humorous, it is an attempt to place my role as archivist for a denomination in a historical context which is intelligible to the person in the pew and that rests squarely in the biblical tradition with which they are familiar.

Within the Reformed Church, it is acknowledged that the life of our denomination is the profile of God's interaction with a specific people within a specific temporal context. The common tradition of the Reformed Church is one of the most significant factors which provides us with a sense of cohesiveness as a distinct body within the larger Church. The preserved record reflects our distinct witness and reaction to the revelation and leading of God. And the past becomes utilized in a very real manner. Today's programs are built upon the foundations of our common past; new programs must demonstrate continuity with old ones. The past is held up as a challenge to the present for ever greater effort in the future.

I hope this brief theological inquiry has clarified how archives can have a theological foundation within the religious institution. Of course, we will all differ on some minor point or another, but the broad strokes of this pattern are probably quite similar for all of us. In this way we all share some uniformity of identity as religious archivists, or more precisely, as archivists serving religious institutions.

What is apparent from this is that what we do as archivists of

religious institutions does not differ, in essence, from what archivists of public and business archives do. But our terminology for beginning to do our job is different and we can maintain that our work is one aspect of the total ministry of the religious institution.

Stewardship and the Archives

But now the question at issue is how does all of this relate to a collecting policy, and more, what does it have to do with the notion of stewardship. I hope that I can know make that clear, because what I want to demonstrate follows from the theological foundation just outlined.

I am using the term stewardship in the biblical sense and suspect that it will have common meanings for most all of us. If not, I still hope that what I am saying will have relevance to you after you have a chance to do some theological translation and reworking.

Stewardship generally relates to the management of affairs, generally of a property or monetary orientation for the working out in the best interest of the work of the religious group. As we are most familiar with the notion it relates to how much money an individual donates to a given charity or worthwhile benevolent operation. But it does go beyond that and relates to the management of ones own being - in terms of time, talent and life-style. Today we are hearing much more about environmental stewardship, for example, in relation to the stretching of limited natural resources for a large population. Generally, this relates to the area of energy and food resources.

However, I would suggest that the Archivist is a professional steward of the religious institution. In my case I think of myself as the steward of the Reformed Church's heritage. As I mentioned earlier the past can be held up as a reflection of where we have been so that we might strive more strongly along the path into the future. In this sense the future then depends upon the faithfulness with which that heritage is administered. To rephrase that, the future of the organization depends upon how well we, as archivists, document the past. In other words, we are preserving the memory of our religious institution, and if a memory is faulty, then the future actions of that institution will likewise be faulty, in so far as they are based upon that memory.

Now I think this puts the whole business of archival management into a satisfactory framework that will sit well with most clerical theologians. Scriptural support or whatever support is needed for the particular religious archive can be appropriately cited with some small amount of research homework.

Collection Policy

Each religious archive should have a formal statement of purpose and policy, which we can call here the collecting policy. This document is what we might call the “enabling” document of our office. It is that which states what we intend to do with our time and energy, why we are going to do this, why it is necessary to expend the resources of the institution for this, and how we fit into the “larger scheme” of things, and an explanation of how it will all happen.

A statement of policy will define the boundaries of the archival agency and indicate over what areas it has jurisdiction. For example, the first paragraph of the policy statement for the RCA archives reads, “The Archives Office, under the supervision of the Commission on History, is responsible for the custody and preservation of the archives and records of the Reformed Church in America. The archives and records of the RCA include all those produced by actions of General Synod, particular synods, classes, and local churches. They include all boards, commissions, committees, and missions established by any of the above-mentioned bodies.”

Now that statement defines where our record gathering boundaries lie. For some of you the scope of your collection may be considerably smaller. Nevertheless it is essential that this be spelled out in a formal document which can be approved by the governing body of your institution. In that way the authority has been given for you to be the steward of the heritage.

After the boundaries have been established then you need to have some bite in the policy. In my instance, there shall be no disposition of any records without the authorization of the archivist or a responsible representative.

This will undoubtedly be the most difficult statement to have approved. Everyone is wary that you will somehow usurp some power from their position. It is incredible how protective some individuals are of their record empire. I think that for them, their records represent the physical depiction of their status and role. The more file cabinets one has, then the busier one must be.

Work with that statement, but don’t give it up. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you will automatically be consulted before records are dumped, but it will give you the authority to say “Hold It!! Let me have a look!”

If your organization has a formal records management program then you would work closely with the records manager on the development of retention schedules. Remember, the archivist has the professional competence to make the decisions regarding permanent retention. Make sure that you have this authority.

Now this introductory paragraph should be combined with an

explanation such as the one I presented at the beginning which ties in the work of the archival agency with the total work of the religious institution. In essence state that you are responsible for the stewardship of the heritage. And that the archives office has this responsibility to the future.

Here, I think it is essential that archivists use the language of the institution. Stewardship says so much more than preservation, collection, or acquisition. The notion of stewardship involves a giving of ourselves. Isn't this what we do when we provide reference service to our users?

Our technical vocabulary is fine when we are conversing with another archivist, but it is important to translate what we are doing into terms that are familiar to the decision makers. Here we can take our cues from the biblical scholars and preachers who do this all the time. Records management is simply stewardship of the information resources of an organization. Of course, I'm perhaps oversimplifying, but I think you can see what I mean.

When we talk about what we do, it must be intelligible to those people who raise the question, "What's an Archive?" Putting our role in a theological context gives it meaning to individuals throughout the religious institution.

For myself, I cannot do what I do outside of the context of the Reformed tradition. What I do is a part of the total ministry of the church. That is where I am coming from. I think that this attitude may be similar for many of you.

So, this personal inquiry may raise more questions than it answers. But that's okay. Asking the right question at the start of an inquiry is one-half of the job. I would still like to explore the question whether this theological reflection does anything to change our archival methodology? How does the notion of stewardship relate to the appraisal process and to conservation of material.



The Story of the RCA Archives

Introduction

A popular cartoon strip of a few years ago had a picture of a fellow standing on a hilltop watching a beautiful sunset. Suddenly, across the sky there flashed a message, “Due to lack of interest, tomorrow has been canceled.” The Reformed Church in America can be compared to that fellow standing on a hilltop because there is often a danger that the message may flash across, “Due to lack of interest, yesterday has been forgotten.”

This is a time when we are focusing much energy and talent to examine our identity and we must be sure that we neither forget nor ignore our heritage in the process. The denominational archives has had a very precarious life over the last three and one-half centuries but the last decade has witnessed years of growth and continued progress toward making the archives a valuable resource for the Reformed Church in America.

Our heritage is something which defines us as a People of God, provides guidance for growth into the future, and serves as our common memory along the course of our corporate journey. Our documentary heritage is the physical record of that journey.

I hope this brief description serves to offer some sense of what archives are, how they can be used, where they are stored, and how the denominational archives came to be gathered in one location.

Archives - What are they?

Everyone is familiar with saving records which are considered of vital importance for our well-being and our well-functioning. Hospital records, financial records, canceled checks, tax returns and receipts, savings account books, letters from relatives and friends all

come to mind when we think about important records which have meaning for our life. Where would we be if we didn't keep a record of checks written? How would our health be jeopardized if we didn't keep immunization records and other medical records? What would the IRS say if we couldn't produce a record which substantiates our deduction?

Such records comprise our personal and family archives and are vital for avoiding financial, legal, and personal difficulties. In addition, we all have collections of letters and papers which we rarely read, yet we hold onto them with fond remembrance of our past. Letters from parents, children, and friends, all make up our documentary memory about earlier years in our lives and the written memories of loved ones. These are our archives.

The Church's Memory

The church also has a need to preserve a documentary memory. The life of the church as a whole is far more complex than the life and memory of a single individual. Financial dealings, legal considerations, and friendly correspondence all take place on a far grander scale than our everyday doings. Financial memory loss and legal errors can cost huge sums of money and will affect far more than one individual. The mass of information created on a daily basis by a denomination of over 900 congregations and 350,000 members with missionaries serving on nearly every continent and with three colleges and two seminaries must be managed very carefully. Paper is generated on a large scale every day and most of it is useful only for a short term and can then be disposed. Records are created to help us keep track of our financial obligations and commitments. In a rapidly changing financial scene these records are short lived. Other records provide evidence of the church's decision making and theological position. Records such as the Minutes of the General Synod help to define us as to who we are as part of the People of God.

The Archives is the "storehouse" for this information and its job is to determine which records are valuable for the future and which records can be disposed of in the present. The Archives also provides a vast informational database which serves to define our identity over time as a People working for the Kingdom.

It also includes records which have an administrative, legal, financial, and historical value for the future. They are not simple housekeeping records which indicate how many pencils the Finance Office ordered in 1978, nor are they collections of old bulletin covers from an assortment of congregations who have run out of room for storing such "paper" in their building. These records provide our denominational memory which stretches back far beyond the lives of

the present membership. As documentary evidence they provide a profile of the faithfulness of the Reformed Church in America as God's people. As memory, they challenge us to grow into the future on the basis of our foundation established in the past. As unbiased witnesses, they indicate the bad times as well as the good times, periods of faithfulness as well as times of trouble and dissent.

The Office of Historical Services

The Office of Historical Services is responsible for the collection, care, and use of the Archives of the Reformed Church in America. This responsibility involves determining which records are of permanent value and which have no long term usefulness (technically known as appraisal), placing these records in an appropriate relationship one to another so that retrieval can be quick and efficient (known as arrangement and description), and assisting researchers, scholars, students, and other users find and use the materials of which they have need (known as reference). In addition to the archival tasks, the Office also manages the Historical Society of the RCA and its publication programs (Historical Highlights, the Dutch American Genealogist, Makers of the Modern Reformed Church, Formative Events in Reformed Church History, and Historical Society Occasional Papers). The Archives budget is supported by equal shares from the General Synod and the General Program Council and the Historical Society budget is supported by various categories of individual and congregational memberships. The storage facilities and office space are provided by the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. I have often referred to the Office, lightheartedly, as the Office of Chronical Collection, Tradition Maintenance, and the Preservation of the Acts of the Disciples.

What is in the Archives?

The denominational Archives are the main repository for all denominational records from the judicatory level of the classis to the General Synod. The current holdings include records from more than 150 active and disbanded congregations, 45 classes, all the particular synods, and the General Synod and its agencies such as the Board of Publication, the General Program Council, the Board of Domestic Missions, and other agencies and boards established during the last three and one-half centuries. Mission records include documentation relating to China, Borneo, Japan, Mexico, the Middle East, India, and North America. Scholars from throughout the world regularly use these records for their research. Yet, it is important to realize that the Archives exist primarily to serve the needs of the denomination.

The Archives did not come into existence over night. The Reformed Church has a long tradition of concern for the keeping of adequate and informative records. The major emphasis of historical efforts in the Reformed Church has always centered upon the use of history for the future well-functioning and growth of the life and mission of the church.

However, it can be questioned whether the concern for history and the use of history ever went beyond slogan quoting and back patting in an antiquarian manner. From time to time individuals with a keen historical sense and an interest in the preservation of important documentation have come to the forefront. Fortunately, they were able to accomplish great works with little assistance and even less financial support.

History of the RCA Archives

A concern for the preservation of the important documents in the Reformed Church was clearly indicated in the earliest formation of a church organization in America. The Rules of Order for the coetus provided for the maintenance and preservation of a record book. The early church was under the supervision of the Classis of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. When American independence was achieved, the church also became independent from the Classis of Amsterdam and established its own General Synod and local Classes.

From the start, a concern for record keeping and orderly processes was evident. In 1785, the “General Synod decreed that a book be purchased to record letters addressed to and sent from the body. The book was to be in the care of” the Treasurer (MGS, 1785:135). A few years later, in 1792, the Synod desired to collect the records of its predecessor bodies, the Coetus and the Conferentie, and requested all classes to search out and gather the old records and also to present an “accurate and definite account of the time of the formation of the congregations, and of the persons by whom it was effected, with an accompanying historical narrative of the most noteworthy events which have occurred from time to time.” (MGS, 1792:241)

This could well be marked as the start of the denominational archives, if indeed records were gathered and deposited. However, what happened was that nothing happened. During the years which followed inquiry was made from time to time concerning the location of the General Synod records and the means of their preservation and protection. While the importance of preserving adequate documentation about the church’s programs and activity was never questioned, no extensive effort was made to insure the archives proper housing and collection. Synod’s notion of record keeping was focused primarily on current records in 1800, they established a rule relating to the

safe-keeping of valuable and historical records. The minister of the congregation where the next annual meeting was to be held was responsible for preparing a copy of the minutes for the Presidents of the individual classes. The Stated Clerk of the Synod was responsible for storing and providing these records to Synod from year to year (MGS, 1800:311-12).

Writing the Denomination's History

A new interest in the history of the church sparked in the mid-nineteenth century. The General Synod of 1841 asked the Reverend Thomas De Witt to prepare a history of the Reformed Dutch church which would include an account of its roots in the Netherlands. After some preliminary research and an inquiry as to the location of its earliest records, De Witt sadly reminded the Synod of its action of 1792 and indicated that many records have already been lost. Despite this resolution, nothing seemed to have been brought into the Archives. The only items having entered the archives was a succession of General Synod minutes.

He chastised the Synod by noting that it "is deeply to be regretted that it was not at the time diligently and faithfully attended to, as then many documents would have been recovered and preserved, and much traditionary information, well authenticated, might have been gathered which are now lost." (MGS, 1843:272) His warning apparently was too late because many valuable and irreplaceable documents had been given into the hands of individual ministers and subsequently were either lost or destroyed. With the hope of receiving the material he needed to write the history of the church, he wrote to many ministers and lay people, asking them to examine whatever consistory minutes or other church records they might have in their possession. He hoped that such a survey would help to gather the needed records together and ease his task in preparing a comprehensive history. His goal was to gather the records and incorporate them into the denomination's archives.

De Witt lamented that the survey was unsuccessful and reported that "in order to procure the materials which may yet by diligent investigation be obtained, it is necessary for the individual engaged in preparing this historical work to possess leisure and means to visit personally different parts of the church, and personally to make thorough research.

This lack of interest in gathering the records of the previous century sparked a new interest in historical matters in the denomination which paralleled other interested in historical matters at the time. The records, previously housed in a large trunk were now transferred to a book case, funds for which were appropriated by the 1841 Synod

(MGS, 1841:535). These records were then stored in the new consistory building of the church on Fulton Street (later the home of the Fulton Street Prayer meeting). The building was fireproof and several documents, manuscripts minutes, and Synod papers were stored here (MGS, 1845:518).

Apparently, the storage area was adequate, because Synod congratulated Thomas Strong, the Stated Clerk, on his “well-known taste and love of order, in the erection of fixtures which do credit to the Synod, and deserve their thanks.” (MGS, 1845:487). This was in 1845, four years after the funds had been approved to buy a storage case! Evidence that the archives were not a high priority.

This situation seems to have been adequate because there is no mention of the archives for the next fifteen years. In 1860, the storeroom of John I. Brower, the Treasurer of the Board of Direction of the corporate church caught fire and burned, resulting in the loss of important papers. It was supposed that “no inconvenience will arise therefrom, as most of them were very old, and possess no pecuniary value.” (MGS, 1860:486) Business books and receipts seem to have been lost. Most of the information had already been published in the annual minutes of the General Synod. However, once again, interest was aroused in archives preservation and resulted in the appointment of a committee to look into the situation. Their charge was to “suggest a plan for the collection and preservation of documents relating to the past history of the church” (MGS, 1866:112).

Permanent Archival Storage Area

Their work resulted in a new, permanent home for the denomination’s archives. The records were transferred to the Gardner A. Sage Library on the campus of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1876. Gardner A. Sage “with wise and generous forethought, provided in the plan of the Hall that bears his name, a room perfectly secure, and ample for all the Synod’s wants, which he has fitted up with shelves and other appurtenances, for the proper arrangement and deposit of the Synod’s archives.” (MGS, 1876, 568-569).

As the records were being transferred to the library, the earlier lack of care and damage from so much transferring from place to place became apparent. The Stated Clerk reported that some volumes of the minutes were missing, many old papers had no dates, and many seemed to be missing. He reported to Synod that “the archives were in a deplorable condition, perfectly confused, permeated with the dust of years and only partially preserved. This is not owing to the carelessness of former Stated Clerks, evidences of whose system and care in arranging papers are manifest, but to the fact that the Archives have never been deposited in a safe place, and that they have been

mixed up with other less valuable papers whose fate they have shared.” (MGS, 1876:568-69).

The committee responsible for their care made an effort to arrange them and then extended an offer to other church judicatories and congregations to deposit their records in this vault for safe keeping. This offer was regularly repeated at the Synod meetings and slowly records began to be deposited in the new storage room.

Gathering the Colonial Correspondence

During this period of the development of a suitable storage facility, a similar effort was underway in regard to the collection of the colonial documents relating to the church. The 1840's, which saw the initial interest in a denominational history, also generated interest in the collection of historical manuscripts. De Witt had notified the Synod of the research of J. Romeyn Brodhead which uncovered many valuable documents relating to the church in the Archives of the Netherlands. De Witt was given permission to have translations made for these at the expense of Synod (MGS, 1841:42). This was not done, but Brodhead did secure transcripts and a loan of the original American letters for four years. (MGS, 1842:42).

These documents remained with Brodhead and deWitt for nearly thirty years. In 1871, they were turned over to the Stated Clerk and then deposited in the Archives, four years later. De Witt translated letters from time to time and published them in the denominational newspaper, “The Christian Intelligencer”. These were documents which Brodhead used in the production of his historical works on New York State.

After the move to New Brunswick, attention was focused on the research in the Netherlands. De Witt passed from the scene and his role was taken over by Rev. Edward Tanjore Corwin, who was named the historiographer of the Reformed Church. It was reported that there were still considerable numbers of documents in the Netherlands which related to the colonial Reformed Church. Corwin began the negotiations for this material in 1887. He had previously prepared a calendar of the documents in the denomination's archives and was quite familiar with the full scope of the holdings.

Throughout the end of the nineteenth century Corwin continued gathering records in the Netherlands, arranging for the translation of these records, and gathering the records of the congregations and other church judicatories. Finally, the denomination had a history written, a complete list of its ministers and the churches they served, all established congregations and the ministers who served them, and a series of historical essays relating to missions, education, the colonial church, and other topics specific to the Reformed Church

began to be published on a regular basis.

As Corwin gathered the records and donated published volumes, they were piled in the storage room in Sage Library. Again, there was no individual available to see to the arrangement and preservation of this material. From time to time the Stated Clerk attempted to organize it according to the judicatory or agency which created it.

Committee on History and Research

Time again passed and little mention was made of the denominational archives. A Committee on History and Research was appointed by the Synod in 1928 to serve as the custodian of the accumulated materials. Once again, a group saw to the proper arrangement and description of the archives and provided files and shelves for their general storage and maintenance. This committee used volunteer services to perform the work and obtained assistance from the seminary library staff as their time permitted. Finally, the professor of Church History at New Brunswick Seminary was appointed to the position of archivist for the denomination and two part-time, retired individuals were employed to answer genealogical inquiries and undertake some routine archival work. The part-time workers were unable to meet the needs of an expanding collection and a church which was becoming aware of its heritage.

In 1978, the Commission on History, the successor of the Committee on Research and History recommended the establishment of a full time archival program with the appointment of a professional archivist. General Synod approved and the first full-time archivist was appointed for the denomination during its 350th anniversary year. The Commission developed a theological and operational rationale for the denomination's archival work which has served as a firm foundation upon which to build.

Over the course of three and one half centuries many opportunities were presented to the church to develop an adequate program for the preservation of its historical documentation. Time and again, individuals came to the front, prepared to grapple with the needs of a denomination concerning its history. Without those individuals many essential materials would have been lost. Yet, with just a moderate amount of willingness on the part of the entire church, so much more could have been saved.

The struggle for the preservation of the archives reflects the divisions and problems inherent in the denominational structure. Leadership prior to the 20th century consisted of pastors willing to donate a portion of their time and talents to running a denomination. Full time staff regularly handled more chores than could normally be expected. Local church pastors had their hands full just handling their

parish chores. Thus, little time was left for the preservation of denominational heritage.

Many congregational histories were written during the 19th and 20th century, indicating an interest in their past and a desire to set their present ministry in the context of an appropriate historical setting. Historical discourses and sermons were regular occurrences on the occasion of church anniversaries and deaths of ministers. Rarely was any mention made of the location of suitable records for research. Many times, they were little more than nostalgic glimpses at past events, but from time to time, the prophet's role spoke out through historical narrative.

Fires in local churches and in denominational offices would alert many to the need for adequate storage and care of important documents. When these events occurred a flurry of brief activity would follow with a rush to preserve what was left and "dump" it somewhere. Never was there a commitment to follow through and develop a sound program for the regular transfer of important documentary material.

Part of the blame for the lack of such a program rests on the shoulders of just those volunteers who came to the front to preserve the archives. By being available at times of crisis and handling the needs of arranging and describing the material deposited, the denomination never felt the need to have a specific steward responsible for the preservation of its documentary heritage.

Permanent Archival Program

But with the events leading up the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Reformed Church in America, the Commission on History recognized its opportunity to present a financially balanced, theologically sound, and administratively necessary archival and records management program. The Commission worked on the project for a number of years prior to 1978, but with the anniversary the time was right and the General Synod agreed to a full-time program with a professional archivist to be established on a three-year trial basis. The goal was to make the program self-supporting by that time through the establishment of a "Friends of the Archives" program or the establishment of an historical society of some type.

That brings us to the present phase of operations. The program has lived beyond its initial three-year trial period and was voted into permanent existence in 1984.

Over these few years, it has become clear that both archival work and records management is totally unfamiliar to both church members as well as denominational leadership. An institution which has such an historical orientation remains so ignorant of historical preservation

beyond that involved in preserving church buildings. The RCA Archivist has spent much time in educating the membership to the fact that the Archives is not a collection of old Sunday bulletin covers, but provides a vital informational database for current and future church programs.

Today, the Archives is recognized as the essential memory of the church and it provides a firm foundation in the past for developing future programs. Hence, the outlook of the denomination's historical work is always future oriented, with a popular slogan of "looking back to see ahead."

As we have seen, the history of the record preserving practices of the denomination have always had periods of quiet and periods of intense interest and activity. We are now in a period of activity. In 1980, the Commission on History established the RCA Historical Society and has been pursuing an active publication schedule since 1968. The Archives has established an initial records management consciousness among denominational staff and church leadership and records are accessioned at an increasing pace in the denominational archives.

The records in the custody of the Archives date from the beginning of the 16th century to the present. These documents represent a fine research collection which regularly attracts scholars and genealogists. De Witt, Corwin, Brodhead, and the others who saw the needs of an historically literate church would be pleased that the documentary heritage is now well cared for in safe, secure facilities. In this way that documentary heritage lives so that the past can inform the present as it moves into the future.