



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Stewarding History, Writing Our Chapter, Gifting the Future

"The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord'...Shaphan the secretary informed the king, 'The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.' Shaphan then read it aloud to the king." – 2 Kings 22:8, 10



Dear Friends in Christ,

I wonder if you considered recently that we are each born into a story that had its beginning long before we took our first breath, and which will continue long after our last exhale upon the earth. The truth is we are born into the formation of a chapter in a larger story of God's unfolding creative love. For some this chapter is short and for others it is long. Regardless, we did not originate the story, nor will we see its completion. We gifted with agency and a responsibility to consent to God's pull of love so that the Holy vision of shalom, expressed in the full flourishing of the human family and the whole creation may be realized just a bit more.

Part of this consent has to do with knowing the history that has formed us both personally and communally. Sometimes histories become hidden either through tragedy or neglect or some combination thereof. But rediscovering (or discovering for the first time) histories that have formed the world we inhabit can both help us understand ourselves better and teach us in ways that may positively shape our own chapter-making. Such stewarding of history is not about constructing a narrative of "glory days" that never actually were. Rather it is about better understanding the forces that shaped the chapters that have preceded us so that we may live ever more faithfully in our own day and time.

When "the book" was read to King Josiah, it resulted in a major reform that recentered the people on God's covenantal call and claim. It reoriented the heart of the people, if only for a time. Part of looking deeply at history has to do with recognizing the pattern of remembering and forgetting and remembering again that seems to be a persistent feature of the human experience throughout history. Still, understanding the particulars of this rhythm can offer wisdom for our own day and time.

The truth is each of our church communities is a repository of such wisdom. Each has an unfolding story archived both in the memories of those who have lived it and in the written records that often are stored in some remote place in our buildings awaiting rediscovery. Buried in those documents are stories of how the spirit guided those who preceded us. Even more they carry narratives about how the energy of love became incarnated in good times and in times of challenge. Likely there are testimonies of resilience that could offer encouragement if only we knew where to find them.

The new year is often a time when we are invited to make resolutions of one kind or another. Call it turning to a fresh page or a chance to start a new chapter, such times can lead us to "go through things" some of which we may want to repurpose and others we may want to release. The same may be true of our histories. Some pieces may provide great learning and other pieces might pull us toward confession, as was the case in the reforms of Josiah. Either way the writing of our own chapter of history will likely be enriched by such engagements. Even more it may be formed into a gift that future generations will need to navigate the situation of the world in their own day and time. I wonder what gems might be discovered by engaging the histories awaiting attention in your setting.

On a very practical level the Congregational Library and Archives has offered a helpful resource ([click here](#)) about how to care for the historical records that may be in your church's care. Another resource I want to

share with you has to do with a listing of what legal and financial documents are necessary to retain and for how long. You will find that resource by clicking [here](#).

Yet one more piece has to do with recording your own history in a way that contributes to the wider story of the United Church of Christ. Each year our Center for Analytics Research Development and Data asks **each congregation to provide a report of key measures of ministry so that we may better understand trends in our life together**. This information helps us all gain greater clarity about our present situation so that we may frame ministry in ever-new ways. **I strongly encourage each congregation to fill this out** so that we may better understand this current chapter that God is writing through us as a gift not only to ourselves but to future generations. Blessings on you and the discoveries that await you.

-Pastor Dave