Records Management and Archival Preservation in the Congregation

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**Part 2: Historical Archives in the Congregation**

Part 1 of this series addressed the need for a records management and retention policy. Such a policy should include a regular, periodic evaluation of the congregation’s records and identify documents that should be transferred to the historical archives.

**Historical archives in the congregation**

The historical archives is responsible for preserving records that document the congregation’s history and those that should be kept indefinitely for legal purposes. Materials placed in the archives might include:

* Written histories of the congregation
* Biographical information about ministers
* Articles of incorporation, constitutions, and bylaws with dates
* List of charter members
* Annual dated lists of members
* Annual reports to the congregation, including annual financial reports
* Reports to the conference and denomination
* Important legal papers
* Bulletins, programs, and newsletters
* Documentation and plans related to building projects
* Property records, such as deeds, surveys, and mortgages
* Important photographs
* Audio and video recordings
* Newspaper articles/clippings pertaining to the congregation with dates and sources
* Chronological lists of pastors and other church leaders with biographical information
* Non-active membership records, such as older church registers
* Any documents of enduring value

**The church historian**

The congregation might appoint a church historian to develop and oversee the historical archives. The historian should help identify, collect, and organize historical documents and see that they are transferred to the historical archives. It is essential that the historian have a familiarity with the history of the congregation and its denomination or at least be willing to learn.

**A place to start**

Congregations that do not have an archives often have a wealth of historical material in various states of organization. Locating documents, evaluating them for historical value and condition, and creating an inventory is a place to start.

**Organization**

A congregation’s active files—those kept on a daily basis—are usually maintained and organized according to a scheme that makes sense to the creator. Archives, on the other hand, have standard organizational principles known as archival arrangement.

Archival arrangement hinges on the concepts of provenance and original order. Provenance is the principle that items from the same source (person, office, organization) should be kept together and not combined with those of another. For example, correspondence produced by one pastor should not be mixed with that produced by another. If materials from several sources are mixed together, the arranger should sort them according to the entities that created them.

Original order is the principle that the original filing scheme of the record creator is preserved. One pastor might file correspondence alphabetically by recipient, for example, but another might file by topic. In each case, the archives would preserve the order of the materials as filed by each pastor. If the original order has been destroyed, then records should be organized in a way that reflects the structure of the creating organization or biographical development, if the creator is a person.

The overall arrangement in the archives should reflect the congregation’s structure. An organizational chart of the congregation will help determine which committees and functions create records. Main divisions, called record groups, can be assigned to the major committees or functions with further divisions into series. An example:

Record Group: Consistory

Record Series:

1. Consistory rosters

2. Minutes

3. Correspondence

4. Reports

Record Group: Christian Education

Record Series:

1. Sunday school

2. Vacation Bible school

3. Adult Bible class

Finding aids—documents that describe and help locate records—should be provided for each record group.

Creating a historical archives and appointing a historian will help ensure that documents of enduring value will be identified and transferred to a secure location for permanent storage. Following the principles of provenance and original order and creating an arrangement structure will keep records organized and findable. The next article in this series will address the preservation of materials in the congregation’s historical archives.

**Resources**

“Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)

<https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Brief_Guide_for_Archives_of_Congregations.pdf>

Archival Training Resources (Yale University Divinity Library)

<https://web.library.yale.edu/divinity/special-collections/archival-training-resources>

“What is Archival-Historical Material?” (Concordia Historical Institute)

<https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/1-what-is-archival-historical-material/>

“Congregational Archives” (Concordia Historical Institute)

<https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/2-congregational-archives/>

“Historian” (Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries, UCC)

<http://assets.nationbuilder.com/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/1334/b10.pdf?1418424800>