

# REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

Descend to the basement of Pittsburgh Presbytery, turn right at the inexplicable array of exercise equipment, turn left at the rows of abandoned desk chairs, and you will find the temporary home of Christian Associates' archives. In 39 mismatched boxes, the story of Christian unity in Southwest Pennsylvania unfolds in papers, scrapbooks, recordings, and photographs.

This year we celebrate half a century as Christian Associates, but our records extend back even earlier: to our predecessor organizations, like the Council of Churches of the Pittsburgh Area and even the Pittsburgh Sabbath School Union, which was founded in 1817. Our earliest documents are written by hand in elegant cursive, listing the meeting attendance and agenda items of people who lived through the Civil War.



Roy Burford of the Pittsburgh Presbytery joins Liddy Barlow on the day the archives were moved to their current quarters.

Those early records describe organizations that were entirely Protestant, but by the late 1960s, in the wake of Vatican II, new connections between the Council of Churches and the Catholic Dioceses of Pittsburgh and Greensburg begin to emerge. Most of these meetings took place at ground level, but on occasion they happened in midair: one scrapbook includes the in-flight menu from a journey bringing the Rev. Lee Hicks, then director of the Council, to the Vatican in 1969, when the Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh became John Cardinal Wright.

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By October of that year, the Council of Churches had voted to close its doors and transform into something new: Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, the first ecumenical agency in the United States to include Catholic churches in full membership. In 1970, Christian Associates held its first meetings of the Council of Bishops and Executives and the Board of Delegates. Meeting minutes upon meeting minutes ensue in the archives, for these governing bodies and for dozens of multiplying committees and task forces.

The archives tell some stories clearly and others less so. For discretion's sake, some matters are only hinted at by carefully worded formal documents; we'll never know all of the interpersonal friendships and quarrels our history might contain. At times our record-keeping has been less than complete: faces smile from unlabeled photographs, leaving us guessing at who's who. Our radio and television ministries were central programs for decades, but few audiovisual records survive. We have letters on file from our early directors but no emails from our more recent ones: paper is easier to keep.

As I have worked this summer to compile our anniversary volume and to summarize our history, I have imagined someone years from now descending into a basement and pulling our 50th anniversary book – or perhaps this very newsletter – out of a dusty box. I am reminded of the Gospel writers piecing together the story of Jesus, and of all the church historians since, drawing lessons from the past that shape the way we practice our faith.

"I love to tell the story," Kate Hankey wrote in her classic hymn. And even as we tell the stories of God at work in our history, we are also telling the continuing story with our lives each day. In our deeds and decisions, our aspirations and alliances, we continue to write the history of the church in Southwest Pennsylvania.

The story of our unity in Christ is only beginning. Let's make it a story worth telling.

Your sister in Christ,

*Liddy*

The Rev. Liddy Barlow  
Executive Minister

Christian Associates of Southwest PA

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