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Episcopal Church

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MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR CHURCH ARCHIVES

V. Nelle Bellamy

Church archives vary in size, number of staff, scope of responsibility, and budget resources. There are monastic archives, parish archives and those of conferences and ecclesiastical legislative bodies. Is it possible, therefore, to discuss general minimum standards for the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, the United Presbyterian Church, the Southern Baptist Association, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church and all of the others? Are the basic approaches to an archival program in a parish church similar to those in the central repository of the denominational or national church? The answer is "yes."

Church archival standards essentially are no different from general archival standards. Archival principles of administration must be adapted to the particular structure and activities of an agency to which they are applied. The arrangement of the records of the House of Bishops is not unlike that followed for records of the Senate of the United States since each legislative body creates minutes, addresses, resolutions, committee reports and similar materials. (The analogy breaks down somewhat when one compares the disposition of papers of a Presiding Bishop and those of the President of the United States. Obviously no Presiding Bishop has built a special library for his papers, but he may take them, or at least a part of them, into retirement.) Church archival programs, from the smallest to the largest, therefore, adhere to the doctrine of provenance as it is applied to all archives.

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Records are arranged and cataloged according to their origin, and the contents of record groups are determined by the activities of departments, divisions or agencies within the church itself. In a parish, the vestry minutes form an obvious record group; in the General Convention, the minutes of the House of Deputies are likewise. The principle of provenance is the same; its application differs only as the structures differ.

Today interest in church archives is mushrooming, with new repositories springing up on all sides. While this involvement in preserving religious records is commendable, it is also a reminder that the time is long overdue for a serious consideration of minimal church archival standards. Furthermore, many of the older church archives with years of experience are less professional than is desirable. All church archives, new and old, stand in need of the most up-to-date techniques, knowledge and experience. Good intentions alone are inadequate qualification for the serious archival program; the archival task demands use of all available professional tools and skills. The records which are administered reveal the very life of the church which created them, and they are the memory of a past which is never far from the present and holds implications for the future. If theological language is preferred, they are the evidences of God's work in the church, or perhaps, the evidences of the inability of the church to follow God's purpose in the world. In any case, they are valuable, and the administration of them calls for all the competence that can be brought to bear upon that task.

These remarks are not intended to be arbitrary or harsh. Stories abound of devoted church workers who preserved church archives through the years, and did so without professional credentials. Many of these persistent laborers continued in the face of opposition and widespread apathy. Even those who merely "sat" with records and thereby prevented loss or scattering made significant contributions. But today, as the archival profession is coming of age, we must take account of the wealth of experience and information it has accumulated. Church archives cannot live largely in the past. Minimum archival standards must be formulated as goals and guidelines for all church repositories.

The basic requirements for reputable church archives can be studied in five categories: physical facilities,

administrator and staff, denominational archival programs, care of sensitive records, and stability of archival program.

Proper *physical facilities* for records is so fundamental that it seems almost unnecessary to comment on it. The physical facilities--whether a building, a designated area in a library, or a room--must be as secure as possible. The place should be fire-, vermin-, water-, and theft-proof. Whereas these requirements have been considered by the larger church archives that have constructed buildings in recent years, the smaller, less formal repositories occupying an area or a room in a building may have difficulty meeting them. A closet in the diocesan house, a basement room in the chancery building, or even the top floor of a seminary library may not be the safest place to deposit records. Temperature and humidity control are almost impossible if the archives lacks its own heating and cooling system. A safe in a bishop's office in the Virgin Islands may offer security from theft, but it will not prevent the gradual deterioration of paper in the humid climate.

Smaller archival collections frequently are not provided adequate physical facilities and therefore are dependent on a library, diocesan house or other place which has defective security. One alternative to such a situation is to deposit the records in the central repository for the denomination or church, where space and staff are adequate, with the understanding that the integrity of the collection will be maintained. Should there be legitimate reasons for retaining the collection within a geographic region, another alternative would be to negotiate an agreement of deposit with a state archives, university archives, or historical society. Such institutions provide protection from deterioration, furnish security, and make the records available to researchers. Both arrangements are superior to a closet at the church's headquarters without an archivist or funds for operation.

A number of dioceses in the Episcopal Church have deposited their archives in historical societies and university libraries. The Maryland Diocesan Archives are in the Maryland Historical Society, where they occupy a separate room under the administration of the archivist for the Diocese. The rules and regulations of the Maryland Historical Society govern their accessibility, and the Society's excellent physical facilities provide security. The Diocese

of Pennsylvania has deposited its early records in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The Minnesota Historical Society administers the archives of the Diocese of Minnesota, a very acceptable arrangement since the Society itself holds the personal papers of one prominent bishop. The Diocese of Nevada has been negotiating an agreement with the Nevada Historical Society. The most valuable collection of documents in the Episcopal Church, however, is that assembled by the Reverend Francis Hawks in the first half of the nineteenth century. This compilation was deposited for thirty years in the New York Historical Society until the Church could provide a reasonably secure archival facility. In 1962, it was moved to the new central repository at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.

Records in central church repositories also may face security problems, if proper safeguards are not provided. Cooperation among central repositories of denominations of churches could provide relief. It is conceivable that, as money continues to be scarce and churches reduce their budgets, the archives of two or more denominations or churches might share the expenses of a building. Design of the structure, of course, would permit maintenance of the integrity of each archival collection. Furthermore, many church archivists seem to enjoy an ecumenical situation.

A second area in which minimal standards must be established is that of the *administrator and staff*. The administrator of a church archival collection must be a historian *and* an archivist. A historian is not a "pack rat," or one who compulsively saves everything, or even one who delights in antiquarian "things of the past." Rather, he both possesses a body of historical knowledge and knows the craft of the history discipline. The church archivist must know the history of the church whose records he administers, must be able to employ the skills of the discipline, and must understand archival techniques. Both disciplines are necessary.

Opportunities abound for acquiring the skills of history and archival administration. Church history courses are offered in colleges and seminaries, and there are lending libraries with a wealth of literature. Courses in the administration of archives are available in many institutions of higher learning, including the University of Texas and Emory

University. (A list of institutions offering courses is available from the Society of American Archivists.) Updating one's knowledge is possible through the workshops and meetings of professional organizations of historians, archivists and churchmen.

The church archivist need not be a communicant of the church whose archives he administers unless the church requires it. It is imperative, however, that the church archivist understand thoroughly the structure and history of the church which created the records under his care. A Methodist archivist could administer the archives of the Episcopal Church, if he knew Episcopal Church structure, polity and history. Indeed, there may be times when the objectivity of the non-churchman could prove valuable. The church archivist who is archivist/historian/church person may find various interests clashing. One would hope that should church commitment cloud objectivity, the archival and historical professional skills would maintain the balanced perspective essential to archival work.

Is a full-time administrator a minimum standard for church archives? This depends on the size of the collection and the definition of "full-time." Administration of the central depository of a church normally would require a full-time archivist, while the management of the archives of a religious order or of a small collection within a church might not. In most instances, qualifications are far more important than concern about part- or full-time employment in the repository. It is not unusual for so-called "full-time" archivists to shoulder teaching responsibilities or other tasks in their respective churches.

The emphasis on the necessity of professional credentials for the historian/archivist is not meant to be discouraging. Many archivists have received their appointments and then acquired the necessary education and training. If one is given the position of archivist by a Superior of an Order, a Bishop, or another church official, surely it is appropriate to request permission for, and assistance in, acquiring training for the task. Church officials seem increasingly aware that archivists need more than a "sense" of historical events and should obtain the professional credentials appropriate to their responsibilities.

It is difficult to suggest a staff size that could be considered a minimum requirement. The size of the repository, the scope of its activities, and many other factors are involved. Larger archives will require librarians, curators of manuscripts, photography experts, records managers and any number of specialists. The standard for any archival repository, however, requires a historian/archivist and a staff large enough to control the holdings--to arrange and catalog records, to prevent excessive accumulation of unprocessed accessions, to deal with legal problems, and generally to meet the needs of its parent organization and its researchers. The competence of the archivist, the support of the church and the extent of the physical facilities all will determine the size of the staff.

The cooperation of all local, regional and central church archives in a *denomination or national church archival program* is the most efficient arrangement for records preservation and administration in that church. No local church archives is an island in a United Methodist Church archival program. Neither are diocesan archives in the Episcopal Church independent collections. Similarly, competition among archives within a national church or denomination is debilitating and wasteful. The good of the total church archival program should supersede the desire to build or expand any single archival collection. Coordination of all archives in a national church is essential to the success of a total archival program.

Effective denominational archival programs are the best insurance against loss of records and related papers. Strength and influence result from the combined efforts of all archival institutions in a denomination or national church. A number of churches and denominations have church-wide archival programs. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's archival program includes the Historical Institute in St. Louis and a wide-spread network of regional archivists. The United Methodist Church has an organization of Conference Commissions on Archives and History. In the Episcopal Church, the Archives and Historical Collections of the Church is a true central archival repository. It works closely with diocesan archivists whose records may be maintained in the diocesan house or a secular institution. Although diocesan archives may be physically housed in a state archives, this practice is not viewed as a departure from an overall archival program for the Episcopal Church.

The strength of a church-wide archival program is that it presents a united effort which may deter the collecting of church archives by non-church repositories. Church archives often are faced with competition from secular institutions which evidently consider church records as common property. The archives of a church belong in its own repository and should not be scattered among various manuscripts collections. The records of the General Convention's Special Program in the Episcopal Church in the latter part of the 1960s are an integral part of the church's archives. Although they contain a wealth of information on the Church's attempt to develop programs with black people and minority groups, they do not belong in a library that is collecting papers pertaining to black people.

The fourth basic requirement for a church archival institution is the competence to process *sensitive, confidential records* and discern the appropriate time for their release to researchers. This may require the decision to close certain records to researchers. Sensitive records in this context are those that contain personal data on individuals, living or dead, or on their surviving families. An archival institution should neither seek nor accept such records until it can both make responsible decisions on their availability and maintain respect for the rights of the persons involved. Archival institutions must walk a narrow path between an overly protective policy and one that ignores rights to privacy. Decisions opening sensitive records may, therefore, require the combined judgments of church officials, the archivist and legal counsel.

The archivist who receives personnel files is faced immediately with decisions. Included in the files are medical and psychological records, as well as confidential letters which were solicited and received with the understanding that their information would not be revealed. How much of this should ever be open to researchers? Should it be placed in an archives at all? Should some of it be destroyed? The archivist by virtue of his office does not have a right to receive *all* information. Certainly one can question the wisdom of placing clergy personnel folders in a small diocesan archives where there is little security and the archivist has had a minimum of experience. Decisions concerning personal data are difficult.

An overall denominational or national church archival policy is especially important as decisions on

sensitive records are made. The church that created the records has a basic responsibility for them, and the rights of the persons involved must not be forgotten. Finally, the archivist must remember that he is not an ecclesiastical reporter collecting every item of information on all church people.

Finally, the *stability of the archival program* is the fifth area in which church archives must establish minimum standards. A church archives that receives and agrees to preserve records must exhibit reasonable evidence of its stability. This stability must be based on a firmer foundation than the ability and expertise of a given archivist. The archivist should continually seek to strengthen the archival program which he administers, paving the way for growth.

Stability and growth demand the support of the church. Money is basic to support, but is not the extent of it. The archival program ought to be an integral part of the church's structure and organization. In this fashion, it will not compete with the general program of the church, but will be recognized as an equal among the other administrative divisions. If the budget committee of the church faces the choice of funding the archives or allotting money for starving children, there would be no hope for the success of the archival program. Responsible and knowledgeable church officials should be able to prevent such a situation.

It seems inappropriate to plead that minimum standards should be less demanding because funding is inadequate. Church archives often are poor, but this is not an unusual situation. Many other archives are likewise. That many church archives operate on substandard budgets with limited financial resources does not permit acceptance of the status quo. In fact, it emphasizes the need for goals and the articulation of minimum standards as guides.

The funding of church archival programs is the basic responsibility of the organization or institution that created the records. It is important that the church recognize this fact and provide the necessary budget. Endowments may supplement the operating budget, provide additional services, and enhance the overall program. Patrons, life memberships, friends and other supports are to be encouraged to participate in the church's program and assist in the archival task. But the basic responsibility belongs to the church.

Actually, viewed as a whole, within a relatively brief span major strides have been made in the administration of church archives. The future looks brighter today than at times in the past, and there appears to be a movement toward more professionalism. The burden falls on the archivist who must acquire professional skills, assimilate all of the knowledge and experience which is available, become an adept politician in the Church whose archives are administered, and cooperate with archival organizations within the Church and on a regional and national level. If this sounds like the prescription for the "Renaissance man"--so be it!