Records Management and Archival Preservation in the Congregation

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**Part 3: Preservation practices**

Part 2 of this series provided an overview of the congregation’s historical archives and the role of the church historian. Once the congregation has decided to establish a historical archives and identified materials of enduring value, it should create a plan for storage and preservation.

The goal of archival preservation is to protect materials against the effects of light, temperature, humidity, mold, dust, and physical handling. Minimizing and mitigating the effects of acid from chemical adhesives and general paper products is also vital.

**Storage location and conditions**

Records in any format should be stored in a secure location offering stable temperature and humidity and good air circulation. Humid conditions encourage mold growth, while extremely dry conditions can make paper brittle. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity are also damaging. Choose an interior space on the main floor that is out of the direct line of air vents and shaded from windows. Avoid attics and basements and areas with overhead water pipes. A location with a stable temperature of 70º Fahrenheit, plus or minus 2º and a relative humidity of 45%, plus or minus 2% is adequate for archival storage and still comfortable for human occupants. The location should be on church property, not in the home of a pastor or individual member.

Items should be stored on powder-coated metal shelving with open sides. Acid from wooden shelving can migrate to archival materials, even if surfaces are varnished. Filing cabinets are not a good choice for archival storage – file folders can slump, and a lack of air circulation can create damaging microclimates.

**Preserving archival materials: a very brief overview**

*General practices*

Whatever is done to preserve an object should be reversible and not itself cause permanent damage or alteration. For example, the chemicals in adhesive tape and laminating material are highly acidic, their effects permanent, and they should be avoided. Only soft lead pencils should be used to mark on photographs and archival enclosures, as ink is acidic and cannot be erased. Always write on a hard, flat surface. Writing on a stack of papers, for example, will cause handwriting to become embossed in the photo and items underneath. Use vinyl rather than rubber erasers. Paper clips, staples, and other mechanical fasteners should be carefully removed from items before placing them in enclosures.

While gloves can be used to handle photographs, they should not be used to handle paper documents. Gloves make handling papers more difficult and increase the likelihood of tears or other damage.

*Paper documents*

Acid-free (or pH-neutral) enclosures are recommended for storing paper documents. Documents can also be inserted or encapsulated in clear polyester sheets and sleeves (Mylar is one brand name). Letter and legal-sized documents can be placed in acid-free file folders and stored vertically in archival storage boxes similar in size and construction to banker’s boxes. Archival storage boxes also come in many other shapes and sizes. Spacers should be used to support materials in boxes that are partially full so that the files do not slump. Conversely, boxes should not be overfilled as this causes stress on the documents inside.

Highly acidic items, such as newspaper clippings, should be photocopied and the original discarded. If the item is too important to discard, it should be placed in an acid-free enclosure or separated (buffered) from other items by sheets of acid-free paper.

Prior to the mid-20th century, records were often kept in leather-bound ledgers. These items should be placed in acid-free boxes to protect them from light and dust, and to contain the red-colored residue of deteriorating leather binding (referred to as red rot). Antique and rare books should also be kept in boxes. Special enclosures, called phase or clam shell boxes, can be custom ordered to the size of the book, and do-it-yourself kits are also available.

*Photographs*

Acid-free paper envelopes or polyester sleeves, available in a standard photo sizes, will protect photographs and slides. Label the back sides of photographs with a soft lead pencil using a light hand or write information on the outside of a paper enclosure. If the photograph has a slick backing that cannot be marked with pencil, try a non-photo blue pencil available from art supply stores. Photos can be stored together in acid-free boxes. Use white fabric gloves to handle photographs to minimize oils from interacting with the chemicals. If these are not available, carefully handle photographs by the edges.

*Sound and video recordings*

Magnetic media, such as cassette and video tapes, can last up to 30 years if kept in stable conditions. Preservation of these materials will also require maintaining the equipment that can play them. Digitization can make the recordings more accessible, but congregations that choose to digitize audio and video records should still retain the original media.

*Digital files*

Documents that are “born digital” present special challenges for archival preservation. Changes in technology and formats can make media obsolete every few years. To keep them viable, files must be transferred onto media that uses current technology and retained in a format that can be read by current software.

Discs, hard drives, flash drives, and magnetic media, such as recording tape, are not permanent. The life expectancy of external hard drives is three to five years. Typical CD-ROM discs degrade and can become unusable at five to 10 years. BluRay discs—reliable up to 50 years when properly stored—fare better. The life of flash drives or memory sticks depends on the frequency data is deleted and rewritten to the device.

Printing out as many documents as possible on acid-free paper, or at least the most valuable ones, is a partial preservation solution. If a congregation retains files on electronic media, it should consider creating a time table for checking their integrity and transferring files to fresh media. Multiple copies should be made and at least one copy stored offsite. The congregation might consider keeping one copy in a “cloud’ service.

*Objects and artifacts*

Congregations who want to preserve objects that are important to their histories might consider using them in a historical display. Examples of such items include such as pulpit Bibles, paraments, chancel furnishings, and communion ware. Archival containers for storing artifacts are also available.

**Preservation copies**

Congregations that are concerned about the long-term preservation of historical information should consider creating preservation copies of archival documents. Microfilm, which can be duplicated and will last many hundreds of years under the right storage conditions, has been the preservation medium of preference for decades. The impact of digitization has made the materials and services used to produce microfilm more difficult to find, but microfilming remains a viable preservation option. Preservation copies should be used for research instead of originals whenever possible. Photocopies should be used to display historical documents in exhibits.

Improvements in computer and scanning technology over the past decades has made digitization a popular choice for preserving historical records. If a congregation choses to digitize its records for preservation, then it will also need to formulate a plan for preserving the digital files.

The next article in this series will cover denominational archives in the United Church of Christ.

**Resources**

*Archival supplies*

Hollinger Metal Edge

<https://www.hollingermetaledge.com>

Gaylord Archival

<https://www.gaylord.com/c/Preservation>

*For further reading*

“How Should we Protect our Vital Parish Records from Catastrophe?” (Concordia Historical Institute)

<https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2A_How-should-we-protect-our-vital-parish-records-from-catastrophe.pdf>

“Rescuing the Memory of Our Peoples: Archives Manual” (Yale University)

<https://dacb.org/resources/archives-manual-english.pdf>

Chapters 4, 6, and 7 address archival preservation.

“Selected Preservation Resources” (Society of American Archivists)

<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/preservation-section/selected-preservation-resources>

“Care, Handling, and Storage of Works on Paper” (Library of Congress)

<https://www.loc.gov/preservation/care/paper.html>

“Digital Preservation Handbook” (Digital Preservation Coalition)

The website addresses information that is born digital.

<https://www.dpconline.org/handbook/digital-preservation/preservation-issues>

“Data Storage Lifespans: How Long Will Media Really Last?”

<https://blog.storagecraft.com/data-storage-lifespan/>