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Creating Effective Congregational Heritage Displays – Part 1: Planning the Project

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“Ask the Archivist” by Paul A. Daniels – ELCA Region 3 Archivist

Creating Effective Congregational Heritage Displays – Part 1: Planning the Project

Displaying the treasures of our church archives is a valuable tool for outreach and education in our congregations. There is nothing quite as rich as a well-planned and well-executed presentation of documents, photographs, objects and interpretive text to tell your church’s stories in lively, engaging, even, fun, ways.

Like all worthwhile projects, though, there are important considerations to discuss with your heritage committee colleagues prior to beginning the work.

Purpose of archives displays:

First, it’s important to consider why you are planning a heritage display program. Often, the impetus to do this is tied to a church anniversary or some other milestone event. These are good, solid reasons that often help lay the foundation for an ongoing display program following the end of these milestone events.

But you don’t have to wait for major events like these to begin a display project. Another equally compelling reason involves providing good stewardship of the wonderful visual treasures your church archives contain. Naturally, you want to lift up these gems for all to see and enjoy, not to mention learn something about their church home in the process.

Both of these rationale in favor of an archives display program are valid, of course. Whatever the impetus behind the effort, it’s important for the group to “name it” prior to beginning the work. This will help insure that everyone is on board with the effort and ready to begin the work together when the planning is completed.

Scale of the display: what is both possible and reasonable?

If you are planning to exhibit displays in multiple cases or are considering a series of themed displays for a church anniversary or other milestone, you will have to face certain practical questions of scale and “do-ability”.

If, for instance, your heritage committee is already focusing on a wide range of archival tasks, including arranging, describing and conserving materials, as most congregational committees are, then serious consideration needs to be given whether or not you should take on a display project. Wonderful as the finished product of a fine display can be, there are few archives projects as labor intensive as this one.

Among the many elements needing attention will be the careful selection of content themes in advance, especially if you plan to work with more than one display case or hope to install a series of displays over several months, or even years.

The next column, part 2 in this series, will focus on these important questions of content, as well as on issues of layout, display case construction and, finally, the care of the archival items being exhibited.

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