

WHY STUDY (AND KEEP) THE PAST?

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Editor's note: The Interpretive Center written about at the end of this article was completed and opened in May 2013. View the announcement at: <http://www.chog.org/church-god-interpretive-center-open>

Of the material that passed across my reading table and into my hands this summer, a pair of items reminded me again of my vocation as a historian of Christianity and the importance of the work done by the archives and the Church of God Historical Society. Rowan Williams, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, calls to our attention once again that “history is a set of stories we tell in order to understand better who we are and the world we’re now in ... We start telling the story to get a better definition of who we are or to what the subject is we’re describing: history thus helps us define things” (*Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, Eerdmans 2005, p.1).

In other words, history is more the study of us than merely the study of long ago. If we want to understand ourselves and gain some perspective on us and our times, it turns out then, in the words of historian David McCullough, that we *need* history. In an article in *American Heritage* magazine, McCullough observes that it does not bode well for America’s future that the rising generations are largely ignorant of the nation’s history. A people “cannot truly know who we are or where we are going unless we know where we have been” (“History and Knowing Who We Are,” *American Heritage*, Winter 2008, p.14).

McCullough’s caution about America’s future applies with equal force to the church, specifically the Church of God reformation movement. Thus, following the lead of the moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, I have often observed that we cannot know what to do unless we have first asked the question, “Who are we?” But we cannot answer that question until we have answered the prior question, “Of what stories are we a part?” To think thus is to consider church history a moral and political art (see the essay by that title in my *Tell Me the Tale: Historical Reflections on the Church of God*, Warner Press, 1991, pp.137-157).

Of course, one cannot study history or reflect on our common past without *places* designated to collect and preserve the materials, the artifacts and records, which historians study to assemble the elements of stories that help answer MacIntyre’s questions. People concerned about the future direction of the Church of God can be thankful that we live at a moment when church leaders and benefactors appreciate the importance and necessity of history as we seek answers to our present and guidance for the future.

The Archives of the Church of God and the proposed Interpretive Center are two wonderful gifts, not only to people concerned about the preservation of the movement’s history, but also for those charged with responsibility of leading us into the future. Thanks to the generosity of many, the Archives has developed into a fine and usable research tool. Forty years ago, when I was a seminary student (at Anderson University School of Theology), the Archives was that in name only. In fact, it was the church’s “hall closet;” there were no finding aids or means even to know for certain the contents in its location. Today, the Archives both welcomes visitors and receives research requests that can be answered quickly, thanks to years of dedicated service and a continual flow of materials and other gifts.

Today we are poised to begin work on another major contribution to the historical study of the Church of God. As the insert in this number of the *Historian* describes, plans are now well underway for the construction and development of the *Church of God Interpretive Center*. Space for the Center has been reserved in the Church of God Ministries building. Thanks to a generous gift, the services of a designer have been retained and a plan developed. When completed, the center will provide visitors with the opportunity to reflect on specific themes important to the movement’s history and identity: holiness; unity; the Bible; healing/wholeness; and evangelism/mission.

Much more than a museum, the interpretive center will be a place to reflect on the movement's past in order to answer the question, "What kind of people is God calling us to be today and tomorrow?" I hope that each member of the Historical Society will make a generous contribution to the construction and development of the Church of God Interpretive Center. It is our opportunity to contribute to the future of the Church of God. As McCullough wrote, whether or not they realize it, the future generation needs history. We must take all appropriate steps to make this history available to them.

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