

From Obscurity to Frontline: Striving for Transformation for Archives and the Archival Profession from an Advocacy Perspective for the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL)¹ in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Advocacy has been identified as the process of identifying and providing services to constituencies with needs relevant to the repository's mission, especially underserved groups, and tailoring services to meet those needs (Society of American Archivists, 2005). For this objective to be realized, the repository needs to identify whom it wants to engage with and take proactive steps to attract and retain users' interest. It is against this background that a survey using questionnaires, observation and interviews was conducted in 2011 to ascertain the collection stewardship strategies of institutional repositories with religious archives in Pietermaritzburg. One of the aims of this survey was to establish their public programming activities and the survey confirmed that exhibitions, brochures, lectures, oral history programmes and publications were popular strategies used in their outreach programmes. An important recommendation made was the need for an Open Day on religious archives to champion the advocacy drive.

Key words: Religious archives, institutional repositories, Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries, advocacy, Open Day

Dall'oscurità alla prima linea: la lotta per la trasformazione degli archivi e della professione archivistica da una prospettiva di sostegno del gruppo di Pietermaritzburg delle biblioteche teologiche in Sudafrica

SINTESI

Il concetto di sostegno è stato identificato come il processo di identificare e fornire servizi alle circoscrizioni con esigenze relative alla missione del deposito, soprattutto dei gruppi meno abbienti, e dei servizi ad hoc per soddisfare tali esigenze (società degli archivisti americani, 2005). Per realizzare questo obiettivo, il deposito deve identificare chi vuole coinvolgere ed adottare misure proattive per attrarre e mantenere l'interesse degli utenti. È su questo sfondo che un'indagine mediante questionari, interviste ed osservazione è stata condotta nel 2011 per accertare le strategie di amministrazione di archivi istituzionali con archivi religiosi a Pietermaritzburg. Uno degli scopi di questo studio era di stabilire la loro attività di programmazione pubblica e l'indagine ha confermato che mostre, opuscoli, conferenze, programmi di storia orale e pubblicazioni erano popolari strategie utilizzate nei loro programmi di sensibilizzazione. Un'importante raccomandazione fatta era la necessità di una giornata sugli archivi religiosi per supportare la spinta del sostegno.

Parole chiave: archivi religiosi, depositi istituzionali, Gruppo delle Librerie teologiche di Pietermaritzburg, difesa, giornata aperta

1. The Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL) is an association of the libraries of the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), St. Joseph's Theological Institute (SJTI), Cedara, the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Congregational House of Formation (CHoF), Anglican House of Studies (AnHoS), Seith Mokitimi Methodist Seminary (SMSS) and the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI). It is in essence an agreement among the theological institutions in the area to form a consortium of theological educational institutions to work together towards the provision of a contextual theological education (Van Rooyen 1996).

Od ne transparentnosti v ospredje: prizadevanje za preoblikovanje arhivov in arhivske stroke v okviru Združenja teoloških knjižnic Pietermaritzburga (PCTL) v Južni Afriki z vidika zagovornišтва

IZVLEČEK

Zagovornišтво je bilo opredeljeno kot proces ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja storitev uporabnikom, predvsem za postavljenim skupinam, v skladu s poslanstvom arhivov in prilagajanjem storitev za zadovoljevanje teh potreb (Društvo ameriških arhivov, 2005). Za uresničitev teh ciljev, morajo arhivi ugotoviti, s kom se želijo povezati in sodelovati in sprejemati proaktivne ukrepe, da bi pritegnili in obdržali zanimanje uporabnikov. Na tej podlagi je bila v letu 2011 s pomočjo vprašalnikov, opazovanja in razgovorov izvedena raziskava za ugotavljanje strategij zbiranja in upravljanja z verskimi arhivi v Pietermaritzburgu, ki jih hranijo različne institucije. Eden izmed ciljev te raziskave je bil ugotoviti njihove javne programske dejavnosti in raziskava je potrdila, da predstavljajo razstave, brošure, predavanja, programi ustne zgodovine in publikacije popularne strategije, ki jih institucije uporabljajo v svojih programih ozaveščanja. Pomembno priporočilo, ki je bilo rezultat te raziskave, je bila potreba organizacija t. i. »Dneva odprtih vrat«, za verske arhive.

Ključne besede: verski arhiv, institucionalna zbirka, Združenje teoloških knjižnic Pietermaritzburga, zagovornišтво, Dan odprtih vrat

1 Introduction

An assortment of terms has been used to refer to those activities in which the archival institution seeks user response to its services or in its bid to raise the profile of the organization either internally or externally. Educational programmes, external programmes, advocacy, developmental services, public programming and public service are other synonyms used as substitutes for the broad term "outreach". Outreach has been defined as those activities whereby archival institutions ensure responsiveness to users, secure user participation and promote the use of archives (Harris, 2000:26). Advocacy has been identified as the process of identifying and providing services to constituencies with needs relevant to the repository's mission, especially underserved groups, and tailoring services to meet those needs (Society of American Archivists, 2005).

For this objective to be realized, the repository needs to identify whom it wants to engage with and take proactive steps to attract and retain users' interest. As noted earlier on a smorgasbord of terms is in use but the primary objective according to Pederson (2008) is to raise the profile and build support for an archive among its stakeholders. The International Council on Archives (ICA, 2012) noted that archivists have a professional responsibility to promote access to archives and this is done through various means such as Internet and web-based publications, printed materials, public programs, commercial media and educational and outreach activities.

Outreach is an extension of reference work and, as Roe (1988:218) highlighted, while the purpose of archives is to preserve and make available historical resources, that goal lacks substance if the resources remain unused. This view has been shared by Harris (2000:26; See also Pederson, 1993:306; Freeman, 1984:282; Blais and Ennes, 1990-91:107) who stated that public programming is arguably the clearest manifestation of archivists having embraced the notion that use is indeed the ultimate goal of all their endeavours.

Considering that it is a perennial professional gripe that archivists have an image problem (Bailey, 2007:123), it is imperative to develop outreach activities, inter alia, for the following reasons:

- i. expansion of basic archival functions through acquisition and preservation of records;
- ii. to increase and encourage the use of archival materials;
- iii. to raise awareness of archives and their holdings, as well as identifying the role and uses of records in society;
- iv. to encourage communication between archivists and the officials who allocate the resources (Roe, 1988:219-220; Maher, 1992:316; Williams, 2006:147).

Possible outreach activity options are multiple and according to Pederson (1993:314), successful ones are characterized by a clear purpose, well-defined scope and content. Ericson (1990-91:114)

reinforced this view by pointing out that archives have a fundamental duty to undertake outreach projects on an ongoing basis, and the process should be clearly stated in archival mission statements, thereby, making the process one that has short and long term goals attached to it. According to Freeman (1984:283), in developing any of these educational services we must first decide for whom we are producing them, at what level of sophistication they need to be produced and in what formats they can be supplied to the maximum number of people.

Freeman (1984:283) further asserted that outreach can range at least from simple exhibits, media coverage, tours and curatorial talks to more sophisticated activity, including multilevel conferences, travelling exhibits, group instruction, teacher workshops, courses based on the archives using records as text and archivists as facilitators, or cycles of activities focused on a theme or period. From this expansive list, only major activities arising from the findings of the study will be discussed and these include internet access, exhibitions, publications, oral history programmes, classes, seminars and workshops.

2 Context of the study

The Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL) is an association of the libraries of the Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA), St. Joseph's Theological Institute (SJTI), Cedara, the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics (SRPC), University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Congregational House of Formation (CHoF), Anglican House of Studies (AnHoS), Seith Mokitimi Methodist Seminary (SMSS) and the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI). It should be pointed out from the onset that within some of these library institutions exist institutional repositories that have manuscript collections with a theological orientation and these archives as noted by Suelflow (1965) are a stepchild within the library establishment.

In that light, Mnjama (2007) observed that the placement of the archives unit within the administrative structure of the library is a contentious one. Regardless of the placement, it will be argued that what is fundamental is to ensure that there is a professional person, be it an archivist or manuscript librarian to provide a continuum of care for the records. Within the theological cluster network of libraries, both designation terms are used interchangeably and at this juncture, some background on the origins of the cluster will suffice.

The idea of a cluster system can be traced back to 1987 when Dr. James Cochrane joined the Department of Theology. Dr. Cochrane shared his experience of a cluster system as encountered in Chicago, United States of America (USA). Funding was obtained for the late Professor Wittenberg to visit Chicago in 1988 with the view of adapting ideas relevant to the Pietermaritzburg situation (Wittenberg, 2013).

The consortiums studied in the USA included the Association of Chicago Theological Schools (ACTS), Boston Library Consortium and Union Theological Seminary. ACTS is an association of theological seminaries committed to utilizing resources to the maximum. The models studied in the United States were adapted to the Pietermaritzburg situation. The structure of the Pietermaritzburg network was set-up during 1989, with the official inauguration of the cluster in March 1990. The vision statement, called "Declaration of Intention" was signed by local Bishops and the heads of the respective institutions. It is in essence an agreement among the theological institutions in the area to form a consortium of theological educational institutions to work together towards the provision of a contextual theological education (Van Rooyen, 1996).

3 Research story

A questionnaire, observation and interview schedules were the primary means of data collection and this research approach was adopted because of the need to represent a plurality of interests, voices and perspectives. As noted by Krivokapic-Skoko and O'Neill (2011), mixed methods research has the potential to provide new insights into, and understanding of, phenomena being investigated.

4 Research findings

In total, 10 questionnaires were sent and 9 completed questionnaires were returned, which represented a 90% response rate. The data presented in this paper was obtained from questionnaires, interviews and direct observation. The aim of an archive is not only to take care of the material housed therein, but also to ensure that researchers and the general public are able to locate and access whatever items are of interest to them. It therefore follows that the ability to make collections available to users should be one of the cornerstones of a successful archival management policy. Use is the goal of all archival endeavour (Harris, 2000:24) and the Canadian Archivist Timothy Ericson (1990-91: 116) has remarked that:

... if, after we brilliantly and meticulously appraise, arrange, describe and conserve our records, nobody comes to use them, then we have wasted our time.

To highlight the importance of access, the Professional Code for South African Archivists (1993:106) and the ICA (2012) begin a definition of the archival mission as follows:

The archivist is responsible for ensuring the availability and use of permanently valuable archives by identification, acquisition, description and preservation. Accountability to the archives creator, employer and user should shape the performance of these tasks.

Consequently, respondents were asked questions that sought information about their public programming activities. Respondents also provided additional strategies they used in public programming. From Figure 1 below, it is discernible that exhibitions, brochures, lectures and publications were popular strategies used in their outreach programmes.

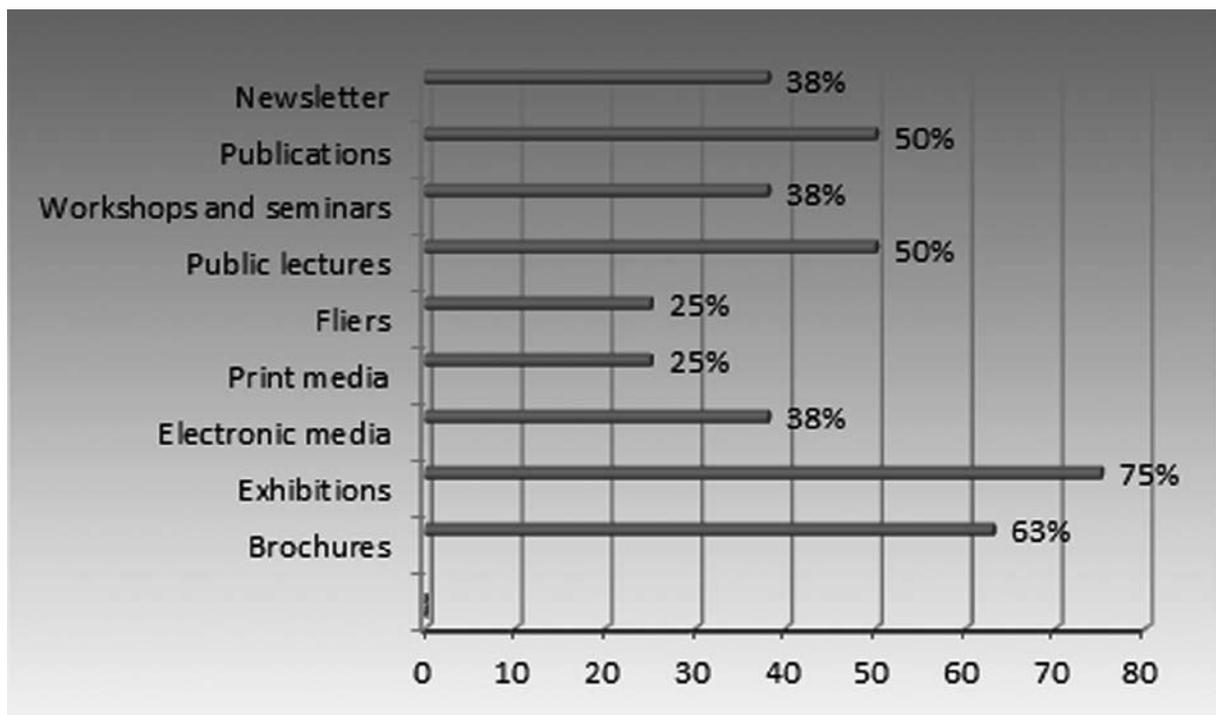


Figure 1: Public programming strategies

Under electronic media, one archivist noted that he had an interview with the Catholic Radio Station in South Africa, Radio Veritas in which he explained what religious archives are and the strategies in place to advocate their importance and use. On suggestions that could be adopted to improve the profile of archives within the cluster, one institution noted that based on experience at their repository, there was need for improved access, information literacy and relevant content and these are reproduced here verbatim. On improved access and relevant content this comment is worth noting:

Access should not be viewed in the narrow sense of merely having archival records on the premises, but rather access in the much wider sense of enabling the archives user to access the records in order to meet personal or social needs. A major factor affecting access to information at our institution is the geographical distribution of our users (especially black), the majority of whom live outside the city centre where the archives is located. Moreover, while we have indexes, guides, catalogues and finding aids that have been produced to assist people to access records, they are all in English and generally not designed for use by people unaccustomed to research. Besides there is a fee attached to all services rendered ---, this can still constitute as a barrier to the majority of our users, who are mostly unemployed. There can be no equity of information access unless relevant and accessible content is available. A predominant amount of documents at our repository are in English and there remains a lack of content written in indigenous languages, the primary languages of many black South Africans. Further, the vast majority of information at our repository is written for an audience reading at an average or advanced literacy level, representing a major barrier for many users.

Commenting on the need for indigenous languages to be given a voice in the intellectual field, the President and founder of the Umsamo Institute and South African Healers Association, Dr. Vela-phi (WO) Mkhize (2013) noted that:

--- We need to launch research projects in isiZulu; make research documents available in isiZulu and cultivate and nurture the language - funds should be set aside for research projects in isiZulu - - - in addition, government, legal and other significant institutional documents should be translated into African languages.

On information literacy this comment came from the same institution:

It is essential for the archives user to be able to locate, evaluate and use information effectively on a day to day basis. This is especially true amongst many of our black users. It must be remembered in apartheid South Africa, the decision to exclude a child from well-run schools was based solely on their race. The consequences of this educational disadvantage are very evident in the low levels of literacy many black South Africans manifest today. This can create a huge barrier to information access as proven by our experience at our repository.

5 Discussion

Wamukoya (2013) bemoaned the tendency by archivists to undersell themselves which explains why the profession is in limbo. One of the important recommendations emphasised by South African Society of Archivists (SASA) chairman, Prof. P. Ngulube at the 2013 SASA conference was the need for archivists and records managers to be pro-active and assertive in their own organizations so that the voice of the record has representation and Wamukoya (2013) echoed similar remarks in his 2013 annual lecture address at UNISA.

Mnjama (2009) and the ICA (2012) noted that access to records and archives is a very important part of their function in society and there is a need for the general public to be made aware of the treasures the archival institutions are holding on their behalf. The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the church (1997) noted that church archives as tabernacles of memory constitute a heritage that should be preserved in order to be transmitted and used.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (2005) *Directory of archival repositories* stated that repositories are obligated to make their holdings known to potential users and to define their acquisitions or collecting policies and areas of specialisation clearly in relation to those of other institutions to minimise the dispersal of related material and the duplication of collecting endeavours. The carrying over of this message to the general public was referred to by Dearstyne (1993:197) as promotional marketing. Other terms that are used interchangeably with regard to the effort to raise awareness of archives within society and promote their use are 'public programming', 'outreach' or 'archival advocacy'.

Consequently, there should be high-level advocacy to persuade religious bodies and leading individuals within faith communities to value their own historical records as a resource for their mission and activities and to encourage them to celebrate their identity and achievements (Chartres, 2010). Commenting on the need to come up with a national association of religious archives or archivists, Lambert (1975:61-62) noted that:

...the integration of all major religious archives on an informational level would be greatly facilitated by the formation of a national association of religious archives or archivists. This association, quite apart from the advantages it would bring through the exchange of information and ideas and through personal contacts, could, perhaps, direct the development of religious archives in the coming years.

The establishment of this religious archives group is worth pursuing and the fact that most of the archival repositories covered in this survey belong to the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions makes it logistically much easier to embark on this endeavour. Funds permitting, it would also be ideal to establish a directory of religious archives within Pietermaritzburg and this could also be provincialized, with the long-term objective of making it national. The directory should ideally contain references to the contents and descriptions of the resources of various repositories, both large and small.

Allied to the aforementioned, having an Open Day on religious archives would go a long way in promoting outreach activities and this was the message emphasised by one archivist during a radio interviewing session with South Africa's Radio Veritas. The proposed religious archives group should start by seeking visibility on the Web through having its own website, preferably a portal on religious archives. It is widely acknowledged that the future lies with ICTs and these have to be exploited as much as possible. Mnjama (2009) and Millar (2010) noted that one way an archive can begin to garner the respect it needs is to develop a website explaining how their institution works and what kinds of information sources may be found within the walls of such a place.

In addition, archival institutions need to move with the times to ensure that they remain relevant. The very use of high-tech tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging et cetera by an archival institution is a signal to the public that the institution is not stuck in the past. Archivists therefore need to understand their users before they can accommodate their needs. Neo and Calvert (2012) pointed out that the 'Net Generation' (those born after the early 1980s), for instance, grew up with technology and therefore Facebook can be a marketing tool to reach out to them. Millar (2010) echoed similar sentiments and noted that it has been argued that archival institutions can reach a different audience, that is, the younger generation, by remaining technologically current. The use of cellular phone applications such as tweets or the short message service (SMS) is one of the most important emerging ICT applications in Africa (Garaba, 2012; Van den Heever, 2008:98). Mobile phone technology is versatile or multimedia; that is, it can support other voice, image and video applications, which makes it a handy tool for the religious repositories within Pietermaritzburg.

Finally, the use of community radio stations is an important mechanism for disseminating information about the archives to the public. Bosch (2008) noted that religious community radio stations, for example, are able to develop and maintain concrete connections with their target audiences. The Roman Catholic Radio Station, Radioveritas, lists as one of its primary objectives in its vision statement the need to be a recognised Catholic broadcaster serving the interests of its community (Radioveritas, 2012). Consequently, the steps taken by one institution to raise the profile of its archives and those of the cluster through Radioveritas is commendable and the proposed Open Day on religious archives will bore fruition once a Cluster committee on archives is constituted to propel the outreach campaign.

With regards to suggestions for the improvement of religious archives within the cluster, emphasis was made on the need for improved access, information literacy and relevant content. The pertinent remarks noted by one archivist underscored the need to re-figure the archive so that it reflects the new political, economic and social dispensation currently prevailing. It is unfortunate that the colonial archives syndrome is still haunting archival institutions in this 21st century and this urgently needs rectification as there is need to cultivate a post-colonial archival tradition. One of the measures that could be taken with regards to improving access could be translating the written documents into local languages though this is not a guarantee that there will be access.

At the recently concluded South African Society of Archivists (SASA) conference (2013), archivists were unanimous in agreement that once a document is translated, the authenticity of that translated document is compromised, debatable though. In agreement with Reed (2013), it is my view that the bottom line is that what is needed is good accountable, reliable information that reflects business

actions, maintained with those characteristics that provide proof of processes to show what happened to the information irrespective of the translation.

Secondly, the cultivation of a post-colonial archival tradition could be done through documenting in the local languages the reminiscences of prominent members of the various church denominations and as noted by Denis (1995:35), oral history is the only way to give the Christian people of Africa a role in the writing of their own history in view of the fact that the indigenous point of view is often ignored or distorted. There is under documentation about the contribution of the indigenous people to the mission of the church and the way they incorporated and reconstructed the Christian heritage to make it acceptable from the point of view of traditional culture. In one interview with an archivist, mention was made of the annual tour at the beginning of each year whereby they go out in the parishes identifying potential informants for their oral history programme and educate their constituencies about the importance of religious archives. Such a move is commendable and will go a long way in addressing the content disparities in their institutional repositories and is a strategic move in their advocacy drive.

6 Conclusion

Advocacy remains an important function of archival institutions and with the onset of digital technologies; archivists can fully utilize the benefits occasioned by this technology by embarking on publicity campaigns to endear users to the archives. For the Pietermaritzburg Theological Cluster of Libraries, they have not fully embraced social networking tools in order to interact with their users. Plans to digitize their collections for access purposes have been mooted but are still a long way from taking off due to financial and technical challenges. In consequence, this means that users or researchers still need to vote with their feet and not with their fingers in cyberspace to access the archives. On a positive note though, discussions with FamilySearch² to digitize the Lutheran Church registers pertaining to birth, baptismal and deceased have been encouraging but the modalities still need to be ironed out. Nonetheless, publications, exhibitions, brochures and lectures remain the popular strategies used in their outreach programmes. Oral history programmes are also popular in an effort to redress the colonial imbalance with regard to the written record in the archives. Having an Open Day on religious archives will go a long way in raising the profile of these archival repositories and the initial steps taken through talk shows on religious archives on community radio stations are commendable.

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2. FamilySearch International is a non-profit family history organization dedicated to connecting families across generations. The organization digitally captures archives of the church using state-of-the-art image-capturing equipment for free.

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SUMMARY

Use remains as one of the ultimate goals of archival endeavour. Without users visiting the archives and scanning our collections, it becomes difficult to justify our existence. It is against this background that a survey using questionnaires, observation and interviews was conducted in 2011 to ascertain the collection stewardship strategies of institutional repositories with religious archives within the Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Libraries (PCTL) in South Africa. The PCTL is a consortium of libraries working together towards the provision of a contextual theological education. One of the aims of this survey was to establish the public programming activities of these institutional repositories. The survey confirmed that exhibitions, brochures, lectures, oral history programmes and publications were popular strategies used in their outreach programmes. Another effective mechanism being used of late were community radio stations particularly the Catholic radio station, Radioveritas. Despite these concerted efforts, there was an urgent need for the formation of a national association of religious archives or archivists to co-ordinate and spear-head the publicity campaign in as far as raising awareness was concerned. To kick-start the publicity drive, funds permitting that is, it would also be ideal to establish a directory of religious archives within Pietermaritzburg and this could also be provincialized, with the long-term objective of making it national. The directory should ideally contain references to the contents and descriptions of the resources of various depositories, both large and small. Allied to the aforementioned, having an Open Day on religious archives would go a long way in promoting outreach activities and this was the message emphasised by one archivist during a radio interviewing session with South Africa's Radioveritas. The proposed religious archives group should also seek visibility on the Web through having its own website, preferably a portal on religious archives. For the PCTL, they have not fully embraced social networking tools in order to interact with their users. Plans to digitize their collections for access purposes have been mooted but are still at an embryonic stage due to teething financial, infrastructural and technical challenges. In consequence, this means that users or researchers still need to vote with their feet and not with their fingers in cyberspace to access the archives. In an endeavour to cultivate a post-colonial archival tradition, oral history programmes are intensifying with regard to capturing oral reminiscences from prominent parishioners to complement the written record in the archives.

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