Records Management and Archival Preservation in the Congregation

*By Scott Holl, Archivist, Eden Theological Seminary*

**Part 4: Institutional archives**

Part 3 of this series described archival practices for preserving historical documents. This fourth and final installment will discuss institutional archives with special reference to those related to the United Church of Christ.

Congregations that are unable to establish and maintain their own archives, those that are concerned about the long-term preservation of its records, and those that are disbanding might consider transferring their historical records to an institutional archives. Doing so has a number of benefits:

* The congregation is relieved of the responsibility of providing space and personnel time to store and preserve historical records.
* Security and preservation of records are maintained to professional standards.
* The archives will be responsible for receiving and responding to research requests, thus relieving the congregation of these functions.
* Archives often have other materials that can support research.

**Transferring materials to an institutional archives**

Once a congregation decides to transfer its records to an institutional archives, it will be helpful to create an inventory of the materials it plans to donate. The initial conversation with the archivist will commonly cover the types of materials the archives will accept, as well as its policies and procedures. The archivist then makes arrangements to do an initial examination of the materials on site, or the congregation may be asked to deliver the materials directly to the archives. After an initial assessment, the archivist will confirm which items will be accepted by the archives based on its collection policy.

**The deed of gift**

The terms under which the transfer of the collection to the archives will occur is detailed in the deed of gift. A typical deed of gift includes:

* A general description of the materials being transferred to the archives.
* Restrictions on use—the donor may request that sensitive information be closed for a period of time except under certain circumstances. For example, a congregation might restrict access to baptismal records that are less than 75 years old to immediate family members or church personnel.
* A description of what will be done with material that is removed from the collection (separations)—items may be removed because of irrelevance or because they do not fit within the archives’ scope of collecting. The congregation will be given the option to have separated items returned to it.
* Terms and conditions—a description of the terms under which the gift is made. Transfer of materials to the archives is usually made as a gift outright unless other arrangements are made. Intellectual rights, including copyright, will also be transferred to the institution.

Once the material is transferred the archives and the deed of gift is signed, the archives staff can proceed to organize and catalog the records. The archives may create finding aids to help researchers navigate the collection.

**Archives related to the United Church of Christ**

Congregations might consider transferring their records to an institutional archives related to its specific denomination. Archives related to the UCC are familiar with the history and structure of the denomination and its predecessors, and the congregation’s records will join similar collections that can provide a broader context for research.

The UCC has no central archives for collecting the records of congregations, but those related to predecessor denominations are available:

* Congregational Churches—the Congregational Library, Boston, Mass.  
  [http://www.congregationallibrary.org](http://www.congregationallibrary.org/)
* Evangelical Synod of North America—Eden Theological Seminary Archives, Webster Grove, Mo.  
  <https://www.eden.edu/the-archives-at-eden-theological-seminary/>
* Christian Church—Elon University Archives, Elon, N.C.  
  <http://elon.libguides.com/c.php?g=396702>
* Reformed Church and Evangelical & Reformed Church—the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Lancaster, Pa.  
  <http://erhs.info>

The UCC Archives located at the denominational office Cleveland does not collect records of congregations, but it does collect histories: <https://www.ucc.org/about-us_archives>

**Eden Theological Seminary Archives**

Founded in 1925, Eden Seminary Archives has long provided an option for preserving the records of congregations. The Archives has two major collections:

* Evangelical Synod of North America—includes official records of the denomination, 1840–1934, and those of congregations, institutions, and professionals originating in the Evangelical Synod.
* Eden Theological Seminary—includes records related to the governance and academic life of the seminary, as well as information pertaining to students and faculty.

The archives will accept the records of any UCC congregation regardless of its denominational origin or geographical location. It currently holds those of approximately 150 active and disbanded churches.

The archives also maintains files containing written histories and other information pertaining to congregations. Biographical files can provide information about pastors that served congregations originating in the Evangelical Synod. The archives responds to genealogical and other research requests and can assist congregations who are researching their histories. Congregations interested in donating materials to Eden Archives should contact the archivist at 314-252-3141 or by email at [sholl@eden.edu](mailto:sholl@eden.edu).

**Summary**

* A clear and straight-forward records management and retention policy can help congregations maintain information in an orderly fashion and ensure that historical documents are preserved.
* Regular evaluation of the congregation’s records should provide for the transfer of important items to the historical archives.
* Addressing preservation needs will ensure the longevity and accessibility of historical materials.
* Denominational archives are an option for the long-term preservation of archival collections.

Congregations that take the steps to preserve their records will ensure their history is preserved for future generations.