"One Parchment Book at the Charge of the Parish . . .": A Sample of Anglican Record Keeping

by SHIRLEY SPRAGGE

It would be tempting to suggest that the keeping of the basic records of the work of the Ecclesia Anglicana — the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials performed by the clergy — was devised by the church in its spiritual wisdom. The origin of record keeping on a national scale, however, is to be found in an injunction of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII’s Chancellor, in 15381. Although the keeping of registers was already a custom of some parish priests, what prompted Cromwell’s action was the incredible tangle of marriage laws and prohibitions of marriage within degrees, not only of blood relationships, but also of spiritual relationships based on baptismal sponsors. Marriage meant transfer of property, property meant taxes; nullification of a marriage within a prohibited degree meant divorce: the ramifications were endless, and the able administrator Cromwell wanted to straighten out the situation.

In 1603, the canons (laws) of the now firmly established national Church of England stated:

Canon 70 In every church and chapel within this realm shall be provided one parchment book at the charge of the parish, wherein shall be written the day and year of every christening, wedding, and burial . . . and for the safe keeping of the said book, the churchwardens, at the charge of the parish, shall provide a secure coffer.

Parochial record keeping was therefore a well-established tradition which accompanied the Anglican Church to the New World. The fact that record keeping was based on a geographical unit, the parish, and then consolidated within a diocese, a region administered by a bishop, was both a strength and a weakness. In England, it is possible for the priest to follow the ancient custom of annually “beating the bounds” of the parish, that is, walking around its borders. In Canada, however, distance was overwhelming. When the Rev. John Stuart, father of the church in Upper Canada and missionary to the Mohawks, came to Kingston in 1785, he had a parish or mission which was four hundred miles long, stretching from the present Quebec border to Niagara. He covered it by horse, canoe, and on foot. Stuart’s bishop, Charles Inglis, was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and that was an improvement in communication because Stuart had previously been responsible to the Bishop of London. Nor did the equally great distances of Western Canada and the Arctic lend themselves to neat parish divisions, but the

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familiar structure persisted, and lent both focus and continuity to administration and record keeping.

Other church records share importance with parish registers. The great English missionary societies founded to support the Anglican church abroad, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) founded in 1701 and its companion, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and later the Colonial and Continental Church Society, the New England Society, and the Church Missionary Society, not only financed but also staffed missions, and in turn expected reports on their progress. At the parish level, the offertory collected during the church service, destined in early times to support the church's social service system, was the responsibility of first the minister and then the churchwardens (leading lay members of the parish) to manage, and their accounts were to be open to the congregation. Records reveal that concern for the safekeeping of records of property or bequests held by churches dated from early times. Minutes of the annual meeting of the parishioners (the vestry) help to illuminate the issues and interests of the time; service registers record every service held, together with the name of the minister who officiated at a service. As administrative units developed within the church in Canada from the synods (councils) of single dioceses to conglomerations of dioceses in ecclesiastical provinces, and finally to the national structure of General Synod in 1893, all of these units developed their records: minutes of committees and meetings; financial records; correspondence; petitions; reports; and canons. The fact that there were Anglican missions to the native peoples of Canada resulted in the creation of a unique body of literature printed in syllabics. Other records have included national and local church newspapers, sermon literature, pamphlets (and polemics), architectural records, visual records ranging from fine art to photographs, private papers and diaries, and machine-readable records.

This archival material is housed in archives across Canada, from the national headquarters of General Synod in Toronto to individual diocesan archives, sometimes deposited in provincial archives or universities, sometimes in cathedral or diocesan offices. It is fair to say that the Anglican Church of Canada, under the leadership of General Synod Archives, has created a functioning network of archives. A national survey of diocesan archives in 1988, and the Guide to Holdings projects of two ecclesiastical provinces, indicate the comprehensive approach being taken to Anglican records. The focus of this brief account of how the care of records has developed over the years in the Anglican Church of Canada is unabashedly narrow and central Canadian. Each diocese is a small kingdom on its own; personalities, churchmanship, timing of founding have all influenced development, and a composite portrait would therefore bristle with exceptions. For instance, the Diocese of Nova Scotia has a two-hundred-year history of records located in parishes, not centralized. Newfoundland, because of its extended colonial period, functioned in the orbit of the Bishop of London, through a commissary.

In recording baptisms, marriages, and burials, the parish register filled what is today the civil function of registration, long before the state assumed this responsibility (which began in Ontario in 1869 and thereafter progressed across Canada, except for Quebec). In England, this function was, not unnaturally, seen as part of the role of a state church, together with probating wills, administering cemeteries, taxing for religious purposes, running church courts, and granting licenses, especially marriage licenses required to circumvent the necessary waiting period for the "calling of banns," the public
pronouncement of intent to marry. These additional functions of the church were not transported to British North America, where the Anglican church, despite its favoured position, never had the role of a state church. The differences in function of the church in England and abroad were difficult for migrating clergics and lay people to understand. When the Rt. Rev. Jacob Mountain, the first English-born bishop appointed to a Canadian diocese, arrived in 1793, he was so horrified to discover a Dissenter (i.e., non-Anglican Protestant) keeping a register that he brought legal charges. Neither Bishop Charles Inglis of Nova Scotia nor the Rev. John Stuart, with their understanding of North American religious pluralism, experienced these qualms; indeed, the earliest registers in the Diocese of Ottawa Archives are the 1790 registers kept by the Lutheran pastor John Gunter Weagant of Williamsburg.

Stuart’s vellum-bound registers are extant from 1788, as are the registers of his fellow missionary, the Rev. John Langhorn of the Bay of Quinte area. Considering that until 1798 the British government recognized the legality of only the marriages performed by Anglican clergy, the registers of John Stuart and John Langhorn come closest to approximating civil records of the new Province of Upper Canada. The SPG, which paid part of the salaries of Stuart and Langhorn, required that these two clergymen send to London semi-annual reports of their work as well as Notitia Parochialis, that is, aggregate numbers of Inhabitants, . . . of the Baptized, . . . of Adult Persons baptized this Half-year, . . . of those who profess themselves of the Church of England, . . . . of Dissenters of all Sorts, particularly Papists, . . . of Heathens and Infidels. . . .

One reads these mission-oriented reports with caution, but the wealth of reports and letters housed in the SPG archives in Oxford are a valuable adjunct to Anglican records in Canada.

It was also a requirement of the SPG that missionaries keep a register. What was entered in the register was less clear. Preprinted registers would not come into use before the 1850s, and much seemed to depend on what the individual priest felt was needed. An English statute in 1812, An Act for Better Regulating and Preserving other Registers of Births, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials in England (52 Geo III c.146), did outline requirements:

Schedule A for baptisms: date, child’s name, parent’s names, abode, quality, trade or profession, officiating clergyman.

Schedule B for marriages: place, date and officiating clergyman and for bride and groom: name, parish, consent of parents (if necessary), signatures; signatures of two witnesses.

Schedule C for burials: name, abode, when buried, age and officiating clergyman.

This statute would have provided a trusted guideline, since English laws were assumed to be valid in Canada at that time, but since there was no enforcement or inspection it could only have been a guideline. More interesting and variable is the additional evidence which some clergy recorded in the register; other entries, especially for marriages, have the signatures of participants and witnesses (in early days often a simple X). By 1793,
there was provision for civil marriages in areas beyond the reach of clergy who were so few in number, and by 1831 other denominations (albeit with certain restrictions) had gradually gained the right to perform marriages, thus ending Anglican dominance.

In August 1789, two years after he became Bishop of Nova Scotia with authority over all of British North America, Charles Inglis met in Quebec City with his clergy from what is now Quebec and Ontario. He issued a set of injunctions on their behaviour and duties, including the recognition of the Canons of 1603, which required, as we have seen, the keeping of parish registers. One of the injunctions dealt with other records:

That as money given at the Offertory should always be applied to charitable purposes, particularly to the relief of poor communicants, and as it may be satisfactory to the parishioners to know how that money is disposed of, it is recommended to each minister to keep an account of the sums collected at the Communion, from time to time, and of the persons to whom it is distributed, and to exhibit the same annually at Easter to the church wardens and vestry.

Communion was to be offered a minimum of three times per year, and at Easter the parish members (vestry) met so that the people could choose one warden and the priest could appoint the other warden to help run the affairs of the parish for the next year. It was at this annual meeting that the financial records would be made accessible to the parish.

As the Province of Upper Canada moved beyond the frontier era and all churches accumulated property and resources, there came the formulation of provincial legislation to regulate the process. The Church Temporalities Act of 1841 (An act to make provision for the Temporalities of the United Church of England and Ireland, 3 Vict. c.74) specified the way in which the Anglican Church was to receive and manage property. Section IX, which concerned the opening of churchwardens accounts to inspection, basically reiterated Inglis' injunction; the duty was, however, no longer the duty of the priest but of the wardens, who were obligated to "carefully preserve" an account book. Any member of the vestry could ask to examine the accounts, but only on the payment of a shilling, a sum which must have been a reasonable deterrent.

In 1851, five Anglican bishops of British North America held a conference at Quebec. Section XI of their joint declaration reads: "Parish Registers Should Be Kept. We would earnestly recommend to the clergy of our Dioceses (even though it should not be required by the civil law) to keep accurate Registers of Marriages, Baptisms, and Burials, in their several Parishes and Missions." This affirmation of the keeping of registers as common practice came after the civil government of the United Province of the Canadas had set up a Board of Registration and Statistics as specified by the Census Act of 1847 (10-11 Vict. c.14). The act also introduced the requirement of civil registration of baptism, marriage, and burials by all clergy. Section 16 reads:

It shall be the duty of every Clergyman, Teacher, Minister, or other person authorized by law to baptize, marry, or perform the funeral service in Upper Canada, to keep a Registry shewing the persons whom he shall have baptized or married, or who shall have died within his cure and belonging to his congregation; the said Registry to be forwarded by him to the Clerk of the Peace of the District or Clerk of the City or Town Council or Board of
Police of the City or Town, where he shall reside or officiate at the time, on or within five days after the first year of January, April, July and October in each year.

Since the act provided neither for publication of its requirements nor for any means of enforcement, however, it was ineffective and was superseded in 1869 in Ontario by an act creating the Office of Registrar General (32 Vict. c.30).

In the interim the Province of Upper Canada had tried to enforce registration by means of an amendment to the Marriage Act in 1857 (20 Vict. c.66). The act introduced registration of marriages by county. Clergy of every denomination were to submit an annual list of marriages performed and pay a fee of five shillings for each marriage. The clergy could in turn demand a ten shilling fee for the marriage and registration (previously the normal clergy fee had been ten shillings, no share to the government). This act had teeth: there was a stiff penalty (one pound per day) for late returns; the Clerk of the Peace was to send a copy of the Marriage Act to every cleric in his county, and further provide the clergy with the blue books for registration and blank forms to be returned to the government.

Not surprisingly, the Anglican clergy were furious at the intervention of the government. Not only did they consider the registration of marriages already required and sanctioned by their church, but they were being told to give half their accustomed fee to the government and do the government's registration work for them. The Report of the Committee on Alterations in the Marriage Act presented to the annual synod of the Diocese of Ontario in 1865 makes their case very clearly. Fortunately, the system of civil registration introduced by the new Province of Ontario in 1869 was more relaxed. Clergy were responsible for registering marriages, parents for births, and physicians for deaths. Civil registration had to struggle to establish itself; church registers continued.

Further concerns about record keeping emerged: care of property records and physical security of the records. The result was often central deposit of the records. In the 1850s and 1860s, the Diocese of Toronto and the emerging Dioceses of Huron (Western Ontario) and Ontario (Eastern Ontario) found themselves making provisions for the property records accumulated by the church: deeds, wills, mortgages, and leases. Despite a series of committees on the topic, Toronto was unable to decide on how to manage these records except for the proviso that documents and records were to be kept in a strong box, yet "at all times . . . open to the inspection and for the information of the parish, as well as any duly authorized officer of the church." It was easier for new brooms, in the form of new dioceses, to take resolute action in looking after their records. One of the first canons of the Diocese of Ontario created in 1862, For the Registry and Safe Custody of All Deeds Relative to Church Property, provided that the Bishop was to appoint a registrar and to establish a registry office where deposited records would be kept "in a safe and secure place."

Although responsibility for record keeping and accessibility had been addressed, custody was still a problem. Parish registers would go astray. The Diocese of Huron in 1874 provided in its canons that no priest would receive his certificate to leave the parish until the churchwardens could assure the bishop that the parish register had been handed over to them. The Bishop of Ontario highlighted the need for centralization of record keeping with a forceful statement in 1884:
... the Synod would be surprised and shocked were they to know of the shameful disregard hitherto shown to the preservation of our Diocesan Registers and other archives. In many cases these registers have been wholly lost; in other cases they have been shamefully mutilated. In the changes that constantly take place among the Rectors and Incumbents of the Diocese and during the interregna — often long vacancies — these valuable documents are often lost and mislaid. Having once myself had occasion to obtain a Certificate of Baptism, most important to me, I could get no information whatever of the Register of Baptism; but, after five months' search, the book was accidently discovered in the Churchwarden's wine-cellar.

The bishop acted to prevent a recurrence: "From henceforth I shall require from every Rector, Incumbent and Missionary of the Diocese a certificate from the Registrar that the Parish Registers (not in use) have been deposited with him before I accept any resignation of a Parish or Mission." In 1883, the bishop appointed a registrar, who immediately began collecting, organizing, and housing in a vault his "archives," just eleven years after the establishment of the Public Archives of Canada in 1872. Bishop Lewis' rule was embodied in a canon of the Diocese of Ontario in 1886:

The Registrar is and shall be the proper custodian of all grants, conveyances, wills . . . relating to land or property . . . for the benefit or use of the Church of England in this Diocese. He is also . . . the proper custodian of all completed or filled up parish Registers. He is and, so far as may be, the historiographer of the Diocese, and the proper custodian of the archives of the Diocese and of the several parishes therein.

As church offices increasingly came to resemble business offices, they generated records which resembled the modern paper flow. Beginning in central Canada in the 1860s, the collection of parochial statistics and publishing of statistical abstracts became routine, reflecting changes in church structure as well as a growing reliance on statistics.

Communication within the church — national and international — has produced an interesting archival record. As dioceses coalesced into the larger units called ecclesiatical provinces and as a national organization was built, there were conferences, committees, declarations, and correspondence as the structures changed. The units had to keep in communication as their relationship changed, and no relationship was more difficult than the one with the church in England. How does one compare a church, founded on ancient endowments and governed, not only through its hierarchy but also through Parliament, to a North American church in which freewill giving (voluntarism) replaced endowments and participation by lay members at the synods replaced Parliament? Clergy arriving from England encountered culture shock; there was religious pluralism, not a state church.

Nineteenth-century Canadian society was hardly egalitarian, but it was far more so than Britain's, and there was religious pluralism, not a state church. Clergy arriving from England experienced culture shock. Differences of distance, circumstances, and education made understanding between England and her senior colony sometimes very difficult. Beginning in 1867, the Lambeth Conferences at London, England brought together every ten years all the growing units of an international church, but sometimes communication could break down over even a "half sheet of [writing] paper." In 1893,
the Canadian church accorded the designation “Archbishop” to the bishops presiding over the Ecclesiastical Provinces. In all innocence, the Secretary of the Ontario Diocese sent a notice of this change of title of his bishop to the Archbishop of Canterbury, senior bishop of the Church in England and spiritual (but not governing) head of the Anglican communion. Technically, the Canadian House of Bishops should previously have informed Canterbury of the election. Independent Canadian action and disregard of protocol were too much for the sensibilities of Archbishop Benson; he proclaimed himself greatly offended by a “scrap of paper.”

Tempers flared. It is now hard to reconstruct the Victorian sense of outrage, but the incident, amply documented in several archives, illustrates the difficulties of dispersed authority, the hallmark of the Anglican communion.

Management of property and funds did not come easily to clerical handling. Both dioceses of Toronto and Ontario lost heavily through mismanagement and cumbersome accounting systems. Parochial finances supported diocesan finances, and these in turn supported national (General Synod) finances; national campaigns such as the Anglican Forward Movement in 1905 raised funds to equalize support for areas and causes. As the financial structure became more specialized and sophisticated, so did the legal structure. When synods were incorporated, they drew up their own constitutions and by-laws. While this paper is not an administrative history, it might be pointed out that the diocesan office of Secretary was a key one in the running of the diocese. The office was sometimes an umbrella for varied functions: treasurer, office manager, and registrar with oversight for the keeping of documents.

Anglicans have never lacked a sense of history or tradition with their attachment to the Book of Common Prayer and, if they were slow in focusing on the Canadian Anglican past, they paralleled Canadian historians, who scarcely saw Canadian history as a field until the 1920s. Perhaps because the Anglican Church was a colonial church linked to England and other units of the British Empire, Canadian Anglicans did not dwell on their sense of identity. Both Methodists and Presbyterians in the nineteenth century had their historians to consolidate memories of early days. Nineteenth-century Anglicans somehow missed chronicling the heroism and excitement of their own history: coastal missions; bishops and their wives paddling hundreds of miles through the Canadian north; the venture of a little band of Anglican nuns who went to Moose Jaw to nurse the soldiers of the Northwest Rebellion of 1885; the early championing of housing as a social issue in Halifax. This is not to say that the Anglican Church has not had good historians — it has had and interest is broadening as social historians begin to look at the role of religion in community life.

The establishment of the Archives of the General Synod of the Anglican Church under Dr. T.R. Millman took place in 1955, and under successive archivists, the profile of archives in the church has risen. Currently General Synod Archives is pioneering in work with the records of ecumenical coalitions and social action groups whose role in society needs documentation. The dioceses have become increasingly aware of their archives; in fact, some are surprised to find they have such a thing. A survey of diocesan archives has revealed that twenty-five of thirty dioceses have an archives, although eleven deposit their records in other institutions. Other facts are not encouraging; only one-third of the staff are salaried and less than half (twelve) of the archives have their own budget. While archives in Toronto and British Columbia are well into implementing records management programmes, other dioceses are making but slow
progress. Finding aids vary from non-existent to computerized. Coordinated effort, however, is producing results in the area of finding aids. Inventories of the records in the dioceses of British Columbia and Ontario were published in the 1980s. For the Ecclesiastical Province of Rupert's Land (a romantic name for all the dioceses from Winnipeg to the Rockies — ten in all) a Guide to the Holdings of the Ecclesiastical Province and Diocese of Rupert's Land was published in 1986. While the listings in the guide are by individual diocese, the format and entries are standardized, using geographical location as access point. A brief historical description of each diocese and a name and place index further assist the user to the 1078 collections described. A second volume in the series, Guide to the Holdings of the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario (comprised of seven dioceses) is now underway, using a similar format but creating a computer data base that can be updated. Central Canada is the most populous area, so that by the time the second volume is completed, the records of a majority of Canada's Anglicans will be listed.

The General Synod Archives Committee, a relatively recent creation, made its first report to General Synod in 1989. Its role is not only to advise the Archives Division of General Synod but also to relate to the diocesan network of archives. With a composition of four elected and two appointed members serving three-year terms (plus General Synod Archivist and the General Secretary), the committee will have representation from each of the four Ecclesiastical Provinces. At the request of diocesan archivists, the committee has prepared Access and Restriction Policy Guidelines which outline general rules for researchers and specify terms of access to official records. The committee is stressing the importance of establishing and maintaining records management programmes at both national and diocesan levels, and has distributed the manual on records management devised in the Diocese of Kootenay Archives to the other dioceses to help standardize record keeping. On the larger archival scene, the committee has commented on the March 1988 report of the Canadian Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level.

From the Anglican Church of Canada's ingrained habit of recording its actions, fostered and preserved by an organized structure, centralized in set locations, a significant body of religious records has grown. Standards of care and appreciation of the value of the records have also grown. These records are not mere statistics of pews filled and money collected whose raison d'etre is to make the sociologist, social historian, lawyer, administrator, parish historian, and genealogist happy. From the founding of the first parish in 1710 in the Royal Colony of Nova Scotia in British North America, these records illustrate the mission and heritage of the church, documenting nearly three hundred years of Christian witness.

Notes
2 Adherence to the Book of Common Prayer and its rubrics (instructions), to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, and to the three-fold ministry of deacons, priests, and bishops; and the recognition of the British monarch as the Supreme Governor of the church: these were the abiding framework of the church in England. To avoid confusion this writer uses consistently the modern title, Anglican Church of Canada, rather than earlier variations.
3 Mountain also tried in vain to wrest from the governor the privilege (and fee) to grant licenses.
4 He eventually entered the Anglican church with most of his flock.
5 The registers of Stuart and Langhorn, and Stewart-Inglis correspondence, are in the Diocese of Ontario Archives, Kingston.

6 Roman Catholic clergy were accorded the right to marry under the Quebec Act of 1774. In 1767 the parish of Assumption, Windsor had been established as the first Roman Catholic parish in what is now Ontario. See E.J. Lajeunesse, ed., *The Windsor Border Region* (Toronto, 1960), p. xciii. Anglicans could, and did, perform services beyond their flock.


9 More information came to be added, for example, sponsors to baptisms. Some priests kept registers of banns (i.e. public announcements of forthcoming marriages). It became common for lists of those confirmed (i.e. public affirmation of baptismal vows sanctified by the bishop's laying on of hands, a prerequisite to full membership) to be kept at the parish or diocesan level. Gaps in registers are found, usually because of illness or death of the priest; if the duty was neglected, it was a case for episcopal discipline.

10 By the Marriage Act, 33 Geo.III c.5, civil marriage by justice of the peace was acceptable if the participants were more than eighteen miles away from a clergyman. Was this distance a day's journey used as measure?


12 The five dioceses represented were Quebec, Fredericton, Newfoundland, and Montreal.


15 The Registrar would be paid a fee for providing a copy. This appears to be a duplication of civil registration, but was the English model. (See 1812 Act.)


18 Bishop Lewis appointed as Registrar the very energetic James Shannon, who in his twenty-year term (d. 1883) collected and organized quantities of diocesan records. He kept the records in the Diocesan vault and in 1885 reported that "a pigeon hole for each parish, properly labelled, has been opened, and in these Deeds and Papers belonging to each Parish have been placed, and can easily be found in a few minutes." (Journal of the Synod, 1885) Shannon soon filled the available space and was asking for a new vault for "the preservation, classification and arrangement of the Parish Registers and where they will not only be perfectly safe, but easily available for reference when required." (Journal of the Synod, 1887) He seems to have grasped the archival essentials.


24 Both projects are funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.