

Nurturing the Spirit: Reflections on the Role of a Church Archivist

by **BOB STEWART**

What is an archivist to do? There are moments when this keeper of a church archives feels more like an arms-dealer than an archivist. As archivist for the United Church in British Columbia, I have had to deal with a number of church members who come seeking ammunition for the various positions they are taking on issues that have sometimes polarized our denomination. Recent strife over the possible ordination of active gay and lesbian members of our church has created a difficult climate of debate within the denomination, and at the same time raises new questions on the role of the church archives and archivist. Perhaps the difficulty is that as keepers of "the record," archivists are not the keepers of "the truth," but that users come to our records seeking the truth. While the records do not change, their meaning does. The truth that can be drawn from the record is ever-changing; interpretations are continually constructed, undermined, and reconstructed. That is what a faithful user of archival records will do: seek the changing truth. The archivist seeks to simply conserve the unchanging records in the hope that they might have meaning to people living in later times. The task of the serious user of the record is to let the truth grow clear and lead to new levels of understanding.

The archives is not a bad place to observe a crisis of tradition. In our church, the struggle to be faithful to the truth has led to passionate and at times painful debate. Members have sought property documentation, historical information on the roots of their congregation, and information on the evolution of various theological and social stances of the United Church. They want to know the legal, historical, and religious ground on which they stand. But the ground is not steady. We have difficulty knowing how to make use of our past in the present. Perhaps a significant source of our crisis of tradition is related to the fact that in our culture generally we are attracted to an idea of progress which comes from our scientific culture, but which is not very amenable to our religious life. Classically, in our religious life, we construct, rediscover, and reconstruct the mythologies which address the great questions of life and its meaning. We do not "make progress" by conclusively answering these questions; it is enough that we simply suffer the questions which have not gone away in the course of human history. But our contemporary appetite for the idea of progress leads to a loss of confidence in the subject matter of religion (and the humanities in general), and thus we swing back and forth between rationalism and romanticism. Many of us in the church become romantics,

whether about the poor, about peace, about personal growth, or about an array of issues we want to “solve.” These issues are important, but we do not really know how to attend to them, because we are unable to converse creatively with our past. In our crisis of tradition, we in the church find it a struggle to converse at times even in the present!

In this context, the church archives has a job which is important to the health of the church. We keep the records. The United Church of Canada is a conciliar rather than a confessional church. I would argue that, as a result, if we want to know the church’s theology and faith, we have to read — and read between the lines of — the minutes of the church’s courts. We find our theology articulated, not in tidy theological confessional statements, but rather in our minute books.

I am suggesting that the records — the narratives and decisions of the church courts — are a resource in understanding the theology of the church. It is also true, however, that when the records “speak” to us today from the past, we in the present may “hear” something quite different in the text from what might have been heard at the time of the creation of the record. What we hear is as much determined by the questions we bring to the records, and our ideological dispositions, as by what the records actually say. Although the records are therefore important to the church as a source of theological self-understanding, they are only useful if they are consulted; if the archivist wants to help the church resist amnesia and to live creatively between the lines of its traditions, then there is much to be done.

If we are to examine afresh the role of a church archives, we need to ask what it is which would impel a church to establish an archives. It may have been the same impulse which led the early Christian community to compile the New Testament. The old timers were dying off, and the oral traditions were becoming harder to recall. In British Columbia, the first Methodist missionaries arrived in 1859; by the end of the century, these founders and early story tellers were dying. What record books the church possessed needed attention. The British Columbia Conference meeting of 1904 appointed Cornelius Bryant, the first member of the Methodist Church to settle in the province, and Rev. Ebenezer Robson, one of the first Methodist missionaries in British Columbia, as an Historical Committee of the Conference.

It is not surprising that the Historical Committee consisted of the two people who had the longest personal history in the life of the church, because they had created much of the history which they were to collect and preserve. The practice of having the makers of the history be the keepers of the history persisted long after the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches joined to form the United Church of Canada in 1925. When I joined the Archives and Historical Committee of the British Columbia Conference in 1970, most of the members were retired Presidents of Conference, who had often played significant roles in the life of the church. One might question the energy level of a committee whose average age was eighty, but there were benefits beyond the pleasure of hearing the old-timers tell stories on one another. In a sense, they were a gathering of “ancient and wise elders” who shared both lifelong service to the church and an attitude that they cared deeply for the church. It may have been a wise instinct of the church to place the care of the archives (and the archivist!) in their hands. Perhaps it was in this environment that I first became aware that the archives is called to be servant to the life and health of the church, as much as it is also to serve historians, genealogists, and other non-church users.

I like to think of the development of the archives in anthropological terms. Perhaps we can see the first stage as the "hunter-gatherer" period, in which the main activity was to hunt down the records and to gather the founding stories. John Goodfellow, the first British Columbia Conference archivist, often wrote, "Help us to save the things that go; we are the gleaners after time." There were very few archival resources during most of the "hunter-gatherer" period; the task was simply to "get the story," and the committee wrote and published many brief congregational histories. The committee also gathered what records it could, some of which were given to Goodfellow, who lived in Princeton, B.C., and others of which were deposited at Union College in Vancouver. It was enough that these records had been "saved," and for many years little effort went into their arrangement and description.

In 1938, the Historical Committee became the Archives and Historical Committee, as the principal of Union College granted permission to "plant" an archives at that institution. Thus began the "planter-settler" stage of development, with growing interest in having a proper archival "storehouse." The committee recruited the college's professor of church history to do what he could to ensure the safety of the records, but nobody was paid to be archivist and there was no formal archival programme. Nevertheless, records began to be sent to the archives at the college. By 1950, Dr. John Webster Grant, the newly appointed part-time archivist and full-time professor of church history, managed to move the records into a more secure room, and a grant made possible the hiring of a student to sort and classify the archival materials which had been scattered throughout the building.

In 1968, Rev. John Goodfellow's archives from Princeton, B.C., reached Union College (now the Vancouver School of Theology), where the newly appointed British Columbia Conference archivist, Marilyn Harrison, integrated them with the records accumulated by Grant. With the creation of a single Conference archives and the hiring of a part-time, semi-professional archivist, we entered a third "professional development" stage. The Archives and Historical Committee has evolved from being the wonderful gathering of "wise and ancient elders" to become more of a single-focus archival committee, as the years have taken their toll and as more energy has been invested in developing archival professional standards. So far during this period, we have employed part-time, semi-professional, self-trained archivists — both Marilyn Harrison and myself were recruited through our interest in church history and our involvement in the church, rather than through our archival training — together with occasional professionals hired through government grants for specific projects. During the past decade, we have been able to increase the visibility of the Conference archives within the church in British Columbia, and as a result there has been increased financial support. During the past year, we have moved into a very good archival facility, which has double the space and full environmental control. During this period, the archivist has participated in both national and regional archival organizations for the first time. The archives has endeavoured to cultivate more professional archival practices, and we intend to develop a records management programme for the Conference.

Although I am sure that we will remain in the "professional development" stage for many years to come, I am also convinced that a new and exciting stage of development is on the horizon, which will involve finding a new equilibrium between our archival and our historical mandates. There will be a need for an exploration of how the archives might more creatively relate to the life of the church today, taking the initiative to help the church engage, at a more analytical level, in the sort of historical/theological conversation which would nurture its life and health.

What is to be done? Church archives have been active in promoting records management as a practical and beneficial service to the church, but records management will be only one of the primary services of the archives to its sponsor. We still have to learn how to engage the church effectively with the records that we keep. It would seem that every generation within the church must put its own questions to the archival records. However, we have a hard time knowing what a genuinely useable history would look like today. In what way do we need our history today? During recent years, the archives has increasingly supported the many congregations involved in a revitalization programme operated by the Institute for the Study of Church and Ministry, based at the Vancouver School of Theology. The first phase of this programme involves the congregation in historical research and congregational history writing. Although the research is somewhat limited, the participating congregations do begin to ask more critical questions of their past than those normally answered by the traditional “anniversary” histories, and the congregations are thus beginning to develop a foundation for revitalization. Another recent activity which may signal a new stage of development in part results from the fact that the archives now has a good set of display panels and is therefore able to take more educational initiatives at conferences and meetings of the church. We frequently use the panels for direct promotion of the archives, but in other cases we are able to engage the church with the resources of the archives to stimulate understanding of issues with which the church is struggling. For example, we are preparing a display on the role of the church in the history of native land claims in British Columbia. Church members are often intuitively sympathetic, but have almost no idea of the long and interesting history of the church’s role in supporting the struggle of native people with various governments for settlement of their rights.

What qualities must a church archivist have? Of course a church archivist must be a competent professional. But competence is not enough. I believe that church archivists must be committed to a kind of pastoral ministry to the institutions which they serve. Although I am **not** saying that church archivists must be members of the denominations they serve, they must have sensitivity and an ability to live and serve comfortably within the ethos of the sponsoring denomination. Church archivists cannot simply set up shop and passively await the arrival of church users, with the hope that sponsors will find the archives worth funding. Perhaps this means that a church archivist must have the sense of a “calling.” I find the idea of “calling” attractive, because it seems to link my professional commitment with service to the religious institution, and because it makes the simple point that a church archives is a religious institution — a repository for records which have religious purpose even after they have been transferred to the archives. But if this is the case, then how does a church archivist act as a mediator of theological tradition? How are we to encourage the important conversation between members of the church, with their hopes and visions for the future, and the voices of the living past which are audible within the archival records?

Perhaps the calling of a church archivist is to facilitate a vital balancing act between memory and vision, between tradition and hope, so that, in maintaining that balance, the church knowingly remains faithful to God’s mission for the church. Without the vision, the keepers of memory become a source of dead traditionalism: the dead faith of the living. Without the memory, the visionaries can never gain clear, trustworthy vision. Church archivists must therefore always seek new opportunities to promote the religious value of the records they hold, in order to nurture the spirit of the church in its daily life.