

About the Congregational Library

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!



Congregational Library

14 Beacon St.
Boston MA 02108

617-523-0470

info@congregationallibrary.org

www.congregationallibrary.org

Copyright © 2006, 2007, Jessica Steytler, Congregational Library



Congregational Library

Records Management For Local Churches

Edited and Designed by Jessica Steytler



Table of Contents

Introduction: Why Do Records Management?

Church Register: Vital Statistics
Electronic Databases and Software Programs

Church Documents & Activities

Legal and Property Related Documents

Financial Records

Church Personnel

Pastoral Care Files

Audiovisual Material

Correspondence Including Email

Sermons

Resource Materials

Retention

Acknowledgements

Introduction: Why Do Records Management?

Since Congregational churches own their own buildings, call their own pastors, create and adopt their own bylaws, elect their own leaders, and completely control their own affairs, it is especially important that Congregational churches maintain good records. 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.

There are also many practical reasons why a congregation would want to implement a records management policy:

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

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 councils or 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.

Disbanding Church

All churches have their own lifetime, and 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. The governing bodies are strongly urged 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 the records. The library is always interested in advising in this process and may be able to help identify suitable relocation sites for records if needed.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, whose Records Management policy was the basis of this document, thus proving that this task is a universal one, no matter what denomination.

Thanks also to our very helpful editing crew comprised of library staff, board members, and friends:

Susanna Baker

Margaret and Norman Bendroth

Donald and Ellen Clark

Robin Duckworth

Claudette Newhall

Richard Taylor

— Jessica Steytler

Sermons

Retention

The pastor and the congregation may agree to place manuscripts of sermons commemorating special occasions in the archives of the congregation.

Resource Materials

Including:

- Resource materials received from the denominational office for the support of the activity of the congregation
- Hymnals
- Worship materials
- Curricula
- Minutes of the denominational meetings
- Yearbooks and directories of the denomination

Care

Resource materials should be distributed to the members of organizations and committees who may benefit from them. Current materials may be filed by subject and kept in an accessible location. Such materials seldom have long-term value and the files should be culled annually. These materials are generally collected in the church-wide and denomination or regional archives.

Retention

The congregation may wish to include the minutes of the national denomination in its own archives. Samples of hymnals and parish education materials are important for recording the history of the congregation. Other resource materials may be discarded when they have been superseded by newer materials.

The next sections talk about specific types of records that are common in most churches. Some of this information may well be about practices already maintained by the congregation, and others new. Be sure to contact the Congregational Library about points that are unclear or not covered adequately for your congregation's needs.

Church Register: Vital Statistics

What are Vital Statistics?

The standard within the Congregational tradition for several hundred years was to have one ledger book that would record the people of the church: members and leaders. Until the early to mid-20th century, churches also kept the minutes of their monthly and annual meetings. Meeting minutes will be discussed further under Church Documents.

The Church Register can include:

- Permanent roll of members
- Baptisms
- Marriages
- Funerals
- Pastors of the congregation
- Other professional lay workers of the congregation such as Christian educators and music directors
- Roster of officers of the congregation
- Congregational minutes

Care

Never leave your church register vulnerable to destruction. Keeping a copy of the register, in the same or another format will provide security for it today. However, for long term preservation you must select a format that is not dependent on hardware and software that quickly become obsolete.

For legal and historical purposes, consider one of the following means of securing your register:

- Maintain the traditional register in addition to any electronic database. Once each year, print out, on acid free paper, the necessary reports that constitute a register; date them and care for them as you would the traditional bound format.
- Additional non-print options:
 - Have microfilm copies made at reasonable intervals.
 - Scan the register onto CD-ROM discs.
 - Take digital photographs of the pages.

Retention

Usually, the church clerk is responsible for maintaining the register. Each congregation should follow its own bylaws/job descriptions on this point.

The Church Register is kept permanently and requires the utmost care. It is a hard-copy record. You may use an electronic database program for managing the records that you maintain in the administration of your congregation. The database itself does not constitute a register.

Duplicate and disburse!

A duplicate copy, in one of the above formats, should be kept at an off-site location, preferably a bank safe deposit box. Remember that digital information is not preserved by accident. If these methods are used, you must commit to reformatting the files as hardware and software change.

Audiotapes of weekly worship services frequently are reused. Be sure to place sound and video recordings of special services in the archives of the congregation.

Retention

All of these visual media are permanent records of the ongoing life of the congregation and should be placed in the congregation's archives.

Correspondence

There are many various types of correspondence:

- From the pastor, as administrator for the congregation
- Correspondence to and from the leaders of the congregation or denomination
- E-mail messages to the congregation or select individuals or groups from pastor, lay leaders, or office staff
- Pastor's personal correspondence

Care

E-mail is especially vulnerable to both unintended loss and retention. E-mail that represents the policies, program, and ongoing life of the congregation should be printed out.

Retention

The administrative correspondence and the correspondence to and from the officers of the congregation or the denomination judicatory should be kept for the tenure of the pastor, staff, or leadership role; the files then should be appraised for permanent value. Only letters with historical significance need be kept for the archives of the congregation. The pastor's personal correspondence should be maintained separately and removed by the pastor at the end of the pastor's tenure.

Retention

The pastor may decide what should be retained at his or her own discretion, but consideration should be given to retaining such records for the duration of his/her call or appointment.

In all states, suspected cases of child abuse are required to be reported to the authorities. Whether such reporting requirements apply to pastors varies. Consult with staff in your regional denominational offices or an attorney in your state for guidance on such matters.

Audiovisual Materials

There are several different ways to document significant events in the life of a congregation. Media types include:

- Photographs and negatives
- Digital photographs on CDs
- DVD and Videotapes
- Films
- Audiotapes and CDs

Care

Digital files must be intentional and regularly maintained to survive for long term use. As one of the newer types of electronic files, audio and visual material is very vulnerable and care in some ways more challenging than that of its paper counterparts.

Place photographs and negatives, properly identified (date, event, names of persons), in the archives of the congregation. Slides, films, and videotapes should be identified carefully and retained in a manner that respects their fragility. Digital photographs may be retained on compact discs, but remember that file formats, hardware and software will change. Make prints and in order to preserve the pictures. **Identify the images!**

Electronic Databases and Software

The Library understands that not all churches have the resources to use computers. For those who do:

Congregations may use electronic databases or software programs for administrative tasks such as:

- Membership and other directories
- Church register
- Accounting system
- Record of member giving
- Mailing lists

Two critical issues pertain to the SAFETY of electronically stored data:

- Restoration of current information in the event of system failure or loss; and
- Migration to newer generations of hardware and software as systems become obsolete.

Care

To ensure the easy restoration of your database in the event of system failure, natural disaster, or human mischief:

- Back up your computer's hard drive at least once each week and store the disks or tapes in secure location away from the computer.
- Limit access by means of password protection.
- Document any software used—identifying the software by vendor, name, and version, and report formats (Word, Excel, etc.)—so that you are prepared, when the time comes, to migrate to a new generation of software or hardware.

Retention

A database, such as a membership management or accounting system, is a constantly changing record. An early decision must be made as to which reports generated by your database are necessary as permanent legal or historical records of the congregation. These should be printed out annually (see Church Register above).

As you update and purge information from your databases, consider which records (i.e., transferred members, general ledger reports) should become part of a subdirectory permitting long-term storage and ease of access, and make certain that these directories migrate to software and hardware upgrades with the rest of the information in the database.

These materials, produced by the congregation to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the parish and tell the congregation's story.

- Annual reports
- Minutes of annual and special congregational meetings
- Minutes of the board or council and those of any trustees and deaconates
- Minutes or reports of committees and of auxiliary organizations for men, women, and youth
- Copies of yearly reports sent to the denomination's office
- Constitutions and bylaws
- Sermons and worship bulletins
- Membership directories with or without photographs
- Newsletters
- News releases and other promotional material
- Congregation histories

Retention

Personnel documents covered in the Legal Documents section must be kept permanently. See Legal and Property Related Documents above. If information, including background checks and letters of recommendation, attest to the employee or volunteer's fitness to fulfill a responsibility or perform a service, it should be retained for up to 40 years. If information relates to a worker's compensation or other claim by the employee, this should be retained. Similarly, if information relates to a possible claim or lawsuit by others involving the employee's conduct or duties, that also should be retained. Biographical information and career history for personnel should be retained in the congregation archives. Unless it is a Legal Document, all other material should be destroyed upon completion of service.

Pastoral Care Files

When the pastor provides pastoral care to parishioners, such as marriage counseling or personal spiritual direction, the pastor may create a file containing:

- Date and time of consultation and persons present
- Observation notes
- Tests, such as personality inventories
- Correspondence

Care

These files must be kept in strictest confidence as they involve a relationship at the highest level of trust and are usually subject to the clergy and parishioner privilege. The pastor must use good judgment in establishing the nature of each relationship and in creating documentation of it. An understanding of the nature of this relationship will determine the appropriate disposition of the records.

Church Personnel

Files, containing some or all of these documents may exist for the pastor, elected lay leaders, employees, seminary interns, and volunteers:

- Letters of call
- Letters of application
- Job descriptions
- Resumes
- Letters of recommendation
- Background and reference checks
- Performance appraisals
- Contracts
- Continuing education documentation
- Documents related to compensation and benefits
- Emergency notification forms
- Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation (HIPAA requires all health files be kept separately from the employee's other files.)
- Correspondence
- Honors and clippings

Care

Right to privacy laws dictate that these files must be held in strictest confidence. Keep these files locked up at all times.

- Devotional materials
- Curricula – locally produced
- World Wide Web site

Care

These may be created electronically, but used and preserved as paper documents. Those documents that are also legal documents should be protected by keeping another print copy in an off-site location. The World Wide Web site changes frequently. You may wish to print out “snapshots” of your web site from time to time to preserve this record of your congregation's story.

Retention

All of these documents tell the story of your congregation and should be collected in the congregation's archives. The section on Disbanding Churches discusses alternatives for what to do with records after the church closes.

Additionally, the volume of what is kept is unique to each congregation. One way to reduce the overall size of archived items is to limit the amount of duplicate material. For further information about this, please contact the Congregational Library .

Legal and Property Related Documents

Vital legal and property related documents may include:

- Covenant
- Articles of incorporation
- Articles of association
- Church bylaws
- Minutes of annual and special congregational meetings
- Minutes of committees of governing boards

- Church policies and procedures
- Tax-exempt status reports and documentation or the congregation's nine-digit federal employer identification number
- Deeds, titles, surveys, leases, mortgages, easements, and blueprints
- Insurance policies (current and retired)
- Copies of letters of call to the pastors and employment contracts for lay church workers
- Service contracts
- Documentation creating endowment funds and for bequests, gifts, and endowments
- Personnel handbooks and employee benefit programs

Care

1. You are advised to use copies of these legal documents for administrative purposes and deposit the originals in a bank safe deposit box or other secure off-site location.
2. Keep all insurance policies, even though you may have purchased a new policy from a new carrier.

Retention

With the exception of service contracts, these are permanent records.

Financial Records

Your financial records may include:

- General ledger year end reports
- Budgets
- Treasurer's reports
- Annual audit reports

- Invoices
- Record of member giving
- Check register
- Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks
- Certificates of deposit or other evidence of savings
- Information on bequests, gifts, and endowments

Retention

It is highly advisable to have a financial management database that handles all of your accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents.

Permanent. . .

- Annual audit report
- Treasurer's report and the congregation's budget should be attached to the minutes of the annual congregational meeting
- Information on permanent bequests, gifts, and endowments

Seven Years. . .

- Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks
- Bank reconciliations
- Payroll administration records such as W-2, W-4 forms and payroll registers
- Cash receipt journals
- Record of member giving (All records related to congregational spending are open. All records related to member giving are confidential and should be secured.)

Three Years . . .

- General invoices (For major purchases, you may wish to keep receipts or canceled checks as evidence of ownership for insurance purposes.)

No need to retain offering envelopes