



concordia historical institute

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RETRIEVE + RECORD + REFLECT + RECALL

“WHICH AGENCY RECORDS SHOULD BE RETAINED OR DESTROYED?”

The local parish cannot retain a copy of each item it produces. A congregation that has just been organized may retain a copy of everything during its early years. Older congregations, however, could have their basements and storage areas flooded with a mountain of materials—that no historian would ever be interested in examining—if “one copy of each” had been preserved. To assist congregations, the following guidelines have been prepared in deciding what materials may be destroyed after certain periods of time have elapsed and what must be preserved permanently.

I. Determining Historical and Legal Value

Papers and materials may have varying degrees of historical and legal value. Consider the following:

A. Papers with primary value accomplish the purpose for which an agency is created. They are administrative, fiscal, legal or operational in their account.

B. Secondary values are contained in papers not related to the agency that created them, yet they may have value for the congregation, individuals or agencies (e.g., reports issued by others, such as the Synod, district or congregational officers).

C. Papers that contain evidence of the congregation’s or agency’s existence or achievements. These may include information about persons, corporate bodies, problems, conditions, involving the congregation or the agency. Usually such records are of primary importance to the historian.

D. Evidentiary records may be divided between:

1. Records on origins, including minutes, memoranda, opinions of individuals, etc. These may be rather scanty during the organizational period of an agency.

Individuals may have produced and controlled their existence by destroying them or limiting their circulation.

2. Records on substantive programs, of which there are four types:

- a. Summary narrative accounts, including annual reports, historical summaries, etc.
- b. Policy documents, directives, regulations, achievements, legal opinions, charts, research reports, budget matters, etc., with special emphasis on how a program or an event came into being
- c. Public relation materials, such as bulletins, pamphlets, circulars, press and radio releases, charts, posters and such, created for publicity purposes
- d. Internal management or housekeeping records relating to personnel, property, supplies, travel, etc.

E. Although the test of importance will always vary from one situation to the next, even from one historian to the next, records having informational value should be tested on the basis of:

- 1. Uniqueness—is the information available at another location?
- 2. Extent—is the information extensive, intensive, or diversified? These papers that are extensive, intensive, or diversified should be preserved. However the form in which such records are available may suggest destruction (e.g., records are in an illegible shorthand or IBM punch cards that are indecipherable and meaningless).

F. The retention and destruction decisions need to be based on uniqueness and form. Wherever possible, congregations or agencies should preserve summary information rather than maintaining records in a voluminous form. A good case in point would be a summary of a questionnaire, rather than the collection of individual questionnaires and answers.

II. Records to be Preserved in Perpetuity

What are some of the records that need to be preserved or destroyed on the basis of these preliminary definitions and considerations? Obviously each agency or congregation has the option of preserving everything that it considers essential to its well-being, for historical purposes and legal identification. Here are some suggestions based on experience:

A. Constitutions and Articles of Incorporation—one copy of each edition, including auxiliaries, affiliated agencies or subsidies

B. Calls issued and accepted by the pastors, teachers and workers serving the parish or the agency

C. Deeds, leases, titles, policies, surveys, and descriptions of church properties

D. Contracts, blueprints, plans, specifications, mortgages

E. Charter member lists

F. Minutes of the voters' assembly and related documents that produced resolutions or actions

G. Ledgers of official acts—baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial records

H. Sunday bulletins, newsletters and announcements to congregational membership

I. Official correspondence relating specifically to membership status, pastors and teachers, or other servants of the congregation, relating to policy modifications, external business corporations, policy and legal matters

J. Treasurer's reports and financial files required by the law

K. Histories of the congregation, including chronological and statistical records

L. School records, including those on teachers, enrollment, policies, terms, record of textbooks, courses, tuition, special situations, entrance requirements, disciplinary actions, etc.

M. Reports of all official committees and commissions, societies, auxiliary, and subsidiary organizations

N. Minutes of the church council, building committees, and other important committees

O. Reports issued annually to the *Statistical Yearbook*

P. Membership updates—new members, transfers, disciplinary cases, excommunications

Q. Officers—lists of the congregation, boards, committees, commissions, and auxiliary organizations

III. Records Retained Only Temporarily

There are some parish records that are created during the normal course of a parish's activity and have value for a limited time. Some parishes may wish to retain these items longer than usual. In any event it is urged that materials for temporary preservation be separated from those for permanent preservation.

This may seem like an insignificant matter, but it will simplify destruction. A person can destroy an entire file without having to rethink or reprocess materials and re-examine the entire contents before making decisions.

A stamping device can distinguish the permanent from the temporary. Temporary retention materials can be stamped, including the date when such records are scheduled to be destroyed.

IV. Materials recommended for destruction at certain intervals include:

A. After each year:

1. Communion announcement cards

2. Mimeographed materials—save one copy for a general file in chronological order of production and destroy all duplicates at the end of each year.

B. After two years:

1. Copies of calls and contracts not accepted, especially after the composite summary has been filed

2. Copies of communications with members of the congregation that have no information related to the structure of the congregation, no legal or historical value, or contain only secondary limited information

3. Program materials—save one set revealing evidential values and summaries.

C. After five years:

1. Remittance envelopes

2. Deposit slips

3. Cancelled checks

4. Weekly financial reports

5. Miscellaneous items not meeting the above appraisal standards or not specifically referred to in the first category of permanent retention

A good rule of thumb: When in doubt—retain.