REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF HISTORICAL SERVICES

The Office of Historical Services maintains the Reformed Church in America (RCA) Archives, which gathers, preserves, and makes available the stories of past generations. Its primary goal is the stewardship of the RCA’s shared heritage and offering stability and relevance to the long-term mission of the church.

The RCA has left a significant historical footprint in its almost 400 years of life and ministry. That footprint is found in items like missionary correspondence representing many stories of transformation. The archives preserves records from congregations, classes, regional synods, the General Synod, our mission fields, and staff offices.

The digital archivist is able to assist denominational staff and RCA commissions that need background on a variety of programs and projects carried out in the RCA as well as researchers who are interested in RCA history.

The past year has been a tumultuous year for the Archives for a number of reasons: rapid shifts in General Synod Council (GSC) staffing and staff structure have resulted in three different staff supervisors for the Office of Historical Services in a seven-month span; the COVID-19 pandemic forced new plans to be put into place for the operation of the office in the event of a lockdown; and the early retirement of the longtime archivist meant he transitioned into retirement a year sooner than originally planned.

In January 2020, the archives staff recognized the likelihood of a prolonged shutdown related to the COVID-19 outbreak. They quickly put together a plan to address the operation of the office in the event of a lockdown that could be put into action within 24 hours. In March, the staff enacted this COVID plan and began its offsite operations.

In February 2020, a massive data transfer of the archives electronic files took place. Up until that point, the archives had stored its electronic files and backups of those files on external hard drives in its offices in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The GSC’s director of IT required that all of the files be backed up to the GSC server and stored there moving forward in order to comply with GSC data security policies. Since the requirement was rushed, there was not enough time to do the task properly, and the process of combining multiple backup drives and transferring the data to the server resulted in numerous duplicate files. Repairing these duplications will be time-consuming.

In April 2020, longtime archivist Russell Gasero accepted an early retirement offer from the GSC, one of a number of staff members who was offered this option as part of significant budget cuts made by the GSC in preparation for an anticipated decline in revenue due to a number of congregations indicating that they plan to leave the RCA. Prior to that offer, the Office of Historical Services had developed an 18-month plan of transition that would culminate with Russell’s retirement in June 2021, but the acceptance of the early retirement offer meant that he had to extricate himself from the office in two months, a year earlier than he had originally planned, and transition it to the digital archivist. In this intervening time while GSC staffing is in flux, the digital archivist has been asked to cover a number of responsibilities that were part of the archivist’s role.

For the last several years, the Archives has been working with the Commission on History (CoH) to address what both Archives staff and the commission feel is a lack of access to and
preservation of staff records. There is a disagreement between GSC and executive GSC staff, and Archives staff and the Commission on History regarding which staff records should be considered archival material and sent to the archives.

The Society of American Archivists defines a record as:
1. data or information stored on a medium and used as an extension of human memory or to support accountability
2. information or data created or received by an organization in the course of its activities; organizational record
3. Audiovisual Records—phonodisc
4. Computing—a collection of related data elements treated as a unit, such as the fields in a row in a database table; a data record
5. an entry describing a work in a catalog; a catalog record

The Archives Policy Manual defines a record as “all documentary materials (e.g., correspondence, publications, photographs, videotapes, etc.) 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. Such records are the property of the RCA and all rights, interests, and use of those records belong to the RCA.” Portions of the Archives Policy Manual, including the preceding definition, were approved by the General Synod Executive Committee (a predecessor of the GSC) in 1980 and reported to the 1980 General Synod, and updated and approved by the Commission on History in 2004.

The reduction in total staff hours in the Office of Historical Services has resulted in a much leaner appearance for the necrology report. In past years, the composition of the necrology report required many hours of research, which was not possible this year.