

Stewards of your history

David Staniunas, Lcui Duckson-Bramble, 2025

- Loss of Funding
- Weather Events
- National Crisis
- Pandemic

Fundraising in challenging times

- Know your donors
- Make sure donors are connected to mission
- Be prepared

How do you adapt?

- Connect with donors
- Engage with key organization leaders
- Communicate with staff
- Communicate with partners
- Current technology platforms

How do you prepare?



Why are you fundraising?

Let's put them on the board:

Mission— doing work in the world

Keeping body and soul together, funding for the future (why? What kind of future?)

To bear faithful witness

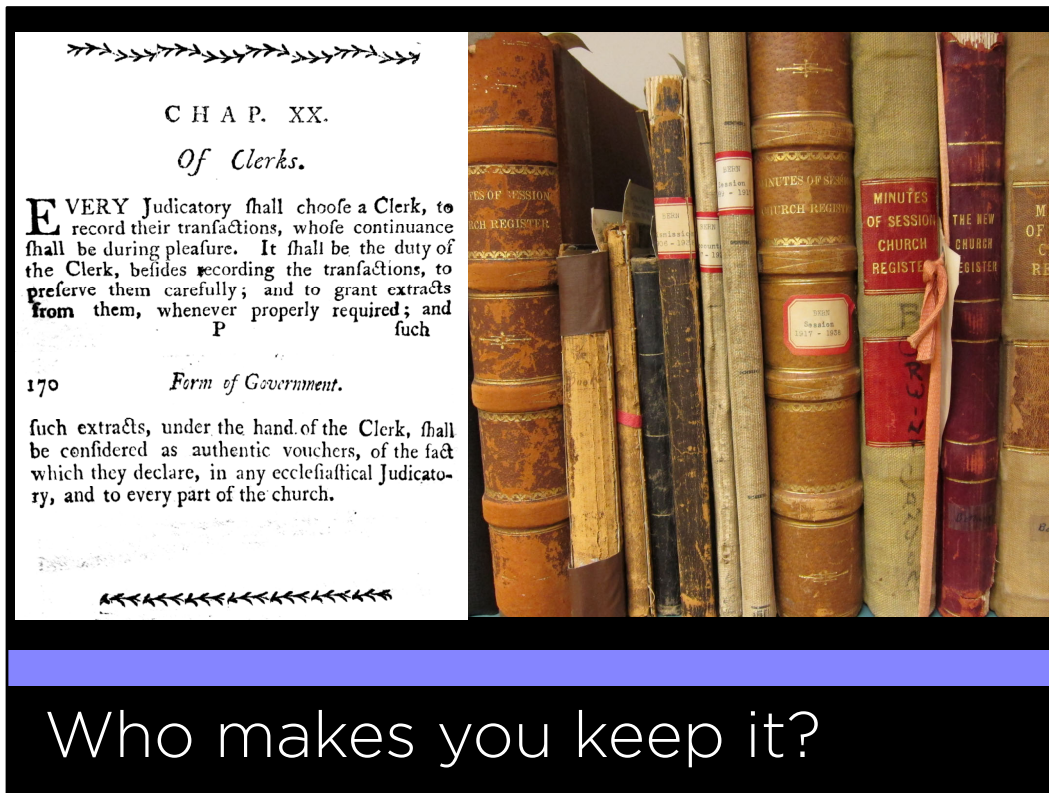
Who is ever going to know about that? Who stewards your history?

(1947: WATCH THE LITTLE CHURCH GROW ATLANTA, Ga. -- Miniature churches are used to encourage offerings to Atlanta's church building funds. The youngsters in this photo are depositing coins in a toy church so a new, real church can "grow.")

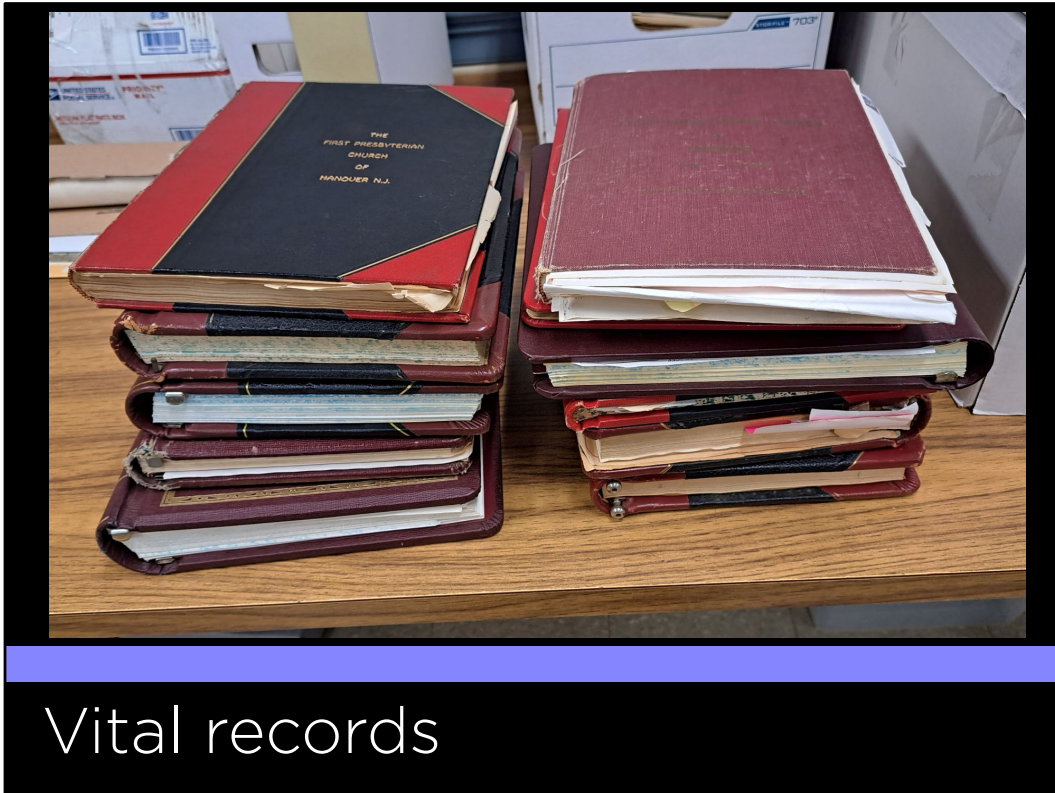


Where are those stories read?

We are the Presbyterian Historical Society, organized in 1852 as the national archives of the PCUSA; we have more than 36,000 cubic feet of archival records, dating to the first Presbytery in 1706.



We're lucky as an institution: recordkeeping is an essential part of the Presbyterian system. Other friends of ours joke that Presbyterians are people of the books: the Bible, the Book of Order, the Book of Confessions, and Robert's Rules. Presbyterians maintain (relatively) orderly meetings and record (relatively) orderly minutes in order to give a full account of themselves to each other. Recordkeeping, reinforced by annual minutes review, is an expression of the connectional nature of the church.



If you do nothing else, find as complete a run of session minutes and registers as possible. They will more or less look like this. Ballpark footprint for essential records of a congregation, if it's been around for 100 years and has had about 100 members, will be 1 or 2 cubic feet. If you run across more than that, that usually means appraisal hasn't happened yet.



Commemorative records

We do bring in things that are not session minutes and registers. Be on the lookout for photographs, photograph albums, and select printed matter: bulletins, newsletters, postcards and the like. We don't bring in full runs of that kind of printed matter, but items that document a significant event in the life of the church – a cornerstone laying, a mortgage burning, a pastor's installation – can be sent here alongside essential records.

Left to right: Clarence Macartney of First PC Pittsburgh PA with the kittens Gog and Magog; Persian Gulf War protest by First and Franklin Presbyterian Church, Baltimore MD; newsletter from Ravenswood Presbyterian Church, Chicago, The Army Goes To Church.



Power to remind

A constituent at an event I was at, upon hearing I was from the national agency offices of the PC(USA), asked me “What is it that you’re doing for the impoverished children, the children who don’t have anything to eat.” I was put a little bit off my game, but I came up with something like: Not a thing. Your church does that work in the world. I work for the archives, and it’s our job to remind you of that work, to remind you of who you are supposed to be. This is the discovery of the Baby Moses, part of a Children’s Day pageant at the Bohemian Brethren Church of Omaha, Neb. Records here speak to contemporary concerns – how has the church spoken to young people; what is the purpose of a language-based presbytery. We recently fielded requests from synods regarding the history of the so-called “language” presbyteries – groups of Welsh, Bohemian, Magyar, and other European Presbyterians which came into the PCUSA in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and kept minutes in a non-English language. We bear testimony to the historic capacity of American Presbyterians to welcome immigrant populations to the table.



Temporary records

Ideally this would have been my first slide, because it is the first task of the people who handle records: appraisal. Most of the time, when you approach your church's records, they're going to be in a stash, and things will be pretty heterogeneous. If you're thinking about the question "Who is going to read this?" you can orient yourself toward making things legible – identifying vital records first; isolating commemorative records; then disposing of what you don't need to keep. PHS publishes a retention schedule for congregations with dozens of items outlined – in broad strokes, you do not need to keep records of daily business forever – these are the records of operations, not of vision, mission, and decision-making, as in your minutes. Clear temporary records out so that permanent records are not hidden.



Doing it yourself

Every year, about 120 active PC(USA) congregations deposit records with us – many are repeat customers, have been depositing new material every couple of decades since the early 20th century. We might hold records of 3000 out of the PC(USA)'s 9000 congregations. This means that the majority of our constituents Do It Themselves; and, with care, there's nothing wrong with that.

The biggest threats to mediated records (stuff on paper or plastic) are water, heat, light, and theft. Store things in a room that can be secured, away from overhanging pipes, away from windows, on a floor where humans are comfortable, and congratulations, you have safeguarded texts on acid-free paper for the next 100-500 years.

What's on the screen is a pretty common archival arrangement, just happens to be from a big rich church. Lockable room with filing cabinets. These folks have isolated their vital records – session minutes and registers going back to 1832 – and have boxes up top for a collection of topical files: clippings, photographs, publications, written accounts on notable topics events people or themes. The only thing missing from this picture is sharing about their history.



Doing it yourself

The very keen-eyed will notice that in the picture above, the volumes have a stamp from the North Carolina Department of Archives and History indicating that they were microfilmed in 1971 – in addition to preserving original records, you can make accessible surrogates. Fortunately for all of us, making accessible surrogates is easier and cheaper than in the microfilm era. Here are some things to keep in mind, if you're thinking of doing your own digitization project:

Select carefully, do not scan everything all at once, scan the most important things first. Some of these things you should leave to a professional. Late 20th century minutes that are unbound? Probably fine to scan on a photocopier. Find someone with an overhead planetary scanner for bound 19th century volumes.

Compile texts to PDF documents; make multipage documents that represent the whole original. You're not in a forensic environment, you don't have the capacity to prove that a given digital file is bit-for-bit a replica of the original, but you can make things reliable-looking.

And then actually read the texts you have! And as much as possible – whatever won't violate the sanctity of your deliberations – make them public! Records are for use!



Reckoning with the past

{PHS offices before 1898; Peace march, Atlanta, 1968}

Ever since 2020, congregations have undertaken projects to rewrite their church histories with the aim of unpacking what their presence was like over the past few centuries of racial capitalism. In some places this has led to restoration of property to indigenous tribes or nations; in some places it has led to the discharge of odious debts; in some places it has led to renewed local partnerships even among people already in the same denomination; in others it has led to further study and reflection.

We have a collection of these histories as examples: <https://pcusa.org/resources-self-study-racism>

And the beginnings of a guide for the perplexed: <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/blogs/historical-society-blog/writing-self-study-racism>



Responding to the Church

As an institutional archives with a mandate to represent the whole church, the entire PC(USA) in all its diversity, we have to take steps beyond what for us had been daily business. We take intentional collection building seriously because failing to do so is a moral matter. I'm going to read something to you that I wrote elsewhere recently:

"Archives are a gift and a promise to the near future. And unintentional collecting -- permitting self-selection into the historic record by affluent and powerful people, passively accepting material without careful consideration, collecting without a sense of guiding mission, principles, and scope -- poisons the gift, and diminishes our constituents and our neighbors."

In the summer of 2020, responding to the national uprising following the police murders of George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, we began to curate a body of publicly-accessible video, documenting Presbyterian words and actions in the moment. This Black Lives Matter video collection, gathered over the next year, expanded to include protests in New Jersey in 2014; news footage of the burning of Martin Luther King Community PC in Springfield MA in 2021; pastors calling for restraint in Ferguson, Missouri in 2020; and street footage from the aftermath of protests in Minneapolis.

To me the videos are remarkable for a couple reasons. First because Presbyterian responses to the moment largely took video form – one of our covid adaptations was to post videos to Facebook, Instagram, YouTube. Similarly, they're overwhelmingly taken outside of church – either outdoors, in the street, or in ministers' homes – these documents do not look like "God's frozen chosen." So they embody immediate and intimate expressions, appropriate for the Pentecost season when the first protests went down.



Archival reparations

This moment lent renewed urgency to our African American Leaders and Congregations initiative as well. Since 2018 we've renewed our efforts to document Black lives, work, and witness in an increasingly multicultural church—from the organization of the First African Presbyterian Church in 1807 to the election of the first African American stated clerk of the PC(USA) in 2016.

PHS provides free imaging of original records to any African American congregation in the PC(USA). If you're in the directory of African American and African diaspora churches, your congregation is eligible. You're welcome to send in records for imaging and return, or to [place them on deposit here](#). Last year we imaged the records of Goodwill Presbyterian Church (Mayesville, S.C.); Edisto Presbyterian Church (Edisto Island, S.C.); Lombard Central Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia, Pa.); New River Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia, Pa.); Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church (Princeton, N.J.); and the former Presbytery of Catawba, and we're eager to bring more churches into the fold.



So far the most significant part of our AALC work is the complete imaging of Katie Cannon's personal papers, amounting to 15,000 pages of text and images, works of art, and dozens of hours of audio and video.

It was Katie's will that her work land in three places, Union Theological Seminary in New York, Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, and PHS. The work of digitization continued despite three of our colleagues coming in and out of service with us, continued despite our having limited on-site staff hours in the first year of the pandemic, continued despite having daily urgent work on top of this initiative.

We're celebrating Katie's life and legacy with a public party at PHS in October (y'all should come. Do a search for Katie Geneva Cannon Eventbrite and you'll hit us.) and we're continuing to look for people who knew Katie – her students and her teachers, her pastors and her flocks – to read some of the things we've digitized, and offer their own reflections on Katie and her work.



LBGTQ+ history

Another of our collections commemorating one major Presbyterian woman is the Pam Byers Memorial Collection, started with funds from friends of Pam in 2015. This is the name we give for documentation of the struggles for marriage and ordination equality in the PC(USA), and of the lives work and witness of gay and lesbian and trans Presbyterians.

(On the left are folks from Woodland PC Nashville TN in a 2020 Pride march; on the right is a PLGC Banner. NYC Gay Pride Parade, 1982..)

Questions:
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<https://pcusa.org/phs>