

## SESSION III: FUNDAMENTALS OF WORKING WITH BAHÁ'Í ARCHIVES

This afternoon I'd like to share with you some of the mechanics of working in the archives. I'm not going to go into a lot of detail, because until you have a trained archivist on board you probably won't be using many of these techniques, but I think it's important for you to understand the principles involved and the context in which archivists work.

### **Developing professional contacts (Handouts: websites of interest to archivists, important contacts)**

There are many allies you can call on when you have questions and need assistance. Begin now developing a network with these folks and don't be shy about asking questions.

Bahá'í World Centre Archives

U.S., Canadian, and U.K. National Bahá'í Archives

International Council on Archives

Regional, state, and university archives – develop contacts, visit facilities, and teach as you ask for advice. It's good exposure for the Faith. We should not only be growing our own archivists, but encouraging trained archivists to investigate the Faith, as well.

### **Cardinal rules of the archives**

The archives profession has its own vocabulary, just as any other discipline. Some of the terms you'll hear archivists use are (in the most basic definition): (there are some differences between the U.S. and Europe)

Accessioning (official steps followed to bring records or papers into the archives)

Processing or arranging (putting the collection into its final arrangement so that it will be ready for researchers to use)

Authentication or documentation (establishing the history and verifying the validity or authenticity of an item or a collection)

Description (preparing finding aids for archival collections)

Conservation (procedures to reverse damage to documents and preserve their longevity)

Inventory (a document that lists in detail the contents of a collection)

Record group (body of organizationally related records) – give examples

Collection (a body of records forming a unit because it was created or accumulated by the same institution, person, or family)

Provenance (tracing the history of ownership of an item or collection and how it came to be in the archives)

There are two very important concepts that guide work in all archives:

Respect des fonds – The archivist treats a collection as an organic whole and does not break it up. An archivist keeps together all records created by one source, whether administrative

or individual, and does not intermingle the records from one collection with another. An archives, unlike a library, is not organized according to a predetermined system of subject classification. We don't create bodies of records grouped around a particular subject, theme, or person. The principle of *respect des fonds* means keeping the records of one National Assembly office or Local Spiritual Assembly separate from the collections of individuals, and individual collections separate from each other. Give examples.

Original order – If it is sufficiently clear and functional, an archivist retains the arrangement that the collection had when it arrived at the archives. You determine that as you do the initial inventory and examine the scope of what the collection contains. The donor's organizational scheme is best, if it makes sense. But sometimes a collection arrives in disarray or its arrangement would make it difficult for researchers to find items. The archivist may then decide to impose a more logical order.

### **Archival Supplies and Special Techniques**

Archivists use specialized materials and supplies to help preserve items as long as possible. There are basic preservation techniques that you can use to avoid causing damage to archival materials and in some cases reverse the effects of previous abuse or neglect.

We take great care in handling documents, not only out of respect, but to make sure that our contact with them doesn't cause any further damage. (**Handout III-1**)

Rule of thumb: Don't do anything in the archives that is not reversible.

One of our most effective tools is the use of acid-free folders and boxes for storage. These come in every conceivable size and configuration. (Show catalogs and samples; **Handout III-2** sources of supplies)

#### Acid

Acid breaks down fibers and causes paper to become brittle, change color, and eventually turn to dust. Acid can remain in paper after it is manufactured if it is made from wood pulp or contains alum sizing. Acid can be transferred between papers or adjacent objects. That's why we use acid-free folders and containers. Highly acidic material, like newsprint, should not be placed against items free of acid.

The sulfuric acid in polluted air can also damage archival material.

Archival pens to determine acidity of paper

There are methods for neutralizing the acid in paper—aqueous and non-aqueous, primarily with use of sprays now, although there are still some problems with soluble inks. Trying to perfect gases, which will allow to do large quantities of documents at once. These methods should only be employed by a professional archivist or conservator.

Isolate acidic documents physically and/or copy them onto acid-free stock (examples: Telegraph cables and newsprint. Make notes if more treatment is required later.)

We put photographs in protective sleeves and use non-invasive methods to label them. Use gloves to handle pictures and negatives. Check negatives for nitrate (especially prior to 1941). They have nitrate written on them or you can clip a corner off and see if it burns rapidly. Deteriorating nitrate film can spontaneously burn and gives off gases. Red dust is a telltale sign. Make copies on safety film and destroy the originals.

We could get into a lengthy discussion about organizing and preserving photograph collections. It's really the topic of a whole separate workshop. One big don't: Never write on the back of a photograph with a pen (it harms the emulsion on the other side). Place the photo face down on a piece of glass and use a soft #1 pencil to label it on a back edge, or write the caption on an acid-free label and attach the label to the back of the photo.

Demonstrate: Use of gloves, archival mending tape, pH pen, plastic paper clips, opaline pad and gum eraser, removing staples, pins, and other fasteners, encapsulation, bone folder, tying tape.

One of the challenges you face in the archives is preserving a wide variety of media. Photographs, films, videotapes, audiotapes, disc records, artwork, carpets, clothing, leather, scrapbooks, artifacts, and relics all require different kinds of skills and preservation techniques. Tapes need to be rewound on a regular basis and stored with the tail end out, so that the user is required to rewind them in order to play them. Clothing should never be left to hang on hangars. In general, fabrics should be rolled rather than folded. Valuable or historically significant carpets should not be hung on walls, and no artifacts or artwork should be displayed where sunlight can affect them. There are many rules and principles that pertain to preservation of historic materials—if you have questions about specific items, bring them to your individual consultation this evening or contact the BWC Archives for guidance.

Non-manuscript items that require different physical handling may be separated. Oversize materials, routine books (as opposed to rare books or autographed copies), photographs, films, tapes, disc records, etc. are sometimes separated from the collection for specialized storage. Create a separation file and cross reference items, so it will always be evident what collection they are part of.

A note about scrapbooks and newspaper clipping or publicity files. These often present a preservation nightmare, attaching fragile acidic newspaper clippings with glue to pages of scrapbooks that are likewise acidic. If pages are in danger of becoming unreadable, photocopy them onto acid-free paper. Do not attempt to remove photographs that are firmly glued down in scrapbooks. If they only have corner tabs, they can be removed, but Xerox the entire book (in reduced form, if necessary) beforehand, so you capture the order and context of the general album, which will be lost once the photographs are moved.

Incidentally, if you discover original tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá or letters from Shoghi Effendi, or relics associated with the Central Figures of the Faith, immediately contact the Bahá'í World Centre Archives for guidance.

### **Preparing finding aids (and use of automation)**

Now comes the fun part—archivists create a variety of finding aids so that they and future researchers can easily see what collections the archives contains and can find them at a moment's notice. The archivist's three main functions are to preserve the archives, arrange them in a logical fashion, and ultimately make them available for use by administrators and researchers.

First, there is the overall inventory or listing of the archives, which you will create and then continue to maintain as new materials are added. This is sometimes referred to as your Guide to the Holdings.

Each manuscript collection, once it is processed, will have its own detailed inventory, which includes a short biography of the person and a list of each box and its contents **(Handout III-3)**. As the collection is processed, the archivist will also prepare catalog cards and/or load details about the collection and cross references into a computer database. It is useful to also include an abbreviated guide entry—in the future Bahá'í archives will want to publish guides to their entire holdings. It will reduce future effort if the guide is written as the collection is being processed and you are most familiar with the materials.

Speaking of use of computers, they can be a boon to archivists and make our work a lot easier. On the other hand, preservation and storage of computer-generated records is yet another specialized area of archives science, and one that we cannot go into in detail here. In general, make sure the people on your National and Local Assemblies are aware that they should never let the electronic version of their documents be the permanent copy. Always print out and file a paper copy. And backup their electronic records on a regular basis. With the rapid advance of CD-ROM technology and the ability to burn CD-ROMs from our personal computers, it is easier and easier to create backup versions of records for intermediate range storage.

Shelve the collection. Remember that you will have already created a system to number or letter your shelves, so you have an easy system for finding things. Another finding aid archivists use is to create a shelf list, so that at any point in time you can see at a glance what is filed on a particular shelf.