Congregational Library & Archive

Records Management For Local Churches

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Introduction: Why Records Management?

Why this booklet was created and our audience

The Congregational Library and Archive offers the following records management tips to churches interested in the longevity and health of their essential records. We serve all Congregationalists, regardless of that group's chosen denomination: CCCC, NACCC, UCC, or independent. At the heart of all these groups is a common understanding: a church that is responsible for the care and maintenance of its history. This document is for anyone who has been given the responsibility of tending to those records: clerk, pastor, archivist, historian, treasurer, and administrative staff. Some outside the Congregational tradition may find that these tips translate to their purposes. We welcome any who are interested in records management.

This booklet was created specifically for the people who volunteer or were chosen by their congregation to take on the monumental task of organizing and ensuring the longevity of their community's history. Most in this position are not professionally trained archivists/records managers/historians. The goal of this booklet is to provide some basic guidelines to make an often overwhelming and open-ended project more manageable.

Motivation for creating a records management policy

Records management refers to a systematic procedure that identifies an organization's legal and historical story, regardless of format: paper,

digital, multimedia. The system provides a framework for the record keepers to maintain documents on both the long and the short term.

Further practical motivations for establishing a records management program include:

- Prevent loss of significant information or errors in discarding information;
- Easier preparation for taxes and audits;
- Planning for fundraising, anniversaries, and other celebrations;
- Efficient use of storage space.

It is critical to involve the congregation's appropriate board or council and office workers in creating and implementing a records management policy. The policy should be adopted by the church's governing bodies. Once the policy is in place, it must be maintained and consistently followed. If the congregation has a historical or library committee, they may be the primary resources for executing the plan.

Getting Started, Getting Organized

Assessing records

When starting a project of this nature, one of the first things you need to do is to survey what you have and where is it located. You may find church records in attics, basements, offices, closets, filing cabinets, safes, and church members' homes. Bring all these components together into one place. Do not be surprised if you find a cache of forgotten boxes or files after the initial search.

If consolidating records into one location is not an option, the alternative is to identify and map out all the places where records are kept.

Identifying categories for records

The next step is to identify the different types of records that have been unearthed. As you do so, start forming groupings of similar topics. Please review the graph on pages 4-6 for a brief description of standard types of records. Your goal is to start creating a coherent sequence - preferably arranged alphabetically or chronologically. The first step is to make sure all the like-topic material is together.

Definition: original order

The order in which records and archives were kept when in active use, i.e. the order of accumulation as they were created, maintained and used. The principle of original order requires that the original order be preserved or reconstructed, unless, after detailed examination, the original order is identified as a totally haphazard accumulation making the records irretrievable (but not an odd, disorderly or difficult arrangement).

Source: http://john.curtin.edu.au/society/ glossary/index.html.

During a project such as this, original order can be useful from time to time. Often times binders were set up for special events or activities or projects. Other times, records are simply kept in filing cabinets or boxes without an order that enhances the collection at all.

Quick Reference Guide

Here is a quick guide to the types of records commonly found in a church. It has been arranged in a Retention Schedule format for a quick reference. Some series titles may vary from group to group. For a complete template, please visit the Congregational Library's *Records Management* resource pages on our Web site, particularly for financial types.

Record Series Title	Definition
Auxiliary Groups	Non-leadership groups, can include social, youth, musical, mission/service
Building/Property	Architectural drawings, plans for improvement, renters
Bulletins	Sunday order of worship program/ weekly news items
By-laws, Constitution	
Committee Records	Leadership: deacons, council, trustees, executive, staff meetings, etc.
Correspondence	Subject– On a specific topic or special interest
	Transitory– routine: loses value after completion of project or activity
Directories	Sometimes included in manuals in 19th cent.
Financial–	*Review full template for more examples*
Audit	
Bank Statements	
Bequests/Estate Papers	Wills, gift agreements, bequests
Budgets, Reports to Board	Annual Budget
Checks, Cancelled	
Invoices, Purchase Orders	
Tax Status/Certificates **Tax Returns**	Certificates and Form 990
Histories	Of/by the church
Insurance	Policies
Legal	Deeds, incorporation, mortgages, contracts– review full template for more

Categories of Records—

Please note: review any major legal and financial decisions with a lawyer and/or accountant to be sure your church is meeting current state and federal mandates. The following table is a basic guideline.

Years kept for temporary documents or if permanent	Years kept as current when applicable	Archives
Permanent	4	Yes
Permanent		Yes
Permanent	2	Yes
Permanent	Active	Yes
Permanent	4	Yes
Permanent	Active	Yes
		No
Permanent	Current	Yes
Permanent		Yes
7	3	No
Permanent		Yes
Permanent		Yes
7		No
7 except major purchases	3	No
Permanent		Yes
7	5	No
Permanent		Yes
Permanent	Permanent	Yes
Permanent		Yes

Categories, Continued

Record Series Title	Definition
Membership	Membership register, baptisms, marriages, transfers.
Multi-Media	Photographs, images, sound recordings, video recordings: needs metadata for full value
Newsletters	Your church, not conference or denominational

Personnel
  Active Employees
  Employment eligibility verif.
  Grievance records
  Rejected employment applications
  Search Records– accepted
  Search Records– declined
  Time Sheets	

Policies, Procedures	Employment, Records Management, Operations, Benefits
Reports, Annual	Includes all end of year reports
Sermons	If space becomes an issue, focus on historically significant

Use the bottom spaces to add some of your own church's record series that were not listed.

Years kept for temporary documents or if permanent	Years kept as current when applicable	Archives
Permanent		Yes
Permanent	Permanent	May need review depending on meta data for individual items
Active + 7	Active	No
Active + 1 (3 years min.)	Active	No
Active + 1 (3 years min.)	Active	No
2	1	No
Active + 7	Active	No
5	1	No
3	3	No
Permanent	Active	Yes
Permanent	Permanent	Yes
Permanent	Permanent	May need review depending on amount and quality

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Organizational Tips

Getting started

- There is no "One True Path" to organizing. Do the best you can with what you have. Ask for help when you are stuck or put aside a puzzle until later. The answer might be in the next box.

- Do not expect to complete the entire organizing project all at once or quickly. Try to break tasks down into bite-size pieces to avoid getting overwhelmed.

- When sorting by topic, use a long table so each section can be in distinct piles.

What not to keep

- Look for duplication, particularly in committee or annual reports, bulletins, and newsletters.

- Material not created by the church, such as denominational newsletters or periodicals, institutional records for an associated but separate group.

- Financial material past its due date. Review the retention schedule either in this booklet or the one created by the church for how long to keep materials.

Putting together folders and boxes

- Use temporary working boxes (as seen in image above) when you are not actively working on the project. Leave a brief summary on those boxes to keep track of where specific subjects are stored.

- Always use pencil on folders, no pens or standard, commercial paper labels. Pencils provide flexibility if new material comes in or better descriptors remembered. See the next page for description of "foil-backed" labels.

- Be as consistent as possible when naming contents for easier readability. Include [topic], [subtopic– if applicable], [beginning date–end date].

- Invest in acid-free folders and boxes. See resource list at the end of the booklet for a list of vendors.

- Do not over or under stuff folders or boxes: too much and the material gets damaged from compression; too little and space is wasted and contents warps.

- Photographs should include first and last names of subjects, and date. Include the activity if possible. When possible, write identifying information in bottom corners with a photo-safe pen or pencil.

- Unfold paper when possible. Reconsider, though, if unfolding would damage or break the paper.

Supplies and storage

As previously mentioned, acid-free containers are a good investment. Some featured, favored supplies include:

Foil-backed labels - on occasions where you absolutely should use labels, invest in the "foil-back" type, which has a layer of thin foil between the paper and the acid-free glue which makes a much stronger bond. Standard non-foil labels will dry out and fall off after 10-15 years. The foil-backed label is ideal for the outside of boxes and the backs of photographs. They are available in archive supply catalogs.

Photo-safe pens - a photo-safe pen is one that does not have corrosive ink. It should not indent the surface when used and should not smear. This last factor is very important, as some pens designated photo-safe might not react well to glossy photo paper. Always test.

Mylar-D - this inert plastic is ideal for using with delicate paper and with photographs. It comes in a 3-foot wide roll, or in a wide variety of sleeve sizes. These are also used as photo album pages in conjunction with three-ring binders.

Filing cabinets are a viable storage option, either as a repository for archive boxes or by using acid-free hanging folders.

Sometimes books or ledgers are stored without a box on shelves or in drawers. If there is a reason why you can't store them spine out like a regular book, be sure to stack them flat or spine down to prevent the text block from pulling away from the binding. Additionally, to avoid compression, only stack a few volumes on top of each other.

Creating a guide

Once historical records have been arranged into a recognizable order and all the folders are well identified, it's time to create a guide to be used by the guardian or others who may need to use the collection.

The Congregational Library has dozens of guides listed on its Web site, which can serve as a template. The guide not only lists the contents of boxes, but may also include a brief historical overview and an explanation of how sections were organized.

Choose a software program that will be easy to maintain and modify. It can be as simple as a Microsoft Word document. Spreadsheets and databases are also useful, depending on the skills of the organizer and the complexity of the guide.

Be sure to share the guide with those in the church who need to use it.

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Digital Records

Industry standards

Most office records are created and stored in computers and have been for a few decades now. The professional archive community is still working on the best practices for long term storage. With the speed at which the technology changes, this remains a complicated issue.

It is always best to treat documents kept in digital formats the same as their paper counterparts. When creating a retention schedule include electronic versions of records.

Pitfall: migrating software

There are two scenarios that require migrating files within software. The first is the most common such as system upgrades— switching from Windows Vista to Windows 7. The second kind is a specific tool, such as your church may switch bookkeeping or donor software.

Solution: be sure the church chooses the new system carefully. Some companies have software that is proprietary, meaning it doesn't translate well when, not if, you switch to something else. Those responsible for choosing new software should do their homework to make sure it is a practical and sustainable choice.

No matter which scenario motivates the change, no matter what, be sure to test it to make sure the data that gets moved isn't corrupted both before and after.

Pitfall: long term stability of file types

Some types of files are more prone to becoming corrupted than others. One way to minimize losing a document, spreadsheet, image, etc. is to migrate to a type that won't corrupt so easily.

When dealing with most Microsoft Office-generated files, particularly documents (.doc), spreadsheets (.xls), consider also converting them into PDFs (Portable Document Format). This file type is used by major government institutions, such as the IRS, for long term storage.

PDFs can replace files that are no longer being actively changed/used or can act as a backup version of the original version. A number of online guides and tools can assist in this process.

When dealing with images, the recommended long term file type is TIF; for audio files, WAV.

Backing up files

Whatever systems you are using, all data must be backed up in case of computer crashes, viruses, natural disaster, or random corruption. As with PDF conversion, there are many resources available, and many options. Ideally, the church should consult with an IT professional to determine what system works best for their needs and budget.

Preservation vs. access

"Why can't we scan all this stuff and just throw away all this paper?" This is a question frequently asked. The response given at the Congregational Library is:

"Digital is about access, not about preservation."

It's true that digital formats are dominating everyday life; however, until there are better, more stable industry standards, there is no guaranteed shelf-life for digital files. As this section has already outlined, there are a lot of pitfalls when caring for said files. Digitizing certainly isn't a long-term money saving option since you need a significant outlay in personnel:

- Expertise to know what file systems are currently the best;

- Staffing to do the work and finances;

- Convert or scan;

- Backup and store;

- Migrate and update software.

This does not mean scanning isn't possible. It just should not be the only format you use to solve the preservation issue.

Paper copies

The opposite end of the spectrum is asking if paper copies of everything is the answer. Generally speaking, no. This is wasteful and not necessary if proper storage and backup is maintained. However, you may find that certain key documents warrant a paper copy for the long term archive. The clerk/secretary may choose to print out the membership information that mirrors the earliest records (member list, baptisms, marriages, deaths) kept in bound ledgers. A good compromise would be to plan one printout a year that summarizes the changes since the last printing. This activity can be written into the records management policy.

Writing a Records Management Policy

Justification: creating a policy

A records management policy is based on the church's mission statement and will direct you on what kinds of material should be kept, for how long, and why. It provides guidance, justification, and explanation on why certain things are kept and some are discarded. The corresponding retention schedule will provide your big-picture policy with an action plan.

Tools to create your policy and schedule

First get support from the governing bodies within the church and those who will be involved in implementing it from year to year. The people who do the heaviest lifting on maintaining the policy need to know why it's important.

The Congregational Library provides templates on its Web site for the policy and retention schedule. Each church can then alter them to suit their individual community's needs. If the templates the Library provides aren't a good match, look at the policies other institutions have published until you find one that works.

Once the church is satisfied with its policy, we recommend getting approval from the church's members to assure their full support going forward.

Ownership of Church Records

The question sometimes come up: who owns the church's records? The church does. While this may not be an issue for everyone, it's important that the issue of ownership is reviewed, especially before major transitions with leadership, office staff, and pastors. Ensure that a complete record is kept at the church, even if the documents are stored in individual homes. Consider including a section in the policy that addresses the issue of regaining records from departing pastors, staff, committee members, and/or leadership.

Preservation Concerns

Identify hazards, reduce risks

Beware of the following:

- Animals (Pets and pests)
- Children
- Insects
- Fire
- Flood
- Food & drink

The real key is minimizing the risk to historically relevant materials.

Storing materials near the kitchen or social spaces and the food that goes with them has the potential to attract pests that would find stacks of paper a good snack or residence.

Basements and attics are a standard default for storage. If you must use either, a simple safeguard is to avoid storing anything within a foot or two of the ground because of potential flooding in basements. Drape polypropylene sheets over shelving in attics.

Climate & environment

The closer you can keep a steady temperature and humidity level where you are storing your records, the safer they will be. Extreme heat and humidity encourages mold growth; cold and low humidity leads to brittleness. One way to reduce risk is to invest in a dehumidifier. It's cheaper to get a dehumidifier than to decontaminate moldy paper.

Be aware that direct sunlight will also age paper. Wood pulp paper is filled with acidic compounds. All those acids turn the paper brown and brittle as a matter of course, but sun acts as a catalyst.

The best safeguard against the sun are UV filters. These can be affixed to the glass in window panes. There are also clear tubes that go over fluorescent bulbs, which can also over-expose delicate paper to UV light.
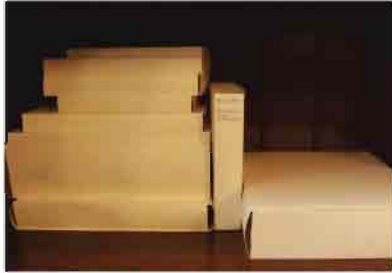
A way to minimize heat, humidity, and light is to buffer your records in acid-free archive boxes and folders.

Know your office supplies

Besides environment, documents sustain damage from living in an office environment. For example, most standard adhesives- scotch tape, rubber cement, white glue, and *Post-it* notes - are all made with acidic compounds and will hasten paper's fragility. Avoid using any of these on significant records. Do not worry about using these items, particularly *Post-its* on non-archival items or as temporary labels for boxes.

Preservation (continued)

Most modern paper clips are stainless steel, but their older counterparts are liable to rust and should be removed. This is true for any straight pins found.

"Sticky back" albums were very popular in the 1970s and '80s. The glues used on their pages will either act like cement, making it impossible to safely remove without ripping the picture, or the glue will fail and all the pictures will come loose. In both scenarios, the adhesive lingers on the back of the pictures, getting yellow and hastening the photo paper's brittleness. Ideally all should be decommissioned in favor of more stable storage options.

With the rise in popularity of scrapbooking, there is a new demand for higher quality supplies in local art and craft stores, which did not exist a decade or two ago.

Closing Churches

When that difficult decision to close the doors comes, a great deal of work needs to be done in order to ensure that the history of the congregation is kept alive. Many churches do not consider this issue until after everything has been decided and the final services have been done. We urge church leaders to be in regular communication with their regional denominational office, where applicable, and also to inform the Congregational Library staff about arrangements for the long term care of their records. The Library is always interested in advising during this process and may be able to help identify suitable relocation sites for records, if needed.

Those responsible for maintaining the church's records should be sure to review this topic on the *Frequently Asked Questions* page of our Web site.

www.congregationallibrary.org

Resources

Archive Supply Companies

There are a few useful online supply companies to choose from. Please compare and contrast regarding pricing, which does vary. Please note that Demco's catalog has a wide range and not everything they sell qualifies as archive-quality (the URL listed below is for the archive section).

Local arts and crafts stores with a good scrapbooking section will also have some archive quality supplies, but be sure to ask questions or compare with online companies.

- *Hollinger / Metal Edge*
  www.hollingermetaledge.com
- *Light Impressions* (focuses on photograph supplies)
  www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
- *University Products*
  www.universityproducts.com
- *Demco*

  www.demco.com/goto?PNHA01

Congregational Library's site

The *Resources* section includes:

- Templates for policy-making and the retention schedule;
- Frequently asked questions (FAQ) for closing churches;
- Useful links to related organizations.

The *Members* section includes the video lessons of the information in this pamphlet, which go into further detail, as well as other useful videos and resources. Be sure to call or email if you have any questions regarding navigation and services, or how to become a member.

Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC)

The NEDCC (www.nedcc.org) is an organization that specializes in preservation and conservation for paper-based materials. They offer a range of classes on these and similar topics as well as offer microfilm and digitization services. Their free pamphlets go into great detail on such topics as book repair and disaster recovery.

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The Congregational Library and Archive is a non-profit organization open to the public and dependent on the support of its constituency for many of its projects.

It is one of our goals to assist churches and organizations in the preservation of Congregational history. If you have found this document to be of value and would like to acknowledge it by making a contribution to the Library so that we may continue to develop additional resources, it would be gratefully received. Contact us for further information on donations or additional services.

Please give credit to the Congregational Library if this booklet is distributed beyond the original individual.

Many thanks to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, whose Records Management policy was the basis of this document. The Library's staff and governing board provided necessary advice and editing.

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