

Religious Archives: Lifting Up Our Eyes

It was at a midnight strategy session that Miles Richardson first asked me to go to Lyell Island [Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.]. At first I hesitated. I believed that the Haida had to make the first move without external participants. I was also frightened. . . . The following morning I flew to Sandspit. As we were driving to the Skidegate Longhouse it came over the news that the Haida had blocked the logging road on Lyell Island. This was the first time I had to consider whether to participate in an act of civil disobedience. . . . In Skidegate we heard that Ethel Jones — the former ACW [Anglican Church Women] president at St. John's — and Ada Yovonovich and Watson Price had been arrested for blocking the road. They were the first of seventy-two people.

As Ada was walking across the tarmac she stopped and handed her purse to one of the RCMP officers. Then she made a statement to them: "I want to share with you some words that Jesus once said: 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" The three elders were arrested by the Haida special constable from Masset, Allan Wilson. Ethel told Allan, who was in tears, that he had to perform his duties and was not being blamed by the Haida. "Do what you have to do and we all love you."¹

A copy of this letter, sent in 1985 by the National Affairs Consultant of the Anglican Church to a group of colleagues and friends, is housed in the Archives of the Anglican General Synod. A valuable account of church involvement in a political struggle, it is also distinguished by its rarity. Relatively few personal papers, particularly expressing such intense emotion, can be found in North American religious archives. Several years ago, American archivist Robert Shuster observed, "Somewhere in our vast holdings of paper, film, tape and other media, we must have material that helps the user understand not only the actions of institutions, but also the upheavals that occur within human hearts and minds, that lead people to create institutions and to initiate their activities."²

In 1990, papers documenting the religious spirit motivating individual Canadians — diaries of women seeking ordination, correspondence of committed laity, notes made by priests during retreat — remain scarce. Although many denominational archives do acquire both corporate and private material, close scrutiny reveals that their holdings are largely official in nature. Records survive most easily when their retention can be readily justified, and it is therefore baptismal and marriage registers, minutes of

committees, and annual reports which enter archives on a regular basis, whereas personal material is often neglected. The consequences for researchers are clear. In this issue of *Archivaria*, for instance, historian Marlene Epp notes that the institutional orientation of existing church records, compounded by the fact that most religious organizations have been administered by men, makes the role of women in churches difficult to study.

To understand the spirituality guiding individual and collective religious action, institutional records are, of course, as essential as personal papers. In "Nurturing the Spirit: Reflections on the Role of a Church Archivist," archivist Bob Stewart points out that the evolving theology of the United Church of Canada can be seen in the minutes of its councils, and stresses the importance of denominational archives as repositories of records which have ongoing religious value. As Shirley Spragge's article demonstrates, some churches, such as the Anglican Church of Canada, now have well-established archives. The records of others, unfortunately, are disappearing. D'Arcy Hande and Erich Schultz chronicle the efforts being made to form a recordkeeping system for the Evangelical Lutheran Church before its documents are lost, and Walter Meyer Zu Erpen and Joy Lowe track the vanishing heritage of the Spiritualist movement.

Of equal concern are the records of various groups which are not fully accepted in their own denominations and wary of church archives, records of cross-denominational religious movements, and of inter-denominational coalitions, none of which are being consistently preserved. Three contributions, Harold Averill's article "The Church, Gays, and Archives," Jim Lewis's review of "A Heritage at Risk: Proceedings of the Evangelical Archives Conference, 13-15 July 1988," and Terry Thompson's article "Ecumenical Records and Documentation Strategy: Applying 'Total Archives,'" address these issues. The range of religious and social forces within and outside churches has yet to be systematically studied by archivists.

In the first issue of *Archivaria*, published in 1975, archivist James Lambert stated that public archivists had underestimated the social role of churches.³ Twenty-nine issues later, his comment remains valid. North Americans in recent years have been influenced by such diverse movements as Protestant evangelicalism, Catholic liberation theology, "new age" spirituality, and religious environmentalism; and religion remains a surprisingly strong presence in daily life. Sociologist Reginald Bibby's research indicates that, despite their increasing tendency to stay away from worship services, Canadian adults are not abandoning churches. On census returns, almost ninety per cent are still indicating their affiliation with the denominations to which they belonged as children.⁴

Why are we not saving public and private records representing the entire religious spectrum? Televised reports of Ethel Jones at Lyell Island? Tapes of gay ordination debates? Files of non-denominational pro-life organizations? Sociological surveys? Personal letters? Networks of public and religious archivists could be capturing all these records, by determining which activities are being documented, by identifying repositories to house each set of records located, and by sharing resource burdens, with just a modicum of cooperation. To overcome the limitations of budgets and boundaries, we need to lift up our eyes and organize.

This issue of *Archivaria* nevertheless attests to the vitality which has developed in the religious archives community during the past two decades, containing as it does articles, reports, reviews, and notices representing Anglican, Baptist, Jewish, Lutheran,

Mennonite, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Spiritualist, United, Unitarian, and other organizations. A broad study by Shelley Sweeney of access to denominational records, reveals in addition the variety of researchers now using church records.

Members of the ACA Religious Archivists Special Interest Section, particularly Paul Banfield and Terry Thompson, deserve recognition for sponsoring an issue long overdue. Ruth Dyck Wilson served for a period as Co-Editor, contacting many potential contributors, but was forced to resign because of illness in her family. Jim Lewis was the Assistant Editor, commenting thoughtfully on all of the manuscripts. Editors Peter Robertson and Candace Loewen of *Archivaria* provided guidance, and the staff of the University of Toronto Archives was very supportive. Above all, it is the generosity and patience of all the authors which has made the creation of this issue possible.

Debra Barr
Guest Editor

Notes

- 1 Reproduced with the permission of Rev. Peter Hamel, National Affairs Consultant, Anglican Church of Canada.
- 2 Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *The American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982), p. 137.
- 3 James Lambert, "Public Archives and Religious Records: Marriage Proposals," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-1976), p. 51.
- 4 Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto 1987), pp. 47-48.