

ARCHIVES
for
CONGREGATIONS

AN
INTRODUCTION
AND
GUIDE

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Edited by Pam Bell 2020

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FOREWORD

Richard G. Hewlett, historiographer for the Diocese of Washington, together with Veronica Doherty, published *A Guide for Parish Archives* in 1995. This simple, helpful, non-technical booklet seemed to be a good starting point for beginning an archives program in a local congregation.

This publication, with the added input from a number of diocesan archivists and others familiar with diocesan archives, seeks to continue the work begun by Hewlett and Doherty. Richard G. Hewlett graciously has given NEHA his approval to reprint, rewrite, revise, and revisit his work.

The reader is urged to seek additional information from the Archives of the Episcopal Church (<https://www.episcopalarchives.org/>) and also from the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (<https://elca.org/Resources/Archives>). The National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC, has a mandate to also assist.

A. Margaret Landis, Editor
Willis H. A. Moore, chairman, Publications Committee

PREFACE

We Christians are a history-centered people. We cherish the Bible primarily as a historical record of God's mighty acts over thousands of years. Our faith in Jesus Christ is grounded in the four historical accounts of his earthly life and ministry preserved in the Gospels. We rely on the Book of Acts and the Epistles for much of the history of the early Church. Since that time, thousands of Christians have faithfully recorded the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in their own lives.

The Holy Spirit, of course, is inspiring us today, but we seldom think of our own experiences as part of the long history of the Church. Events in the past are revered for their age and for the traditions they have produced, but what we are doing as a Church today or did yesterday is often considered transient and hardly worth recording.

The fact is we are all a part of that long Christian heritage. The work we are doing as Christians in the world today is the beginning of a new chapter in the Church's history, and a record of that work deserves to be preserved.

In the Church, the parish is the center of institutional life, and the records generated within the parish from week to week provide most of the information that should be preserved as part of the historical record. But because we often do not consider these documents to be of historical value, we do not take steps to assure their preservation. Even if we do realize their importance, we may not know how to go about the task.

This guide is intended to help parishes preserve their historical records. It identifies the kinds of records that should be saved. It tells how to organize records, how to file them, how to establish a parish archives, and how to use the archives once it is created.

The last point, how to use the archives, is the most important of all. Historical documents are of no value if they are stored but never consulted. A parish archives will prove a valuable resource not only in writing histories of the parish, but also in providing practical information that can be vital in parish administration and ministry.

INTRODUCTION

A records management program is necessary for legal, administrative, and fiscal reasons. Records management is the application of systematic control to the creation, organization, maintenance, and disposition of the records. An effective records management program will ensure that unnecessary records are not created, that necessary records are maintained and used effectively, that records which have served their purpose are disposed of properly, that vital and confidential records are protected, and that all records with permanent value are identified and transferred to the congregation's archives for care and preservation.

Individual congregations are not required to have an archives, but an area should be set aside where non-current records with permanent value may be stored appropriately. Such materials document the growth and history of the congregation and are generally impossible to replace if damaged or lost.

Examples of materials usually contained in a church archives include correspondence, meeting minutes, memoranda and reports created to support daily business transactions, and records that document the legal status of the congregation. Bulletins, newsletters, directories, architectural plans, histories, etc. should also be included. In addition to the written record, archives may also contain artifacts (e.g., altar linens, vestments, liturgical objects), photographic materials, and items in a variety of audio, visual, and electronic formats that illustrate the nature and development of the church community.

POLICY STATEMENT

A congregation's records management and archives program must have adequate support and resources to succeed. Establishing and maintaining a program requires organization and planning as well as staff, monetary commitment, and support from administration.

A records management and archives policy should be created to outline clearly the scope and content of the program. The vestry or bishop's committee should be involved in the process and approve the final document. The following is a sample policy statement that may be adapted to particular needs.

Sample Policy Statement:

The purpose of the archives of *[name of congregation]* is to collect, organize, preserve, and make available for research the official records of *[name of congregation]*. The purpose of the records management program is to assure that the active and inactive records of *[name of congregation]* are managed in a manner in keeping with the standards of the records management profession and to assure the transfer of the appropriate records to the archives. The archives and records management program is approved by the vestry *[or bishop's committee]* of *[name of congregation]* and is established in accordance with the archives and records management policies of the Diocese of *[name of diocese]*.

WHAT RECORDS SHOULD BE SAVED?

The day-to-day administration of a church generates a variety of documents, many of which are used only for the moment and then are discarded. Others, such as parish registers and minutes of vestry meetings, are usually saved and accumulated over the years. Falling between these two extremes are many documents of varying degrees of significance. Some of these should be saved, others discarded.

The best reason for saving parish records is they are likely to be useful in the future. The high cost of storing and maintaining historical records precludes saving them for sentimental reasons alone or in the misguided belief that everything can be preserved. The process of selection does involve identifying records to be saved, but it is much more a matter of deciding what to throw away (*see Retention Recommendations, page 25*).

In appraising the value of parish records, we should ask:

- * Do the documents contain essential legal information that will have to be consulted in the future?
- * Would the information be valuable in writing a history of the parish or its principal activities?
- * Do the documents reveal something of the essential character of the parish and the community it serves?
- * Do they explain critical turning points in the history of the parish?
- * Do they contain statistical data that reveal important facts about the growth and composition of the congregation and its financial condition?

- * Do they provide unusual insights into the roles of the clergy and laity in the parish?
- * Do they record essential information about major parish organizations and projects?
- * Do they provide valuable biographical information about parish leaders, lay, or clergy, especially those who have attained national or international prominence?
- * Do they contain essential data on the physical fabric of the parish, its buildings, grounds, and other property?

Judgment must be used in answering these questions. On the one hand, they must be answered rigorously if worthless materials are to be culled. On the other hand, valuable sources will be lost if the records are appraised with little insight or imagination. Two general rules should be followed:

1. Be rigorous in selection, but if in doubt, keep the documents in question, at least temporarily. Documents can always be discarded later; once gone, however, there is little chance the information can be recovered.

2. Do not be overly concerned, at least initially, that more is being saved than there is room to store. Substance, not volume, should be the criterion. The methods of organizing and archiving records described in the following sections will put the size of the collection in proper perspective.

Ideally, the parish should choose a small group of people to establish the ground rules for setting up the archives and to designate the records that should be archived. The group should include at least one person who is knowledgeable about the parish's history and one person who understands the inner workings of the congregation today. Including a person who is

familiar with archival or library work and one who understands historical research can be very helpful in establishing guidelines. Members of this group may become the actual archives workers, and members of the congregation may want to volunteer to help.

The following types of materials should be preserved:

- * Parish registers of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials
- * Minutes and other documents generated at annual parish meetings
- * Minutes of vestry or bishop's committee meetings
- * Minutes of major parish committees
- * Registers of services conducted
- * Legal and corporate records, mortgages, deeds, and significant contracts
- * Copies of annual parochial reports to the diocese
- * Annual financial statements and adopted versions of parish budgets
- * Selected records of major parish projects, such as building programs and special mission projects
- * Architectural plans and specifications, descriptions of significant church fabric and property
- * Records of memorials
- * All parish histories written to date
Parish scrapbooks and photo collections (all photographs should be identified on the back, using a special pen made for that purpose)
- * Information, flyers, invitations, programs for major events

In addition to these essential materials, other types of records deserve consideration:

* Some parishes regularly reproduce copies of sermons preached in the church. If bound copies exist, they should be preserved. Otherwise, the parish should at least consider building a file of representative sermons.

* Sunday bulletins should be preserved if they contain information not available elsewhere about parish activities.

* Selective correspondence files can be of great value in supplementing formal records when the time comes to write the parish history. Formal documents such as vestry minutes record what happened; correspondence files can often explain why it happened. Correspondence files most likely to contain historical material are those created by the rector, the secretary of the vestry, the chairpersons of major committees, or the leaders of major parish projects.

* Non-documentary items and artifacts associated with important events in the parish's history can often be saved if they are not too large or bulky. Large artifacts can be photographed or taken to the Diocesan Archives for preservation.

* Recordings of special events can be saved if care is taken to preserve them. Oral history recordings of long-time members can be valuable to the history of the parish.

It is equally important to know what to discard. Old parish files always contain numerous copies of reports, studies, and publications that at one time were of special concern to

the parish. For archival purposes, one copy or at most two should be saved and the rest discarded. It is helpful to make a distinction between materials of lasting historical value and those which may be vital records for a short period of time only.

Many records of routine parish administration must be retained for a year or more, but they should not be considered archival material. These include: payroll vouchers, pledge data, canceled checks, paid vouchers, expired insurance policies, and outdated minor contracts.

The archives group should also keep in mind the scope of the documents to be saved. Parish files, for example, should not duplicate materials which are more properly held in the diocesan archives or by other institutions. Internal records generated by day schools associated with parishes, for example, should be retained by the schools and not by the parishes. Records of organizations or activities outside the parish, such as community projects, should not be retained simply on the strength of the personal association of the rector or another parish leader with the project. A good rule for parishes is not to accept the personal papers or memorabilia of individuals or families unless such materials are valuable for the history of the parish. In short, the parish must define the scope of its collection and resist the temptation to build a general collection of local community history.

HOW CAN ADDITIONAL RECORDS BE COLLECTED?

The documents available within the parish buildings may constitute only part, and sometimes only a small part, of all the records that might shed important light on the history of the parish. Unfortunately, it has been too common a practice in the past for rectors and wardens to take vital parish records to their homes for safe-keeping. Sometimes such records have been lost by fire or the departure or death of the person who was trying to preserve them. Once all existing records within the parish buildings have been identified, some effort should be made to find other records which may be held by present or former clergy or lay persons.

The news that the parish has started an archival project will automatically stimulate interest in collecting records. It seems that every archival project sparks individuals to offer valuable records no one else knew existed. Publicity about the project and direct inquiries to individuals likely to have such records can also be rewarding. Such inquiries often produce excellent photographs, records of parish projects and committees, and in some cases such vital records as parish registers and vestry minute books.

Parish leaders should recognize that documents produced today may well become the historical records of tomorrow. An important function of the archives group is to assure that records of historic value are regularly added to the archives. The rector, parish secretary, secretary of the vestry, and other parish leaders should be asked annually for such materials.

HOW SHOULD RECORDS BE ORGANIZED?

Once records have been sorted, they must be organized in a form that will aid subsequent research. A cardinal rule used by archivists is called the "principle of provenance." It is based on the fact that the original organization of the records, as well as the contents of individual documents, reveals important historical information. The way files are organized can tell us how the originator looked at the parish. The relative size of files can indicate which activities demanded the greatest attention in the parish at the time. The existing file designations can serve as a list of major activities. Thus, whenever possible, the archivist preserves the original provenance of the files.

Especially in working with correspondence or subject files, it is important to retain the original organization of file folders. In many instances, however, there may be no apparent organization. Sometimes much of the available material consists only of loose documents packed in a box in no obvious order. In such cases the archivist must try to sort the material into general categories revealed by the contents of the documents, place the documents in folders labeled to indicate the subject of the file, and arrange the documents within the folder in chronological order. The file folders themselves should then be arranged in some logical order.

Other materials, such as newsletters, vestry minute books, and financial records, should be assembled as distinct collections and arranged chronologically.

HOW SHOULD RECORDS BE PRESERVED?

Even when a parish takes great care to collect its historical records and to organize them, the files may still prove useless in the future unless steps are taken to preserve them from deterioration. Historical records, like all other material objects, are subject to deterioration and even disintegration over long periods of time. There is almost no limit to the measures that may be taken to preserve historical documents, and many of these involve an expense beyond the resources of most parishes. Some simple and relatively inexpensive techniques, however, will avoid or delay some of the most serious forms of deterioration.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the life of documents generated in the last 100 years is the disintegration of the paper on which documents are written or printed. Unlike many of the fine papers used in the 19th century, much of the paper fabricated in more recent decades has a high acid content which causes the documents to discolor, become brittle, and eventually crumble into dust. This kind of deterioration could be thwarted by photo-copying the originals on acid-free paper or by scanning into a digital pdf document. These solutions, however, are costly and time-consuming and still provide no permanent answer.

A partial solution is to transfer the documents to acid-free folders and boxes. Because many of the original folders and boxes may be dirty, broken, or of odd sizes, a sensible move is to re-folder and re-box all the materials as they are organized for the archives. A variety of boxes of different sizes,

each designed for a specific purpose, can be purchased from commercial suppliers. The diocesan archivist can provide information on local retailers (or see the list on page 29).

Other sources of deterioration are paper clips, staples, rubber bands, and transparent tape. These materials in time deface the documents and may cause them to stick together. Whenever possible, these materials should be removed and the documents stored loose within the file folders.

Loose-leaf notebooks and binders are also a hazard. Over long periods of storage, pages often stick together, and pages are easily torn on the rings. Notebooks usually do not fit in record storage boxes, and they do waste space. Materials should be removed from notebooks and placed in file folders.

Storage conditions also greatly affect the life of records. Once the documents have been placed in acid-free folders and boxes, they should ideally be stored in a dry, fire-proof, locked space equipped with temperature and humidity controls. Most parishes cannot meet all these criteria for storing historical records, but all can take some protective measures. Obviously, records should not be stored in attics, where they are subject to extreme temperature fluctuations, dirt, and vermin. Nor should they be stored in damp basements or in areas where they are subject to bright sunlight.

Small collections (up to 10 cubic feet) may be stored in lockable metal file or storage cabinets in an air-conditioned room. For larger collections, the best solution may be an interior closet, preferably in an air-conditioned part of the church or parish house. The door should be lockable, and a sign should be placed on it or inside the closet to identify the mate-

rials as part of the parish archives. Metal shelving can be used to hold the boxes or, if standard record storage boxes are purchased, they can be stacked in the room—but never on the floor.

Older parishes may have historically valuable documents that have been extensively damaged or on the verge of deterioration. These documents can be transferred to the diocesan archives for permanent preservation.

HOW CAN RESEARCH BE CONTROLLED?

Direct access to the archives should be limited to two or three persons in the parish who know what the collection contains and how it has been organized and who will take responsibility for its safe-keeping. It is critical, however, that several individuals have a good working knowledge of the archives so the "key" to the archives will not be lost when one person dies or leaves the parish.

Researchers may inquire from the parish about their archive contents and access should be authorized by the archivist or clergy. While photocopying of documents is most likely possible, in no case should researchers be permitted to remove files or other materials from the archives, even for short periods of time. Researchers should be supervised at all times to assure that they do not remove documents from the files or in any way damage or deface them.

Materials in the parish archives are the property of the parish, and they should be treated accordingly. Archivists traditionally have the right to deny access to certain kinds of information; to determine conditions under which the materials may be used; to determine whether requests for access are reasonable, appropriate, and relevant; and to charge for research services and photocopying under some circumstances.

RETENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Resist all efforts for the archives to become a dumping ground for records that have an eventual destruction date, i.e. canceled checks, payroll records, monthly financial reports, pledge cards.

Nor should the archives be the repository for personnel records (who worked at the church, yes; correspondence, copies of id, pay stubs, tax information, medical insurance information, no), clergy counseling records, etc. If it is essential that confidential information be retained, it should be kept in a locked file in the church office.

Recommended retention schedules (what records and other documents need to be kept and for how long) are available from diocesan office.

Following is a list of items the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma suggests be transferred to the church archives after they are no longer needed for current use.

- * Audit reports
- * Balance sheets, annual
- * Bequest and estate papers
- * Blueprints
- * Budgets, approved and revised
- * Cashbooks, special fund-raising subscriptions
- * Chart of accounts (archive previous versions after revision)
- * Constitution and by-law with revisions (archive previous versions after amendment)

- * Copyright registration
- * Correspondence files, legal
- * Deeds and title search papers
- * Every Member Canvass records (discard working papers)
- * Financial statements, annual
- * Incorporation papers
- * Inventories of property and equipment (should be reviewed)
- * Invoices and paid bills, building construction and alterations (should be reviewed)
- * Journals and ledgers, general and special funds
- * Ledgers, subsidiary (should be reviewed)
- * Lists and schedules of subscribers/donors
- * Litigation papers (remove and discard non-substantive documentation 3 years after settlement)
- * Memorial gifts register
- * Mortgage deeds (archive after discharge)
- * Office files (archive records that document parish administration, ministry, worship, fellowship)
- * Pledge registers (summary record of annual stewardship giving)
- * Policy statement (archive old statements after revision)
- * Profiles, parish
- * Property files: copies of deeds, title papers, repair history, permits, leases, correspondence (destroy duplicate files after administrative use ceases)
- * Real estate surveys/plot plans
- * Records schedules and destruction logs
- * Specifications for building and design
- * Statistical summaries (should be reviewed)
- * Tax-exempt certificates and Form 990
- * Trust fund files
- * Trust fund registers
- * Wills, testaments, and codicils

FOR ADDITIONAL ARCHIVAL ASSISTANCE

The Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma archivist can assist parish archivists in obtaining further knowledge and resources about archives management.

Books and pamphlets on archival principles and management may be obtained from the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal Street, Suite 504, Chicago, IL 60605, and from the American Association of State and Local History, 530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219.

Parish historians and archivists may participate in professional groups which are concerned with archival activities. These include:

* *The Society of Southwest Archivists*, a professional regional archivist society promoting sound archival principals and standards. Web site: <https://www.southwestarchivists.org/>

* *The National Episcopal Historians and Archivists*, a group of historians, archivists, and interested clergy and laypersons from many dioceses throughout the United States and Canada. The association publishes a quarterly newsletter, *The Historiographer*, and holds annual conferences in various parts of the country. For further information, write to NEHA, 509 Yale Avenue, Swarthmore, PA 19081. E-mail: nehahqs@aol.com. Website: <https://www.episcopalhistorians.org/>

* *The Historical Society of the Episcopal Church*, a group of professional church historians and laypersons. The society publishes a journal, *Anglican and Episcopal History*. For further information, write to The Historical Society of the Episcopal Church, PO Box 2098₂₄, Manchaca, TX 78952-2098. Web site: <https://hsec.us/>

Another resource is the Archives of the Episcopal Church, PO Box 2247, Austin, TX 78768-2247. Web site: <http://EpiscopalArchives.org>.

Many internet resources are available free, but be cautious of the source.

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RESOURCES FOR ARCHIVAL PRODUCTS

Gaylord Brothers
PO Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13221-4901
1-800-448-6160
e-mail: customerservice@gaylord.com
<https://www.gaylord.com/>

Hollinger Metal Edge Corporation
9401 Northeast Dr.
Fredericksburg, VA 22404-8360
1-800-634-0491
e-mail: info@hollingermetaledge.com
<https://www.hollingermetaledge.com/>

University Products
517 Main street
PO Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041-0101
1-800-628-1912
<https://www.universityproducts.com/>

Archival Products
A division of Library Binding Service
1801 Thompson Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50305-1413
1-800-526-5640

