This January, former Ringling curator Deborah Walk spoke to the diocese at the annual Word Out marketing, evangelism and communications day. Walk was curator of the Ringling circus collection at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art; in her retirement she has begun helping Episcopal parishes better collect and promote their unique history and features.

While she has an appreciation for history for its own sake, her interest in archives is purely future-focused and Gospel-fixated. Her thesis? Archives not only record the history of an organization, but in the case of a church, tell the world the meaningful story of God’s people, in action.

Archives can take many forms, and are often maintained because of their permanent legal, administrative, or historical value. An archive is also the name of the building or space that houses these records. Most simply, it is the record that remains when work is completed.

These records can take on many forms: original documents and paper records are a primary part of most historical archives, but photographs can also dominate, especially as it relates to important milestones, events and people. In recent years we’ve seen an increase in types of media in archives: videos have become easier to come by, and oral histories captured through audio - think NPR’s StoryCorps - have regained popularity as a way to capture first-person accounts of critical moments in time.

Archives, well run and maintained, reveal the past and proclaim boldly the movement of God in a faith community. They reveal the character and work it took to get a group to where they are today, and give them a foundation on which to build the future on. Newcomers to a church can experience some of the same important events as longtime parishioners by exploring the history found in old photographs and video, where second and third generation families can look back on key moments which overlap with their own personal histories.