A Conversion Experience in the United Church Archives

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There is an element within Christian religious traditions which values a dramatic conversion experience above almost everything else as the basis for a strong religious life. Evangelists call on individuals to be born again. For some converts, intense emotions, sensory experiences or miraculous healings accompany the instantaneous change to a new beginning. Many more people are also of the religious tradition which believes in the possibility, necessity and hope of new beginnings. They believe, however, that this rebirth is a gradual growth in knowledge, understanding and patience which begins with a commitment to a new way of living, but is an ongoing process requiring perseverance from day to day. The collective conversion experience at the United Church Archives was patterned rather on the second model; the project was informed by continuous learning, patience and perseverance.

The Decision

A change of senior management at the United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, together with other staff changes between 1985 and 1987, precipitated the decision to implement descriptive standards. In the competition for a new chief archivist, administrative and archival experience was measured above specific historical knowledge and familiarity with the Archives' holdings. This trend continued with other staff hiring. That the new staff had a particular and personal interest in descriptive standards was a factor in their introduction.[1] However, the change of senior management precipitated a more fundamental shift — "professionalizing of the Archives" — as viewed by staff and certain users alike. Descriptive standards became one important focus of this shift.

For the previous staff, many of whom had enjoyed a long tenure at the Archives, knowledge of the records had grown along with their acquisition, while decades of underfunding and staff shortages allowed acquisitions to outpace description. The new staff, lacking a history with the institution, looked first to the descriptive systems for knowledge of the records and found description to be incomplete, inconsistently applied

and without sufficient linkages.[2] The time had come for a standardized and integrated description of all records in the Archives in the form of a repository guide.

There was some user dissatisfaction with the newly appointed archives staff, who made claims to professional archival knowledge, but who could not immediately respond to questions about the availability of records and record content. Personal knowledge of all the holdings was not a possibility for the new staff, but standardized description of all records was one effective means of providing more efficient reference service. The staff wanted to demonstrate as soon as possible the advantages which their skills and the Archives' new direction might bring to their work. There was, however, the inevitable disruption as new procedures replaced old; before any new integration became evident; and before at least the basic knowledge which was part of the former archivists' experience could be communicated in a usable format. These factors generated a sense of urgency around the project, part of which might usefully have focused on presenting more effectively the procedures and potential benefits of the changes being made — at least to the small but influential group of users most directly affected. Certainly the project, upon completion, engendered a very positive response from the same group of users.

Descriptive standards implementation was also a management response to other factors. It was a response to increasing numbers of more varied users, and a different approach to reference service. An integrated and consistent system would make access less dependent on archivists' personal knowledge of the records.[3] It was also a response to the growing volume of accruals which precluded archivists' personal knowledge of the records; the realities of staff turnover and the cost of initiating new staff into procedures differing from archives to archives; and the specialized description required by a growing variety of media covered by new standards being developed. Standards implementation realized opportunities offered by the new automated systems and the possibilities for information-sharing among archives. Thus decisions regarding personnel and the future direction of the Archives had set in place a descriptive standards priority within the new management agenda.

The Standards

The implementation took place in two parts. Initially, the decision was made to describe all records according to a consistent format, using the guidelines in Steven L. Hensen's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM)* to create a card catalogue of holdings. Although Hensen's emphasis was on collection level cataloguing, this approach was not prescribed: "Repositories will make cataloging level decisions based on their own internal need...."; the manual's intent was "only to give all cataloging records, regardless of level, a consistent format."[4] Without the benefit of accession records, for the most part, description began at one end of the stack area; selected units of the same provenance, which were sometimes all the records of a fonds or sous-fonds and at other times only the records of one series, were described. In practice, most often the smallest subdivisible units were described in order to provide low-level access to records, many of which were without file listings and would remain so. Procedures were outlined in the in-house "Manual for Accessioning and Cataloguing" (24 June 1988/rev. March 1989). Soon, however, there was a growing sense of the practical difficulties involved in creating a useful guide from so many descriptions at so many levels. In order to be

useful, these numerous descriptive records needed to be linked together, a process which was difficult to integrate into the developing descriptive system. At the same time, chapters of the Canadian data content standard, *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, were becoming available, so the focus of the attention shifted there. The first part of the implementation process had begun in the autumn of 1988 and continued until the autumn of 1990.

The second part of the implementation, and the one which defined institutional description as it now exists, began when the Archives adopted the preliminary provisions for multilevel description in *RAD* as the new standard. Multilevel description was adopted ''for preparing descriptions of a fonds and its parts where separate descriptions for both the parts, and the fonds as a whole, are required ... where the description of the fonds as a whole represents the highest or first level of description and its parts represent lower levels of description.''[5] These rules provided the framework for the redesigned project, which called for a guide to the Archives' holdings of textual records at the fonds level and also allowed for description at the series and subseries level. A strict time-limit on this second project required decisions on certain applications before the draft *RAD* chapters were finally approved. The project took on the characteristics of a prototype envisaged by *RAD* — ''a form in the process of being created.''[6] Only names authorized by *Canadiana Authorities* and in-house authority records were to be used as added entries and subjects in descriptions. Subject terms were to be based on *Library of Congress Subject Headings* and *Canadian Subject Headings*, supplemented by in-house subject headings approved for use in the description of particular records.

Automation

The first part of the implementation was planned and developed for a manual system, and included instructions for the production and duplication of catalogue cards. These procedures were showing themselves to be cumbersome and time-consuming, only limited access being provided by subject and added-entry indexing. The requisite policies and procedures for the manual system having been developed, however, the basis for conversion to an automated system was in place. A suitable software package was needed to run on the one IBM-compatible personal computer which the Archives already possessed; it had to be relatively inexpensive and easy to use, since computer expertise among the staff was limited. As a result of a search during which archival literature was examined, several software packages tested, other archives consulted, and costs considered, InMagic was chosen. The most compelling reason for its choice was its use in other religious and smaller Toronto-area archives and the positive feedback from colleagues in these repositories. Other reasons were its capacity for use on a single computer or as part of a network; manageable initial cost and reduced costs for additional copies; product support and response to user needs from the parent company. The software was easy to use after little preliminary training. Staff were able, with important assistance from other archives[7] and a one-day, in-house seminar by an InMagic consultant, to design a data structure and report format compatible with *RAD*. The software's unlimited field lengths were necessary for adequate description of administrative histories, personal biographies, and scope and content notes; its unlimited overall record length made possible the description of large corporate bodies; and its compatibility with WordPerfect allowed for the production of a hard-copy guide from the database. The capacity for repeating fields was essential for the subject and added-entry access, moreover, and the searching

function with Boolean capability was quick and powerful. Finally, it was advertised as MARC-compatible, a potential which would facilitate interface with other archives' machine-readable formats at some future time.

Description now proceeded at the highest, or fonds, level, with series and subseries description being provided wherever relevant within the context of the fonds. Each fonds, series or subseries description was a single record in InMagic. Linkages were made through numbering the fonds (e.g., Fonds number 1), series (e.g., 1/1) and subseries (e.g., 1/1/1). The fonds title, moreover, was repeated for each series description, and the fonds and series title for each subseries description. There was no attempt to describe each fonds down to the same level of description. Thus Fonds number 1 — the records of the Methodist Episcopal Church [Great Britain] — had no series, while Fonds number 12 — Methodist Church of Canada — had nine series. Series titles most often included the form of material, along with the names of the subordinate corporate bodies responsible for the creation of the materials. Finding no references to sous-fonds in *RAD*, the "Name element" section of Rule 3.1B2b served as the pattern for the majority of the series descriptions. The series definition and examples in *RAD* allowed for a very broad usage of this level of description, resulting in a combination of the various series types in one fonds arrangement.[8] The other most common series constructions were based on form of material and function.

The Project Management Model

Initially, descriptive standards implementation was a broadly defined goal to describe all the holdings of textual records according to newly developed and consistent standards. By 1987, the procedures for the first project were being codified, and preliminary work was being done on the inventorying of undescribed records. By 1988, the first description of Methodist and Presbyterian records had begun, and standards implementation took on a life of its own within the regular activities of the Archives. Archivist work plans included the requirement to spend at least one week per month on description. This work was to be the major focus of the Archives as a whole, rather than routine work in all the other areas. The work did not progress quickly, however, since regular Archives functions often demanded more than the staff time remaining. It was often difficult and frustrating to try to find the hours which descriptive work required. Another approach was clearly called for.

At this point, the Archives applied for funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) in order to hire an archivist for two years, to pay for additional software to run the automated system and to produce a guide to certain Archives' holdings. For the purpose of the funding application, the project was more narrowly defined — as the description of records of the uniting churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Evangelical United Brethren); the United Church's national and Ontario regional offices; personal fonds of missionaries, clergy and lay persons associated with those churches — in order to fit into a two-year period from May 1990 to May 1992. Once funding was assured, further project clarification continued. InMagic was selected for the database, and *RAD* was finally chosen as the standard. Work on this now better-defined, two-year project began in May 1990, when a contract archivist joined the permanent staff archivists, who were still being asked to give at least four days a month towards continuing the work already begun. The project coordinator,

who had designed the grant application, now monitored the progress and quality of the work, and collaborated with project staff in dealing with the unending questions relating to automation, archival and implementation issues arising from the project. The tradition of monthly archival staff meetings was continued, although the focus was now almost completely on project goals. These meetings were the forum for discussing and approving procedures which were then codified, between meetings, into the evolving in-house policy manual. Procedures, for example, had to be adjusted from a manual to an automated system; from the second edition of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (*APPM2*) to the multilevel rules in *RAD*. As the deadline for completion of the project approached, codification was given over to direct description, so minutes still remain to be added to the policy and procedures manual. The staff meetings also served as seminars for professional development and training. There were a lot of new lessons to learn — not only how to run InMagic and apply *RAD*, but also how to design and adapt procedures in order to have them interrelate successfully. The agenda, moreover, always included practical questions relating to implementation, which had come up between meetings and which from time to time led to the modification of or change in procedures. One question, for example, related to the description of microfilm. A field-and-field format had been designed to record the existence of originals and reproductions while describing the microfilm copies of original records. Practical difficulties in utilizing this field, however, led to a modification of the procedures. Archivists found that records had been reorganized after filming and that file lists described the revised arrangement of the records but no longer the microfilm. There was also difficulty in determining which segment of the original records had been microfilmed, since targets were often absent and description of the microform very general. Since no satisfactory description of microfilm in many instances was possible without examining the rolls in detail, it was eventually decided that information on the microfilm be placed in this field of the descriptive record, but that it would be excluded from the published guide until the microfilm was more firmly under intellectual control. Finally, the minutes of the monthly staff meetings tracked the progress of description and served as one of the project controls.

The most important resource, as well as the most costly, in undertaking such a project was the staff. The work was very labour-intensive. Experience was also an important element in the success of the project: experience in general archival work, with *RAD*, with InMagic, with name and subject authority work. Experience was shared among project members in the meetings already described and in the implementation process. This sharing was the essential part of the training process, which was supplemented by related readings and discussions, by visiting other institutions having similar applications and by communicating expertise among team members. Flexibility within the team was essential — taking advantage of experience, reading, codifying procedures, learning the new descriptive rules and the new technology of automation at the same time as description proceeded, choosing and creating name and subject authorized headings, entering data and monitoring the quality of the work. To paraphrase the title of an article read during this project, the implementation of descriptive standards was managed by completing tasks while participative planning proceeded.[9] Flexibility became a further byword due to the departure of three staff members during this period, and their replacement only after some months had elapsed in order to accumulate salary dollars for budget purposes. Staff changes were costly in terms of building team spirit, project continuity, and archival experience linked to specific knowledge of the records being described. The better communication was among team members the further the

project advanced. The role of the project coordinator was initially somewhat ambiguous in relation to staff members on the team — where no line of authority existed. As the project progressed, however, it became evident that the coordinator needed to have and should assume greater authority over the project and over the work of all members of the project team.[10] Quality control was centralized as inevitable differences in information among descriptions prepared by various people were to some extent reconciled. Missionary endeavours, for example, of the United Church's Woman's Missionary Society, often paralleled those of the Board of Foreign Missions, and thus the descriptions were edited to be complementary.

Resource needs in the form of equipment escalated during the project. SSHRCC funding addressed some of those needs but not enough for a computer for each project member. Initially, the project had envisaged a data entry specialist to input information from handwritten forms. As the project progressed and staff became familiar with the procedures and equipment, however, it took less time for each member to input information directly into the database. The entries were more easily edited there than on handwritten forms, and the procedure had the added advantage that the information became immediately accessible for reference. Additional equipment was bought, and also borrowed, in order to make the project more efficient.

The rather pleasant working environment deteriorated somewhat as the deadline approached and as more and more of the archivists' time — particularly that of the project coordinator — was scheduled to complete the project. Archivists made up many of the days which had gone to other work earlier in the project, so that by the end of May 1992 the main body of descriptions had been entered into the database. The deadline for entry into the database had been met. There remained, however, the boxes of records which were totally unidentified, or which might be duplicates, and these were dealt with as time permitted during the following months. There was also much proofreading and quality control to be done, and there remained as well the large task of producing the published guide from the database.

The time needed for the production of the publication was longer than had been planned for. Distribution of a guide in some form was required by the terms of the funding received. The technology would have permitted the distribution of the database, but the budget did not; a loose-leaf guide was chosen as the format. It would have been possible to generate a rather more basic hard-copy guide directly from the database. The decision was made, however, that since a publication had to be produced, additional time and money would be allocated to publish a usable and attractive product. Design by the United Church's Graphics and Print Production Department enabled in-house application of WordPerfect to differentiate among fonds and, within fonds, between series and subseries. Fonds numbers, capitalization, indentation, headers and page numbers were included, in addition to the foreword, introduction and index. Some effort was also made to organize the records in a logical manner for research. The descriptions were divided into four categories: Uniting Churches, United Church General Council Offices, United Church Conferences and Presbyteries, and Personal Papers. Within these categories, there was an attempt to arrange records into a useful order. In describing Methodist records, for example, the records of the parent bodies of each of the Canadian Methodist churches preceded the entries of the churches which they planted. Within the Presbyterian subcategory, Canadian churches followed the description of records of the parent bodies of the three main traditions — Church of Scotland, Secessionist Church and Free

Church. The draft copy of the publication brought to light certain inconsistencies, typographical errors and problems with the index, which required many long hours of work before the appearance of the guide itself.

Project evaluation is a legitimate part of the project management model. It would be premature, however, as the terminal phase of the project is still under way. Detailed statistics, which would permit an accurate analysis of time spent on the various phases of the project — name authority or subject headings authority work, as compared with drafting the basic descriptions — were not kept. Such statistics would now be valuable to have. In very basic terms, projects have been deemed successful if they were completed within the time and budget allocated, met technical specifications and produced a high level of satisfaction among system users and management.[11] The basic qualifications for success seem therefore to have been met.

Library Conversion Model

To continue the conversion analogy, a brief look at library conversion projects in relation to the United Church Archives (UCA) project led to some interesting comparisons. Libraries have used the term "retrospective conversion" to describe the activity "whereby card catalog records of library holdings are converted to machine-readable records, and [this] involves the transformation to MARC format of information stored in the traditional card catalog."[12] Articles on library conversion projects identified similar factors to those just discussed under general project management: determination of need, management support and sufficient resources, definition of the scope of the project, planning and methodology, implementation, periodic review, and evaluation. There were, however, as many differences as similarities as one moved from the generalities of project description to the more practical issues surrounding implementation.

That part of the UCA project most directly resembling a library conversion project was the retroconversion of about 300 personal papers catalogue cards to *RAD* descriptions at the fonds level. The unit volume of the papers was usually small and the catalogue cards included for the most part the necessary elements of description. Thus, as in library conversion projects, machine-readable descriptive records replaced pre-existing manual descriptions; while the format changed, however, the descriptive elements remained similar. Unlike a library, this Archives held unique materials and had no access to pre-existing machine-readable descriptive records; thus the time needed for an archival project was greatly extended. Another study of archives retroconversion projects estimated that, in a library project, well over 50 per cent of the cataloguing records to be converted would be found in some pre-existing machine-readable form.[13]

To stretch this point somewhat, the recognition within the Archives of the need to take advantage of pre-existing information in other ways led to the introduction of a records management system at the United Church's national and regional offices. Only very basic weeding preceded the transfer of files, file titles were idiosyncratic, application of the few records schedules which did exist was sporadic, and original order often could not be determined. Records received in this way had to be processed on a file-by-file basis, and there was no way of keeping up with description. A Records Management Steering Committee, chaired by the Secretary of the Church's Division of Finance, was the forum through which changes began to be made. Initially in a very basic sense,

the Archives procured agreement that records had to be accompanied at least by a file list, along with information on dates of creation, access and provenance. As support was received, the programme expanded gradually so that all records at Church House were first inventoried; a file classification system instituted; active files coded into the new system; records disposition schedules and instruction added; and the system automated.[14] The Archives was integrated into the system, and procedures are currently being finalized to transfer as much information as possible concerning the records directly from the system. There is the potential that future records received by the Archives will be those scheduled for permanent retention, that they will be coded systematically according to the Church's use of the records, and that a file list will be generated from the system in a format compatible with the Archives' finding aids. Since these files have been coded into primary and secondary access points based on subject and function, intellectual access to the records will be almost immediate upon arrival at the Archives. David Bearman has written that archives must design archival description and control systems in such a way as "to capture information from external sources either before material[s] are acquired or when they are accessioned, rather than to depend on information provided by archivists in the years following acquisition, through laborious analysis of the records in hand."[15] Thus, while the United Church Archives had no access to pre-existing descriptive cataloguing, it took the lead in designing a parallel programme which would allow the institution to take advantage of pre-existing, machine-readable records in quite a different way.

Another basic difference from library conversion projects was the work involved in the choice of name authorities.[16] Established name authority records for personal fonds were very rare: almost none were located in *Canadiana Authorities*. The Archives' procedures for developing authorized forms included a "name authorities form," on which the following were documented: authority heading, "see also" and "see" references, information notes for name changes, sources, rules, reference to other descriptive records in which the name was found. The in-house guidelines instructed staff to check *Canadiana Authorities* and, if no reference was found, to use the fullest form of the name based on the vertical biographical files collection in the Archives. An evaluation of the *RAD* draft rules on compiling personal name authority records — when they did appear — did not result in a change of procedure, even though different rules for selecting the form of the name were set out. The decision was made that in the UCA conversion project the practical difficulties and the time allotment did not permit staff to adopt the new rules. If the personal name were not found in *Canadiana Authorities*, then it was not clear how to determine the person's published or distributed work without a literature search, for which the Archives was not prepared. There were similar difficulties — where the person was not a published author — in choosing the form of the name from published reference sources. Although in many instances it was necessary to go back to the unit for clarification of descriptive information, in a retroconversion project there was simply no time to evaluate use of the name in the fonds itself. Hensen wrote in the first edition of *APPM* that "if the fullest form of a person's name does not appear as part of the form chosen as main entry,"[17] it must in any case appear as part of the description, probably in the administrative or biographical note. For all these reasons, the project continued to use the fullest form of the personal name. Practical guidelines as to how these rules might realistically be applied to personal name authority work will be welcome.

There were also decisions to be made concerning the corporate name authorities. There were practical difficulties in searching for publications emanating from each of the many corporate bodies. The decision was made to base the name on that appearing in the official record of the corporate body while, however, respecting the rules for determining levels of hierarchy to be reflected in the name. Since creating name authority records was very time-consuming, the number of name authority records created was limited to only those names used as primary and secondary access points, and a minimalist approach was taken to adding secondary access points. These were limited for the most part to names appearing in series titles and to all authorized names by which the body had been identified. Since the UCA project included a keyword-searchable database, such a minimalist approach was easier to adopt; all of the corporate names appearing in the description were accessible in any case. The placement of the primary access point and the secondary access points also needed discussion; in the end, it was decided to make the primary access point — the last name by which the body was known — and the secondary access points, which included other authorized forms of that name, part of the fonds record.[18] The secondary access points designating other creators of the fonds were placed in the appropriate series descriptions. In this sense, the prototype of the project is clear, since there exist as yet no rules to assist in the matter. An in-house discussion paper on the creation of name authorities for corporate bodies overseas raised many issues — the languages of names, correct romanization of non-Roman names, secularization of names in certain countries after the expulsion of missionaries — which could not be solved in the course of the project. None of these names became secondary access points; topical headings, such as "Missions — Japan," directed users to appropriate descriptions. This remains an issue for the Archives to grapple with further.

Decisions about subject-indexing were also made in the course of the project; the differences between indexing a group of records which might have an indefinite number of subjects, and indexing books based on certain themes, were found to be vast. Subject headings were chosen from an in-house authority file and standard authorities indicated earlier. Other decisions included choosing general rather than specific headings and using them to primarily document the major functions of the Church, such as missions, education, finance, interaction with government, fund-raising, church personnel management, etc. Subject terms describing the fonds as a whole were placed at the fonds level, while the subject terms for each series and subseries were also placed at the appropriate level. Discussions on subject terms were part of the monthly staff meetings, and there was a subject committee which met periodically to approve in-house subject terms which had been put forward by those describing the records. Even with the controlled vocabulary, however, there were difficulties in consistent application of the same term by all involved in the project. It was also not possible simply to create the index from the terms used for the description at each level. Much work was needed during the production of the guide in order to reconcile the different terms for describing similar functions; to replace specific terms having only one reference to more general terms already providing access to a number of fonds; and to add relevant "see" and "see also" references in order to link the terms specifically selected for the guide index. In spite of this effort, the index demonstrates that there are many things yet to be learned about effective indexing.

In considering the retroconversion model, one of the fundamental differences was the unit of description. Libraries for the most part converted descriptions of single items.

In this project, however, it was often necessary to determine the units to be described; designating the fonds/series/subseries was not completely straightforward. Articles such as those by Michel Duchein[19] provided a context for decisions which were then modified by practical considerations arising from the original records themselves. The United Church of Canada was created in 1925 out of the Methodist Church (Canada), parts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Congregational Union of Canada. In turn, each of these had been the result of nineteenth-century amalgamations within these broader religious streams. Each of the uniting churches was designated a fonds. When the requirements of the software and the database structure were examined in relationship to the level of detail to be captured within the description, however, some of the fonds were found to be too extensive to describe effectively. Thus, in some respects, arbitrarily — one might argue the applicability of the minimalist position — each of the administrative units within the larger Methodist Church (Canada) and The Presbyterian Church in Canada was designated a fonds. Practically it worked better to do it this way, but the decision created a rift between the practicalities and detail of description and a more theoretical understanding of what constituted a fonds.

In identifying a fonds, there were difficulties deciding on its boundaries. The United Church of Canada's Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education, for example, although established in 1971, included records dating back to 1957. The records of the preceding Board of Colleges, moreover, had been integrated into these records so completely as to make their separation impracticable. Users nevertheless have found the final format of the description initially confusing, since the dates immediately following the fonds title — the inclusive dates of creation — conflicted with the vital dates of the corporate body as given in the following administrative history. Committees also presented their own difficulties. There was a separate, probably artificially created collection of General Council Committee records, two-thirds of which were controlled by file lists. Many of these committees had short life-spans and their records were small in extent. Some committees having longer life-spans and significant extents of records had been described on their own. Still others were found as series within the fonds of the larger corporate body which had created them and to which the committees reported. Thus, in being described, some committees were treated as series in a committees collection and a few as separate fonds, while still others remained as series within the descriptions of larger fonds. In the first two instances they were easily accessible through the database; in the last, only by means of the file lists to which there were references in the database. Committees were described in the context in which they existed at the time of the description, but the result was uneven access.

Once the unit of description had been determined, other archival decisions followed, based on the differences between conversion from a catalogue card and conversion from the various formats in which the finding aids existed. Besides the card catalogue of personal fonds, there were 400 small, provenance-based descriptions which had to be converted to multilevel *RAD* descriptions. In the Methodist records, for example, 171 descriptive records were converted to 50 fonds level descriptions, supplemented by 116 series and subseries descriptions. This involved the identification of both the fonds and related series. Practically, moreover, it often consisted of building a fonds level description out of the various descriptive records already mentioned. The Presbyterian Church in Canada Board of Foreign Missions records were initially described as twenty-three units providing references to fifteen detailed file lists. The final multilevel description took the form

of a fonds description followed by sixteen series — records of the central board; missionary applicants' records; correspondence with women's missionary groups; missions in eight countries; mandates within Canada relative to the aboriginal, Chinese, and East Indian communities; and a scrapbook of clippings. Often the fonds/series descriptions were shaped by the descriptive work already done. Decisions to describe below the fonds level were sometimes made in order to retain information previously gathered. In the Presbyterian Church records, for example, there were separate descriptions and finding aids for each of the Honan, South China and Shanghai missions, and for the Chinese Labour Corps in France during World War I. The descriptions of these units were detailed enough that the "Records pertaining to China Missions" became the series incorporating each of the above as subseries. Once the fonds/series were designated, administrative histories had to be rewritten in order to conform to the new structure — in almost all instances at the fonds level. Thus, in each individual fonds description, the extent and the complexity of the existing description became factors in determining the level of description.

Another type of record integrated into the fonds-based descriptions was the close to 100 accessions received since 1986 — when accessioning procedures were established. Again, however, this was not a straightforward retroconversion. Accessions were often simply arbitrary transfers of records from Church House — record groups, parts of series, records with varied provenance — often without provenancial integrity of their own. These accessions were designated parts of fonds or series, as appropriate, and the accession number(s) were recorded in an additional field within the database. Accession units continue to be entered into the database — particularly in the descriptions of open fonds — as they are received.

The descriptions already available had an impact on the nature and progress of retroconversion.[20] This project included the approximately 250 linear metres of United Church records for which finding aids existed — most often file level descriptions. Many of them also carried detailed administrative histories. All possible information was taken from them and interpolated into the database description. The finding aids became, in effect, the file level description of the fonds, not by being added to the database but through references from the database to the appropriate guide number. Although the finding aids were too numerous and extensive to add to the description, an effort was made to strengthen their links to the database. New title pages were supplied, clearly identifying the provenance of the finding aid. Tables of contents were provided in order to assist in linking series descriptions in the database to finding aid pages. Where practicable, moreover, finding aids describing one fonds — for example, the records of the United Church of Canada Board of World Missions — were combined into one finding aid. This work was very time-consuming; thus, for the most part, each series or subseries description, where relevant, identified the finding aid extending the level of description downward to the file level. As with other existing descriptions, file lists had a great bearing on the final *RAD* description — particularly in the determination of the series level. Where finding aids were linked to series, these were converted into series level descriptions in the database. Most often it was necessary to examine the records themselves in order clarify information, find the documentation to complete the fields — or rather, in this project, to ensure that all records had been described.[21] While considerable work was involved in converting finding aids to *RAD* descriptions, there remained more than 250 linear metres for which no finding aids existed.

At this point in the project, therefore, the conversion model broke down completely. While *RAD* prescribed that description move from the general to the specific, higher-level description could not be attempted without knowledge of specific files. A number of backlog projects prior to 1990 assisted in this required work. Summer staff compiled a few basic file lists at the same time as the work of description was being continued by archives staff. Records transfers from the parent body gradually began to arrive accompanied by basic file lists. For most of these records, however, file level description simply became one more big step in the procedures for creating automated description. The more complex the records became, the more time the process required. The Division of Mission in Canada — the most complex body and the most undescribed unit of records —alone took months to describe. Enough retrospective description was nevertheless undertaken to permit adequate fonds/series level descriptions. Work remains to be done, however, in appraisal and in basic conservation at the file level.

The comparison of the UCA project to library conversion was instructive. However, the practical difficulties involved in applying library principles and practices to the very different archival records, and certainly the increased time needed for archival retroconversion projects, were not to be underestimated.

The conversion project has been significant for the United Church Archives. It has integrated the various research tools for the above records — card catalogues, file lists, administrative histories and biographical sketches — into one system of access. Since description at the fonds level had to be preceded by description at the series/subseries and file level, the project generated numerous new container and file lists to previously inaccessible records. It also gave impetus to the general automation of the United Church Archives. The ease of data entry by each archivist, and the advantages for the reference function of a keyword-searchable database, resulted in the expansion of automation into other areas of description (e.g., graphic materials), and other, administrative functions (e.g., accessioning). The project enhanced reference service. There has been much positive feedback from those users who have accessed the database, and at least two long-time users of the records concerned have already located sources which had been in the Archives for many years, but of which they had been unaware. The project has made reference service less dependent on the personal knowledge of archivists — an important factor in times of increasing staff mobility and personnel reduction. By using generally the most recent standards, the project not only trained UCA archivists in new procedures in the area of automated description, but also gave the institution greater visibility within the profession. The project generated a database with both the potential for participation in an archives information network, and the potential for linkages to the parent body in order to stimulate the use of archival records for administrative purposes. The production of a repository guide also proved to be well worth the effort. The guide has served as a useful public relations tool in dealing with the United Church hierarchy and has, for the time being at least, increased the Archives' profile at Church House. Although it would be premature to attempt to assess its impact on reference service, the publication, unlike the database, which can only display one record at a time, provides to users the overview of descriptive records available for each fonds. While the guide is a static finding aid, however, the database continues to expand and evolve — as new records are received, other categories of records are added, and more information is gathered about the various records already described.

Notes

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1 Jean E. Dryden, Chief Archivist since 1986, was the original chair of the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, and she had just co-authored *Developing Descriptive Standards: A Call to Action*. Two of the other staff came from the Saskatchewan Archives Board, which between 1977 and 1986 had adopted *AACR2* and controlled subject and name authority headings as the basis for archival description.

2 An internal memorandum, written in 1986, identified gaps in the intellectual and physical control of the corporate Church records. Although corporate records were generally arranged on the shelf by record group, many were not accessible through any written finding aids beyond a very general shelf list and brief box labels. Finding aids came in various formats and described textual records at many different levels. It was difficult to determine quickly which part of the records of a particular board or division had already been described, and what remained to be done. Within the descriptions themselves, moreover, there was inconsistent determination and documentation of provenance.

3 One of the new directions in the United Church Archives was a codification of reference procedures emphasizing that "a basic principle which underlies our reference services is equal access and equal service to all research as far as possible" ("Reference Procedures 2," June 1989), and which set up a centralized registration and reference service with rotating staff. See also Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 107-8. This paragraph discusses the inefficiencies of traditional reference service based primarily on the expertise of the specialist archivist.

4 Steven L. Hensen, comp., *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries* (Washington, DC, 1983), p. 2.

5 *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), 1.0J. "Multilevel Description General Rule" [draft].

6 Carol Shields, *Swann: A Literary Mystery* (Toronto 1987), p. 35.

7 Karen Evans, of the Anglican Church of Canada General Synod Library; Mary-Anne Nicholls, project coordinator for a guide to the records of the Anglican Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario; and Grahame Henry, computer consultant for the Anglican project, shared their experience. Corrado Santoro of the Archives of Ontario demonstrated the use of InMagic in the preparation of different types of finding aids.

8 *RAD* Glossary includes in its definition of "series," records "maintained as a unit because they relate to a particular function or subject, result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, or arising out of their receipt and use." Rule 3.1B2b, "Supplied title proper for a series" [draft], seems to include the notion of sous-fonds under the heading "Name element," which states, "If, at the series ... level, the name(s) of the person(s), family (families) or corporate body (bodies) predominantly associated with, or responsible for, the creation of the unit being described is different from the name(s) of the creator of the fonds as a whole, include the name(s) as part of the supplied title proper."

9 Ellen G. Miller, "Managing Automation for Results: Completing Tasks While Participative Planning Proceeds," *College & Research Libraries News* 45 (10 November 1984), pp. 532-39.

10 See "Techni-Notes: Effective Project Management" [Part 1], *ASA Newsletter* (June 1991), p. 3, for a discussion of the role of a project manager which emphasizes the need for authority, along with responsibility for the project's success.

11 Ibid., p. 4.

12 Patricia Cloud, "Cost of Converting to MARC AMC," *Library Trends* (Winter 1988), p. 575.

13 Ibid., p. 576.

14 A brief description of this implementation can be found in "Sharing the Wealth," *Office Systems and Technology* (November 1992). The article emphasizes that the records management system at

the United Church is simple, low-cost and adaptable, but does not really exploit the potential of the Archives.

15 David Bearman, "Arrangement and Description," *Archival Methods: Archives & Museum Informatics Technical Report* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1989), p. 33.

16 Cloud, "Cost of Converting to MARC AMC," pp. 577-78. Cloud writes that one of the factors "that slowed record creation time was authority work, that is, the process of verifying name and subject headings in local authority files and in *LCNA* [*Library of Congress Name Authorities*].... Since authority files are generally designed to serve the bibliographic community and, therefore, contain primarily authors' names, many archival repositories will discover relatively few headings established for their collections. Extra searching will extend the time required for authority work.... Two repositories reported that authority work took roughly a third of the total record creation time."

17 Hensen, *APPM*, p. 6.

18 The latest discussions of this matter in meetings which the Choice of Access Points Working Group had with the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, in April 1992, concluded that such name changes would become part of the name authority records, but not necessarily become added entries in the archival descriptive records.

19 Michel Duchein, "*Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64-82.

20 Cloud, "Cost of Converting to MARC AMC," p. 576: "Crucial factors affecting the amount of time it took to create records seem to have been identified similarly by all repositories, whether or not they found the project unexpectedly time-consuming. The factor that seemed to have the most effect on creation time was the integrity of the existing finding aid."

21 Ibid., pp. 576-77. In comparisons of the conversion projects described by Cloud, participants reported that the finding aids provided insufficient information 20-40 per cent of the time. In these instances, the archival unit itself had to be consulted.