

An Anthology of Faith-Based Collections' Writings: Tracking the Genealogy of Scholarship on This Genre of Archives

Takatso Nawe

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6497-4240>
National Archives and Records Service
of South Africa
katsolele@gmail.com

Francis Garaba

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6958-9819>
University of KwaZulu-Natal
garaba@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Faith-based collections, also known as religious archives, church archives or archives of faith traditions, have paradoxically not received attention in mainstream archives. However, they permeate every facet of human endeavour. This could be attributed to this genre of archives as they are relatively unknown; there is a lack of general interest, maybe because of the small volume of archives generated from their parent churches or ministries, which renders them insignificant. Consequently, a definitive and authoritative text on faith-based collections has remained a pipe dream in the records and archives discipline, a global challenge. This paper explores the breadth of the writings to inform the global archival community so that scholars and archivists can contribute in this regard, thereby bridging this literary gap in our archival historiography. Faith-based collections, as they relate primarily to manuscripts of evangelists, are an under-researched area in Archival Science. Using secondary sources like books and reports and empirical works in journals, dissertations, theses, conference proceedings and so on, this paper provides a historical insight and timeline that highlights the trajectory of the scholarship on faith-based collections. While this article highlighted the scholarship on faith-based archives, it also contributed to managing manuscripts by evangelists/pastors in African Independent Churches (AICS) and mainstream churches. It offered insight into the emerging literature on faith-based collections and how this is scattered over various sources.

Keywords: Faith-based collections; archives; archives management; scholarship; manuscripts

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Introduction

There is a lack of empirical studies on faith-based collections, with much of this existing in survey reports and theoretical papers by concerned professional bodies, archivists and organisations on private archives. As noted by Garaba (2014,48), faith-based collections are defined as material that exhibits humanity's long history of God's interaction with the world, be it paper, digital or commemorative medallions used during worship like coins, medals, vestments, drums, furniture and other paraphernalia. The term religious archives or archives of faith traditions, as standardised by the International Council on Archives (ICA 2012), is also used interchangeably in scholarship. Still, the term faith-based collections is used for this paper. Regardless of the terminology used, empirical studies on faith-based collections are lacking. Choi and Nilson (2019) correctly noted that records and documents produced from religious activities and administration are valuable and important as a cultural heritage. Suelflow (1961) states, "the earliest and most valuable records in a country are often those of an ecclesiastical institution or parish." This shows the need for religious records to be recognised for their significance and should be the point of focus for researchers to develop the limited existing literature. Eberhard (2013) further expresses concern for the limited information and knowledge on faith-based collections and that this should be addressed worldwide. The reviewed literature included theoretical and empirical studies conducted globally, regionally (Africa) and locally on faith-based collections. Since the faith-based collection is a relatively under-researched area in archives management, the literature reviewed revealed limited published content.

Purpose and methodology

This review aims to outline seminal and contemporary literature on faith-based collections and provide some insight into the emerging literature on faith-based collections and how this is scattered over various sources. A comprehensive literature search of multiple databases, including Academic ResearchSpace, Project Muse, SA ePublications via SABINET online, Index to South African periodicals, Web of Science, Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA) via EBSCOhost, Elsevier, Scopus, Emerald, Wiley was conducted including repositories of grey literature sources (for example OpenDOAR, OAIster) and pre-print servers or repositories for Social Sciences (Advance, a SAGE preprints community and SocArXiv) were also included. Search keywords used in this review included church archives, ecclesiastical records, religious archives, manuscripts, evangelists, faith-based collections and Boolean search terms AND/OR. Electronic databases were searched until December 31, 2022, and the review was kept open, keeping an eye on recent publications in this genre of archives.

Empirical studies of faith-based collections

In a study on the management of religious archives in Pietermaritzburg conducted by Garaba (2013), 77% of the archival repositories ranked threats to their electronic records, and 44% cited insufficient policies and preservation plans as the greatest threat to their electronic collections. Similarly, another study conducted by Garaba and Zarvedinos (2014) on religious archives found that the now-defunct Lutheran Theological Institute collected resources either by accident or unknowingly due to a lack of archival policy. This attests to the lack of policy guidelines on managing records in religious institutions. This is also validated by Ngoepe and Ngulube (2014), who noted that no official policies and procedures for preserving and managing religious archives have been documented.

Nwaomah and Nwaomah's 2021 study also indicated challenges to the management and preservation of faith-based archives, focusing on the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Africa. Their study states, "there is no regular schedule for appraisal of records," "no designated records room and off-site storage for their physical records," and "most pastors have hardly received training in records management" (Nwaomah and Nwaomah 2021, 78–79). Such challenges undoubtedly impact the management of faith-based collections.

On the other hand, Matasio (2017) highlights access issues about faith-based collections. Records are not stored in secure environments. Therefore, their security is threatened and susceptible to damage or loss. There is non-compliance to recordkeeping requirements grounded on the legislature, and records are handled by unqualified personnel. Ntwayagae (2019) also confirms that the lack of trained personnel makes it challenging to manage records. According to Warkentin (2020), most church archives have not prioritised preserving valuable digital records. Due to inadequate funding, Church archivists do not have the necessary resources to do their work.

PAUCITY of literature on faith-based collections

There is a lack of research and writing about faith-based collections belonging to African Independent Churches (AICS) and mainstream churches. Garaba (2015,4) correctly noted that much of the literature on religious archives is obsolete, and available resources online, whilst helpful, are mostly guides or manuals for practitioners. In addition, some of these manuals are no longer available online as these were not published. A definitive and authoritative text on faith-based collections has thus remained a pipe dream in the records and archives discipline, and this is a global challenge. McKemmish and Piggott (2013) noted that in Australia, for instance, there has been relatively little exploration of particular types of personal recordkeeping and archiving, impacting the subsequent documentation of prominent individuals in society. The two authors highlight the scarcity of writings on personal archives from an Australian perspective. Very little information is available on managing personal papers or manuscripts of evangelists as they report.

In the United States of America (USA), Sueflow's (1961; see also Delozier 2004) journal article highlighted the plight of faith-based collections in terms of their management in the Lutheran Church. This article was later expanded and developed into a manual published in 1980, which is a single comprehensive publication that gives an overview of what faith-based collections are, their place in religious organisations and how they should be managed in terms of collection policies, acquisition, processing, references services and outreach (Sueflow 1980). This article used this manual as a reference point in reviewing issues about faith-based collections. O'Toole (1984) further underscored the importance of religious archives in the USA by highlighting what it meant to be an archivist stewarding such collections.

This is followed by Seton (1984), who surveyed non-governmental organisations in 28 selected UNESCO member states regarding the acquisition, preservation, arrangement, description, and access to the principal categories of private archives, including those of business and labour organisations, cultural and scientific institutions, estates, and families. Seton (1984) used a questionnaire to gather data from developed and developing countries. Her findings revealed that paper was the medium of most manuscripts and private archives held in responding institutions.

Of great relevance to this paper was the fact that this survey by Seton (1984) had a global appeal, unlike Sueflow's 1961 work, which had an American focus and bias and revealed that private archives were a matter of concern to archivists in developing countries as these were not actively acquired. Seton's (1984) study concluded with recommendations for action at the international level to assist in ensuring more comprehensive and effective preservation and administration of private archives.

In August 1992 in Hawaii, members of the Documentation, Archives and Bibliography Network of the International Association of Mission Studies (IACM) issued a declaration in which they reiterated the need for commitment by churches, organisations and individuals on the importance of the ongoing documentation of life and faith through the collection, preservation, and distribution of oral, written and media records relating to the history and praxis of mission in the churches of every culture.

This was followed in 2002 by a joint conference by the IACM and Centro Internazionale Di Animazione Missionari (CIAM) on faith-based collections in Rome, Italy, with the eye-catching conference theme: Rescuing the Memory of Our Peoples in which they highlighted that many of those memories are not being recorded. Where those memories are recorded often, their preservation is uncertain, their location hazardous, and access and documentation non-existent (International Association of Catholic Missiologists and Centro Internazionale Di Animazione Missionari 2002, 9). The conference produced the famous prayer on faith-based collections' and one excerpt is noted here for the simple reason that it highlights the paraphernalia or diversity of these collections:

Our spiritual and cultural ancestors have left behind monuments, carvings, paintings in caves and frescoes, on stones, tablets, in epics and stories, in oral and written traditions, and they serve as signposts of your hidden presence in creation and historical revelation.

Apart from this famous prayer, the conference also developed a manual on managing faith-based collections co-authored by Smalley and Seton (2003). In the United Kingdom (UK), the Religious Archives Group (RAG), in partnership with the Archives and Records Association (ARA) of the UK and Ireland and The National Archives (TNA), surveyed religious archives in the United Kingdom and aided by a grant from The Pilgrim Trust. This was the first-ever comprehensive survey of religious archives in the UK. Key themes that emerged from this report were fourfold. First, the importance of faith-based collections to their creators; second, the use of volunteers in faith-based collections; third, the creation and archiving of new religious media; and lastly, the selection and preservation of personal religious papers (TNA, the ARA and the RAG 2010). Three themes emanating from this report that provided a point of reference for this article included their importance, the technologies in use about how digital or electronic records should be created and archived and how these should be selected and preserved for the benefit of posterity.

The National Archives, the Archives and Records Association and the Religious Archives Group (2010) noted that few surviving collections remaining in the hands of religious institutions benefit from purpose-built or suitably adapted accommodation. Ngoepe and Ngulube (2014) correctly noted that memories of African Independent Churches (AICs) can be lost forever due to the lack of preservation of records, resulting in “holy amnesia”. Recently, in February 2020 in England, a petition¹ was doing rounds to ensure that the papers and collections of the late Lawrence Upton, who was a 'leading figure in the British Poetry Revival’ and died intestate, do not become landfill fodder (Creek as cited by Norledge 2020). In the United States of America (USA), in March 2019, The Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Archive found a home at Stanford University Libraries. The late Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is a palliative care pioneer and psychiatrist best known for having developed the ground-breaking Five Stages of Grief theory (Stanford Libraries 2019). These two incidents highlight the importance of preserving the manuscripts of prominent individuals in society as such works are of national importance (Creek as cited by Norledge 2020; See also Hearne 2018; Belovari 2018; Krause 2020; Bradley-Saunders 2020). The Religious Archives Group: Britain's Archival Religious Heritage (2014:2) reiterated that:

1 The petition reads as follows: I am sharing this call to sign this petition from Chris Creek: https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/the-archive-of-lawrence-upton?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=&loc=thank-you-page
Thank you for supporting this petition
Joanna Norledge
Curator, Contemporary Literary and Creative Archives, British Library

Please help bring pressure to bear so that Lawrence Upton's papers and collections do not become landfill fodder. The situation is precarious. Lawrence has no next-of-kin (as far as we know) and might have died intestate. We need to gain access to the building to ascertain if there is a will and to begin to assess the condition of the mountain of materials inside his house. It is currently boarded up by the police for security and possibly in danger of being declared a public health and safety hazard by the coroner's office. Time is in short supply. This petition seeks to demonstrate the importance of his materials for future research by scholars and practitioners. [The link to the petition is as follows]:

--- any collection of private records of a figure in the public eye is likely to include material of wider interest and potential future research value. Such figures may operate in an international, national or local context. They might have a world-wide profile such as the Dalai Lama or Archbishop Desmond Tutu, or simply have played a significant role within a particular congregation or community. Their records could be sources of information for biographical research, the study of religious thought and the development and impact of ideas, the study of education and the diffusion of knowledge, political affairs and social change, local events, and in many other, sometimes unexpected, ways.

That said, further highlighting the trajectory of the scholarship on faith-based collections is appropriate. Between the publication of the UK's RAG report in 2010 and the commencement of the Master's dissertation project in 2020, from which this article is drawn, there have been a couple of theoretical and empirical papers, including monographs on faith-based collections. The UK's RAG report appears to have influenced research in this genre of archives. Figure 1 summarises the trajectory of interest and growth in the corpus of faith-based works.

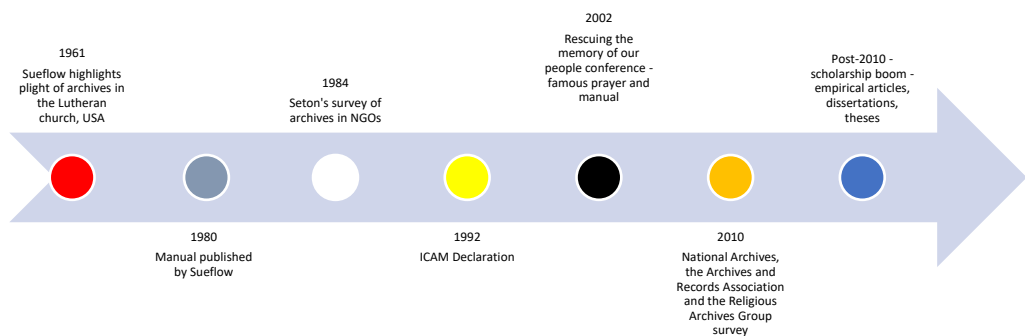


Figure 1: Tracking the origin and growth in the corpus of faith-based works

In the USA, Pressuti (2012) leans heavily on O'Toole's (1984) work to highlight the challenges of religious archives within the American Theological Library Association (ATLA). In Southern Africa, for instance, Bayane (2012) surveyed Botswana's church

archives, which provided a good starting point. This study was sponsored by the UK-based Endangered Archives Programme (EAP). The Endangered Archives Programme seeks to preserve cultural heritage and make it available to as broad an audience as possible. To achieve this, they provide grants to applicants to digitise and document archives. 'Endangered' means material at risk of loss or decay, located in countries where resources and opportunities to preserve such material are lacking or limited (Endangered Archives programme n.d.). It was in this risk context that church archives in Botswana were recognised, and funding was provided by the EAP for this survey to take place.

Bayane (2012) highlighted the plight of church archives in Botswana, and his study mainly concentrated on managing archives at the non-active stage. In South Africa, empirical studies on faith-based archives are sparse, and this paper attempts to add to this corpus or body of knowledge on faith-based collections. However, there have been notable works by Garaba 2013, 2014, 2015 2016 and Garaba and Zaverdinos 2014; Ngoepe and Ngulube 2014, Denis 2018 and Nawe (2024), which have all highlighted the plight of faith-based collections in South Africa. Just like the narrative reported by general works on records and archives, the problems are the same regardless of whether this is a private or public institution, as the issues of neglect, chronic underfunding, lack of expertise, and infrastructural challenges hog the limelight. McFarland (2012) aptly remarked that it is difficult to convince those leading a spiritual movement that they should invest resources in archives.

Nevertheless, five empirical studies done at the Masters level are worth mentioning here. First is the study by Matasio (2017) in Kenya, who noted that very little research has been conducted on records management in religious institutions. Similarly, studies by Lwabi (2011) and Ntwayage (2019) in Botswana and by Nwaomah and Nwaomah (2021) for the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Africa had this records management orientation. There is also a doctoral study by Chibambo (2023), which is noted here for its use of archival material, that is, African Enterprise archives and Michael Cassidy's manuscripts, which is material that informed this article extracted from a master dissertation project in terms of its upkeep. Nawe's (2024) study explores the management of faith-based collections of the evangelist Michael Cassidy at African Enterprise in South Africa.

It is also significant to note that following the 2010 RAG survey report, there was another survey in 2019 in the UK conducted on a smaller scale and focused on private records. This survey focused on one county, Oxfordshire. The Oxfordshire Undeposited Records Project, as it became known, is a small-scale project that the UCL Department of Laws funded to design a model methodology for identifying private sector records of value which have not been deposited in established archives by investigating records in one designated area, Oxfordshire (Cowling 2019, 5). This project highlighted a common global thread regarding preserving private records, as this was reported to be uneven and sometimes random in England and Wales.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the burgeoning interest and steady growth of works on faith-based collections. Sueflow's 1961 seminal work, culminating in the publication of the manual on religious archives, laid the groundwork or foundation for this genre of archives. Seton's 1984 survey, the 1992 ICAM declaration, the 2002 watershed conference, the 2010 National Archives, the Archives and Records Association and the Religious Archives Group survey all trace their origins to the groundwork by Sueflow (1961) in the USA. This background context informs the post-2010 boom in scholarship in the form of journal articles, dissertations, theses, reports and so on, as archivists, academics, and scholars join the cacophony of voices in raising the plight of this genre of archives. It is hoped that these voices will eventually translate into the compilation of a definitive, authoritative and comprehensive resource on this genre of archives, as this has remained elusive to date.

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