

# BRIEF GUIDE FOR ARCHIVES OF CONGREGATIONS



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

This brief guide, intended as an introduction to congregational archives, can help in starting an archives, but may not answer every question that arises. Additional assistance is available from the ELCA churchwide archives, from your ELCA synodical/regional archives, or from professional organizations listed at the end of this guide.

## **Why Establish an Archive?**

The archives of a congregation contain the primary 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 was neglected.

Archives have been called the collective memory of an organization. In order to preserve the entire history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 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.

## **Responsibility for a Congregation's Records**

A congregation has the primary responsibility for its archives mainly because they are the property of the congregation. Churchwide and synodical archivists can only assume a limited responsibility as advisors to congregations. Specific responsibility for maintaining a congregation's records belongs with the pastor and others involved in the creation of those records.

The ELCA's model constitution includes the following element relative to records:

C9.12. The pastor of this congregation:

a. shall keep accurate parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members dismissed, or members excluded from the congregation;

b. shall submit a summary of such statistics annually to the synod;

In addition to recorded pastoral acts and compilations of parochial data, there are many other historical records that need attention and preservation. To administer the

congregation archives, to assist the pastor, and to oversee and perhaps to conduct archival work of the congregation, it may be useful to appoint an archives committee. The ELCA Model Constitution for Congregations provides for committees such as an archives committee to be established as needed. The archives committee, directly responsible to the congregation council and pastor, should be concerned primarily with providing continuous care of records as they move from active to archival status. Archival work carried out by the archives committee should be performed in full cooperation with the pastor and others who create records of the congregation. For some congregations, in addition to an archives committee, an archivist can be appointed.

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 become the responsibility and property of the synod and are deposited in the appropriate synodical/regional archives.

### **Archival Materials**

Archival materials are those that hold historical and evidential value for the congregation. Usually these documents answer the who, what, when, where and (if possible) the why of the history of a local parish. The official papers, correspondence, and other parish records created or received by the congregation and its officers and organizations belong to the congregation. All such material qualifies for archival preservation. Records should not be thought of as the property of the pastor or any other individual member who maintains or produces them. A policy to clarify the issue of ownership of congregational records should be developed by the congregation council.

To keep track of records transferred into archival custody, creating accession records is advised. An accession record maintains the provenance, by recording 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 by adding or changing some sections. Both the donor and the congregation's representative (the archivist or a church officer) should sign and date the agreement, with a copy of the signed agreement given to the donor. For smaller donations, such as a single photo or bulletin, a simple dated letter or acknowledgement and thank you naming the item donated may suffice.

## What 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.

Generally, there are three categories of records that must, should or could be retained by your archives:

A. Records and documents that must be preserved and filed systematically in the archives:

1. Copies of the articles of incorporation, all constitutions and all by-laws and amendments of such documents, of the congregation and its organizations. Note: Each version should be dated.

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

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

4. The minutes of the meetings of the congregation, Congregation 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 correspondence (i.e. concerning congregational, rather than personal, matters).

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

9. Copies of all calls extended to rostered leaders and appointments to teachers and other church workers that are accepted by them. Calls and appointments that have been declined should not be preserved.

10. Records of any disciplinary actions.

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

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

13. The non-current treasurers' records, such as annual reports and audits.

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

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.

16. Mortgages should be retained even after they have been retired. It is advisable to use copies for mortgage-burning ceremonies.

17. Photographs or other graphic depictions of the congregation's building(s), pastors, organizations, activities, and events.

18. Other media items: sound or video recordings of worship services, special events, musical presentations, and activities.

19. Histories of the congregation.

B. Additional materials created by, for, or about the congregation provide additional documentary evidence and should be preserved:

1. Source materials, such as original returns of surveys or questionnaires.

2. Statistical and comparative summaries on finance, attendance, and membership, particularly copies of reports submitted to the synod office or ELCA units and organizations.

3. Local newspaper articles or histories that include information on the congregation.

4. Synod minutes that include parochial reports of the congregation.

5. A chronological account of the major events and activities of a congregation.

6. Unpublished studies, theses or dissertations about the congregation by students or other researchers.

C. Supplemental information could be maintained, for reference purposes, if space permits:

1. Histories of: the ELCA and predecessor church bodies; related synods and their predecessors; neighboring congregations; and ELCA colleges, seminaries, and social service institutions closely associated with the congregation.

2. Biographical information gathered from various resources on persons from the congregation.

3. Museum pieces (such as carvings, stained-glass windows, old vestments, and altarware) also should be preserved, although congregations may need to be guided by considerations of space in deciding what objects are kept. Often if still usable, it is best to donate them to a congregation in need of them, although records of such gifts should be preserved.

## **How Should Materials Be Preserved?**

### Location

The archives should be located in a locked, fireproof room, area, or filing cabinet that is least affected by extremes of light, heat, dryness or humidity. The ideal storage environment has a temperature of 67 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus 2 degrees, with relative humidity of 47% plus or minus 2 percent. If this ideal cannot be met, an area that can maintain conditions close to these, with minimal fluctuations is best.

### Storage Containers

Archival materials should be placed into archival file folders or envelopes made of acid-free or lignin-free paper. Folders form the primary support for preserving the documents. If open shelves are used, folders are placed in acid-free boxes, or document cases, available in sizes to fit standard letter- and legal-size paper, pamphlets and oversized materials such as parish registers. Document cases protect records from direct light and dirt. (Note: Acid free folders and boxes are available from manufacturers who specialize in archival products.)

### Care for Records

When placing materials into folders and document cases, all fastening devices -- metal paper clips and staples, rubber bands, and string -- should be removed. These items may be a source of deterioration.

Materials should not be folded to fit into containers. Oversize materials, such as blueprints, confirmation photographs, and other large items should be stored flat if at all possible. Map cases would be advisable if a large number of such items need preservation. Do not try to unroll items, since brittleness may cause documents to crack.

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

When records have become severely damaged or deteriorated, carefully place items into folders and containers and seek professional advice. The axiom, "when in doubt, do nothing," should apply until a professional can assess what is needed to stabilize or restore damaged documents. Costs of such treatments are expensive and special budgeting or fund raising might be needed to complete such work.

Documents should not be marked with permanent ink. If any marks are made for identification purposes, use pencil. Another axiom is the "rule of reversibility:" only do things to the documents that can be reversed, such as erasing a pencil notation.

Photographs, negatives, slides, audio and video recordings, and artifacts should be filed separately from paper documents. Negatives should be stored separately from associated prints. These items have chemical properties that are more active or unstable compared to paper, so extra care in providing appropriate sleeves, folders and boxes is important as well as storing them in a location without temperature and humidity extremes.

If scrapbooks are to be assembled for anniversaries or other historical observances, be aware that most adhesives will permanently damage original documents and photographs. A scrapbook cannot be considered a means to permanently preserve materials, but rather serve as a memento for a specific occasion. Whenever possible, use only duplicates or copies to compile a scrapbook, so that when it is used during special occasions you will not be endangering the original documents to theft, vandalism, etc.

Records should be inspected periodically for atmospheric and vermin damage, and adequate safeguards and protective measures should be taken if evidence of such damage is found.

Under normal circumstances, vital records such as minutes, membership records and ministerial acts should not be removed from the church premises, except for restoration or microfilming. In certain cases, ELCA synodical/regional archives may be willing to store records for congregations.

## **Arrangements and Description**

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

Arrangement according to provenance is when records are organized according to the group or person that created the records. Within an archives, materials are arranged into what are known as record groups, each representing a record creating entity. In a congregation, some record creating entities include: the congregation as a whole, the pastor, officers, congregation council, committees, and organizations. Subgroups may be used for greater clarity. For example, the record group, "Christian Education," might have subgroups for each department,

Sunday School, Adult and Confirmation. Past and present organizational charts of the congregation would be the best 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.

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.

Once materials are arranged by record group and record series, guides to the records, or finding aids, can be prepared. Each record series 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 correspondence 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 comprise, 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.

## **Electronic Records**

The least complicated way to retain information found in electronic form is to store paper copies of narrative sources such as correspondence, reports, and minutes. Parish membership lists and other data that are updated often should be printed and dated regularly. Creating a records schedule would avoid gaps in this information gathering.

With the use of computers and related devices, archivists now face the challenge of preservation and accessibility of electronic or machine-readable records. Common electronic records storage media, such as computer hard drives, tapes, and disks, are susceptible to damage and obsolescence and cannot be considered for permanent archival storage. Data in these media is software and hardware dependent. For electronic records to remain viable, the data must be migrated to newer software programs using the latest hardware. Therefore, to maintain records in an electronic form, there must be a commitment to update continually as you convert to the newest technology. Migrating data to new systems may not be an archival activity, but if the records have long-term, historical value, and a choice is made not to continue to store them in an electronic form, then appropriate actions must be taken to retain the records or information for historical purposes.

For those records that are only useful in data form, a strict schedule of refreshing the data, including transfer to new software and hardware is necessary. Information on the data contents (metadata) should be retained for continuing access. Also, saving files in more universal formats will allow for easier conversions to newer technologies as they become available.

Also of interest for the historical record is a means to ensure that short-term storage, through back-up copies is done regularly and copies are stored in a another building, if possible. Data loss can occur for a variety of reasons during active use or in storage. Adequate back up will ensure that a high percentage of data can be restored for current activities. This is an archival issue since many records needed for on-going business may also hold historical value. Congregations should become involved in creating a "Business Continuity Plan," which would also benefit the archival record in the long-term.

## **Microfilming, Digital imaging, Refomattng**

The information below is a brief introduction to microfilming and should not be considered a complete guide.

When records are deteriorating and further damage results from using them, a cost-effective and accepted method of preserving the information, if not the actual paper, is microfilming.



Ensuring that archival quality film is produced is extremely important. Most commercial microfilm companies do not do this kind of filming. It is recommended that congregations seek outside assistance before entering into such projects.

Records must be appropriately prepared before filming so that they are filmed in a logical sequence with introductory title and contents pages at the beginning of the film, and frequent "targets" to indicate the start of a new record series, volume, or folder.

Archival film, which is silver-based film, must be used and it is further subjected to tests for contrast, density, and clarity, according to American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards.

The original negative should be stored under environmentally controlled conditions and is only used to make additional copies. Only positive copies are used for reference purposes.

The ELCA churchwide archives can store the original negatives of microfilm for congregations who choose to have their records filmed. Synodical/regional archives may also offer this service to congregations.

Digital imaging is used to capture the image of archival materials through electronic means. Through the use of scanning or digital cameras, a quality image of the original is created, which can be further enhanced electronically. The question is whether the scanned images will continue to be retrievable with technological change. Metadata indicating how the data is stored, the contents and other technological information is needed, so that it may be migrated to new software and hardware as technology changes.

In addition, newer technology makes it possible to transfer audio and video recordings and motion picture film to digital formats. It is important to have quality control over these procedures just as it would be for microfilming or scanning paper-based records. In all instances, the originals should not be discarded except if they are disintegrating and the information is no longer accessible. As technology advances, it may be possible to reformat the originals again with an improved result. Also, some items may still have values as artifacts that could be used in special exhibits or anniversary celebrations.

Additional information and assistance is available from the churchwide archives or from your synodical/regional archives.

### **Cooperation With Others**

Because a congregation is related to the rest of the ELCA, as well as to its community in which it is located, working with others is an important element of any archival

program. It is a means by which to obtain assistance and information, and make the story of your congregation known to others.

Congregational archivists should report significant historical events to the synod archivist or other appropriate synod staff and deposit copies of certain materials with the synod archivist. Among the items to be deposited in the synod archives are:

1. Histories of the congregation, or copies of manuscript histories, if available.
2. Special orders of service prepared for ordinations, installations, groundbreakings, dedications, re-dedications, and anniversaries.
3. Special bulletins or newsletters. (Synod archives cannot maintain sets of Sunday bulletins.)
4. Biographical material pertaining to pastors, teachers, church officers, or prominent lay persons.
5. Local or regional Lutheran periodicals and serials.
6. Photographs of churches, schools, pastors, teachers, and staff members, identified with names and dates.
7. Positive copies of microfilmed records of congregations.

The ELCA Archives in Chicago collects congregational histories, special bulletins, biographical information, photographs, positive reference copies of congregational records on microfilm and for storage, original camera negatives. Other items are accepted on a selective basis.

Your local and state historical or genealogical societies are interested in obtaining printed congregational histories and positive copies of congregational records on microfilm.

Pastors may desire to keep personal copies of some of the materials described above. They should be allowed to do so, provided original copies are retained in church files.

### **Using the Archives**

Anyone with a legitimate purpose should be permitted to use the archives. Discretion should be exercised, however, where personal information is involved. Policies on use should be established by the congregation council, upon recommendation and consultation with the congregation's archivist or archives committee. If records will be used for research, the person doing so 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.

If materials from the archives are to be exhibited in anniversary displays or for other celebrations, materials should be placed in a location safe from theft or vandalism. No writing or adhesives should be applied to the documents. Mats used to frame photographs may be used to secure documents for viewing. Original documents, including photos, should not be left on display indefinitely, since the display area will probably not be environmentally controlled and may be vulnerable to theft.

## **Bibliography of Resources**

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## **Additional Resources**

Society of American Archivists  
527 S. Wells St.  
5th Floor

Chicago, IL 60607

American Association for State and Local History  
1717 Church Street  
Nashville, TN 37203-2991

Concordia Historical Institute  
(Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod)  
801 DeMun Avenue  
St. Louis, MO 63105  
(314) 721-5934

Note: Each of these organizations issues publications of interest to congregational archivists. Catalogs and prices are available from each.