

Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations

CONTENTS

Introduction
Why Archives
Responsibility for the Congregation's Records
Archival Materials
What Materials Should be Preserved?
Oral History
Arrangement and Description
How Should Materials be Preserved?
Electronic Records
Microfilming
Cooperation With Others
Using the Archives
Acknowledgements
Additional Resources

INTRODUCTION

This brief guide is intended as an introduction to archives for congregational archivists and archives committees. It can help start a congregational archives, but may not answer every question that arises. Additional assistance is available from the ELCA churchwide archives, from your ELCA synodical/regional archives, or from the professional organizations listed at the end of this guide.

WHY ARCHIVES?

The archives of a congregation contains the primary, documentary evidence that is needed to identify its past. Today, the documents that provide evidence of the past are produced in a number of formats, from traditional paper to computer disk. All of these materials require protection and preservation from physical deterioration, to prevent the historical loss that would occur if they were ignored or forgotten.

Archives have been called the collective memory of an organization. In order to preserve the entire history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, well maintained and accessible archives are needed in each congregation. Congregational archives stand together with the other archives of the whole church as a resource for American Lutheran history and as evidence for the wider history of Christian life and mission in the world.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONGREGATION'S RECORDS

The primary responsibility for a congregational archives belongs to the congregation. Specific responsibility for maintaining the records of the congregation belongs with the pastor and others involved in the creation of congregational records. Churchwide and synodical archivists can only assume limited responsibility, mainly as advisors, for congregational archives.

The ELCA's model constitution for congregations provides for committees to be established as needed. To administer parish archives, to assist the pastor, to oversee and perhaps to conduct some archival work of the congregation, it might be useful to appoint an archives committee. This group, directly responsible to the Congregation Council and pastor, should be primarily concerned with providing continuous care of records as they move from active

to archival status. The committee should develop policies regarding the archives, particularly on such issues as collection development and access to information. The committee also should learn about archival administration and seek training in archival methods whenever possible. Archival work carried out by the archives committee should be performed in full cooperation with the pastor and others who create records of the congregation.

For some congregations, in addition to an archives committee, an archivist could be appointed. He or she would be primarily concerned with collecting and appraising, preserving and protecting, arranging and describing and making accessible original documents and records of the congregation. An archivist is not necessarily the historian or interpreter of the congregation's history. The archivist should work in close cooperation with those creating records, as well as with the pastor, Congregation Council and archives committee.

If a congregation is the result of a merger or consolidation of congregations, the resulting congregation becomes responsible for maintaining the records of all predecessors. If a congregation disbands, however, the records become the responsibility and property of the synod and are deposited in the appropriate synodical/regional archives.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Archival materials are those that hold historical and evidential value for the congregation. Usually these documents answer the "who, what, when, where and (if possible) the why" of the history of a local parish. The official papers, correspondence, and other parish records created or received by the congregation and its officers and organizations belong to the congregation. All such material is entitled to archival preservation. The records should not be thought of as the property of the pastor or any other individual member who maintains or produces them. A policy to clarify the issue of ownership of the congregational records should be developed by the Congregation Council. If records are donated to the archives from private sources, a "Deed of Gift" should be created that assigns all copyrights, as well as literary and property rights in the materials, to the congregation.

WHAT SHOULD BE PRESERVED?

A. Records and documents that must be preserved and filed systematically in the archives:

- 1.. Copies of the articles of incorporation, all constitutions and all by-laws and amendments of such documents, of the congregation and its organizations. (Each version should be dated.)
2. The list of charter members and all accessions, transfers and releases of members thereafter.
3. The parish registers recording the ministerial acts, especially for baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, etc.
4. The minutes of the meetings of the congregation, Congregation Council, committees, and organizations.
5. An annual list of all the names of officers and members of boards and committees.
6. All official correspondence (i.e. concerning congregational, rather than personal, matters).
7. Copies of the reports of all the church's official committees, commissions, societies, and organizations.

8. Copies of all calls extended to pastors and appointments to teachers and other servants of the church that are accepted by them. (Calls and appointments that have been declined need not be preserved.)
 9. Records of any disciplinary actions.
 10. Printed materials including the Sunday bulletins, congregational newsletters, letters to the council or general membership, orders of service, and programs for special events.
 11. The records of parish, weekday, and Sunday schools.
 12. The non-current treasurers' records, such as general ledgers and annual reports.
 13. Copies of the deeds and descriptions of the church properties, titles, leases, surveys, etc.
 14. All contracts for the construction of congregational buildings, and facilities, as well as contracts negotiated for special services. All plans, specifications, blueprints, and drawings should be included.
 15. Mortgages should be retained even after they have been retired. It is advisable to use copies for mortgage-burning ceremonies.
 16. Photographs or other graphic depictions of the congregation's building(s), pastors, organizations, activities, and events.
 17. Other media items: sound or video recordings of worship services, special events, musical presentations, and activities.
 18. Histories of the congregation.
- B. Additional materials created by, for, or about the congregation provide additional documentary evidence and also should be preserved:
1. Source materials, such as original returns of surveys or questionnaires.
 2. Statistical and comparative summaries on finance, attendance, and membership, particularly copies of reports submitted to the synod office or ELCA units and organizations.
 3. Local newspaper articles or histories that include information on the congregation.
 4. Synod minutes that include parochial reports of the congregation.
 5. A chronological account of the major events and activities of a congregation.
 6. Unpublished studies, theses or dissertations about the congregation by students or other researchers.
- C. Supplemental information could be maintained, for reference purposes, if space permits:
1. Histories of: the ELCA and predecessor church bodies; related synods and their predecessors; neighboring congregations; and ELCA colleges, seminaries, and social service institutions closely associated with the congregation.
 2. Biographical information gathered from various resources on persons from the

congregation.

3. Museum pieces (such as carvings, stained-glass windows, old vestments, and altarware) also should be preserved, although congregations may need to be guided by considerations of space in deciding what objects are kept. Often if still usable, it is best to donate them to a congregation in need of them, although records of such gifts should be preserved.

ORAL HISTORY

Over the last several years, the oral history interview has become a popular and useful resource for archives and history. With the aid of recording devices, memoirs may be preserved in audio or video form, supplementing or complementing written sources.

The purpose of an oral history interview is, generally, to clarify or fill in the gaps where written records are either lacking or missing. An interview also may provide candid comments and opinions not available in other sources.

An interview begins as a well-planned series of questions, and is not an informal chat. It should focus on an era, landmark person or event to be documented. The interviewer should research the subjects to be covered to reduce the need for time consuming clarifications. Any one interview should not go on for more than an hour or two, since both participants will tire if a session runs longer.

If at all possible, a written transcript of the interview should be prepared. The interviewee should check the transcription for details such as dates, the spelling of names, and other details. Finally, both the interviewer and interviewee should sign a donation agreement to make the taped and transcribed interview property of the congregation, including literary and copyrights.

ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION

In archives administration two major principles govern the method of organizing materials: **provenance** and **respects du fonds**.

Arrangement according to **provenance** means that the material is organized according to the group or person that created or originated the records. Therefore, within the archives of a congregation, materials are arranged into what are known as record groups, each representing a record creating entity, such as the congregation as a whole, the pastor, officers, Congregation Council, each committee, and organization. Subgroups may be used for greater clarity. For example, the record group, "Sunday School," might have subgroups for the superintendent and each department, nursery, primary, or youth. The organizational chart of the congregation would be the best place to start when establishing appropriate record groups for the archives.

Under each record group will be one or more series of functionally related records or record series. Record series are often identified by such general titles as: correspondence, reports, minutes, and subject files. An example in a typical congregation would be as follows:

Record Group: Church Council

Record Series: 1. Membership Lists

2. Minutes

3. Correspondence

4. Reports

Each record series is arranged in this manner at the time records are received into the archives. An accession log maintains the provenance, by recording who produced what records, the inclusive dates and volume of the materials, date received and the person responsible for the transfer of materials to the archives.

The second archival principle, **respects du fonds**, or retention of the original order of records, means preserving the records in the order and filing scheme in which the records were created. In other words, records should not be reorganized alphabetically by subject, name, or any other system. The original order must be maintained except in cases where records are inaccessible due to the original arrangement. When this happens, records should be rearranged simply into record series by type (minutes, correspondence) in chronological order, under the appropriate record group.

Once materials are arranged by record group and record series, guides to the records, or finding aids, should be prepared. Each record series has its own finding aid. Basic to the finding aid is a folder by folder listing of materials in the records series. Also included are brief historical background notes and a description that highlights what cannot be easily understood by looking through the folder listing.

Historical notes might include the starting date of the group involved, name changes, function of the group and major changes in its authority, objectives, or activities. The description would indicate completeness of materials, reasons for missing items, notes on arrangement (alphabetical, chronological, etc.) and other information as needed. The finding aid/guide could repeat the provenance information recorded in the accession log and the name of the person who processed the records and developed the finding aid.

HOW SHOULD MATERIALS BE PRESERVED?

A. The archives should be located in a locked, fireproof room, area, or filing cabinet that is least affected by extremes of light, heat, dryness or humidity. The ideal storage environment has a temperature of 67 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus 2 degrees, with relative humidity of 47% plus or minus 2 percent. If this ideal cannot be met, an area that can maintain conditions close to these, with minimal fluctuations is next best.

B. Archival materials should be placed into archival file folders or envelopes made of acid-free paper. If open shelves are being used, folders are then placed into acid-free document cases available in various sizes to fit standard letter and legal size paper, pamphlets and oversize materials such as parish registers. The document cases add protection from direct light and dirt. (Note: Acid free folders are available from manufacturers who specialize in archival products.)

C. When placing materials into folders and document cases, all fastening devices -- metal paper clips and staples, rubber bands, and string -- should be removed.

D. Materials should not be folded to fit into containers. Oversize materials, such as blueprints, confirmation photographs, and other large items should be stored flat if at all possible. Map cases would be advisable if a large number of such items need preservation.

E. Water, chemical sprays, all adhesives and lamination cause irrevocable damage to paper

and photographs. Cleaning or repair of documents requires special techniques. Restoration work should only be undertaken by professionals.

F. Documents should not be marked with permanent ink. If any marks are made for identification purposes, pencils should be used.

G. Photographs, negatives, slides, audio and video recordings and artifacts should all be filed separately from paper documents. Negatives should be stored separately from associated prints.

H. If scrapbooks are to be assembled for anniversaries or other historical observances, be aware that most adhesives would permanently damage original documents and photographs. A scrapbook cannot be considered a device to preserve permanently materials, but rather a memento for a specific occasion. Use only copies to compile a scrapbook.

I. Records should be inspected periodically for atmospheric and vermin damage, and adequate safeguards and protective measures should be taken if evidence of such damage is found.

J. Normally vital records such as minutes, membership records and ministerial acts should not be removed from the church premises, except for restoration or microfilming. In some cases, an ELCA synodical/regional archives may be willing to store these records for congregations.

ELECTRONIC RECORDS

Professional archivists have just begun to tackle the problem of preservation and accessibility of electronic or machine readable records. Currently, common electronic record storage media, that is, computer tapes and disks, are susceptible to damage and cannot be considered permanent. New computer technologies may bring some answers to long-term archival needs. But new technologies may create another problem, which is accessibility of records with outdated or absent software or hardware. Therefore, to maintain records in an electronic form, a commitment must be made to update continually and convert all records to the newest formats, disks or tapes

The short-term answer to storage of electronic records is to store paper copies as back up for all correspondence, reports, and minutes. Parish membership lists and other data that are updated often should be printed and dated regularly. Strict policies and procedures to preserve these records, including adequate funding, is needed. For both long- and short-term storage, back-up copies should be made regularly and stored separately, in a separate building, if at all possible. Data loss can occur for a variety of reasons during active use or in storage. Adequate back up will ensure that a high percentage of data can be restored for current activities.

MICROFILMING

When records are deteriorating and further damage results from using them, a cost-effective and accepted method of preserving the information, if not the actual paper, is microfilming.

Ensuring that archival quality film is produced is extremely important and complicated. Most service bureaus do not do this kind of filming, and it is recommended that congregations seek outside assistance before entering into such a project.

Archival quality microfilm must have each of three elements. First is appropriate preparation before filming so that materials are filmed in a logical sequence with introductory title and

contents pages at the front of the film, and frequent "targets" to signal the start of a new record series, volume, or folder thereafter. Second, the film used should be silver based and the filmer should test for contrast, density, and clarity, according to American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards. Third, the original negative should be stored under environmentally controlled conditions and should be used only to make additional copies. Only positive copies should be used for reference purposes.

This is a brief introduction to microfilming and should not be considered a complete guide. Further information and assistance is available from the churchwide archives or from your synodical/regional archives. The ELCA churchwide archives also is able to store the original negatives of microfilm for congregations who choose to have their records microfilmed. Synodical/regional archives may also offer this service to congregations.

COOPERATION WITH OTHERS

A. Congregational archivists should report significant historical events to the synod archivist or other appropriate office and deposit copies of some materials with the archivist. Among the items to be deposited in the synod archives are:

1. Printed or mimeographed histories of the congregation, or copies of manuscript histories, if available.
2. Special orders of service prepared for ordinations, installations, groundbreakings, dedications, re-dedications, and anniversaries.
3. Special bulletins or newsletters. (The synod archives cannot maintain sets of Sunday bulletins.)
4. Printed or mimeographed biographical material pertaining to pastors, teachers, church officers, or prominent lay persons.
5. Local or regional Lutheran periodicals and serials.
6. Photographs of churches, schools, pastors, teachers, and staff members, always identified with names and dates!
7. Positive copies of microfilmed records of congregations.

B. The ELCA Archives in Chicago is collecting congregational histories, special bulletins, biographical information, photographs and positive copies of congregational records on microfilm. Other items are accepted on a selective basis.

C. Your state historical society is interested in obtaining printed congregational histories and positive copies of congregational records on microfilm.

D. Pastors may desire to keep personal copies of some of the materials described above. They should be allowed to do so, provided original copies are retained in church files.

USING THE ARCHIVES

Anyone with a legitimate purpose should be permitted to use the archives. Discretion should be exercised, however, where personal information is involved. Policies on use, with recommendations and consultation of the congregation's archivist or archives committee, should be established by the Congregation Council. If records are searched, the person doing

so should use the documents under supervision, copying what information is needed, but not removing ledgers, files or individual documents from the church office or archives.

Researchers must be cautioned that the copyright to both unpublished and printed materials in the archives is owned by the congregation. Whenever records are cited in published works, credit and congregational ownership should be indicated.

If documents are to be exhibited in anniversary displays or for other celebrations, materials should be placed in a location safe from theft or vandalism. No writing or adhesives should be applied to the documents. Mats used to frame photographs may be used to secure documents for viewing. Original documents should not be left on display indefinitely, since the display area will probably not be in an environmentally controlled area.

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