

Counterpoint

Ecumenical Records and Documentation Strategy: Applying "Total Archives"

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As we enter the 1990s, archivists have become accustomed to living in a resource-poor economy. During the past ten years, in contrast to the expansive days of the 1960s and 1970s, we have adjusted to budget and hiring freezes, to staff squeezes, and to the necessity of doing more with less. The volume of material arriving at our repositories and the demands of an expanding clientele of researchers have continued to increase. A significant exception to this resource squeeze has been in the area of federal, and in some cases provincial, funding. Canadian archivists have developed national and provincial Archives Councils, which act cooperatively to allocate this funding, for example in the form of grants to hire personnel to describe archival backlogs.¹ Little attention has yet been given, however, to the potential use of the councils for the development and implementation of cooperative programmes in the area of acquisition.

"Total archives" is an acquisition premise upon which Canadian archivists have built much of their practice. Acknowledged in the term is the fact that publicly funded archives in Canada, unlike those of many other nations, acquire both official records and private papers. In an influential article published in 1980, Terry Cook delineated the concept of total archives, stating that i) archives should acquire collections reflecting the total complexion of society; and that ii) an institutionalized system of archives, with national, provincial, and municipal archives cooperating with university, church, county, business, and labour repositories, should exist to ensure that both institutionally and privately created records documenting all significant human endeavours are preserved.² The concept of total archives outlined by Cook, indicating the systematic acquisition of community records in an institutionalized system,³ can be linked directly to the premises of archivists and other information professionals exploring the area that is becoming known as "documentation strategy." This writer contends that the systematic application of the total archives philosophy will become possible with the addition of documentation strategy.

The total archives tradition has permitted us to gather in specific repositories related records created both within and outside of sponsoring organizations, a process which has benefited researchers and has provided for the retention of invaluable community documents. Its application, however, has not been without problems. In the past, it took for granted a capacity for active institutional acquisition programmes; and it also

assumed that Canadian researchers fell into a narrow range and would best be served from central locations.⁴ Legislation sanctioning acquisition has been broad in nature and, unsupplemented by clear and coordinated guidelines, has not been administered consistently. Ill-defined and overlapping acquisition jurisdictions established by government, university, and other archives have led to unnecessary competition for some records (with such broad phrases as “national significance” sometimes being used to justify encroachments) and the almost complete neglect of others. There has been little coordination among repositories.⁵

One Canadian attempt at cooperative strategy, however, was recently made in the religious sphere. In the mid-1980s, this author undertook a survey of the records created by fourteen research and social action organizations known as ecumenical coalitions, and a committee of archivists working in religious institutions in the Toronto area considered the implications of the findings. The ecumenical coalitions were founded by consortia of Canadian Christian churches to address common concerns in such areas as economic development, native rights, and corporate responsibility. Most have been directly supported by the churches’ national structures, with denominational staff placed on ecumenical administrative boards or committees. These agencies have been recognized by scholars as a unique Canadian contribution to the world ecumenical movement.⁶ On the whole, the permanent records produced by the coalitions have not been finding their way into Canadian archives, although a few exceptions can be cited. A decade ago, the records of the Canadian Council of Churches and a related ecumenical educational agency, the Ecumenical Forum of Canada (formerly the Canadian School of Missions), were deposited under agreement with the Public Archives of Canada. Lack of staff resources repeatedly delayed both the production of an inventory of these fonds and the microfilming of the records of such antecedent organizations as the Religion and Labour Council.

In the mid-1970s, archivist James Lambert argued that the records of extra-institutional (including ecumenical) groups would best be preserved in public archives, “given the present organization of religious archives and their limited and precarious funding.”⁷ In response to Lambert’s article, Marion Beyea, then the Anglican General Synod Archivist, stressed that the records of religious organizations should not be routinely housed in public repositories. She believed that when a relationship could be found between denominational and extra-institutional records (for instance, the relationship of the Canadian Council of Churches to such participant bodies as the Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, and United Churches), denominational archives should not be discouraged by public archivists from acquiring them. She acknowledged that in some cases only a large and well-established church archives would be equipped to deal with interdenominational records, but also thought that much of the material produced would be likely to enter religious archives as part of the papers of denominational staff.⁸

Following the publication of Beyea’s article, and recognizing a need to outline a model mandate for the gathering of ecumenical and other extra-institutional records (in the total archives tradition), in 1983 a Toronto-based committee of religious archivists developed a general acquisition policy applicable to both official records and private papers. The resulting statement was adopted by the Religious Archivists Special Interest Section of the Association of Canadian Archivists in 1987.⁹ The work of the group faltered when it did not follow through by devising an actual strategy for acquisition, but was nevertheless useful because it made assumptions about the nature of ecumenical

records which could be tested. Although the committee members agreed that the work of the ecumenical coalitions was important, they concluded that they were peripheral to institutional programmes. Based on a perception of the level of activity of social action groups, they also decided that the records produced could potentially overwhelm the modest staff resources of most institutional archives. In addition, they determined that along with coalitional records, most of which have been created and maintained in Toronto, researchers would need to use related papers in central denominational archives, and therefore user needs would be most effectively served if a single Toronto repository for all coalitional archives could be found. It was assumed that this approach would be the most efficient one and would provide a mechanism for systematic appraisal, eliminating duplication across fonds.

This author's 1985 survey was designed to test the conclusions of the Toronto-based committee of religious archivists and to determine if there were a possibility of creating one ecumenical archives, either as an independent entity or within an existing institution. The results showed that, while the volume of archival material would not in fact be overwhelming, the difficulty of either founding or finding a single archives, and of forming a standard deposit agreement for use by a variety of organizations, was daunting. The coalitions had almost uniformly produced about five linear metres of permanent records for every ten years of operation. The series produced by each one were similar, and surprisingly there was very little duplication of material. The publications and reports of one coalition rarely appeared in the fonds of another, even when two coalitions cooperated on one programme or when one coalition provided original background research for another. The range of administrative structures and sponsoring agencies led to the conclusion, however, that there was no chance of a single-archives solution; a cooperative effort involving denominational archivists and coalitional staff seemed more likely to provide a permanent answer.

In 1987-88, a task force with representatives from the Anglican and United Church archives, along with the coalitions, met to devise a strategy for acquiring and making available coalitional material. A flood in the basement of the building housing the offices of the Canadian Council of Churches and three coalitions, which resulted in minor damage to the records of the Inter-Church Coalition on Latin America, added some urgency to the situation. The group took the results of the 1985 survey and attempted, in cooperation with other denominational archivists and the archivists of two religious orders, to devise a master plan. The goal was to ensure that the permanent records of each coalition would be placed on deposit in an archives where they would have an affinity with related denominational fonds. For example, the task force recommended that the records of Project North, a native rights coalition in which the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and United Churches had the most prominent roles, be deposited in the Anglican General Synod Archives. The group, unfortunately, had difficulty for administrative reasons devising a comprehensive acquisition strategy. For example, although the project was supported by Roman Catholic agencies in a variety of ways, the Roman Catholic church does not have a national archives equivalent to those of several other Christian denominations and therefore has no obvious repository for extra-institutional material. The work came to what is hoped will be a temporary halt when another denomination began an internal review of its institutional mandate. Although this specific task force did not succeed in ensuring the survival of the archives of ecumenical coalitions, it did provide us with experience illustrating some possible

advantages of cooperative acquisition. A network of archivists can effectively identify all of the fonds being created in a particular sphere and determine the most appropriate home for each one, and the resource burden associated with preserving them can be collectively shared.

In considering cooperative acquisition in the future, records keepers will also benefit from the studies presented by proponents of documentation strategy. In recent years, American archivists (taking a cue from the eminent German theorist Hans Booms) have been considering and applying inter-institutional documentation strategies for the preservation of community records, along with rationalized acquisition strategies within individual institutions and organizations. According to Booms, the necessary steps in a thoughtful and systematic acquisition programme include: the analysis of the societal significance of organizations and the importance of specific functions within them; the examination of the degree to which the records being created document these functions; the study by archivists of their own assumptions about acquisition and appraisal values; and a collective approach to these tasks, involving archivists in councils including administrators, technical experts, and scholars.¹⁰ The basic tenets of the documentation strategy movement reflect the steps proposed by Booms. Broad social topics are addressed with a view to preserving records representing the topics in a variety of repositories (including private archives, public archives, libraries, museums, and other appropriate institutions). The process advocated includes working cooperatively with records creators, administrators, technical experts, and researchers to determine the social activities and specific functions to be permanently documented; to identify which records relating to these activities/functions are being created and establish whether some of them are already being preserved; to develop strategies for acquiring and housing the remainder; and to establish on-going cooperative structures in order to implement the strategies.¹¹

Several important implications of documentation strategy can be seen. Perhaps one of the most significant effects is the movement's reinforcement of the classic definition of archives as the result of activities. Documentary strategists add to the practice of total archives a mechanism for the analysis of social and organizational activities in a forum permitting input from creators and users of records. The likelihood of systematic identification of records of social significance is clearly increased, and the chances of retention of them are improved. The Canadian religious archivists meeting in 1983 believed that the work of ecumenical coalitions was peripheral to institutionally based programmes. Had they been working within a larger acquisition network, they (and their sponsoring organizations) might have been more readily convinced of the need for broad social commitment. Documentation strategy teams provide an opportunity for the staff of participating archives to recognize that other institutions are willing to commit a small part of their own resources to the community at large. Finally, competition among repositories is likely to diminish as a result of record keepers working together.

Inter-institutional documentation strategy does rely on the willingness and ability of participants to take part. The institutional priorities of each archivist involved, understandably, must take precedence. Some of the literature on documentation strategy, however, indicates the responsibility of professional archivists to increase their social awareness and community participation. In return, individual archivists inevitably benefit from participation in strategy groups, because they are forced to

examine and rationalize their own approaches to acquisition and appraisal and can, in turn, improve their internal institutional practices. To ensure participation in documentation strategy groups, however, a primary requirement might be the rewriting of the mandates or mission statements of member repositories to allow for involvement. Unless sponsors agree that this is an effective way to serve researchers, it is not likely that the efforts of individual archivists will succeed.

It is encouraging that the Canadian Council of Archives has recently begun to study documentation strategy, establishing a committee which, among other tasks, is drafting a nation-wide survey to gather information on existing acquisition policies.¹² It would be useful if strategy committees were extended to provincial councils. The maintenance of records in institutions close to their point of origin and in proximity to related material would facilitate access for researchers, and locally produced, network-sponsored guides to holdings would do the same. If both the national and provincial councils do enter the acquisition field, an interesting question will inevitably be raised: what will be the role of national vs. provincial councils? In establishing acquisition strategies, should an archivist representing the national office of a religious denomination participate in a provincial council, as is presently required? Should religious archivists with provincial mandates and inter-provincial denominational links participate in the establishment of documentation strategies within their own provinces without due respect for coordination? These challenges aside, there is an opportunity for religious and other archivists to participate within provincial councils, rather than within structures such as the ecumenical network presented above (one danger being that, as a relatively small profession, we are in danger of over-structuring). In any case, as long as institutional archivists continue to collect extra-institutional records, we need to become more systematic about the process in the interests both of improving the scope and logic of collecting and of softening the effect of limited resources.¹³ Documentation strategy, implemented through the councils, would help us achieve the potential of total archives.

Notes

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- 1 Reports on the grants awarded have been regularly included in the Association of Canadian Archivists' *Bulletin* since 1986.
- 2 Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives,'" *Archivaria* 9 (1979-80), pp. 141-49. Total archives is an archives management concept. As outlined by Cook, it also addresses the need for archival involvement in the total life cycle of institutionally created records and the desirability of preserving all types of archival material. For a summary of the total archives tradition, see Hugh Taylor, "Canadian Archives: Patterns from a Federal Perspective," *Archivaria* 2 (1976), pp. 3-19. See also Wilfred I. Smith, "Archival Selection: A Canadian View," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 3 (October 1967), pp. 275-280.
- 3 In his 1976 article, Hugh Taylor also stated the need for the identification of the Canadian documentary record and the formation of close ties between repositories in a systematic acquisition effort (pp. 12-19).
- 4 See Ian E. Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty: The Cultural Role of the Public Archives of Canada (1904-1935)," *The Canadian Archivist* 2 (1973).
- 5 In an article published in 1977, Nancy Stunden noted that in the labour field each institution "operates in isolation . . . for the most part, ignorant of the activities of other repositories in which it might participate for mutual benefit." See Stunden, "Labour, Records and Archives: the Struggle for a Heritage," *Archivaria* 4 (1977), p. 88. She advocated "a form of repository specialization whereby an individual union designates a particular archives as its official repository . . . Interested archivists should meet regularly to develop and to monitor a Canadian labour acquisitions strategy" (pp. 88, 90).

- 6 For an administrative history of Canadian ecumenical coalitions, see Roger Hutchinson, "Ecumenical Social Action in Canada: Selected Documents," Emmanuel College Library, Toronto. For additional information, see Roger Hutchinson, "Ecumenical Witness in Canada: Social Action Coalitions," *International Review of Mission* 71 (1982), pp. 344-352; and Brian Ruttan, "GATT-Fly and the Churches: Changing Public Policy," in Terry Brown and Christopher Lind, eds., *Justice as Mission: An Agenda for the Church* (Burlington, Ont., 1985), pp. 171-182.
- 7 James Lambert, "Public Archives and Religious Records: Marriage Proposals," *Archivaria* 1 (1975), p. 60. Lambert believed that the importance of social action in contemporary religious theology and practice made church records invaluable, yet public archives had largely ignored religious organizations (p. 51). See also "But What is Caesar's and What is God's: Toward a Religious Archives Program for the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria* 3 (1976), pp. 40-56.
- 8 Marion Beyea, "Archives and Religious Records," *Archivaria* 4 (1977), pp. 208-213.
- 9 See the report of the committee in the Association of Canadian Archivists' *Bulletin*, September 1987.
- 10 Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage," trans. and ed., Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhower, *Archivaria* 24 (1987), pp. 69-107.
- 11 A growing body of literature on documentation strategy is available. In particular, see Joan Blewett and Larry Hackman, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and A Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987), pp. 12-47; Eva Mosely, editorial, *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987), pp. 468-472; Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986), pp. 109-124. It should be noted that librarians have also been exploring networking models in such areas as acquisition and lending. An interesting theoretical article is Donald Beagle, "Libraries and the 'Implicate Order': A Contextual Approach to Theory," *Libri* 1 (1988), pp. 26-44. See also Kurt Pond and Dwight F. Burlingame, "Library Cooperation: A Serials Model Based on Philosophical Principles," *Journal of Research Libraries* (July 1984), pp. 299-305; and R.F. Munn, "Collection Development vs. Resource Sharing: The Dilemma of Middle Level Institutions," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 8 (1983), pp. 352-353. For a recent Canadian critique, see Barbara Maass, "The New Mythology: Cooperative Collection Development," *Canadian Library Journal* (Feb. 1989), pp. 23-29.
- 12 Information obtained from Marion Beyea, Canadian Council of Archives.
- 13 For discussions of the lessons of documentation strategy applied to religious archives, see Robert Shuster, "Documenting the Spirit," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982), pp. 135-141; and *A Heritage at Risk: Proceedings of the Evangelical Archives Conference, July 1988* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1988). The latter examines the acquisition, preservation, and use of records of evangelical groups in the United States. Additional literature available includes two case studies, James M. O'Toole, "Things of the Spirit: Documenting Religion in New England," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987), pp. 500-517; and Robert Shuster, "'Everyone Did What Was Right In His Own Eyes': Fundamental/Evangelical/Pentecostal Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 366-375.