

REPORT OF THE RCA ARCHIVES

Looking Back to Look Forward: The Role of Archives and Their Special Purpose for the RCA

The purpose of archives is usually stated as legal, financial, historical, and administrative. Archives also serve a spiritual purpose in the life of a religious community, especially that of the Reformed Church in America. Records of activities and initiatives (from those of churches, classes, or regional synods to the General Synod; from urban outreach to global mission work) tell a compelling story: how the Reformed faith is lived out in the world.

The history of the Reformed Church in America is the embodiment of a living faith, one whose early footprint predates the founding of the United States. This long history also has depth: the Reformed Church is introspective by nature. A desire to be true to the faith informs periodic denominational self-examination. Examples of such reforms include the anti-apartheid promise of the Belhar Confession, current denomination-wide antiracism initiatives, and other changes that address modern challenges while maintaining the faith. A recent Reformed Church Center lecture by Dr. Andrea Mosterman exemplifies using archival research to learn about the past in order to learn *from* it. The role of archival research in the living faith of the Reformed Church shows a continual desire for reflection, self-examination, and *reform*.

The history represented by these records continues to inform decision-making by the Reformed Church in America. Throughout four centuries, the Archives has held and maintained records of churches, classes, consistories, and regional synods. It also houses records of General Synod Council staff, missionaries, and more. Last year at General Synod, the Commission on History expressed concern about some staff records that had not been collected. In follow-up conversation, they named records of the Strategic Leadership Team, formerly known as the Executive Leadership Team, since 2018. Those records have been collected and submitted to the Archives, with plans in place to continue collecting them every year. The Commission on History also raised concerns about records related to Transformed & Transforming; the Archives is working with the commission to verify, and, if needed, remedy the oversight.

Last year, the Archives was staffed by a digital archivist and was closed during a staff transition from mid-September through January. After assessing the needs of the Archives and of the Reformed Church in America, a full-time archivist, rather than a more specialized digital archivist, was determined to be the best fit. A job description was revised with input from the Commission on History. The commission was kept up to date during the hiring process, which concluded with the new archivist, Dr. Elizabeth Pallitto, beginning her role at the end of January 2023, and the RCA Archives reopening a week later. This report presents observations based upon the new archivist's limited time in this role, outlines suggestions for maintenance and improvement, and offers a vision for the future of the Archives.

This assessment and vision for the RCA Archives can be summed up with the acronym **P-COATS**: Preservation, Conservation, Organization, Accessibility, Technology, Spirituality. The last category is summarized in the conclusion.

Preservation. In keeping with archival principles, care for the RCA's collections begins with preservation and conservation. Archival preservation ensures that records such as vulnerable items in the Collegiate Collection, which was transferred to the RCA Archives in the fall, are protected in suitable archival housing. For example, the rare books in the Collegiate Collection will now be housed in acid-free archival boxes.

Conservation encompasses repair, when possible, of damaged materials. The archivist will continue in these initiatives through active involvement in professional organizations such as the Northeast Document Conservation Center; the Center for Book Arts, the religious archives section of the Society of American Archivists; and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. The latter organization sponsors grant programs for assessment of archival collections such as the RCA Archives; the archivist will apply for this grant both for practical reasons and for its institutional prestige. Candidates for conservation include books in the Collegiate Church collection that range from 100 to 400 years old; these rare artifacts are systematically being housed in archival boxes for protection and longevity.

Organization: Coordination of electronic lists with physically stored archival materials. Granting accessibility to researchers includes the need for re-organization, specifically coordinating electronic finding aids, inventories, and file lists with the physical materials stored in the archives. This is a long-term project that will proceed in increments. An intern from New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) or Rutgers School of Communication and Information (library school) would assist in this work, allowing the archivist to create workflows for accession and deaccession of materials. Accessibility could be improved with new software. For example, the archivist has a continual need to process bequests (such as the recent bequest of the late Rev. James Eelman's papers), the Collegiate records, and records of departing churches.

Accessibility of the archives is necessary in more than one sense of the term. Making the collections accessible to researchers and physical accessibility are overlapping concerns. The physical space in the basement, which encompasses two former offices, will be maximized in three ways: digitization, distribution, and deaccessioning.

- **Digitization.** Six boxes of paper files sent out for digitization by the previous archivist now take up 6.75(H)x2(W)x5.5(D) inches; similarly, 47 boxes of microfilm are now accessible on a dedicated external hard drive.
- **Distribution.** Multiple copies of books now taking up valuable space could be distributed to students or theological libraries.
- **Deaccessioning.** Obsolete computers, pamphlet copies, redundant copies of modern books, and other non-archival items in archival boxes are proposed for deaccession, freeing up space.

“State of the Archives” reports from the early 1990s predict that space would run out in six years; thirty years later, this prophecy has come true. The RCA Archives share physical space at the Gardner Sage Library with the collections of NBTS. Recently, storage was maximized by the availability of an old basement office and clearing out boxes previously stored in NBTS’s space. The new space has 28 boxes, with shelving space for incoming church records; contents of the former archivist’s basement office will reside there during construction.

Currently, researchers with disabilities cannot access the basement level where archives are stored. Boxes are now carried by hand down to the archives and storage areas. The non-functioning dumbwaiter also limits the type of materials that can be brought up to the main level. Repairs are scheduled for June.

Technology. Accessibility would be enhanced by ArchiveSpace, the software standard in the field. Filemaker Pro would continue to be used, as most of the records use this software.

Spirituality. This report presents suggestions for the good stewardship of administrative, legal, financial, and historical records of the RCA. It also offers a vision for a well-preserved, organized, accessible collection of spiritual and historical interest. As demonstrated above, the new plan for the Archives is designed to fulfill practical needs as well as attest to the Reformed Church’s manifestation of faith in the world. Contemporary archival technology is an ancillary but necessary means to the end of preserving the rich, four-century-old heritage of the RCA.