

## THE LOCAL CHURCH ARCHIVIST : TO BEGIN WITH

### A. INTRODUCTION

1. The Methodist Discipline (2009) approved by General Conference, makes it mandatory for each local church to elect/appoint an Archivist. It is an important responsibility which some may find perplexing because of a lack of training or background. However, with some help, it is possible to make a modest start.

2. In Singapore, the main problem in most churches is that many records have been destroyed, lost or just abandoned. The files and other materials are just dumped without any identification or system, and, within a short time, are lost or thrown away. This is partly because of the lack of space, and a lack of appreciation of what they represent. However, since they reflect the work of many men and women who have sacrificed time and talents, they deserve to be preserved as a guide for new generations of leaders and workers.

### B. SOME THINGS TO START WITH

1. The work of the church archivist is to help IDENTIFY and PRESERVE church records to provide future church leaders with a guide to the past. It does not depend on whether he 'likes' history, although this may help, but he must be eager to learn.

2. **IDENTIFYING** the materials. Depending on each local church, the typical materials are:

2.1 Local Conference Minutes;

2.2 Local Church (LCEC) Minutes- together with important supporting documents, if available, including accounts, important correspondence, etc.

2.3 Records of Baptisms, Marriages & Deaths;

2.4 Photographs of people and events; and

2.5 Sunday Bulletins with announcements and news items, Newsletters, magazines, anniversary publications, newspaper cuttings, etc

3. **RECORDS. SORTING** the materials, **SEPARATING** the important from the unimportant, the confidential (and sensitive) from the publicly accessible, and **ARRANGING** records in a logical order, so that they can be easily assessed. The ability to access records is, perhaps, the most important part of your archival work, which you can simplify if you **COMPUTERISE** them using a Data Base. Otherwise, information/materials may be difficult to access.

3.1 Many files contain a lot of broadly relevant materials which make them bulky and difficult to handle; they also take up a lot of space which most churches cannot spare. Therefore, you must decide: what are the most essential materials that must be retained, and what can be discarded. You must follow this principle, and keep to it, so that the work can

proceed apace. Otherwise, if you keep 'everything', you will achieve little or nothing.

- 3.2 Generally, materials in existing files are classified according to SUBJECT and follow a broadly CHRONOLOGICAL order. Regular and occasional publications would follow a natural sequence by week, month or year. Special programmes and brochures may have to be examined to ascertain their importance. It is recommended that a chronological order be adhered to, unless there are other considerations. A folder should be used for each year and subject, properly labelled, so that it can be easily referred. For example:

LCEC 1965; or LOCAL CONFERENCE 1966; or 1965 LCEC; etc.

In the case of a file that exist within the folder, the following labelling convention could be used:

1965-01-30; or 1965\_01\_30; or 19650130; etc  
to suggest the year, month and date of the meeting

### 3.3 SUGGESTED SYSTEMS TO PRESERVE RECORDS

3.3.1 For many years, microfilming (and microfiching) records was the way to preserve and access records, taking up little space. Most libraries and museums still employ this method. It has been tried and tested, and is well-known to researchers who can refer to documents quite easily via microfilm or microfiche readers. The National Archives is prepared to microfilm church records, and arrangements can be made to have them perform the service at a cost. However, local churches may find this technology too expensive.

3.3.2 Electronic scanning and Compact Disc technology offer an attractive alternative. Electronic scanning enables documents to be very quickly 'scanned' and 'saved', either in the computer HD, and/or CDSs. Since each CD has about 720 MB and DVD has 4 GB capacity, large numbers of documents can be conveniently scanned, and easily retrieved, provided they have been properly filed. Needless to say, they take little space, are not subject to deterioration, and, provided they are archived properly, are nearly indestructible. However, familiarity with IT is essential, as well as proper support for the technology. One drawback is that over time, this technology may change and there may be a need to periodically upgrade the storage/preservation method. Also, CDs and DVDs may not last forever. While estimations are that these will last up to 200 years, we cannot be sure when they are going to break, get mouldy or rot.

4. **PHOTOGRAPHS** are a special problem. Their value is diminished if they are NOT properly identified, are damaged or suffer from physical deterioration.

4.1 You should IDENTIFY and DATE the photo, if possible, by requesting help from the older members of the church. Eg. Mr XYZ, or GROUP, at HIJ, on 12.1.55. Of course, it may not be possible to do that for all photos, but it is a start. Without positive identification, the photos are essentially meaningless.

4.2 QUALITY of prints. Sometimes, the photos are in a poor condition. If they are important enough, they can be improved and copied using both traditional and electronic techniques. Of course, having an old picture places a great responsibility on the archivist, and it is important to preserve it from deterioration for future generations.

4.3 STORING PHOTOGRAPHS. Photographs in their original form do not last forever, and usually deteriorate within a few years. Colour photos, especially those prior to the 1980's tend to be less stable, and when their colour fades, little can be done to improve them. Black and white photos, if properly processed, seem to have a longer life. At Methodist Archives, there are original photographs that go back a hundred years - although their condition will gradually deteriorate.

4.3.1 Photographs should be mounted on plain good quality card (free of chemicals, particularly sulphur), properly labelled and sorted out by subject, eg. Church anniversaries, functions, pastors, leaders, etc. Mounting them between certain kinds of plastics should be avoided, as photos have been known to have stuck, and so be completely ruined.

4.3.2 For the longer term, photographs can be electronically scanned and saved as soft copies. (see 3.3.2)

5. **BOOKS, MAGAZINES & BOUND PUBLICATIONS.** By definition, these have to be preserved as they are. Although a number of ways are suggested, none can be really 'permanent' in our humid climate, and subject to deterioration due to humidity, attacks by silverfish and other insects.

5.1 The classical way to preserve these paper products is to subject them to regular applications of chemical poisons which used to be available in dispensaries. Because they were considered toxic, they are now unavailable.

5.2 Keeping them in fairly airtight cupboards, treated with camphor, may help to prevent them from the depredations of insects and silverfish. But this is not a long-term solution for institutions like churches.

5.3 Keeping them in an air-conditioned environment is probably a practical alternative, although the essential quality of air-conditioning is to keep humidity down, like a dehumidifier which is cheaper, without the cooling effect. This is believed to reduce the probability of insect and other organic attacks.

- 5.4 If your materials are seriously infected, the only alternative is for the whole room to be fumigated by a pest control company.
- 5.5 Of course, the ultimate means of preservation is to scan all the pages and to save them on a CD/DVD, as discussed above.

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