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In a Flood, Secure your Life Vest: Pitts Theology Library and the disaffiliation of 327 churches from the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church

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In a Flood, Secure your Life Vest: Pitts Theology Library and the disaffiliation of 327 churches from the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church

Abstract

This paper is partially adapted from a panel discussion delivered at the VRA Annual Conference in 2024, “In a Flood, Build an Ar(k)ive: A Collaborative Approach to the Unexpected,” presented by Elizabeth Miller, Brinna Michael, Emily Corbin, Ann McShane, and Spencer Roberts. As the archival repository of the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, Pitts Theology Library experienced a dramatic increase in accessions beginning in 2023 due to disaffiliation. To manage the “flood,” staff at Pitts worked together to create a project structure and new workflows around these acquisitions. Since October 2024, the project has undergone changes to both its staffing and scope. To capture the content of our earlier presentation while also providing a meaningful update to it, this paper includes a brief history of United Methodism, a brief history of the recent disaffiliation event within the United Methodist Church; the workflows devised and undertaken by Pitts Theology Library in response to disaffiliation, and the revisions to those workflows in response to changes in staffing during 2024.

Keywords

Archival Management, Homophobia, United Methodist Church, Project Planning, Workflows.

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Introduction

In 2023, the United Methodist Church (UMC) experienced one of the largest schisms in the denomination in over a century. During this time of division, the North Georgia Conference (NGC) of the UMC made a priority of gathering records from departing churches. This task ultimately fell to the conference's official repository, Pitts Theology Library, Emory University. The following paper will introduce the history of Methodism, sketch out a timeline of decisions leading to the 2023 schism, and explore the ways the staff at Pitts leveraged collaboration and flexible thinking to successfully acquire, organize, and preserve church records during this historical moment.

Methodism: A (Brief) History of Division and Unity

From its inception, Methodism has been shaped by the concept of breaking away, embodied in the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 by John Wesley and his contemporaries. As seen in Figure 1, in the succeeding 400 years, differences in ideology and doctrine would result in Methodism taking on dozens of names and appearances as it spread across the globe. In the United States, the early 1800s saw the first of these splits, the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816. Into the 1900s, various Methodist denominations would merge with outside traditions. This produced the United Methodist Church (UMC) in 1968 from the merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

Structurally, like many of its sister denominations, the United Methodist Church is governed through a series of regional conferences which send Bishops and lay representatives to the General Conference. While each regional conference holds an annual gathering to address matters of membership, clergy appointments, and governance, the general body meets every four years to address denomination-wide matters of doctrine, policy, and governance. One of the most important functions of the General Conference is to oversee any revisions, additions, or cancellations in the *Book of Discipline*, the central document which dictates the collective doctrine and governmental policies of the church. Changes to the *Book of Discipline* range from minor to doctrine-shifting and therefore have the potential to raise considerable support or opposition from the membership. In 2012, a proposal to change the language of the *Book of Discipline* to relax restrictions on LGBTQ+ clergy and members was summarily rejected, but sparked a debate which would have a major impact on the UMC a decade later.

Disaffiliation in the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church

At the 2016 General Conference, the proposal to amend the language of the *Book of Discipline* explicitly barring LGBTQ+ people from ordination was presented again. In response, rather than outright rejecting the proposal, the Council of Bishops received approval to “form a commission to explore options that help maintain and strengthen the unity of the church.”¹ This Commission on a Way Forward met between January 2017 and May 2018, producing a final report that put forward three models for the church's future: the One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the Traditional Plan. With the report published in all four official languages of the UMC, the Council of Bishops put out a call for a Special Session of the General Conference to consider each plan. In October 2018, the UMC Judicial Council ruled on the constitutionality of each plan, finding the One Church

¹ Commission on a Way Forward, *Commission on a Way Forward's Report to the General Conference*, May 2018, 4, https://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf.

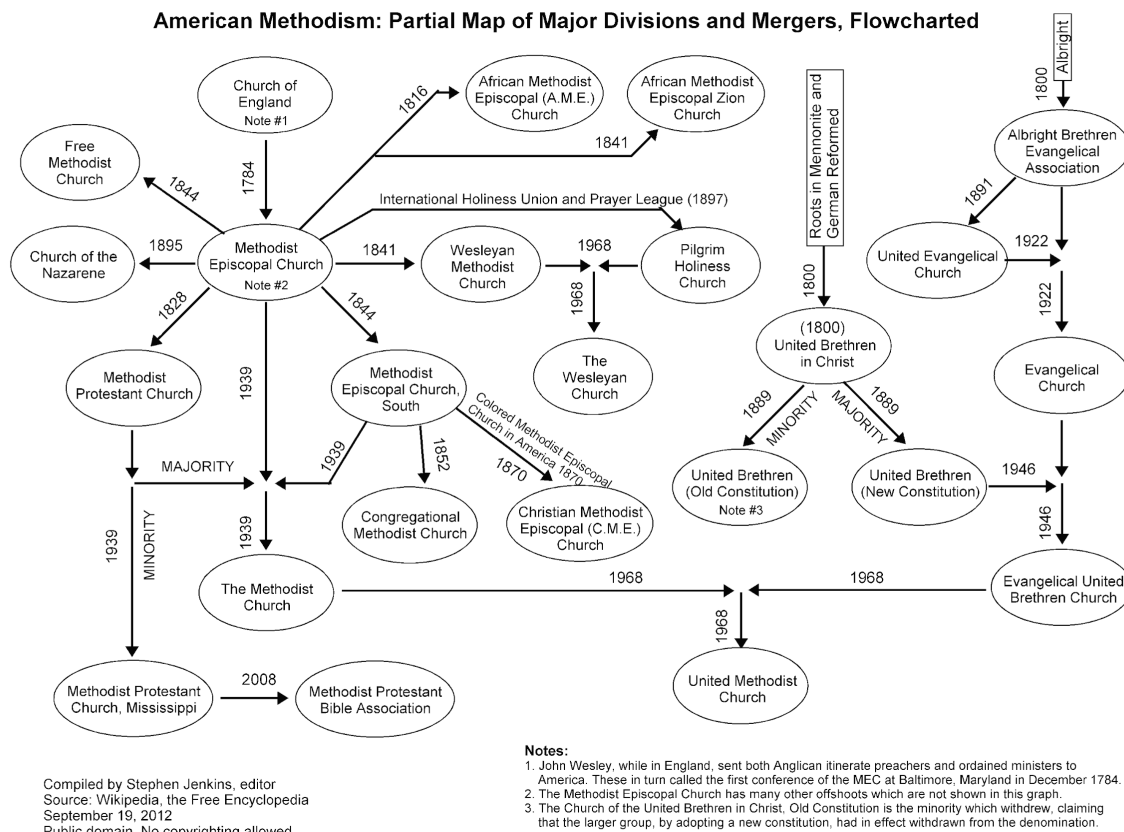


Figure 1: A flowchart of the major divisions and mergers of Methodist denominations in America. There are a number of divisions in the early 1800s from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and several more divisions and mergers throughout the 1900s. A notable division is the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1844 over abolition. The history of the Brethren Church denominations is traced as it leads to a merger with The Methodist Church into the United Methodist Church in 1968. Credit: Stephen Jenkins, 2012.

Plan largely constitutional, the Connectional Conference Plan outside of the court’s authority at the time, and the Traditional Plan requiring revision to pass a constitutional test.² At the Special Session of the General Conference, held from February 23-26, 2019, a new section of the *Book of Discipline*, ¶2553, outlined a limited time process for churches to disaffiliate from the denomination specifically “over issues related to human sexuality.”³ This was followed by an official ruling⁴ by the Judicial Council in April 2019 that ¶2553 was constitutional. Additional rulings were made through October 2024⁵ clarifying, defining, and determining the legality of ¶2553 and actions taken by regional Conferences thereunder.

² Linda Bloom, “Court: One Church Plan Largely Constitutional,” *UM News*, published October 26, 2018, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/court-one-church-plan-largely-constitutional>.

³ United Methodist Church General Conference, *Addendum to The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016, 4, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://cdn.cokesbury.com/images/community/cokesburyportals/2016boderrata.pdf>.

⁴ Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, *Decision Number 1379*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/in-repetition-for-declaratory-decision-from-the-council-of-bishops-re4>.

⁵ Decisions and memorandums related to ¶2553 can be found on the United Methodist Church’s resource website by searching “2553” here: <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home>. As of January 27, 2025, the latest decision made in connection to ¶2553 was on October 26, 2024.

The Board of Trustees of the NGC, following the Judicial Council's reaffirmation of the "validity and effective date of ¶2553,"⁶ officially adopted "both a disaffiliation process and a standard form agreement for local churches in keeping with the terms of Section 2553."⁷ The NGC Bishops, at a March 15, 2022 meeting, decided that the process and form laid out by the Board of Trustees was to be the primary avenue for disaffiliation related to human sexuality.⁸ This decision followed a ruling by the Judicial Council affirming a Decision of Law made regarding the Board's actions.⁹ At the following NGC Annual Conference, seventy churches, representing nine percent of the congregations and three percent of membership in the Conference, had their disaffiliation agreements approved with an effective date of June 30, 2022.¹⁰ During the ensuing six months, there were issues with the dissemination of information, statements, and materials which were "false and misleading...antithetical to the concept of a gracious exit"¹¹ regarding the disaffiliation process and the UMC. In light of this, conference leaders decided to pause the acceptance and processing of disaffiliation agreements, as there were concerns about the "validity of upcoming church conference disaffiliation votes."¹²

The Role of Pitts Theology Library

To understand the impact of this process of enacting, verifying, and adjusting the rules for disaffiliation on Pitts Theology Library, it is important to understand the role Pitts plays as a theology library and archive and the way that role shapes Pitts processes and policies. Pitts Theology Library serves Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Candler is a UMC aligned theological school and provides students seeking ordination with the required educational and vocational development. The primary role of Pitts collections is to serve and support student, faculty, and staff research needs, and the main circulating, periodical, and eResource collections meet the bulk of those needs.

The Pitts Special Collections and Archives unit acts as a repository for a wide range of historical materials, primary documents, artifacts, and audiovisual materials. These materials offer unique research opportunities for Candler students, faculty, and staff, but also outside researchers, community members, and organizations. Pitts staff and librarians actively seek out opportunities to build strategic partnerships within and outside of Emory University by engaging in projects, often supported by grant funding, that serve the needs of a wide range of users.

One important partnership is with the North Georgia Conference of the UMC, for which Pitts serves as the institutional repository. This means that Pitts is responsible for stewarding the Conference's historical records, documentation of Conference decisions, and the records of individual member churches. Some of these congregations regularly deposit records at Pitts, while others never do until they are required under the policies of the UMC. Under normal circumstances of dissolution or merger,

⁶ Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, *Decision 1401*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/decision-1401>.

⁷ Trustees of the North Georgia Conference of the UMC, "205.a. Report," *2021 Annual Conference Handbook*, 47–53, <https://www.ngumc.org/files/fileslibrary/annual+conference+session/2021+annual+conference+handbook.pdf>.

⁸ "Bishops Affirm Paragraph 2553 as the Primary Path for Disaffiliation," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/bishops-affirm-paragraph-2553-16396774>.

⁹ Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, *Decision 1420*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/decision-1420>.

¹⁰ Sybil Davidson, "Conference Members Ratify Disaffiliation Agreements, Pray Over Departing Churches," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/16505564>.

¹¹ Sue Hauptert-Johnson, "North Georgia Conference to Pause Disaffiliation Process," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/17216662>.

¹² Ibid.

a church provides their records to Pitts as the arbiter of the larger Conference and UMC organization. The process of collecting the records generally occurs with minimal challenges. However, the sanctioning of disaffiliation as a valid method of departure meant that Pitts would need to carefully rework the acquisition, processing, and use of these materials.

Historic Rural Churches Archive

At the same time that the decisions on disaffiliation were being made, Pitts entered into a partnership with Historic Rural Churches of Georgia (HRCGA),¹³ an organization that seeks to document and preserve the history of rural churches and church life in Georgia. With a grant from the Lettie Pate Evans Foundation, Pitts began to develop the Historic Rural Churches Archive (HRCA), a central online repository for historic churches in the rural South from library holdings, as well as materials contributed by community members and local organizations. Joined by two partner libraries, the Jack Tarver Library at Mercer University and the John Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary, the grant project brings together records from different denominations to support genealogy and local history research while also compiling datasets for contribution to larger projects such as the Digital Library of Georgia¹⁴ and *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade*.¹⁵ In the midst of the HRCA project, Pitts staff considered the opportunity presented by the imminent flood of records from disaffiliating churches, many of which meet the requirements for inclusion in the HRCA. The work of managing and organizing these incoming collections could support the overall success of the HRCA project, providing a rich foundation of materials to prompt community and local organizational interaction with the archive.

Pitts Theology Library and Methodist Disaffiliation

During the events of early 2022, there was no official communication between North Georgia Conference leaders and Pitts Theology Library regarding the disaffiliation requirement to deposit records with the conference. As questions from congregations seeking disaffiliation began to pick up, the archives staff reacted as nimbly as possible to draft brief instructions for gathering materials, including the type and format. These initial requirements were, by necessity, minimal, resulting in the first round of incoming collections needing careful assessment and processing. It wasn't until the conference paused disaffiliations at the end of 2022 that Pitts staff were able to compile a more robust document outlining the records requirements as part of reworking the disaffiliation process leading up to the June 2023 Annual Conference, where the new procedures were approved.¹⁶ The final record requirements included the following documents be submitted to the archive in either physical or digital format:¹⁷

- Final disaffiliation document from the Special Charge Conference Voting to Disaffiliate,
- Records pertaining to membership, baptism, weddings, and deaths from the church's inception,
- Written histories of the church, including a list of clergy members who served in the church,

¹³ Discover Georgia's Rural History." *Historic Rural Churches of Georgia*. Accessed February 28, 2025. <https://www.hrcga.org/>.

¹⁴ "Digital Library of Georgia," *Digital Library of Georgia*, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://dlg.usg.edu/>.

¹⁵ "Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade," *Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://enslaved.org/>.

¹⁶ "Disaffiliation Process and Information," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, November 2023, <https://www.ngumc.org/disaffiliation-process-and-information>.

¹⁷ "Required Records from Churches Disaffiliation from the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church - November 2023," *Pitts Theology Library*, November 2023, https://www.ngumc.org/files/websites/ngumc/DisaffiliatingChurchRecords_Nov23.pdf.

- Copies of any deeds in the church's possession,
- and at least one photograph of the current building and former buildings, as available.

Additionally, instructions were provided for delivery of the documents and the creation of digital copies of physical materials.

In August 2023, Bishop Robin Dease officially called for a special session of the NGC to be held November 18, 2023, for the sole purpose of ratifying disaffiliation requests.¹⁸ At the special session, 262 disaffiliation agreements were ratified with an effective date of November 30, 2023,¹⁹ and a deadline for all obligations of the disaffiliation agreements, including records deposit at Pitts, to be completed by December 30, 2023.²⁰ What resulted was 257 church collections arriving at Pitts Theology Library between November 30th and December 21st,²¹ with 202 brought in person and 55 submitted through the mail.

Acquisition

Coordinating the deposit of such a large number of collections in such a short time frame required careful planning, communication, and a willingness to adapt in the moment. Most of the collections were delivered in-person, and the Head of Special Collections scheduled an appointment with each church to bring the physical materials to the library loading dock. However, church volunteers could not just drop off materials and leave,²² and many were not prepared for the amount of time delivery would take. Appointments began with an initial assessment to determine that all materials were indeed church materials and relevant to the collections. If anything was not applicable, items would be sent back with the volunteers. The time that these assessments took varied widely and were largely dependent on the quantity and organization of materials brought by the volunteers.

Once Pitts staff received and assessed the materials, they assigned each collection a Record Group (RG) number and gave the volunteers a signed Deed of Gift. The collections were tracked using a spreadsheet of their RG numbers as they were assigned. Staff then attached a sticky note with the RG number on the collection box and moved it to the Special Collections Reading Room which remained locked throughout the day. If the materials were digital and received on an USB Drive, the Head of Special Collections would have to check that the files were extant, not password protected, and readable. From start to finish, this process demanded the majority of the Special Collections staff hours beginning in November 2023 in order to meet the December 30, 2023, deadline for completed disaffiliation requirements.

¹⁸ "Bishop Dease Calls Special Session of the Annual Conference for November 18," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/bishop-dease-calls-special-session-of-the-annual-conference-for-november-18-17525016>.

¹⁹ Sibyl Davidson, "Annual Conference Gathers for November 2023 Special Session," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, November 18, 2023, <https://www.ngumc.org/newsdetail/special-session-meets-18144158>.

²⁰ "Disaffiliation Timeline / Procedure Brief," *North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church*, November 2023, <https://www.ngumc.org/files/websites/ngumc/Disaffiliation+Timeline+Document+8.22.2023.pdf>.

²¹ December 21, 2023, was the last business day before the Winter Recess for Pitts Theology Library.

²² "Establishing Custody: Packing, Transfer, and Intake of New Collections," *Archival Accessioning Best Practices*, <https://accessioning.gitbook.io/archival-accessioning-best-practices/methods-and-practices/establishing-custody-packing-transfer-and-intake-of-new-collections>.

Accessioning and Processing

Once the initial chaos of receiving was complete, the collections had to be formally accessioned. In the summer of 2023, Emory University transitioned from a homegrown finding aid system to ArchivesSpace. As a result, by November 2023, the Special Collections staff were trained in, but not necessarily proficient at, using ArchivesSpace. With over 250 separate collections arriving in such a short period, it was necessary for staff to sharpen their skills, including refreshing accessioning procedures. Archivists often approach accessioning as processing,²³ which generally means accessioning *while* processing. This was not feasible for such a large project, and staff prioritized labelling and storing each collection correctly over looking through each collection to carefully craft a thorough accession record. In the end, staff decided to complete basic fields rather than creating a more robust record.²⁴ These fields included: title, identifier, accession date, disposition, provenance, acquisition type, and extent. As a result, the Reference Archivist was forced to practice "more product, less process" on a project scale.

With this influx of materials, the number of accession records by year dramatically increased during the 2023-24 academic year, as seen in Figure 2. These new collections represented an 856.7% increase in new accessions in 2023-24 over 2022-23 and a 362% increase over 2021-22, the year the first seventy churches disaffiliated. According to ArchivesSpace, 124 of the 151 accession records in 2023 and 133 of the 136 accession records in 2024 were disaffiliating churches. Between 2015 and 2021, Special Collections had an average of 43 accessions each year. The number of disaffiliating church records Pitts staff received in 2023 was more than six times the rate of accessions for all collections – Methodist and non-Methodist.

Accessions per Year

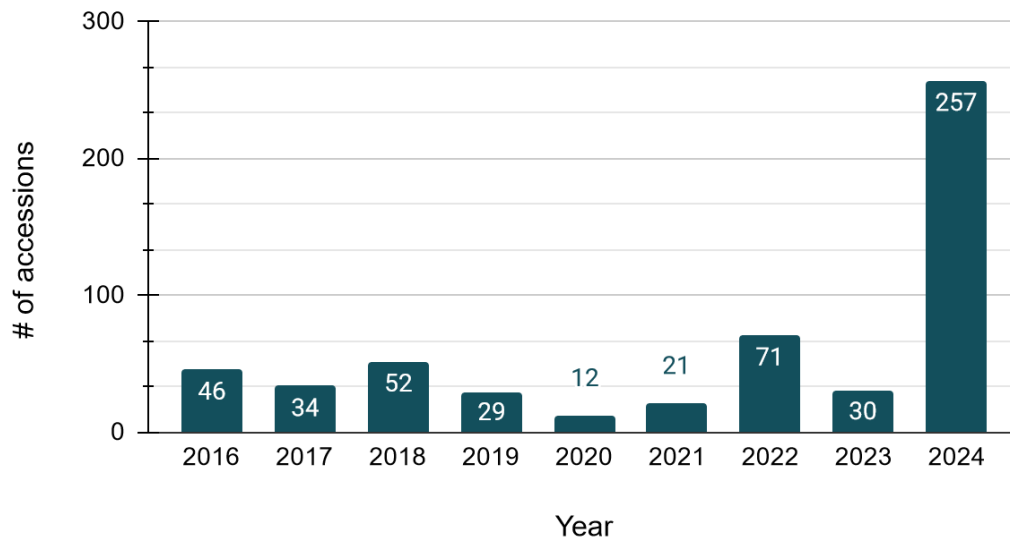


Figure 2: A bar chart of new collections accessioned by year from 2016 through October 2024 at Pitts Theology Library showing a sharp increase in 2024. There were 46 in 2016, 34 in 2017, 52 in 2018, 29 in 2019, 12 in 2020, 21 in 2021, 71 in 2022, 30 in 2023, and 257 in 2024. Source: Brinna Michael and Emily Corbin 2024.

²³ Christine Weidema, "Accessioning as Processing," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 274–283, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.69.2.g270566u745j3815>.

²⁴ "Guiding Principles," *Archival Accessioning Best Practices*, <https://accessioning.gitbook.io/archival-accessioning-best-practices/guiding-principles>.

Disaffiliating church collections included predominantly physical materials, and based on this, staff followed typical assessment policy.²⁵ After receiving the collection, they performed an initial visual assessment, recorded the collection name, placed the box(es) in the locked Reading Room, and then created an official accession record in ArchivesSpace. Once a record existed in ArchivesSpace, staff relocated the boxes from the Reading Room to the locked, climate controlled archival stacks to await processing (Figure 3).

Full processing of the physical materials began with viewing all materials and applying routine preservation measures, such as rehousing papers into acid-free boxes and folders; sleeving, storage, and housing of special formats or fragile items; and weeding of duplicates. Graduate student worker, Lexi Nooga, performed much of this work. Once materials were physically organized, cataloged, and stored, Pitts staff created an online Finding Aid, or Resource Record, for each collection (Figure 4). The Finding Aid is critical not only for researchers to see what materials are physically available, but also so that they can request digitization services, if appropriate, or schedule a visit to the Reading Room.






Figure 3: A grid of stacked, mismatched banker boxes. Each box has a sticky note identifying the accessioned collection waiting for processing and rehousing. Source: Ann McShane 2024.


²⁵ Audra Eagle Yun, *Archival Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2021).

Welcome to ArchivesSpace, the new Emory Libraries discovery system for archives. Visit the [Help page](#) for more information about using ArchivesSpace. We encourage questions and comments via our [feedback form](#).



Oostanaula United Methodist Church (Rome, Ga.) records

 CITATION  PRINT

 HOW TO REQUEST

 **Collection** Identifier: RG 389

No requestable containers

 Pitts Special Collections and Archives |  Oostanaula United Methodist Church (Rome, Ga.) records

Collection Overview | Collection Organization | Container Inventory

View Digital Material

Scope and Contents

The Oostanaula United Methodist Church (Rome, Ga.) collection includes apportionments, church programs, committee records, finance committee records, lay leadership, nomination committee minutes, staff/parish relations committee information, trustee records, conference reports, deeds, disaffiliation records, financial materials, church histories, membership records, and photographs.

Dates

Creation: 1861-2023

Figure 4: Part of an ArchivesSpace finding aid for the Methodist disaffiliation collection "Oostanaula United Methodist Church (Rome, Ga.) records." The collection title, Scope and Content Notes, and Dates are visible. Source: Pitts Theology Library, 2025.

Digital Materials

Digital collections are not fundamentally different from their analog counterparts, insofar as the idea behind archival processing.²⁶ One hundred thirty-eight disaffiliation collections were either partially or entirely born digital, and nearly all digital materials were received as flash drives (Figure 5). After accessioning and tagging the physical drives, the Digital Asset Librarian began the process of mirroring the drives, creating file lists, testing the files, assigning or documenting order, and assigning unique IDs. A Student Assistant, Angela Tran, was also trained to test files, document order, and assign unique IDs.

²⁶ Christopher J. Prom and Thomas J. Frusciano, *Archival Arrangement and Description* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013).



Figure 5: Four lines of flash drives with colorful tags on them. The picture conveys an overwhelming workload. Source: Ann McShane, 2024.

Unlike physical records, born-digital and digitized records require item-level identification. Pitts Theology Library uses a shared naming convention for all files in the access server, born digital or digitized. Visually demonstrated in Figure 6, this naming goes from broad to narrow: library, collection, container type, folder, item, page/part, following the structure of naming analog collections in the physical archives as closely as possible. This system treats born digital material as an alternate location container type (BD for born-digital) similar to how Pitts' oversized containers are labelled (OS for Oversized) instead of the common Box (B is for Box). Each container label signals to archivists that materials are stored in specific locations. In the case of items with a BD container label, that location is online.²⁷

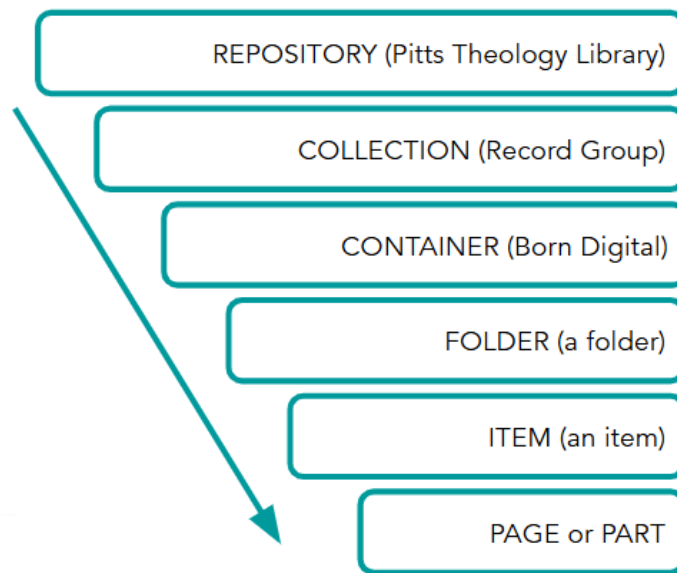


Figure 6: Chart depicting the broad-to-narrow organization of archival records at Pitts Theology Library. From the broadest, it reads; "Repository, Collection, Container, Folder, Item, Page or Part." Source: Pitts Theology Library, 2024.

Whenever possible, disaffiliation collections underwent minimal rearrangement and were left to follow original order at the folder level, with some concessions to keeping the folder naming as consistent as possible across accessions within this project. Since Pitts Theology Library specifically requested five kinds of records, those five folder names are by far the most prevalent: Disaffiliation, 2023; Membership Records; Church Histories; Deeds; and Photographs.²⁸ Most of this arranging work was done in a spreadsheet before being added to the finding aid in ArchivesSpace, where they are maintained as part of collection-level administrative records to document the processing decisions made.

For files outside of the five requested, order was determined at the item level at the time files were tested for readability and marked for migration to approved file types for the access server. Many files had misleading names and some had to be discarded²⁹, making the processing work tedious, but

²⁷ Pitts Theology Library. File Naming Notes. 2019. Accessed March 1, 2025.

²⁸ "Required Records from Churches Disaffiliating from the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church - November 2023." 2023. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kV7FKwtq2LYQMycf5l-hlnpQvwPl7ymp/view?usp=sharing>.

²⁹ When Pitts received employment, childcare, and other sensitive unrequested records, we opted to not acquire them.

necessary.³⁰ By early 2025, competing project deadlines pushed the lower priority collections down the queue, and as of the writing of this article, 25 born digital collections are yet to be processed.

Looking Forward

Ultimately Pitts Theology Library staff have completed the initial goal of this project, accessioning the church records of the disaffiliating churches in the North Georgia Conference and creating accession records in ArchivesSpace. However, staff are still only about halfway through processing and creating published finding aids for these collections. One non-tangible result of this project is that staff at Pitts have developed the confidence in handling large-scale hybrid or digital collections. Prior to this project, Pitts Theology Library rarely accepted even small collections of born digital materials and did not have a clear, concise workflow in place to accession and process these materials. This previously resulted in stray USB drives included in collections being placed in an archival box and locked in the stacks to languish.

An additional benefit is that Pitts Theology Library staff are more comfortable and familiar with talking to potential donors about born digital collections. They know who should lead these projects and have a basic workflow for accessioning and processing these materials. Staff are more confident in their ability to preserve born digital materials and make them available to the public. While the disaffiliated collections continue to be processed, their materials are already being incorporated into other projects within the library, such as the Historic Rural Churches Archive (HRCA)³¹ grant funded project. The involvement with this library grant gives staff at Pitts the opportunity to work interdepartmentally and develop collaboration skills.

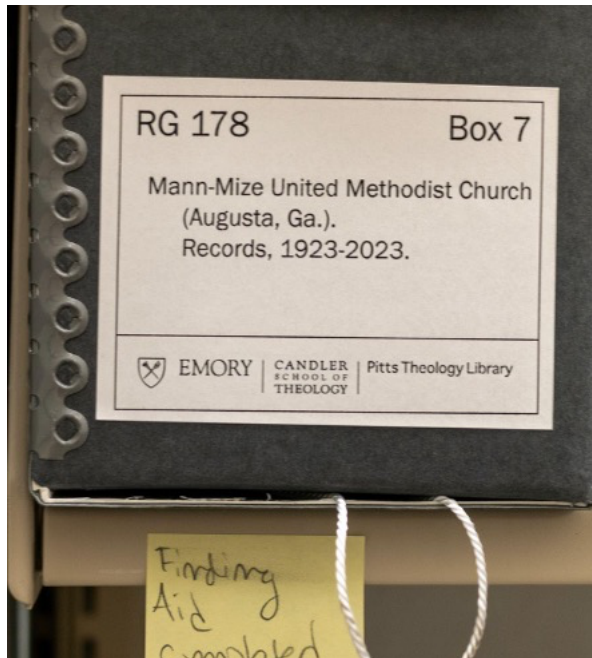


Figure 7: A label on a blue-gray, half-foot archival box. The label reads, "RG178 Box 7, Mann-Mize United Methodist Church (Augusta, Ga.) records, 1923-2023." A small sticky note is attached to the shelf just beneath the box reading, "Finding Aid Completed." Source: Ann McShane 2024.

These newly minted staff skills were put to the test as three of the five original members on the HRCA project, including the original Principal Investigator (PI), took new positions and left Pitts Theology Library during the latter half of 2024. The remaining team members, archivists Emily Corbin and Ann McShane, were left to drive the HRCA project forward despite looming deadlines and the reality of the slow academic hiring process. Corbin took over as the local project manager and PI, and with clear gaps in staff expertise and labor hours required to maintain established workflows for the disaffiliation accessions and HRCA grant project, a revised project plan would be necessary. In December 2024, Corbin and McShane reworked the project plan with particular focus on the required deliverables of the HRCA grant, identifying what had to be completed per month, and which tasks were not staffed. This revised plan reoriented the focus of the disaffiliation processing to prioritize the born-digital materials which could be in the HRCA repository, focusing on high-interest items like church histories, photographs, and deeds. Additionally, it identified gaps in staffing, in particular, metadata

³⁰ Erin O'Meara and Kate Stratton, "Preserving Digital Objects," in *Digital Preservation Essentials*, ed. Christopher J. Prom (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016).

³¹ Historic Rural Churches, <https://www.hrcga.org/>.

staffing that could not wait for the Cataloging and Metadata Librarian hire.³² Staffing challenges were addressed by temporarily reassigning some of McShane and Corbin's regular work duties to the end of 2024 and early 2025. This allowed the archivists to focus on what work could get done on the disaffiliation collections processing and HRCA grant until staffing shortages could be addressed. Additionally, grant money was reallocated to hire a short-term metadata contractor to support both projects while permanent Pitts staff were hired. Corbin communicated these project changes to the partnering institutions, reinstated regular project meetings, and collaborated with staff at Pitts Theology Library to ensure monthly project goals were achieved. As of the writing of this article, all high-priority Methodist disaffiliation collections are either processed or in progress and the HRCA project is on track to finish on time.

Conclusion

The archivists' work of processing is just as important as the records being processed. Human connection and communication are always at the heart of this work. This article has largely focused on that work, and it is important to address the very real human impact of projects like this. Like many long-term archival projects, the acquisition of disaffiliating church records challenged staff tangibly (e.g. workflows, workloads, etc.) and intangibly (e.g. emotional labor, burnout, etc.). Staff met tangible challenges head on, developing new workflows nimbly and with consideration for long-term continuity. Despite unexpected staff turn-over, a shift in focus from addressing small- to large-scale concerns and leveraging open interdepartmental collaboration enabled Pitts staff to lay a solid foundation of documentation and experience to support further work.

The intangible effects are harder to account for but are no less important to recognize. Disaffiliation is a challenging, but important moment in the history of United Methodism and LGBTQ+ life in the United States. Mirroring a growing social divide in the larger US, these disaffiliation records attest to an ideological schism within the United Methodist Church over recognizing, respecting, and affirming the lives and rights of LGBTQ+ people within the UMC community and beyond. While the records themselves might or might not directly reflect that, the context of their collection and preservation (disaffiliation) contextualizes a critical moment in UMC history. Archives serve to preserve history for the benefit of the future, and often that requires careful documentation of all aspects of the moment. As critical as addressing the very common "silences" and "gaps" in the archives,³³ it's equally important that archives do not fail to preserve and represent the aspects of history that are "deemed too negative and controversial."³⁴ Plainly put, collecting disaffiliating churches' records, not only preserves the history of one third of UMC North Georgia Conference churches and the communities they serve, spanning 150 years, but also records that those churches chose to disaffiliate because they did not agree that LGBTQ+ people should be recognized as legitimate and equal members of the community. The impact of this reality is that staff who worked with these materials often had to impose a level of academic distance from the material in order to process, describe, and preserve it with the same care as other collections. Maintaining this distance for such a long period took great resolve and emotional fortitude, particularly for those for whom LGBTQ+ issues are personally important.

³² The new Cataloging and Metadata Librarian started at Pitts on February 24, 2025.

³³ Kaitlin Smith, "The Problem of Archival Silences," *Facing History & Ourselves*, published October 25, 2021, <https://www.facinghistory.org/ideas-week/problem-archival-silences>.

³⁴ Jeannette Cooperman, "The National Archives Deletes Our Problematic Past," *The Common Reader: A Journal of the Essay*, published November 12, 2024, <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/the-national-archives-deletes-our-problematic-past/>.

Pitts Theology Library full time staff were not the only people who dedicated their time and energy to support the success of this project. The staff are grateful to train and work with two talented student workers who were integral to processing the physical and digital materials. Angela Tran processed many digital church collections, wrote scope and biographical notes, and assisted in beta testing the HRCA digital collections site. Lexi Nooga processed many physical church collections. Their enthusiasm and attention to detail made a strong, positive impact on the process of completing the disaffiliating churches and HRCA projects. Additionally, the authors are grateful to the Lettie Pate Evans Foundation, who generously funded the Historic Rural Church Archive. Their support made much of the work described in this article possible, ultimately making rural church history more accessible online and furthering a larger effort to tell the story of religious life in rural Georgia.

The titular “flood” has taken on more than one meaning for these projects. Facing contentious times in the United Methodist Church, a large number of new accessions, staffing shortages, and looming deadlines presented what could have been a catastrophe. No library worker could handle these obstacles alone, but with flexibility, honest communication, and thoughtful planning, the Pitts Theology Library staff weathered the “flood” and will continue to flourish in its aftermath.

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