



concordia historical institute

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RETRIEVE + RECORD + REFLECT + RECALL

“HOW SHOULD WE PROTECT OUR VITAL PARISH RECORDS FROM CATASTROPHE?”

Like any other corporation, a congregation needs its vital and essential records in order to conduct its business and to continue serving its membership and community. If one would know in advance when catastrophes were to strike such as fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc., it would be easy to prepare for them in advance. But since this is impossible, every congregation ought to have a vital defense plan for the preservation of its essential records.

The best plan is the one offering the greatest amount of security, regardless of what emergencies, catastrophes, or other destruction may occur. In this service bulletin we hope to offer a few basic steps, which congregations ought to take in order to preserve the records necessary for continuing their spiritual ministry. We will also provide some suggestions that should be implemented immediately after a catastrophe has struck. Naturally further elaboration and adaptation of any plan must be provided for locally.

I. Records Considered Vital

- A. Records of official pastoral acts including baptisms, confirmation, marriage and funeral
- B. Minutes of official boards including church council, voters' assembly, etc.
- C. Official membership list with the normal accompanying data on each member including birth, date of membership, date of death, membership termination
- D. Legal papers and documents including incorporation, ownership of any materials and goods, leases, mortgages, wills and bequests, and related papers
- E. Copies of the deed and descriptions of all church property, leases, titles, policies, etc.
- F. Building blueprints and construction plans, particularly with reference to such vital aspects as the type of construction, sewer and water pipes, electrical and telephone conduits, and other similar vital services
- G. Financial reports and documents, treasurer's ledgers, records of receipt of members, appraisal of property, tax information, etc.

- H. Inventories of all equipment and property by purchase date, cost, condition, etc.
- I. Current constitution and its predecessors
- J. School records pertaining to registration, curriculum, staff, etc.
- K. Congregational history
- L. Collection of photographs of buildings, equipment, personnel, both past and present
- M. Inventory of the church library and related resources
- N. Inventory of the equipment and library of the pastor's study should be included, if located in the church building
- O. Records of materials belonging to the Sunday School, choirs and societies

II. Safeguards to Preservation

- A. All texts listed above which are not available in duplicate should be microfilmed or photographically reproduced. It may be best to preserve the originals (with some discretion and selection) in a local bank safe deposit box. The absolute minimum which ought to be microfilmed or scanned is the official acts ledgers and the minutes of the congregation.
- B. File security copies with Concordia Historical Institute, the Department of Archives for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, for safe-keeping. Distribution of such materials to several locations also assures the possibility that at least one of the copies will be preserved unless a catastrophe is nationwide.
- C. Make certain that none of these records listed above are filed in private homes, even if temporarily. If this is done on rare occasions, make sure that a receipt for the materials is placed on file in both the vital documents themselves and in the church office.
- D. When possible provide for a safe bomb-proof vault in the local church building. If a vault cannot be provided give consideration to the purchase of a heavy steel, fireproof safe, stored in a dry basement section of the church building and located in an area least likely to be destroyed through fire, tornado or flood.

E. Engage in periodic “drills” to make sure that the occupants know what to do for themselves and with the records when a disaster threatens.

F. Provide for frequent inspection against vermin, silverfish, termites, high or low humidity damage, etc.

G. Check into adequate insurance coverage, particularly for replacement purposes. Such insurance should be adequate for fire, liability, vandalism, theft, tornado, windstorm and floods.

H. Have adequate fire extinguishers immediately accessible and an alarm system. Such systems should have the capability to detect smoke and heat at a predetermined level.

I. Inspect electrical wiring frequently, as well as highly inflammable materials such as old dry brittle papers. Do not allow any smoking when using these vital congregational records.

J. Destroy all combustible cellulose nitrate film (i.e. photographic film) through the watchful eye of a professional and have modern reproductions made. For more information, see CHI Information Sheet #19.

K. Protect papers and materials from direct sunlight or intense artificial light.

III. Salvaging Operations

Depending on the nature of the damage from water, fire, tornado etc., note the following:

A. In case of water damage there may be mildew and other deterioration, unless the items are dried out as quickly as possible. A dehumidifier or fans placed in the room will be helpful.

B. Any paper with slight water damage should be interleaved with blotters the size of the page. If the material is bound it should be placed on a drying rack after blotting, so that the air can get at the paper and dry the material further. Books can also be set on end to dry them out. Use only white blotters as colors may be transferred to the pages of the books and documents.

C. After the items are nearly dry they may be very carefully ironed, in order to smooth out the wrinkles. Care should be taken that the hot iron does not come in direct contact with the page itself. Use a blotter as a pressing cloth and practice on less valuable material, so you can get a feel for this painstaking technique.

D. Immediately try to attempt to identify any items or portions of a page that were separated from a ledger, file or whatever. Charred materials should be placed into protective

envelopes, preferably an inert plastic such as polyethylene food storage bags, so that they will not have to be touched in further processing. It is important that items be identified by content immediately and labeled properly, so that the various pieces of the puzzle can more readily be reassembled at a later time.

E. Immediately list all items of papers, documents and records which seem to have disappeared completely.

F. If the damage has been extensive it will be wise to enlist the help of professionals in cleaning and restoration that may include lamination. Contact government or university archives in your area for references. Libraries may also be able to help.

G. A word of caution with respect to lamination—do not use any other laminating process except the Barrows Method, which includes de-acidifying and neutralizing the paper, and if necessary enclosing it later on with sheets of acetate. This is the only method which will do a job properly.

H. Exercise great care in the use of glue, paste and mending tape. Do not use scotch tape or any pressure sensitive tape under any conditions at any time.

I. Utilize the photo-duplicated copies available either locally or at the Institute to reassemble the materials.

J. Follow good preservation procedures when materials have deteriorated through age and usage.

K. If papers and documents have become extremely brittle and all the moisture has been extracted, so that they can break easily and thus be destroyed, place them on aluminum foil in a large container with steam underneath until the paper has again absorbed some moisture. Then flatten the document between weighted, plain white blotters, as necessary.

L. Pictures and photographs which have been damaged, faded or otherwise destroyed, require a professional laboratory for rehabilitation.

M. If leather bindings have been damaged they may need to be carefully cleaned with saddle soap, followed by an application of a potassium lactate solution and completed with an application of Neat's foot oil and lanolin.

IV. Resource

An excellent book which treats this topic is *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010). It is available from the Society at 17 N. State Street, Suite 1425, Chicago, IL 60602-4061 or archivists.org.