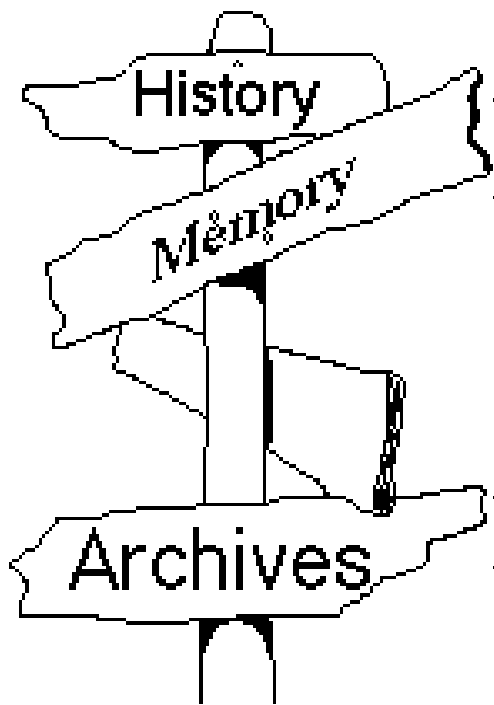


# History Helps

from the  
Archives  
of the  
Reformed Church in America



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# Preface

It is my hope that this brief group of articles and papers which I have prepared will serve to assist you as you begin to establish a congregational archives or start to plan a congregational anniversary. The chapters fall into three parts. First a set of papers providing some background for the archival function in the church and the development of the Reformed Church Archives. Next, two brief overviews which will assist you in gathering your records and beginning conscientious, intentional record-keeping. Finally, the last few pages relate to organizing and celebrating a historical anniversary in your congregation.

This is the third version of what has appeared in the pages of *Historical Highlights*, as separate single page guides, and as formal papers delivered by me to professional archivists. I hope that they will stimulate you and provide some starting point for your own church historical work. This publication is in the process of growing and expanding to meet the historical needs of RCA congregations. To that end, I would appreciate your comments, suggestions, criticisms, and ideas. *History Helps* is designed to change according to the needs of congregations and as we experience history together.

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Thank you for your help. If you have any questions, or if I can assist your congregation in any way, please let me know.

Russell L. Gasero  
Archivist

# History Helps

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# 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.



# Appraisal and Retention of Church Records

## Purpose of the Archives

The archives of an institution consists of those permanently valuable records which need to be preserved because of the way in which they document its ongoing work and activity. The Archives exist first and foremost for the benefit of the agency which created the records and only secondarily for the benefit of other users.

As such the Archives serve as an institutional memory, in our case, the memory of the Reformed Church in America. To these records one refers when planning new programs or examining the functioning and purpose of older or discontinued projects.

## Aim of retention

The aim of retention is to preserve those records which relate to the “why” and the “how” of the life and mission of the church by arranging for their storage when they are no longer needed in active daily work. The goal is to select records which illustrate the programs effected and the organization which has been achieved. The most efficient manner in which to accomplish this is with the preparation of a retention schedule which covers all the records in an individual’s custody and indicates when they may be either destroyed or transferred to another location for storage. Suggested retention schedules for Classis records are included at the end of this pamphlet.

## Preserved for four reasons:

There are four main reasons for the long term retention of non-current, inactive records.

### Legal

Legal records, such as contracts, deeds, agreements, titles, surveys, etc., are kept for protection in the event of litigation. These records also serve to indicate the extent of our agreements and obligations one to another.

### Financial

Financial records serve to indicate the fiscal health of the church. Such records are adjuncts of the legal records in that they indicate our financial obligations, indicate from where funds were received and to where they were disbursed. These records include general account books, check registers, insurance records, etc.

### Administrative

These are the records which help us operate our programs and run our agencies on a daily basis. It is the general “catch-all” term for all the other records. Those retained for this value are those which are essential to help us understand the structure we have established and the patterns of operation we have developed. These records are usually reports, correspondence, minutes, and planning materials. Permanently valuable administrative records indicate policies and procedures developed over time.

### Historical

This is the secondary value for preserving some inactive records and often the primary use made of the records. Those records which no longer serve a legal, financial, or administrative purpose, yet which document who we are and what we have been about fall into this category. They are no longer needed in the course of regular business, but do serve to indicate the work of the church over time. Without historical records, there is no memory.

## Records kept in the Archives

Records kept in the Archives generally fall into those preserved for

historical purposes. Other records are usually current and active and so are used or referred to in the ordinary course of daily business. The “rule of thumb” for determining the activity level of a group of records is when they have not been referred to once during the previous six months. Note that this refers to an entire group of records, not just an individual piece of paper. When records reach this state of inactivity, they are slated for transfer to the archives if they are of permanent value. Non-permanent records will have a retention schedule date for destruction rather than for transfer.

## Appraisal and transfer of office records

Appraisal is the process of determining the ultimate disposition of records, that is, either destruction or permanent preservation. Included in the appraisal process is the determination as to what type of evidence the records provide relating to the work of the organization. Do they provide historical information unavailable elsewhere? Do they provide evidence as to the functioning and structure of the program? Do they offer important legal and financial information necessary for the continuing function of the agency?

## Requesting appraisal assistance

A major function of the job of the Archivist is to appraise records as to their permanent preservation potential. The Archivist will be pleased to appraise your records and make suggestions as to their ultimate disposition. In order to make this process simple and efficient a few steps need to be taken.

## Preparation of Records for Appraisal

The records need to be listed by file title, including the starting and ending years of the contents. If these are records in a file cabinet, then each file folder should be included in the list as in the following example:

## Format for Listing

1967-1972 Correspondence - Cape Horn Church  
1971-1973 Correspondence - De Jong  
1969-1973 Rejoice Committee

1968-1973 Glad Hand Committee - Financial  
Statements

1969-1974 Minutes - volume 10

1969-1970 Reports - Management Planning

A general explanation of who created the records, their approximate volume, e.g. 3 filing cabinets, 2 letter size file drawers, 6 folders, etc. for the group of records will help. The archivist will supply forms which will assist in listing and describing these records for appraisal and transfer. Any additional information you can provide about the nature of the records and their reason for creation will be helpful in making the final appraisal.

## Research Availability

Records sent to the archives are not necessarily available to all researchers. If there are any sensitive or private records in the group being transferred, please indicate these on the list or form provided. In those places please indicate any restrictions for use and time periods for which they should be closed. If this is not done, then the records are considered available for research at the discretion of the archivist.

Currently, non-restricted records are open to individuals demonstrating legitimate research needs and interests in Reformed Church history. All use of these records is undertaken in consultation with the archivist. There are no open stacks and efforts are taken to preserve the security and the integrity of the documents.

When the lists are received, the archivist will respond with suggestions as to which records should be permanently preserved. The next step is to prepare them for transfer to the archives.

## Transferring records to the Archives: Preparing for shipment

The safest and surest mode of transfer to the Archives is by arranging for pickup by the archivist, bringing them in person, or sending them with someone who has business in the area. Other than that, either UPS or Federal Express are viable alternatives. Pack them carefully in appropriate sized boxes. Take care that the records will not slip apart and become a mass of wild paper upon their arrival as a result of the usual throwing, tossing, and other havoc which the transportation companies wreak upon cartons.

When they are received in the archives, they will be unpacked,

boxed, listed, and shelved. A return list with an accession sheet will be sent to you for your records and as a receipt. Custody is then transferred to the archives.

## Status of transferred records

The archives is a service office and exists to provide custodial care for the permanently valuable records of the church. The ownership of the records always resides with the office of creation until it no longer exists. At that point, ownership of the records resides with the archives.

## Reference and research assistance available

The archivist will engage in normal and routine research and reference tasks in the records for the agency transferring the records. Please take care to be certain that the records transferred are non-current, inactive records, so as to minimize the number of reference queries made. If there is an extensive research project, consult with the archivist as to whether a suitable researcher, such as a student, might be found, or if the records should be temporarily returned.



# **Policy and Purposes of the Archives**

## **Responsibility**

The Archives, 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. In the event of abolition of any of these bodies, their records and archives shall be transferred to the RCA archives for custody and preservation.

## **Disposal of Records**

File series of the RCA shall not be disposed of without the authorization of the archivist and/or the Commission on History or their representatives.

## **Availability of Records**

The Archives shall be made available to all staff of the RCA for the conducting of church business and to scholars who have a legitimate interest in studying the history of the denomination. The hours of operation of the Archives shall be determined by the Commission on History. The commission shall endeavor to promote scholarly research concerning the RCA and to that end shall publicize these records.

## Functions of the Office

The functions of the RCA Archives shall be to:

- a. Maintain, repair, and preserve the archives and non-current records of the RCA.
- b. Establish an effective records management program for the denomination resulting in the mandatory transfer of non-current records deemed worthy of permanent preservation to the Archives according to satisfactory retention/disposal schedules.
- c. Coordinate the storage of official records already in the custody of established repositories and authorize the storage of such records in a decentralized system.
- d. Arrange, describe, and prepare suitable finding aids and guides concerning the records in custody of the Archives.
- e. Inspect and appraise the records and archives in the possession of these bodies and their staff and determine suitable disposition. The archivist shall be bound to observe the confidential nature of their contents if so restricted. The Archives may request a list of the records to be made in accordance with established format.
- f. Dispose of non-current records that have no further administrative, legal, historical, or other scholarly value with the agreement of the concerned bodies which produced or received the original record. The disposals shall be carried out in agreement between the Archives and these bodies. When no disposal schedules are available, disposal lists shall be prepared.
- g. Encourage the deposit of archives of private individuals and organizations that are deemed to be of scholarly or historical interest and reflect some aspect of the denomination's work and action in the world.
- h. Make available for use such records as are needed by RCA staff in the conduct of church business, subject to any established restrictions.
- i. Promote scholarly research concerning the RCA by making available such records as will best serve this end.

## Records Definition

Official records are defined as all documentary materials (e.g. correspondence, publications) received or originated by the RCA and its staff in the normal course of its activities, which serve as evidence of the organization, function, policies, decisions, procedures, and operations.

Approved by the 1980 General Synod (*MGS*, 1980, pp. 143-145).



# Starting a Congregational Archives

## Purpose of the Records

The records of a congregation serve as a valuable asset for the continuing ministry of that church. As old records they provide an invaluable link to the earlier generations of members who dedicated their lives to bring the church to the point it has reached in the present. As the memory of the congregation they provide the foundation for consistent decision making and the continuing check for faithfulness in living as a called people. As the sole documentary source of the heritage of the congregation they look to the future of the church by providing a challenge to increased growth and effort. The question naturally arises as to what kind of records should be saved and what kind may be disposed. Clearly, not all records are permanently valuable. Indeed, there are only a few major types of records which fit the category of a permanent record.

## Types of Permanent Records

**Consistory minutes** - These are the most valuable and important of the local church records and must be kept in a safe place. It is important to remember to annex all correspondence and reports which are referred to in the body of these minutes. Without this supporting evidence, the decisions of the group tend to lose meaning over the years since the substance of the issue has been forgotten.

**Vital records** - These are the baptismal, marriage, membership, and death registers. They are necessary for genealogical research as family history source material. Often they provide legal evidence for people needing to prove dates of death or marriage, when civil records

have been lost or destroyed. However, more than these they serve to make concrete our relationship with the past by offering the names of the men, women, and children who have ministered, worked, and served in a particular congregation.

**Minutes of other groups** - Women's groups, young people's groups, Sunday School, etc. They also relate the journey of the congregation in specific specialized ministries over the course of the years.

**Church newsletters/magazines** - These would include the monthly (or other) publications of the church which are designed to keep members and friends informed about congregational life and news. They serve as evidence of the church's social life, its outreach into the community, and the growth and work of its members.

**Bulletins (weekly or Sunday)** - These may be kept if they include information about what is happening in the life of the congregation other than just the minimal service of worship outline. In most cases these bulletins usually duplicate what has been recorded elsewhere and have no permanent value.

**Correspondence** - This is where the "mass" of paper comes from. Keep important papers that relate to substantive programs of the church and discard routine 'housekeeping' matters and general administrative correspondence. One hundred years from now, no one will care how many envelopes or pencils you ordered, but they will want to see the report of the Evangelism Committee which gave new life to a small congregation.

**Legal records** - Retain such items as contracts, deeds, mortgages, loan papers, and insurance records. These records have great value while they are active (i.e. in force). However, when they expire and time has passed they have little permanent value. Blueprints of the current physical plant are needed as long as they remain accurate. It is far cheaper to store a set of good drawings than to hire an architect to reproduce them.

**Financial records** - Retain the general ledger and whatever financial records are needed to insure the orderly operation of church accounts. Check stub books have no long term value, nor do bills, receipts, or purchase orders.

**Photographs** - Keep pictures of special events in the life of the congregation, church people, building changes, etc.

**Other records** (e.g. cancelled checks, expired insurance policies, old contracts, general correspondence) may be disposed after their useful life span as administrative and legal records. This is generally somewhere between 3 and 10 years.

## Organizing and Storing the Records

How can all this material be kept in some orderly and systematic fashion? Most of the records are easily segregated into their 'types' insofar as they are usually bound volumes or distinct physically (e.g. baptism register, consistory minutes, newsletters, photographs, etc.). When keeping bound or looseleaf volumes, be sure to annex the attachments (reports, correspondence, etc.) to the minutes to which they pertain. Do not overcrowd the volumes, avoid cramming them so as to escape buying a new book. Other records are best stored in standard file folders (use acid-free folders described below), with the title and starting and ending dates printed clearly on the folder tab.

All archival records should be stored in acid-free folders and in acid-free document cases. These are specially treated cardboard boxes and manila folders in which the paper has been specially treated to eliminate the acidity which causes browning and brittleness. Acid-free paper (as most early rag-content paper was) is designed to last several hundred years. Compare the oldest church record book (often 300 years old) to a newspaper clipping of ten years ago to see how acid affects paper.

The boxes will help to protect the records from dust, insects, and water damage. While they seem expensive, they are far less costly per linear foot than a good-quality, metal file cabinet. These boxes can be conveniently stored on steel shelving units.

## Building Preservation into the Process

You can build longevity into your record-keeping process by using acid free bond paper when you create the record. This paper is only slightly more expensive than standard bond paper and has long life capability built into it. These papers, folders, boxes, and other supplies can be ordered from:

University Products, Inc.  
P.O. Box 101 (South Canal Street)  
Holyoke, MA 01040

Ask to receive their archival materials catalog. Their catalog is an

archival education in itself.

## Storage Conditions

When storing records it is important to keep them in a cool and dry location. The ideal atmospheric conditions are 45-50% relative humidity and 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit (coolness is far better to records than heat). The ideal cannot always be obtained, what is important is to keep the environment stable, avoid shifts of temperature and humidity (both on a daily and a season basis). Constant changes between these two variables does more damage than higher temperature alone. Dehumidifiers can be used to dry otherwise humid locations. Humidity lead to mold, mildew, and insect infestation both in the permanent records and in other possessions in the church.

The storage area should be safe and secure and free from dust and dirt. Use steel shelving units to hold the boxes. These are far better than wooden units, which absorb moisture, emit fumes over time, and are prone to dry rot and mildew. The low-cost units at the local hardware store are fine. Avoid exposure of the records to excessive sunlight or fluorescent light. Tungsten lights do not emit the ultraviolet radiation which adds to the deterioration of the paper.

In the actual filing of the papers, avoid the contact of newspaper clippings (which are highly acidic) with other records. Acid migrates from document to document, so that acid-free paper you used will soon be worthless when you store it next to the news clippings. (Did you ever notice the brown rings left on other papers by newsprint?) One more never! Never put scotch (or other adhesive) tape on a document. It will deteriorate and leave a sticky residue, hastening the deterioration of an otherwise good document.

Maintain the records in chronological order, keeping the file folders lightly filled. Keep records of a particular type together (e.g. don't mix 1980 consistory minutes with 1980 guild minutes). Most of how you store these materials and arrange them for use can follow your own common sense guidelines.

## Photographs

Photographs are best arranged in a subject classification system. Photos can be quite useful for periodic displays during special church events, or for continuing displays in the entryway or fellowship hall (where they offer a visual display of what this congregation has been about in its life and mission).

Store negatives and prints separately in appropriate envelopes. They can be filed and numbers sequentially (e.g. 1, 2, 3...56, 57, 58)

with the number corresponding to the accompanying numbered print.

This all sounds like a lot of work. It is when you are starting with years of neglect. But it can be a lot of fun and a great learning experience. Remember, the primary reason for preserving the documentation is so that we can understand how we arrived at where we are today and move forward 'decently and in order' in our corporate life and mission.



# **Recording the Minutes of a Meeting**

## **Need for Minutes**

How many times have you been at a meeting only to spend a large block of time trying to remember what the action was that was voted upon a year ago. Time is spent as everyone recalls, with some variations, the motion that was passed. The secretary or clerk thumbs through the minutes trying to find the action and after several minutes blurts out the action. Someone then recalls that a second motion was made in the next meeting which significantly altered the intention of that motion. Again, the clerk pages through the record book, skimming each page, looking for the motion. Having the minutes available enables us to recall precisely what the action was that we approved. How many times have you met with groups, considered to be short-term, task force type committees, which never bothered to keep minutes. At the first question relating to earlier decisions which were controversial, the group engages in time consuming arguments trying to recall the exact discussion and motion that they voted upon. It is very important to retrieve needed information from the minutes of a meeting in a quick and efficient fashion.

## **Keeping the Minutes**

The minutes of a group serve as an adequate record of the actions which were taken and as general documents illustrative of the group's life. In order for the minutes to serve this function, two important procedures are necessary. First, retain all pertinent correspondence and reports which were mentioned in the body of the minutes. Second, develop an index of actions voted upon. An index is not difficult to develop and will take very little time to maintain once the initial work is completed. Following are five basic rules which will simplify the

process:

1. Key all actions/decisions by year and sequence of adoption in the minutes, e.g., 80-1, 80-2, 80-3...80-45, 80-46, etc.
2. Determine brief one or two word summaries of the action, e.g. Salaries-Pastor; Repairs-Parsonage Roof; Worship-Christmas Eve.
3. Give each decision both a descriptive title and an action number to serve as the reference in the index.
4. Develop a few subject headings by looking through the minutes of past years and group the actions under these headings, e.g. Worship, Administration, Education, etc.
5. Keep the index on 3 X 5 cards and add entries on the same card after each meeting or develop a computerized database to store the entries.

Typical entries in the minutes of a meeting might look like the following:

**80-34 Salary - Pastor**

It was moved/seconded (Smith/Jones) that we increase the pastor's salary by \$2,000 for the next fiscal year. (Approved)

**80-35 Repairs - Parsonage Roof**

Due to the leak in the parsonage roof and the general deterioration of roof tiles, it was moved/seconded (Kuypers/Blauw) to receive bids from local contractors for a new roof. The bids will be opened and acted upon at the next meeting. (Defeated)

**80-36 Repairs - Parsonage Roof**

Since the church roof had been repaired recently by Jolly Time Roofers and the work was considered excellent, it was moved/seconded (Kuypers/Smith) that they be hired to replace the parsonage roof and the estimate for the job is not to exceed \$3,000. (Approved as amended)

The above should indicate the basic idea of how to record the minutes of a meeting in order to key actions to an index for quick retrieval of information. The names in parentheses refer to the originator and the supporter of the motion. Between the numbered actions record the summary of the discussion, key points of opposing

arguments, etc. This will provide a full description of the events and reasoning which led to the action. The corresponding index entries would list the above actions as follows:

Repairs - Parsonage Roof: 80-35, 80-36

Salaries - Pastor: 80-34

The reports, correspondence, etc. that are attached to the minutes of the meeting should be noted in the body of the minutes. For example, the beginning of a discussion and action on the Sunday School:

**80-38 Sunday School Superintendent Report**

(see attachment 3)

It was moved/seconded (Smith/Jones) to accept the report as read. (Approved)

In this situation, attachment 3 refers to the third report or document attached to the minutes of the meeting. This may or may not be circulated with the printed minutes to the members, but it should be attached to the original copy of the minutes. These basic techniques can be applied to any group in the church. If it is desired, a comprehensive index of all organizations may be compiled by simply filing the index cards in one series. From these cards or computerized database, a printed index can be prepared as needed. This manner of keeping records should facilitate the finding of needed information. With the back minutes available and coupled with the index, the group will have all the supporting documentation near at hand. Attaching the reports will insure a complete story of the activities for future researchers and leaders of the group.



# Worship Resources for a Historical Celebration

## Worship Springs from Life

The rationale for the church autobiography mentions that worship springs from life. History is part of our life. We hope that in your study you have found materials which will help you develop a meaningful celebration. Worship usually revolves around an awareness of God, an awareness of ourselves and a response to God. This is the outline of our basic worship on Sunday mornings. This also provides a good framework around which we can build a service for historical celebrations. Another framework around which you can build such a celebration is the use of the past, the present, and the future.

This study ought to provide the materials for a number of things such as litanies, prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving as well as things that can be used in the response. If there are those in your church who are artistically inclined, making of banners or quilts signifying the meaningful parts of your past history could be utilized very effectively.

## Organizing the Worship Event

Try to remember that the more people who are involved in the development of the service, the more meaningful it is going to be. The use of the sacrament of communion could be worked in very effectively with such a service. Try to remember that when the service ends there should be a rededication to the future. It would mean that the significance of your historical celebration carries on to tomorrow and does not end just at that point.

## Suggested Resources

There are a number of resources that can be used in putting together such a service. The following is a partial list of hymns that could be used:

### Traditional:

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”  
“Now Thank We All Our God”  
“We Come Unto Our Fathers, God”  
“Come Ye People Rise and Sing”  
“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise”  
“Lord Thou Hast Been Our Dwelling Place”  
“The God of Abraham Praise”  
“O God the Rock of Ages”  
“God of Our Life Through All the Circling Years”  
“O God Our Help in Ages Past”  
“Ancient of Days Who Sitteth Enthroned in Glory”  
“Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah”  
“Faith of Our Fathers”  
“God of Grace and God of Glory”  
“For All the Saints Who From Their Labors Rest”  
“O Where Art Kings and Empires Now?”  
“Christ Has Made the Sure Foundation”  
“Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken”  
“The Church’s One Foundation”  
“We Would Be Building”  
“God the Omnipotent”  
“God of Our Fathers”

Following are contemporary hymns that could be used:

“The Great Parade” by Adrian Marsh  
“Happy Birthday” from “More Hymns Hot and Carols Cool”  
“Let’s Get On” from “More Hymns Hot and Carols Cool”  
“Passed Through the Waters” from “Alive and Singing”  
“Wake Up My People” from “Come Alive”  
“Saints and Sinners” from “Songbook for Saints and Sinners”  
“The Church Within Us” from “Songbook for Saints and Sinners”

There are a number of Psalms which can be utilized in such a service. Psalms 24, 27, 33, 34, 46, 65, 67, 84, 90, 92, 95, 96, 98, 100, 107, 115, 122, 127 are all Psalms which could be used. Psalm 79 has some good thoughts for a prayer of confession. You might want to

rewrite Psalm 105 or 118 with your congregational experiences in mind. Psalm 136 can be worked into an excellent litany using that framework. Nehemiah 9 provides a setting that could be used for some things we want to do with our own histories.

## Sample Worship Service

### CALL TO WORSHIP

LEADER: Who are we who have gathered here?

PEOPLE: We are the people of God for this time.

LEADER: Why are you here?

PEOPLE: We are here to praise God for those who have gone before us.

LEADER: Is that all?

PEOPLE: No, we are also here to confess the failures of the past and our own failures and to ask God's forgiveness.

LEADER: Is that all?

PEOPLE: No, we are here to celebrate God's presence now. We are here to ask God's Spirit to equip us for tomorrow.

LEADER: Past, present and future make up our lives; but God is eternal, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end; the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Come, let us celebrate His presence among us.

### HYMN

### PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

(Here, a responsive prayer might work well. The leader recounting things for which forgiveness is sought and the people responding with "Father forgive us" or some such phrase. Another suggestion might be to ask several people to each offer a prayer for a specific thing in the past or the present. Psalm 76:8 & 9 could work very well as a conclusion to that prayer.)

### ASSURANCE OF PARDON

(A few scriptural forms of assuring forgiveness of sins.)

### LITANY OF THANKSGIVING

(If you utilize banners, this might be a good time to bring them in and use them as part of a short ceremony of thanksgiving, using banners to symbolize events and persons for which thanksgiving

should be offered. You might want to compile a list of names of those who have been an important part in the life of your congregation or a list of events that have been significant in the life of your congregation. Incorporate them into a litany of thanksgiving. You might want to conclude the litany of thanksgiving with a hymn. A contemporary hymn is “Come On And Join the Great Parade,” a more traditional one is “For All the Saints Who From Their Labors Rest.”)

#### SCRIPTURE

#### MESSAGE

#### HYMN

#### RESPONSE

#### OFFERING

#### ACT OF REDEDICATION

(Write one of your own. An act of rededication will only be effective as it touches the lives of those who are a part of your congregation.)

#### BENEDICTION

We are heirs of much. We bear the fruits of the sins of the past generations. We also bear the fruits of the past generation’s faith, vision and courage. We have left go of the guilt of the past. It has been confessed, God has forgiven it. We must leave go of the glories of the past as well. We can not live in their glories now. We must make our own. God’s people have been here for \_\_\_\_ years. Now at this time, you and I are God’s people in this place. Go, live to his glory. Redeem the time remembering that the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of His Spirit go with each one of us. Amen.

#### CONCLUSION OF THE SERVICE

Use your imagination. The horizons are wide open for what you can do with this kind of service. You can make the past live, you can make it affect the present. Even more than that you can use it to enable us to move out into the future.



# Oral History in the Local Church

## What is Oral History?

Oral History in the local church is certainly not a new subject. It is an area of which we are well aware in one aspect or another. From the oral traditions of the Old and New Testament, to the oral remembrances occurring in contemporary folklife, whether watching the evening news or viewing a TV talk show, we have gained some familiarity with the field of oral history in its broadest sense.

This same type of “oral testimony” can be useful in developing the local church history, but first, it is necessary to narrow the definition and to speak specifically about oral history. In our usage oral history is the systematic gathering of historical evidence through the method of personal interviews. This definition has three key parts. First, it is systematic in that it has a specific focus or subject for which information is sought following a standard procedure. This separates oral history from mere reminiscences or wanderings. Second, it is historical information. This aspect, perhaps, is the most controversial problem in the field of oral history. We are well aware that memory is faulty at times, and we often tend to recollect events in such a way that may make us appear more prominent than we actually were. Awareness of this subjective bias should help us to deal with the testimony as historical information. Third, it is an interview, that is, it is history which is acquired from a systematic conversation on one or more selected topics. The questions asked are designed to assist memory in such a way as to elicit as much information as is possible.

With this understanding in mind, it is clear that oral history can be very useful in the life of a congregation. In instances where the records are inadequate or missing, oral history can play an important part by filling in the gaps of the church’s journey. We can focus on an individual’s insight and recollection of these events, thus gaining

some sense of how one person saw oneself fitting into the flow of history. That is, it can provide an illustration of the intertwining of one's personal faith-history with the church's story. This side benefit offers some insight into the development of the religious personality.

## Some Uses of Oral History

The completed oral history may have several other various uses as well. The most obvious use is for the compilation of the church's life story, as already mentioned, but it can also be used as a Christian education resource, or to acquaint new members with the history of the church. What better way to illustrate the meaning of the church in a person's life and to provide concrete illustrations of the struggles of a Christian lifestyle. These testimonies take on additional importance because they are familiar to us and they touch on our own immediate concerns.

## The Practice of Oral History

An oral history program in the local church need not be a difficult, nor an expensive undertaking. However, there is a certain amount of preparation prior to interviewing. An interviewer needs to have a solid understanding of the history of the church and the surrounding community. This is essential for assuring an awareness of the right questions to ask and for remaining alert to significant insights which may arise during the course of the interview. Thus, a certain amount of historical background preparation is necessary. (Do not arrange a set of "twenty questions.") The interview should be focused on a set of topics and sub-topics which are selected as areas on which to focus the discussion. The interviewer should attempt to question as little as possible, allowing the interviewee to carry the discussion. A pre-interview session should be arranged in which possible topics might be discussed, a relaxed atmosphere is established, and the interviewee is given some time to gather the pertinent thoughts and memories.

It is very important to avoid inhibiting the interviewee, keep the atmosphere very relaxed. Avoid asking loaded questions. For example, don't draw implications by asking "Do you still dislike Rev. Van Blauw?" when the idea of dislike has never been mentioned. Controversial issues can be dealt with, but remember to take a neutral position by asking neutral questions. Try a question such as, "There was some controversy over Rev. Van Blauw's practices indicated in the consistory minutes. Were you familiar with any of these attitudes?"

When dealing with any of the topics attempt to obtain all the information that is possible during the interview. The intent is to

procure knowledge about particular events. Interviews with other individuals will help to balance out any biased viewpoint. During the interview be alert to possible new topics that might be investigated. This indicates the flexibility of a list of topics as opposed to the rigidity of a list of questions.

Keep the questions focused. Avoid such broad inquiries as, "Tell me about Rev. Vander Smythe's ministry." Instead focus on one aspect of the ministry by asking, "When Rev. Vander Smythe arrived, the church statistics indicate that it was at a low level of membership. The consistory minutes indicate that he undertook a new outreach program into the surrounding community. Apparently there was a great deal of success with his efforts. Do you recall this program and some of the feelings that were expressed at that time?"

Try to remain on the topic and avoid wandering, for example, "I'd like to discuss the changes in liturgy during his ministry, but I wonder if we could speak a little more about the growth of the congregation at that time. How did the Sunday School handle the increased number of children?" Be tactful, when an interviewee feels that he or she has said all that can be said, "don't force any more information. Make the interviewee comfortable by maintaining eye contact, periodic nods, and smiles. Allow him or her to change the direction of the interview when no more can be added.

## Equipment Needs

There is a certain minimum of equipment needed for oral history interviews. Most obvious is the need for a good quality tape recorder. A cassette recorder is probably the easiest to use. Try to find one that has a good microphone and good reproduction quality. Use the 90 minute cassettes (45 minutes on one side) in order to minimize interruptions during the interview. Avoid the 120 minute size since they have thinner tape and tend to break and garble the sound. Remain aware of when the tape is nearing its end in order to stop the discussion at an appropriate point. Try and limit the interview to a maximum of two hours, one hour is ideal. Return for a couple of visits if it is necessary, since this type of interviewing can be very tiring.

When the interview is completed it can be used as a tape or transcribed by a competent typist. If it is transcribed, be sure to check the accuracy of the transcription against the tape. If you use a cassette tape recorder, remember to punch out the two little tabs on the rear edge of the cassette to avoid accidentally erasing the tape at a future time. In all cases make a second copy and use this one for the transcription and all other possible needs. The original should be preserved and used only to make duplicate copies. When the transcription is completed, or the interview is completed when not making

transcriptions, compile a list of topics that were discussed and key them to the tape or transcript. This will serve as an index. Obtain written permission from the interviewee indicating that this tape is considered “open” and is available for legitimate research use.

This type of research will be a distinct help in developing the local church history. When handled creatively, it will be a valuable experience for all involved. Perhaps you might want to try it as a project for the high school class or the confirmation class, thus providing an excellent opportunity to relate to some of the older members of the congregation while giving the children an idea of what it means to be a member of the church. Taped excerpts can be compiled from various interviews and coupled with a set of slides, thus making a fine audio-visual history of the congregation. Relate your experiences doing oral history to me and they will be made available to others undertaking similar projects.

## Suggested Reading

Should you desire more information, the following books provide a good starting point:

Baum, Willa K., *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 2nd, Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1971

Hoopes, James, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979

Shopes, Linda, *Using Oral History for a Family History Project*, Technical Leaflet 135, Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980

Tyrell, William G., *Tape Recording Local History*, Technical Leaflet 35, rev.ed., Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1978

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# An Outline to Help Accomplish Writing the Congregational History

1. Set up a task force to do the job. The task force should include the following:
  - 1.1. Older people who have a knowledge of the past. The more eyewitnesses you have the better your information will be.
  - 1.2. People who have an interest in history.
  - 1.3. Some new members. They can ask questions which will add perspective.
  - 1.4. Get a cross section of your congregation, men, women, young, old, etc.
2. Establish what you want to accomplish. Some suggestions are:
  - 2.1. A worship celebration coming out of the study.
  - 2.2. A history of your congregation.
  - 2.3. Goal setting for the future.
3. Establish a time line for getting the job done.
4. Break the study into parts and let smaller groups do the research on a small part. Then come back together and share. Recognize that not everyone will be as equally interested in all parts.
5. The following are resources that may be of help to you:
  - 5.1. Consistory minutes and congregational minutes.

- 5.2. Church record books from Sunday School, Women's groups, as well as the Church Membership Records.
  - 5.3. Written histories of your church and other churches in the community.
  - 5.4. Histories of your community or area.
  - 5.5. Genealogical records.
  - 5.6. People who have lived in your community for some time.
  - 5.7. Businessmen, as well as people who simply live in the community are a resource for how the community looks at you.
  - 5.8. Former pastors, correspondence.
  - 5.9. The Archives of the Reformed Church.
  - 5.10. Old bulletins of worship and special services.
6. Additional hints:
- 6.1. The more the entire congregation is involved, the more effective the whole experience will be.
  - 6.2. Absolute honesty is essential, even if it is embarrassing. The church is made up of humans, so it has limitations just as we do.
  - 6.3. Have a sense of humor. Being able to laugh at your past is healthy.
  - 6.4. You may want to utilize an adult Sunday School class to discuss some of the areas and some of the results.
  - 6.5. A worship experience can draw all these things together. It's a worthy goal towards which to work.
  - 6.6. Be open to God's Spirit. He speaks through our pasts as well as our presents.
  - 6.7. Have fun! Make it enjoyable!
7. Send a copy of your study to the Archives at New Brunswick.

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# 1776 Dutch Colonial Service

## Prelude

Only one of our congregations in 1776 possessed an organ. In all the others, the voorlezer read consecutively from the Scriptures until the sounding of the bell. The congregation gathered during this reading, which lasted from fifteen to twenty minutes.

## Reading of the Law

The preliminary reading always ended at the beginning of the service with the full reading of the Ten Commandments by the voorlezer. In the one case of an organ prelude, the voorlezer would have begun the service by reading the Law.

## Psalm

The voorlezer announced the opening Psalm. Hymns # 24, # 493, and # 357 in the Hymnbook are suitable. Even in the church which had an organ, the Psalms were sung a capella. During the singing of the Psalms, the Domine entered, shook hands with all the members of the Consistory, and went to the pulpit.

## Exordium Remotum

This was the announcement of the text plus a short summary of the sermon. It always concluded with the formula "...that I may so preach and you may so hear, let us now together call upon the name of the Lord."

## Prayer Before the Sermon

A prayer of confession and for illumination. In conservative churches, it was read from the Liturgy. In evangelical churches it was a free prayer.

## Scripture and Sermon

Never less than one hour!!

## Psalm

Lead by the voorlezer. The offering was received during this singing.

## Prayer After the Sermon

A prayer of thanksgiving and intercession, again liturgical or free, depending on the congregation. In any event, the Lord's Prayer was used at the end.

## Closing Psalm and Benediction

The so-called Aaronic Benediction was almost always used.

Men and women sat separately.

After the service, when the minister left the pulpit, he shook hands with the members of the Consistory. The withholding of the handshake meant that a member of the Consistory had not approved of the sermon.



# Resources for History

## *Mission to Borneo*, by Gerald De Jong.

This is the first of the RCA Historical Society's *Occasional Paper* series and details the efforts to establish a mission on the island of Borneo in the 1830s. A group of dedicated men and women sacrificed and suffered to bring the gospel to the inhabitants of the jungle island. Met with obstacles from the colonial government and the slow communication with America, the mission failed to become permanently established. This mission provided field workers for the later mission effort in Amoy, China, established in 1842.

The sacrifices and struggles of these early missionaries are carefully related by Dr. De Jong in this volume.

## *Historical Highlights*, edited by Russell L. Gasero

This publication of the Historical Society of the Reformed Church in America is free to all supporters of the RCA Archives and Historical Society. The focus is on *Makers of the Modern Reformed Church* and *Formative Events in Reformed Church History*. Recent issues have included a history of the RCA Archives, John Henry Livingston and the Origins of the American Mission Movement, histories of several congregations, the first baptism in Japan, and other interesting stories of the history of this denomination and its mission.

*The Story of the Reformed Church Archives,*  
by Russell L. Gasero

This is the first in the “Formative Events in Reformed Church History” series and outlines the development of the RCA Archives.

*John Henry Livingston and the Rise of  
the American Mission Movement,*  
by John W. Beardslee, III

This is the first in the “Makers of the Modern Reformed Church” series and focuses on Livingston’s contribution to the development of ‘foreign mission thinking’ in the United States.

*History Helps,* by Russell L. Gasero

A booklet of information relating to establishing a congregational archives, celebrating and writing a church history, the history of the RCA Archives, beginning an oral history project in the congregation and other items for use in the local congregation. 36 pp., 8 1/2 X 11, spiral comb binding, \$15.00

*Bibliography of the Reformed Church,*  
compiled by Russell L. Gasero

This regularly updated publication is creating a comprehensive bibliography of books and articles relating to any aspect of Reformed Church in America history. A related part of the bibliography under development includes publications by Reformed Church clergy.

This is an ongoing project. Additions, corrections, and suggestions are appreciated. Available to any interested individual upon request.

*Finding Aids to the RCA Archives*

Specialized publications which offer information and descriptions of the holdings of the RCA Archives. These include the Guide to Congregational Records, the Guide to Foreign Mission Records, the Guide to Classis Minutes, Retention and Appraisal of RCA Records, and Accessions, 1978-1989. Available free upon request.

*Guide to the Local Church Records in  
the Archives of the Reformed Church in America*

This booklet offers information about the congregational records in the custody of the denominational archives. An appendix provides finding aids to records transcribed in such publications as The New York Biographical and Genealogical Record, the Collections of the Holland Society, the Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey, and other sources of transcribed records. A brief historical sketch of the colonial origins of the Dutch in America is included as well as a list of all established congregations in the RCA by state and city. 8 1/2 X 11, spiral comb binding, \$15.00

*Dutch American Genealogist*, edited by Russell L. Gasero

This publication is a transcription of Dutch Reformed Church records and other material of use to family historians and genealogists working with Dutch-American families. The publication has been discontinued and will be published again beginning in 1994.

*Boel's Complaint Against Frelinghuisen*,  
translated and edited by Joseph A. Loux, Jr.

This is the first English translation of the entire complaint of 1725. This document expresses an extensive theological perspective on the internal issues then confronting the colonial Dutch Reformed Church. Boel's Complaint represents the first "practical theology" to be written by Dutchmen in America. Hardcover. \$20.00

*Historical Directory of the Reformed Church  
in America, 1628-1992*,  
edited by Russell L. Gasero

This is the updated publication of the RCA Directory in the line of E. T. Corwin and Peter N. VandenBerge. It will be maintained annually and periodically republished. The data is available on disk. \$39.95.

*Singing the Lord's Song: A History of the English  
Language Hymnals in the Reformed Church  
in America,*

by Rev. James L. H. Brumm

The second in the Historical Society's *Occasional Paper* series. This study explored the growth and development of the RCA's hymnology.

*The Diary of Dina Van Bergh,*  
translated by Gerard Van Dyke

The third in the Historical Society's *Occasional Paper* series. This volume is the diary of a distinguished churchwoman. Dina was married to Johannes Frelinghuysen when she came to America in the eighteenth century. \$15.00.

*Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America*

A series of more than twenty-five volumes published by William B. Eerdmans which focus on various aspects of RCA history. The volumes cover ecumenism, mission history of the middle east and China, nineteenth century Dutch immigration and church history. Available from the RCA Distribution Center and through local bookstores.

For additional information, or to order any of these items, contact:

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