

THE MINNESOTA CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST RECORDS SURVEY

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Between 1980 and 1983 the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ surveyed the records held by its 160 local congregations.¹ The survey had its genesis in 1976, when enthusiasm for historical matters led the Conference to create a state-level historical committee. Among other responsibilities it was charged with encouraging and educating churches in the preservation of their historical records. The committee, composed of lay volunteers, soon recognized that it had little idea of the kinds or quantities of records which might be found in parish collections, let alone how they should be preserved. In its dilemma the committee turned to the Minnesota Historical Society, hoping that the society's field representatives might be able to conduct a survey for it. That notion was impracticable, but the society did encourage an application to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for financial support for a full-scale survey.

Four years (and many grant applications) later, sufficient funds had been secured from federal, state, and private agencies to begin a four-goal project. The aims were: (1) to survey local church records; (2) to compile and publish a guide to the materials surveyed; (3) to heighten awareness of the significance of church records and the importance of preserving them; and (4) to train persons responsible for church records in appropriate preservation techniques.

The grant monies for the project, which took two and a half years to complete, totaled \$48,000. Principal grants came from the NHPRC, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the F. R. Bigelow Foundation of St. Paul. The Greater Minneapolis Union of Churches, a small agency related to the denomination, provided additional grants. The original plans had called for a one-year project funded at \$36,000. When it became apparent that the program could not be finished on schedule, an adjusted work plan and a second, smaller round of grants permitted continuation at a lower level of activity. The Conference's soft-match contribution, budgeted at \$33,000, included the time spent by its executives, the time given by respondents and other volunteers, and the value of office space, equipment, and some services.

The project staff consisted of a full-time director and a half-time assistant for clerical and research tasks. After the first year both staff compensation and number of hours dropped as the funding diminished. The staff reported to Conference administrators and to the state-level historical committee,

which acted as nominal supervisor of the project. In practice oversight was loose, permitting the staff to act with considerable independence.

The Survey

The survey gathered information by a mail questionnaire which was filled out by the official historian or the pastor in each church (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The questionnaire was designed to be inviting and easy to complete, but at the same time to produce a maximum amount of information. Harmonizing these incompatible goals required painful choices as questions were added, dropped, or consolidated. At an early stage it was decided that the form must be limited to two pages and to use as much which space as possible. Consequently, as respondents quickly pointed out, the questionnaire appeared much simpler than it actually was.

The grant-application process offered an opportunity to make two limited tests of the form because the funding agencies asked to see both blank and filled-out samples. These tests led to revisions which improved both graphic and logical clarity. For example, using rectangular boxes rather than ruled lines yielded neater and more precise answers. In addition, questions about related materials were tightened and grouped into number parts, beginning with the most important materials. This arrangement, in effect dividing the questionnaire into units of work, was intended to make the form less intimidating. The numbering of parts and questions facilitated references to them in the instructions, which were also revised and expanded to reduce the difficulties experienced by test respondents.

Throughout the design process language problems, particularly definitions, received a good deal of attention. Common words rather than technical ones were used as often as possible. Ecclesiastical terms received special treatment, including the use of definitions, variants, and synonyms, because these names tended to be denomination-specific and to change over time.

In its final form the questionnaire asked for inclusive dates and quantities (number of volumes, envelopes, folders, or items) for twenty kinds of records grouped into six general categories: membership records; minutes of official boards and auxiliary organizations; "church life and activities," a rubric including photographs, scrapbooks, and newsletters; property records; historical accounts; and miscellaneous. A three-page set of instructions gave general guidance on completing the questionnaire along with sample answers for kinds of materials that might cause reporting difficulties. Respondents were asked to give the location of records and to indicate if they were kept in languages other than English. In style, the instructions attempted to strike a balance between the firm tone of "Be thorough" and a lighter one of "We'll be grateful if you just do the best you can."

The questionnaire, instructions, and an accompanying letter were tucked into the pockets of an illustrated brochure to make a handy kit (Figure 3). The first mailing went out in early September, in order to take advantage of the beginning of the churches' program year, with a return deadline of ten weeks. During the following relatively inactive period the staff made plans for locating records of "lost churches." Besides the 160 active congregations on the Conference register, another four to five hundred were either

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CHURCH RECORDS INVENTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Church records are kept in a variety of forms and ways, depending on the needs of the individual congregation. While it is difficult to reduce them to a few uniform categories, we ask that you do your best with this questionnaire form.

The questionnaire lists several basic types of church records. Not every church will have every kind, of course, and many churches will have additional types of materials. We are asking for general information about the type of records, the years the records cover, and the quantity of records. As you fill out the form, please feel free to use extra sheets of paper whenever necessary, leaving your answers to the appropriate item number on the questionnaire.

If noncurrent records are not kept in the church building, please indicate their location by footnotes, or separate comments. Some churches have deposited their records with local, state, or denominational historical societies. Others may not yet have retrieved them from the homes of members or officers. Information about current location is important.

If your church is the result of a merger, please fill out a separate form for each antecedent congregation that belonged to one of the denominations now merged in the United Church of Christ. In addition, any records of discontinued congregations which happen to be in the possession of your church should also be listed on a separate questionnaire. (The Conference Office can send you extra copies if you need them.)

FILLING OUT THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please give the full, formal name of your congregation. On the third line of the form, under "former names," fill in both the official and unofficial names by which your congregation has been known.

Example: *Pełham Congregational Church, also known as the "Gusset Lake Church"*

Under "years covered" give the inclusive dates for each type of record. Records may not be complete or continuous. Indicate any large gaps you notice.

Example: *Deacons' minutes. 1885-1905, 1920-1927, 1963-1980. 3 vols.*

Under "no. of volumes, folders, or items" indicate the quantity of records. Any bound book or looseleaf book is considered to be a "volume." Please specify the number. Even if a record book has been only partly filled, count it as one volume.

Example: *Church record books. 1897-1980. 4 vols.*

Instructions--2

Your records may be arranged in file folders or envelopes. (If the materials have not been well organized, you may want to arrange them in file folders as you go through them.)

Example: *Women's organizations. 1889-1980. 3 vols., 6 folders. Sunday school minutes. 1910-1930. 1 envelope.*

If older records and minutes of your church are in German or another non-English language, please specify.

Example: *Congregational meeting minutes. 1879-1916 (in German), 1917-1980 (in English). 4 vols.*

Item 1. Church record books or registers usually include vital statistics (members, baptism, confirmations, weddings, deaths, etc.); sometimes they also contain minutes.

When several different kinds of records have been kept in a single volume, make a note on the questionnaire form or on a separate sheet, giving the kinds of records included in the volume and the dates covered.

Example: *Membership records, consistency minutes, and congregational meeting minutes are combined. 1877-1905. 2 vols.*

Item 2. Membership lists and directories include the names of members in forms other than bound or looseleaf volumes. These may be lists, card files, printed directories, and so on.

Example: *Membership directories. 1937, 1940, 1945, 1951. 4 items.*

Items 10 and 11. Your church may have had several women's organizations at different times, or at the same time--fraternities, sisterhood, guild, ladies' aid, missionary society, and so forth. The names of these groups should not be listed separately. List all their records under the general heading, "women's organizations." The same is true for men's organizations.

Item 13. Many churches prepare a consolidated annual report with yearly reports of the minister, the boards, the committees, etc. which is distributed at the time of the annual meeting. If your church has a file of these reports (or if they are included as part of the minutes of the annual congregational meeting), please list them separately.

Example: *Consolidated annual reports. 1944-1980. 2 folders.*

Item 14. If your church has significant records for other committees, boards, clubs, or organizations that are part of or related to the church, list them here and/or on an additional sheet. Specify the name of the organization along with the dates and the quantity of its records.

Example: *Boy Scout troop #798. 1947-1967. 5 folders. Couples' club. 1950-1952. 1 envelope.*

Instructions--3

Item 15. If your church has a collection of unmounted photographs, list them here with a general description of the subject matter, the years covered, and some indication of the quantity.

Example: *Confirmation classes. 1950-1980. 3 folders. Buildings. 1976. 8 slides. Various activities. 1950-1980. about 35 photographs.*

If the pictures are mounted in albums, list the albums in item 16 as scrapbooks.

Item 16. Some churches keep scrapbooks of photographs, newspaper clippings, special programs, and so on. List the dates covered and the number of volumes.

Item 17. If your church has a fairly complete and extensive collection of newsletters, Sunday morning bulletins, or orders of worship (whether bound or not), specify the years covered and the quantity. If you have only a few copies scattered over many years, list these materials under Part VI, Miscellaneous.

Example: *Church newsletter. 1945-1965. 3 vols. Morning bulletins. 1970-1980. 3 envelopes.*

Items 18 and 19. These documents are difficult to list on a standard form. Please identify any you find and give the dates, if they are known, and the quantity.

Example: *Notepages. 1880, 1920. 1 copy each. Blueprints of education wing. 1942. 1 set.*

Item 20. Include any historical accounts which have been prepared for anniversaries or other occasions, whether they are printed, typed, or handwritten. Give the dates they were prepared.

Example: *75th anniversary booklet. 1928. 5 printed copies. Memorial talk. about 1935. 1 typed copy.*

Part VI On a separate sheet please list any other materials that seem to have historical value but are not included in the preceding items. Important examples would be constitutions, by-laws, articles of incorporation, covenants, and statements of faith. Be sure to list the dates if they are known.

Other miscellaneous items your church might have include: sermons, hymnals, church manuals, collections of music, self-studies, tape recordings, official correspondence, list of the contents of the cornerstone, and so forth.

Example: *Sermons, programs of special occasions, orders of worship, 8 Sunday school lessons. 1889-1940. 3 envelopes.*

Correspondence with foreign missionaries, anniversary accounts, 1938 self-study, pastoral committee files. 1903-1939. 4 folders.

Finally, please be sure to add your name, address, phone number, the date, and the approximate amount of time used to complete the form.

Figure 1

CHURCH RECORDS INVENTORY
QUESTIONNAIRE
Minnesota Conference, U.C.C.
122 W. Franklin, Rm. 323
Minneapolis, MN 55404

Name of Church

Year organized

Street address

Town

Zip code

Former names of church

Years covered

No. of volumes,
folders, or items

PART I. MEMBERSHIP RECORDS

1. Church record books.
(Membership, baptism, confirmations, etc.)

2. Membership lists, directories.

3. Cemetery records, plot plans.

PART II. ORGANIZATIONS--MINUTES AND REPORTS

4. Consistory, council, or cabinet minutes.

5. Congregational meeting minutes.

6. Deacons' minutes.

7. Deaconess' minutes.

8. Financial, treasurer's reports.

9. Trustees minutes.

10. Men's organizations.

9/80

Church Records Inventory--2

Years covered

No. of volumes,
folders, or items

11. Women's organizations.

12. Church school and youth groups.

13. Consolidated annual reports.

14. Other organizations.
(Specify)

PART III. CHURCH LIFE AND ACTIVITIES (see instructions)

15. Photographs.

16. Scrapbooks.

17. Newsletters, bulletins.

PART IV. PROPERTY RECORDS

18. Abstracts, deeds, mortgages, etc.

19. Blueprints, plans, etc.

PART V. HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

20. Anniversary histories, etc.

PART VI. MISCELLANEOUS (see instructions)

9/80

Name of person filling out questionnaire

Street address

Town

Zip code

Phone number

Date

Estimated time used

Figure 2



September 24, 1980

Dear Pastor:

"Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged." So Isaiah advised the people of God, in order that remembrance might give birth to new hope.

By recalling its heritage the church community may recapture its vision and renew its strength. But the past will be lost beyond recall unless the record of names and deeds is preserved and used. The Conference is engaged in a project to do just that.

One of our goals is to gather information about the records that exist and where they are located. A few days ago a questionnaire was sent to the historian of record or the clerk of your church. (The kit may already have crossed your desk.) From information gathered in this way, we're planning to publish a directory describing in brief form the records of all the churches in the Conference.

Any help you can give in seeing that the forms are filled out and returned by the appropriate church officer will be gratefully appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Anne A. Hage, Director
Historical Records Inventory

AAH:ld1

Figure 3

disbanded or no longer affiliated with the denomination. After a search through yearbooks and denominational histories for the names and locations of inactive churches, the staff followed up various leads to discover whether any records still existed. Eventually records of nearly 100 inactive churches were located — about half of them in the archives of active churches, a third in the Minnesota Historical Society, and the remainder in denominational archives, county museums, or private hands.

Meanwhile, as the questionnaires were returned, each one was logged, acknowledged, and scanned for the quantity and quality of information supplied. Spurred by a reminder postcard in mid-November, 30 percent of the churches had returned the forms by December 1. A mail follow-up in January yielded additional returns or reports that work was in progress. In February, six months after the first mailing, the response rate had climbed to about 50 percent. Thereafter, nonresponding churches were contacted by letters, telephone calls, and field trips. By the project's conclusion, 80 percent of the active churches had participated in the survey.

The high rate of response was a surprise to everyone involved. From the beginning, experienced Conference administrators believed that fewer than half the churches would cooperate. Also unexpected were the quality of the returned questionnaires and the quantity of the records they disclosed. Most respondents answered all of the questions that were relevant to their collections and filled out the forms carefully. Nearly all appeared to have handled the materials on which they were reporting. Their effort and care is remarkable in view of the potential for disarray in collections maintained by a succession of pastors and lay volunteers, as well as the changes in record-keeping practices and formats over more than 100 years. The questionnaire asked respondents to estimate the amount of time required to complete it. According to their reports (probably understated), the average time was twenty hours per respondent. For some individuals, particularly those who had first to collect and arrange their materials, the estimated ranged upward of one hundred hours.

The questionnaires revealed substantial collections of records in local churches, in spite of the toll taken by fires, tornadoes, and other mishaps. Not surprisingly, the records most likely to be complete were those relating to membership and the official congregational minutes. Items frequently reported, through seldom complete, included financial records, minutes of women's organizations, bulletins, newsletters, and photographs.²

Preparation Of The Guide

Compiling and editing the guide began informally when each incoming questionnaire received a preliminary reading. At this time omissions in data were spotted, internal inconsistencies noted, and typographical errors marked. Mistakes and gaps in descriptions were cleared up in a number of ways, depending upon their seriousness, the importance of the collection, and the presumed competence of the respondent to cope with requests for more accurate information. Sometimes a telephone call proved sufficient; in other cases a tactful letter pinpointing the problem resulted in the necessary clarification. It was useful to submit draft entries to the respondents along with specific questions on problem areas. Questionable data were occasionally omitted from the final guide entry because there seemed to be no practical way to verify them. Sending edited entries to all respondents for verification never received serious consideration, because it seemed unlikely that they would make the effort to check every item by referring to their collections.

The preliminary reading of all questionnaires, which had familiarized staff in a general way with their contents, provided the background for devising

a format. The twenty items on the questionnaire were condensed to descriptions of the records in four categories: membership, organizations, property and finance, and church life and activities. Not every collection was large enough for this four-part classification and so many entries were very short. After the project assistant had compiled a first draft of the guide, the director edited and revised it, rechecking each entry against the questionnaire.

Once the format and editing procedures had been established, compilation proceeded reasonably smoothly. A number of minor difficulties surfaced, however, underscoring John Fleckner's warning that "even the most informal guide will require a substantial investment" of time.³ Entries for merged churches puzzled the staff for some time. One church in the survey, established by the consolidation of eight congregations, represented an extreme example, but many churches had come into being through the union of two or three earlier bodies. Eventually, each congregation received a separate entry, with a cross-reference to the united body, except in cases where the collections themselves had been substantially merged. This latter situation, incidentally, had already created unforeseen problems for the respondents.

An unanticipated editorial problem, and one never satisfactorily resolved, was that of establishing the correct name for some churches. Over time, a few congregations had used a variety of formal and informal names. There were cases in which the name appearing in the original constitution or incorporation papers seemed never to have been used in actual practice. Determining the correct title for churches of German background proved to be especially difficult. During Anglicization and denominational merger, the formal name was by degrees translated, changed, and shortened, appearing in many variations. Because it proved impossible to formulate a general rule for handling such problems, each case was decided individually, with preference given to the best established or most frequently used form.

Entries in the guide were listed alphabetically by town or township, not only because this practice followed traditional usage in denominational registers but also because it appeared to be the most helpful order for users. Unfortunately, this arrangement created a potential source of confusion for researchers working from older histories or family records. The town listed in a roster as the location of a country church might actually designate only the distribution center for a mail delivery route, and the centers often changed as routes were realigned. Thus older churches that remained on the same site might be listed over the years under two or three different towns. Similarly churches in the inner-ring metropolitan areas, for reasons now obscure, might appear under the name of either the suburb or the central city. In both situations, the entries in the most recent denominational directory were used, again with appropriate cross-references, even though this procedure might conceal the true locations of some country churches. As an additional help in identifying congregations, the guide included an index of churches by county.

The guide was published in an edition of three hundred, with two hundred earmarked as complimentary copies for participating individuals and churches, professional journals, libraries, and so forth. Unanticipated demand required reprinting after six months.

Heightening Awareness

Soon after the project was launched, it took on the aspect of a vast promotional campaign. A variety of methods was used to publicize its goals, motivate cooperation, and demonstrate the significance of church records: speeches to lay and clerical groups; appearances at district and statewide meetings; news releases for the Conference's monthly house organ and the general press; and a series of workshops held at different locations around the state. Every effort was made to include what Fleckner called "multiple sources of influence."⁴

Measuring the success of an awareness program is difficult, but various indicators suggest some gains over the course of the project. The number of congregations with historians or historical committees nearly doubled; more attention was given to historical themes in celebratory programs and other gatherings; more congregations undertook translations of their old German records. Churches began to upgrade their storage areas and to use acid-free archival supplies. The questionnaire itself had an educational function since it came to be interpreted as an authoritative checklist of records meriting maintenance and preservation. To some extent, also, the goals of the project were institutionalized. For the first time preservation committees were created at the district level, and the Conference appointed an archivist, whose job description included educational work with local churches.

In its efforts at consciousness raising, the project was fortunate to be able to build upon and support an existing interest in denominational and congregational history. This doubtless explains why the survey became a community endeavor, involving all parts of the Conference constituency and attracting its time, energy, and funds.

Training in Preservation Techniques

Although for planning purposes the project involved three distinct outreach aims — conducting the survey, raising levels of awareness, and educating custodians in preservation practices — these goals actually tended to overlap and to reinforce each other. Thus the questionnaire, as noted earlier, was not only a survey instrument but also raised awareness and constituted a guide for records management. Similarly, the workshops, arranged primarily to introduce the questionnaire to respondents, and the newsletter, edited chiefly to acquaint parish historians and lay leaders with the importance and uses of historical materials, were also used for instruction in preservation techniques.

A series of ten workshops held in different areas of the state attracted 180 participants. Designed for the convenience of people who traveled up to fifty miles to attend, the seminars were held at host churches, from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., including luncheon. At first, expenses were paid entirely from project funds; later a small "registration fee" helped to recover the cost. After a morning session devoted to the questionnaire, the afternoon program concerned preservation, including such topics as what materials to save and how to arrange them; temperature, humidity, and security controls in storage areas; acidity and paper deterioration; and the use of archival supplies.

Workshop presentations, fact sheets, and newsletter articles endeavored to adapt good professional techniques to the needs and limitations of parish custodians. Arrangements were also made to supply them with a limited selection of acid-free folders and boxes.

In addition to improving their on-site storage areas, churches were also urged to consider other options for long-term preservation, including the transfer of noncurrent records to appropriate public or denominational depositories. Unfortunately, in this respect the awareness program backfired. As churches became persuaded of the importance of their records, they were less interested in relinquishing them. Congregations were also advised to microfilm their materials. During the course of the project the Minnesota Historical Society, which is the official depository for Conference records, agreed to microfilm important collections not available for permanent donation. At least a dozen collections were eventually donated or loaned for filming to the state Society. Other churches, too, took advantage of the microfilming program of the Utah Genealogical Society. When none of the foregoing options seemed desirable or practicable, custodians were advised to use a dry-copying machine for frequently consulted and fragile materials.

Evaluation

Generally, the Minnesota Conference's church records survey succeeded in meeting its goals. Among the factors contributing to this achievement, three or four are significant. The first factor was working within a single institution with desk space in the central state office and having access to formal and informal communication networks. A second factor was the participation of the Conference leadership. Even in an institution with such diffused authority as the United Church of Christ, the support of this group was crucial. The importance of these two factors suggests that a survey involving large numbers of volunteers may not succeed without the involvement of a supporting organization.

A third and pivotal factor was the availability of a pool of respondents with an interest in their own records and accustomed to contributing large amounts of volunteer time to church-related activities. These characteristics helped to compensate for their lack of experience. In addition, the project profited from efforts to fine-tune its strategies to the structure, practices, and symbolism of its constituency. As far as possible, for instance, project activities were scheduled with the cycles of the church calendar to avoid placing unnecessary demands on crowded agendas. Another effective technique was the use of a theological rationale in explaining the projects's goals.

Nevertheless, there were deficiencies, some of which might have been avoided by better management. Above all, the unanticipated level of response created more work than resources of time and funds could accommodate. The staff learned by hard experience the importance of thorough, early planning and the necessity of readjusting goals periodically. Staff energies could have been deployed more efficiently by the use of someone with public relations skills to assist in copywriting and the planning of promotion. Moreover, a carefully selected advisory board, recruited in the planning stage, might have provided valuable assistance in the shape of expert advice,

feedback, and influence. The bookkeeping arrangements caused a minor, though troublesome and time-consuming, problem. Accounting was handled by the Conference as part of its in-kind contribution and to satisfy requirements of the funding agencies. Unfortunately, the Conference's standard bookkeeping procedures failed to serve the project's accounting needs, making it difficult to obtain timely and useful financial reports.

Finally, on-site verification of survey responses would have improved the project. For some reason this step was not considered during the planning process, perhaps because it would have required a relatively large sampling and it risked antagonizing respondents. Nevertheless, verification would not only have given the survey data a sounder basis but would also have yielded useful information about records arrangement and storage conditions.

FOOTNOTES

1. The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 through the merger of two denominations — the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the latter of German-immigrant origins. Both denominations were themselves products of earlier mergers in the 1930's. UCC congregations are autonomous though associated at the district and state levels. About two-thirds of the churches in the Minnesota Conference come from the Congregational tradition and one-third from Evangelical or Reformed backgrounds.
2. An analysis of two-thirds of the questionnaires, including both active and inactive churches, showed that 65 percent of the congregations held complete membership records from time of founding. Even those collections that were scored as incomplete often had only minor gaps. Nearly all churches possessed minutes of congregational meetings, the basic documents of church life; around 40 percent reported an unbroken series. Seventy-two percent reported minutes of church council or other lay governing body, with 20 percent reporting a complete series. Nearly all congregations had financial reports, though only 25 percent an unbroken series. Seventy percent had photographs, with about 10 percent reporting pictures spanning the life of the congregation. Just under 40 percent possessed scrapbooks. Of special interest is the fact that 90 percent of the churches held some minutes or other records of their women's organizations. In churches of Congregational background, 19 percent had women's records dating from the beginning of these groups.
3. John A. Fleckner, *Archives and Manuscripts: Surveys* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977) p. 11.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.