

SAFEGUARDING CHURCH HISTORY

HOW THE CONGREGATIONALIST HELPED PRESERVE A CHURCH'S LEGACY

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It began with a seemingly inconsequential meeting between the two archivists at the Congregational Library & Archives (CLA), Billy McCarthy and myself, and the newly-hired CLA Executive Director, Kyle Roberts, in the fall of 2022.

The meeting focused on an ever-present question: "How do we reach out to churches struggling to manage their own records?" Following the global pandemic, we had embarked on an effort to contact closed churches with little success. By the time we received word that a church had closed, it was typically too late for us to help preserve its archives. However, through talks with supporters, church leaders, area Congregationalists, and church historians, we knew that there was a real need and desire from churches for some direction regarding the management and stewardship of their records. In that meeting, the seeds of what has come to be known as the CLA's Church Stewardship Initiative (CSI) were planted.

Use of the term "stewardship" in relation to a church's archives instead of its finances might strike some as unusual. When churches discuss "stewardship," it is often in reference to money, fundraising, or finances. But the CLA embraces the underlying theological claim here: that Christians are called to appropriately steward the resources God has given them. Recognizing that church records contain unique histories documenting the mission, memories, and work of churches across time that are worthy of being stewarded, we set out to create a program that would train church members how to do this work themselves.

Initially, Billy and I committed to leading one online webinar, titled "Archiving Your Church's Records." That first program was always meant to be a one-off event focused purely on first steps that could point churches in the right direction. Never did we imagine that the program would spawn something far larger. It was one of the best attended webinars we had ever offered at the CLA, and the response following the program was overwhelmingly positive. In the weeks that followed, we began developing new virtual and in-person programming under the umbrella of the Church Stewardship Initiative.

From an archival perspective, stewardship focuses on preserving and making accessible the memories and mission of church communities. Most often, these are best captured within the minutes, photographs, videos, correspondence, scrapbooks, vital records, and ledger books within a church's archive. Stewardship looks to the past, present, and future, and it is always an active endeavor. The records churches create today continue to

document mission and memory. And those, too, need stewardship.

The Church Stewardship Initiative attempts to break down complex archival concepts into digestible, standalone topics. These have included discussions on archival storage solutions, basic archival inventories, creating active records management programs, and digital preservation. While each program builds on the work of previous webinars, they can also be watched individually.

Attending the live webinar offers audience members the opportunity to ask questions. But recognizing that not everyone can attend these events, we upload videos from each program to the CLA's YouTube page at youtube.com/@CongregationalLibrary. And the Church Stewardship Initiative section of our website at congregationallibrary.org/CSI brings together videos, resources we've produced, transcripts of each program, and more.

Each year, we host three virtual Church Stewardship Initiative webinars, and at various points during the year, we host in-person workshops focused on the intellectual arrangement of church records collections, a particularly complex topic in archival theory. During the summer, we also run a virtual CSI Summer Camp. Billy and I work closely with participants over Zoom to work through the tough job of creating, organizing, and maintaining church archives.

The Church Stewardship Initiative's work has had a tangible impact on many churches, such as Second Congregational Church in Warren, Maine. "We had been searching for information on how to preserve our history for several years. I came across an article in *The Congregationalist* a couple of years ago about the Congregational Library & Archives in Boston," shares Patricia Weaver, the church's treasurer. "I reached out to them, and the journey began."

With the church's 200th anniversary on the horizon in 2028, Second Congregational Church was interested in working with us to ensure that their historical records were properly preserved. Weaver and her fellow congregants watched the CLA's webinars and used our guidance to start organizing the collection. "Kyle, Zachary, and I had a lot of discussions on how they will be handled," Patricia says. "Kyle came to our church to look at [the records and] discuss the next steps once they had them in Boston...We are excited to have our valuable history preserved and to know that it is now safe from deterioration."

To ensure that your church's stories and mission are preserved for the future, it is important to look at the records you're keeping. At the CLA, we hope that, through our Church Stewardship Initiative, we can provide you with the tools, resources, and know-how to tackle the daunting task of organizing church records. And of course, as we note at the end of each of our programs, we are always happy to answer questions via email or phone at ref@14beacon.org or (617) 523-0470.