



concordia historical institute

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RETRIEVE + RECORD + REFLECT + RECALL

“What is a congregational archive?”

This information sheet is intended as a basic introduction to congregational archives. It can help in giving a working knowledge of what is involved in establishing and maintaining a congregational archive but may not answer every question that you may have. However, additional resources and assistance is available from the Concordia Historical Institute, from your district archivist, or from professional archival organizations listed at the end of this information sheet.

Why Establish a Congregational Archive?

A congregational archive contains the primary-source records needed to identify its past. Today documents that provide evidence of the past are produced in a variety of formats from paper to electronic. These materials require protection and preservation to prevent the loss of your congregation's history that would occur if the material were neglected.

Archives have been called the collective memory of an organization. In order to preserve the entire history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, well-maintained and accessible archives are needed in each congregation. Congregational archives stand with the other archives of the whole church as a resource for American Lutheran history and as evidence for the wider history of Christian life and mission in the world.

History of Congregational Archives in the Missouri Synod

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod provided for synodical archives at its founding convention in 1847. Four years before that, the first congregational archives were established at “Old Trinity” Lutheran Church in Saint Louis. As early as 1858 two of the original four synodical districts adopted blanket resolutions urging their member congregations to establish parish archives.

In 1940 Dr. Theodore Graebner wrote:

Our churches should have their old records preserved in fire-proof cabinets. Old minute-books and membership lists should be substantially bound. This is more important than ever in view of the social security acts (pension, etc.) of State and Federal Government. (*The Lutheran Witness* 59:23 (November 12, 1940), page 389)

Three years later he emphasized:

If our church librarians or archivists wish to have future generations call them blessed, let them keep complete files of church papers, programs, special services, and newspaper notices from which the history of the church may be gathered by those who come after us. (*The Lutheran Witness* 62:14 (July 6, 1943), page 230)

The Missouri Synod spoke directly and officially on this matter when it adopted the following resolution at its Denver convention in 1969:

To Encourage Congregations of the Synod to Establish the Office of Archivist

WHEREAS, Accurate maintenance of congregational records will serve for immediate contemporary usage and for long-range planning and historical value; and

WHEREAS, Any kind of systematic and serviceable record system required ongoing attention; and

WHEREAS, The Committee on Parish Records has established guidelines on the role and function of the congregational archivist; therefore be it

Resolved, That each congregation of the Synod be encouraged to establish the office of the archivist in their midst.

ACTION: Adopted (*Proceedings*, 1969, p. 155, Resolution 11-13)

Responsibility for a Congregation's Records

A congregation has the primary responsibility for its archives—including fiduciary responsibility for maintaining its church records and other legal documents. Concordia Historical Institute and district archivists serve as advisors to congregations when it comes to best practices regarding record retention and archives. However, day-to-day responsibility for maintaining a congregation's records belongs with the pastor and other congregational leaders responsible for the maintenance of the congregation's records.

In addition to recorded pastoral acts and compilations of parochial data, there are many other historical records that need active management and preservation. To administer the congregational archives and assist the pastor in conducting the archival work of the congregation, it is suggested that the congregation appoint an archives committee. The Archive Committee, directly responsible to the Church Council and pastor, is primarily concerned with providing continuing care of the congregation's records as they move from active to archival status and performs its duties in full cooperation with the pastor and congregational leaders.

Note that if a congregation is the result of a merger or consolidation of congregations, the resulting congregation becomes responsible for maintaining the records of all predecessors. If a congregation disbands, the records should be transferred to Concordia Historical Institute so that the records can continue to be available for study and research.

*See Information Sheet 2a, *"How Should We Protect Our Vital Parish Records from Catastrophe?"*

Archival Materials

Archival materials are documents, published materials, photographs, audio/visual materials, and artifacts that hold historical and evidential value for the congregation. Usually these materials answer the *who, what, when, where* and *why* of the history of a local parish.

The official papers, correspondence, and other parish records created or received by the congregation (including its officers and organizations) are the property of the congregation and, therefore, the congregation holds the responsibility for the safe-keeping and management of these important documents.

All such material qualifies for archival preservation by the congregational leadership. Records generated as the pastor and congregational leadership carry out their parish duties are the property of the congregation. In this regard, a written policy to clarify the issue of ownership of congregational records should be developed by the church council or voters assembly and made available to the pastor(s) and church leaders. *See CHI Information Sheet 2b.

To keep track of the various materials transferred into archival custody, creating an *Accession Record* for each document or set of documents is advised. An *Accession Record* maintains the provenance of the document or set of documents by specifying who produced the records, their inclusive dates, the amount of materials, date received, and the person responsible for the transfer of materials to the archives.

If records are donated to the archives from private sources, a *Deed of Gift* should be created that assigns all copyrights, as well as literary and property rights in the materials, to the congregation. (The form can be adapted to specific donor requests agreeable to the congregation.) Both the donor and the congregation's representative (the archivist or a congregational officer) should sign and

date the agreement with a copy of the signed agreement given to the donor. For smaller collections, such as a single photo or bulletin, a simple dated letter of acknowledgment on the congregation's letterhead may suffice.

What Materials Should Be Preserved?

Records created and maintained today will become the historical records of tomorrow. These records may have administrative, fiscal, legal and evidential value. While some records retain these values, many do not.

There are three general categories of records: (a) primary records (must be retained); (b) additional records (should be retained); and (c) artifacts and supplemental records (may be retained).

A. Primary records and documents (MUST be preserved in the congregational archives):

1. Copies of the articles of incorporation, all constitutions and all bylaws and amendments to such documents, of the congregation and its organizations.

*Note: It is extremely important that each version include the date it was approved by the congregation (and approved by the district constitution committee).

2. The list of charter members as well as all accessions, transfers, and releases of members thereafter.

3. The parish registers recording the ministerial acts, especially for baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and burials.

4. The minutes of the meetings of the congregation, voters assembly, church council, committees and organizations.

5. A dated annual list of all members of the congregation.

6. A dated annual list of all the names of officers and members of boards and committees.

7. All official congregational correspondence (i.e., correspondence concerning congregational rather than personal matters).

Note: this includes correspondence by the pastor(s).

8. Copies of the reports of all the church's official committees, commissions, societies, and organizations.

9. Copies of call documents extended to pastors and teachers and accepted by them. (Call documents the congregation extended but declined should not be preserved.)

10. Records of any disciplinary actions. *Note: all HR files should be maintained in a secured file cabinet. Consult with the congregation's legal counsel regarding the time most appropriate to destroy employee records.

11. Printed materials including service bulletins, congregational newsletters, letters to the council, letters to the general membership, and programs for special congregational events.

12. The records of parish, weekday, vacation, and Sunday schools.

13. Financial records, such as annual reports by the treasurer or finance committee, including annual audit reports.

14. Copies of the deeds and descriptions of the church properties, titles, leases, and surveys.

15. All contracts for the construction of congregational buildings and facilities, as well as contracts negotiated for special services. All plans, specifications, blueprints and drawings should be included in the congregation's archives.

16. Mortgages should be retained—even after they are retired. (It is advisable to use photocopies for mortgage-burning ceremonies.)

17. Photographs (or paintings / drawings) of the congregation's building(s), pastors, staff, organizations, activities, and events.

18. Other media records: sound or video recordings of worship services, special events, musical presentations, oral histories, etc.

19. Historical accounts of the congregation and the congregation's leaders.

B. Additional records created by, for, or about the congregation which provide added historical evidence about the congregation (SHOULD be preserved in the congregational archives).

1. A chronological account of the major events and activities of the congregation.

2. Photocopies of local newspaper articles or local / regional histories that include additional information on the congregation.

3. Source materials, such as original returns of congregational surveys and questionnaires.

4. Statistical and comparative summaries on finance, attendance and membership, particularly copies of reports submitted to the LCMS Office of Rosters and Statistics.

5. District minutes that include parochial reports of the congregation.

6. Unpublished studies, theses or dissertations about the congregation by students or others doing historical research.

C. Artifacts and supplemental records (MAY be included in the congregation's archives—if space permits):

1. Histories of the LCMS, district(s) in which the congregation held membership, neighboring congregations and LCMS colleges, seminaries, and social service institutions closely associated with the congregation.

2. Biographical information gathered from various resources on significant members of the congregation.

3. Artifacts (such as carvings, stained-glass windows, old vestments, altar-ware, agendas, lectionaries) may be preserved, although congregations may need to be guided by considerations of space in deciding what historical objects are kept. An attached description of the history of the artifact is very important in order for future leadership to gauge the historical value of the artifact. (If the artifact is donated to another congregation or mission a record of donation should be kept.)

How Should Materials Be Preserved?

Location

The archives should be located in a secure room that is least affected by extremes of light, heat, dryness, humidity, and insects. The ideal storage environment has a temperature of 65 degrees Fahrenheit, with relative humidity of 45%. If this ideal cannot be met, an area that can maintain conditions closest to these with minimal fluctuations is best. Records that are most vital for preservation should be kept in a “fire-proof” file cabinet. Note that walk-in vaults, while most secure, are problematic in that air circulation is poor and temperature and humidity levels may be unacceptable for the preservation of delicate paper documents, vintage photographs, audio/visual materials, and artifacts.

Storage Containers

Archival materials should be placed into archival file folders or envelopes made of acid-free / lignin-free paper. Envelopes and file folders form the primary support for preserving the documents.

If open shelves are used, folders are placed in acid-free boxes (available in sizes to fit standard letter and legal-size folders as well as oversized materials such as parish registers, oversized photographic prints, posters, and paraments). These archival boxes protect records from direct light and dirt and increase support for envelopes and file folders. Both archival file folders and archival boxes are available from library and archive supply companies.

Care for Records - Fasteners and Oversized Items

Before placing archival records into envelopes and file folders, all fastening devices (paper clips, staples, rubber bands, and string) should be removed. These items are often a source of deterioration for archival records.

*Note: a group of papers previously held together should be placed in a paper folder with a note that they were previously held together. (Avoid the temptation of removing staples, make copies of archival records, and re-stapling the papers together.)

Materials should not be folded to fit into containers. Oversize materials, such as blueprints, oversized photographs (such as large prints of Confirmation group photographs), should, if at all possible, be stored flat. Horizontal blueprint cabinets are best if the congregational archive contains a large number of oversized materials.

*Note: for rolled-up photographs or documents, seek professional advice before attempting to straighten these fragile items. The staff of a local archives or historical society are often a good source to provide good advice.

Care/Conservation for Damaged Materials

Water, chemical sprays, adhesives, and lamination cause irreparable damage to paper and photographs. Cleaning or repair of damaged materials requires special techniques, and restoration work should only be undertaken by professionals.

When records have become severely damaged or deteriorated, carefully place items into archival folders / containers and then seek professional advice. The axiom “when in doubt, do nothing” should apply until a professional can assess what is needed to stabilize and restore damaged documents.

*Note: water-damaged materials can often be salvaged and should be placed in air-tight containers/bags as soon as the water damage occurs while you consult with a company that specializes in archival disaster remediation.

Documents should not be marked with permanent ink. If any marks must be made for identification purposes, use a pencil (or special removeable ink for glass, plastic or metal). Note “the rule of reversibility” and only do things to the archival documents that can be reversed without altering the original. *Note: attach descriptions and metadata on the envelope or file folder, not the back of a paper document or photographic print.

Photographs, negatives, slides, audio and video recordings, and artifacts should be filed separately from paper documents. Negatives should be stored separately from associated prints in archival sleeves. These items have chemical properties that are more active and unstable compared to paper, so extra care in providing appropriate sleeves, folders, and boxes is important before storing them at optimal temperature and humidity.

If scrapbooks are to be assembled for anniversaries or other historical observances, be aware that glues and adhesives will permanently damage original documents and photographs. A scrapbook cannot be considered a means to permanently preserve materials but rather serves as a memento for a specific occasion. Whenever possible, use only duplicates or copies to compile a scrapbook. This will ensure that groups can enjoy viewing historical items without damage to original, one-of-a-kind photographs and documents.

Regular Inspection is Necessary

Archival materials should be inspected periodically for environmental and insect/vermin damage, and adequate safeguards and corrective measures should be taken if evidence of such damage is found.

Archival Materials must not Leave the Archive

Congregations should make clear policy that archival records (especially minutes, membership records, and church record books) cannot be removed or “checked-out” from the church premises except for restoration, microfilming, or digitizing—and then strict measures to ensure that the records are not damaged or lost are to be put in place during the entire time the materials are away from the church building.

Organizing Congregational Archives

Two major archival principles govern the method of organizing materials: arrangement according to provenance and original order.

Arrangement According to Provenance

Arrangement according to provenance means that records are organized according to the group or person that created the records. Materials are arranged into what are known as *record groups*, each group representing a record-creating entity. Within a congregation, some record-creating entities include the pastor(s), officers, voters assembly, church council, boards, committees, and organizations. Subgroups may be used for greater clarity. For example, the record group “Board of Christian Education” might have subgroups for each department: Sunday school, early childhood center, day school, adult education, and confirmation. Past and present organizational charts of the congregation’s structure may be a good place to start when establishing appropriate record groups.

Under each *record group* will be one or more groupings of functionally-related records, referred to as *record series*. Record series are often identified by general titles such as correspondence, reports, minutes and subject files. An example in a typical congregation would be as follows:

Record Group: Church Council

Record Series:

1. Council Rosters
2. Minutes
3. Correspondence
4. Reports

A record series is identified as such and is arranged in this manner at the time records are received into the archives.

Retaining Original Order

The second archival principle, retention of the original order of records, means preserving the records in the order and filing scheme in which the records were created. Records should not be reorganized alphabetically by subject, name or other systems. Original order must be maintained except in cases where records are inaccessible due to their arrangement or if they are not arranged at all. When this occurs, records should be arranged into record series by type (minutes, correspondence) in chronological order under the appropriate record group.

Finding Aids

Once materials are arranged by record group and record series, guides to the records, or finding aids, can be prepared. Each record group has its own finding aid. Basic to the finding aid is a folder-by-folder listing of materials with inclusive dates. Also included are brief historical background notes and a description that highlights what cannot be easily understood by looking through the folder listing. For example, the finding aid for corre-

spondence by the pastor to the congregation may include a brief biographical sketch of the pastor, as well as the circumstances related to the creation of the records. The description may denote what subject matter the letters contain, how they are arranged and whether there is correspondence missing.

Historical notes might also include the starting date of the group involved, name changes, function of the group and major changes in its authority, objectives or activities. A description indicates completeness of materials, reasons for missing items, notes on arrangement (alphabetical, chronological, etc.) and other information as needed. The finding aid/guide repeats the provenance information recorded in the accession record and the name of the person who processed the records and wrote the finding aid. Concordia Historical Institute can provide congregational archives with examples and templates of appropriate finding aids.

Archiving Digital Files

The least complicated way to retain information found in electronic form is to print and archive paper copies of digital files. This eliminates the continual procedures that will be outlined below. Parish membership lists and other data that are regularly updated should be printed, dated, and archived on a regular basis.

Note: Creating a *Records Schedule* helps avoid gaps in files that are generated and archived on a regular basis. See CHI's recently updated booklet *Record and Archive Management Program Handbook* for an in-depth discussion of using a Records Schedule.

With the advent of computer-generated electronic documents, archivists now face the challenge of preserving and accessing digitally-created records. Document files that are archived using computer hard drives are at high risk of being corrupted or lost. Computer hard drives, while good for daily backup, inevitably stop working and should not be relied on for permanent archival storage.

More importantly, access to older document files is software and hardware dependent. For electronic records to remain accessible, data files must be "migrated" to current software versions. Therefore, to maintain records in an electronic form, there must be a commitment to update—on a regular basis—archived files using current software versions under the computer's current operating system.

The most important fact in this discussion is that digital files are more vulnerable to damage and loss than paper printouts of digital files. Therefore, if paper documents are scanned and digitized, the original paper documents should not be destroyed but placed in a different physical location in case the digitized files are lost or damaged. Please consult with Concordia Historical Institute for options in storing original paper church records at the Institute after scanning / digitizing.

The Stability of Microfilm Copies of Church Records

Making microfilm copies of vital church records has been an accepted medium for archiving since the 1960s. Even today, there are distinct advantages of creating microfilm copies of church records. One of the greatest strengths of this format for archival records is the stability of the medium of microfilm. The life expectancy of microfilm copies (when stored at archival temperature and humidity) is estimated at 500 years—almost the same as paper copies. However, high standards of preparing paper originals for filming on microfilm must be employed for optimum results. (See CHI Information Sheet 19: "Why Should We Microfilm Our Church Records?" for additional information on preparing church records for microfilming.)

The original microfilm negatives of congregational records should be stored off-site for added protection (consider off-site storage at Concordia Historical Institute). Please contact CHI for more guidance in determining if microfilming your church records is a valuable option for your congregation.

Digitizing Audio and Video Recordings

Current technologies make it possible to transfer deteriorating audio and video recordings and motion picture film to digital formats. As in the case of making microfilm copies, producing the highest quality copy is of utmost importance. And, as in making digital copies of paper records, the original audio / video recording or original motion picture film should be not discarded.

Additional information and assistance is available from Concordia Historical Institute.

Other Resources for Congregational Archives

Preserving the legacy of your congregation's history is dependent on the preservation of your local church documents, photographs, audio-visual materials, and artifacts. You are encouraged to use your district's archivist as a regional resource in managing your congregation's archival material. District archives may also be interested in copies of congregational material that is most related to the history of the district and the Missouri Synod. Please contact your district office for current archival resources available to your congregation.

Concordia Historical Institute is also interested in obtaining paper copies of congregational histories, special bulletins, biographical information, photographs, and copies of microfilm (positives). Other items are accepted on a selective basis.

Note that your local and state historical / genealogical societies may be interested in obtaining copies of historical documents from your congregation.

Granting Access to your Congregation's Archives

The congregation's archives committee should make individual decisions regarding who has access to the congregation's archives. As in the case of a library, policies need to be in place to balance access with the risks of loss, damage, and theft. Without prop-

er monitoring, handling of the archives by an inexperienced researcher can quickly lead to damage or material that is misplaced when returned to files and boxes. “A misplaced item is a lost item.” Those interacting with the archives must keep order of materials within files, files within boxes, etc. Misplaced items will no longer be available to future access and research.

While anyone with a legitimate purpose should be permitted to use the archives, discretion needs to be exercised since congregation archives contain sensitive and personal information. Policies on using the archives should be established by the church council, upon recommendation and consultation with the congregation’s archives committee.

If records will be used for research, the researcher requesting access should use the documents under supervision, copying what information is needed but not removing ledgers, files or individual documents from the church office or archives. Researchers must be cautioned that the copyright to both unpublished and printed materials in the archives is owned by the congregation. Whenever records are cited in published works, credit and congregational ownership should be indicated.

Archival Materials on Public Display

If materials from the archives are to be exhibited, three factors need to be seriously considered: (a) the environment (temperature, humidity, air flow, light) the materials will be subject to; (b) the length of time the materials will be kept on display, and (c) the security measures in place to ensure that archival materials are not damaged or stolen.

It is important to note that damage to materials in strong sunlight and less than optimum temperature and humidity occurs more quickly than often imagined. Exhibition of original and irreplaceable historic items should be limited to the shortest time necessary. Handling of items will quickly lead to deterioration.

Placing documents and artifacts under glass must be done with archival materials. Frames and paper mats must be acid-free and the piece must not be fixed to the mat or frame in a way that damages the archival piece. Glass should be museum-quality UV protective glass. Display cases must not have materials that give off gases that will affect the condition of the archival pieces on display. Exhibited materials should never be in direct sunlight or placed near a heat or cooling source. Finally, making a replica of delicate photographs or documents for exhibit purposes has never been easier. Using a replica for exhibition purposes eliminates the possibility that archival treasures will be damaged or lost. Consult with local professionals who can suggest appropriate ways to make digital photographs and copies for use in public displays.

A Final Word

Creating and maintaining a congregational archive demands intentional planning, clear policies, and regular oversight. However, the rewards for current and future generations is immense.

Concordia Historical Institute stands ready to advise and encourage your congregation in its goal of treasuring and trumpeting the redeeming work of Christ in the midst of your congregation and its people.

Please let us know how we can help.

Please also remember to send two copies of any printed material that has historical value (service bulletins, congregational histories, and anniversary books). The material you send will broaden historical resources available for study and research around the world.

We also encourage you to submit an additional copy of your congregational history or anniversary publication to our annual awards program committee. This CHI program recognizes individuals and congregations who have made significant contributions to Lutheran archives and history. Contact CHI for more details.

Discover more here:

- Behrnd-Klodt, Menzi L., and Peter J. Wosh, eds. *Privacy & Confidentiality Perspectives: Archivists & Archival Records*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.
- Hunter, Gregory. *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How-to-Do-It Manual*. 2nd ed. Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2003.
- Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.
- Ritzenhaler, Mary Lynn. *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993.
- Yakel, Elizabeth. *Starting an Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994.

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Society of American Archivists
archivists.org

American Association for State and Local History
aaslh.org

Southern Baptist Historical Library & Archives
sbhla.org

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