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Records Management for Congregations

Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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[A version of this document suitable for printing, is available.](#) 

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For teaching purposes, a  PowerPoint Presentation based on this manual is available from the [Director for Records Management](#).

 **The Fisher's Net** offers a free online distributive learning course in [Congregation Administration](#), which includes records management and other useful topics.

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Your records have a life cycle!

You create and maintain the records of your congregation in order to have the information you need when you need it; in the format from which you can most easily retrieve it; and in such a way that partners working in your congregation, today and in the future, can readily find the information. As you set about preserving information for future reference, plan for the entire life cycle of the records you are creating. If you do this, you should never need to spend time going through old material to determine the potential administrative or historical value.

Today, most of the records of your life together as a congregation begin as digital files. Your financial records and parish register may be kept in a database. Minutes, reports, newsletters, sermons, and other documents are created using word processing software. Correspondence is usually by e-mail. Much of the information you use and distribute to parishioners is created in formats to be read by a Web browser. Even the photographs of your congregation's activities are now in digital formats. These guidelines will address the ways in which you can assure future generations that these records will still be available for their use long after hardware, software, and file formats have changed.

Consistency is important in the care of records. Any records retention policy has validity, once accepted as the policy of the organization, only as it is uniformly practiced. It should be neither selectively implemented nor disregarded at the whim of the custodians of the records. Never purge records in the face of potential litigation. Information that is retained in hard copy or in electronic files is the property of the congregation. Such information is not the property of the pastor or of officers of the congregation to be removed, retained personally, or destroyed at will. All staff members are custodians of the records they maintain.

Most of the records retained by a congregation for its daily operation, legal protection, financial security, and responsibility to history fit into one of the following categories. For the well-being of the congregation, each type of record has a specific life cycle and needs appropriate care.

Parish Register

The Parish Register includes:

- Permanent roll of members
- Baptisms
- Confirmations
- Marriages

- Funerals
- Communion participation
- Pastors of the congregation
- ELCA-rostered lay workers
- Other professional lay workers of the congregation such as organists and choir directors
- Roster of officers of the congregation

Care

Never leave your parish register vulnerable to destruction. Keeping a copy of the parish register, in the same or another format, will provide security for it today. However, for long term preservation you must select a format that is not dependent on hardware and software, that quickly become obsolete, in order to read it. For legal and historical purposes, consider one of the following means of securing your parish register:

Maintain the traditional parish register in addition to the electronic database. Once each year, print out, on acid free paper, the necessary reports that constitute a parish register; date them and care for them as you would the traditional parish register. Have microfilm copies of your parish register made at reasonable intervals. Scan the parish register onto CD-ROM discs. Take digital photographs of the pages of the parish register.

Retention

According to the Model Constitution for Congregations the pastor is responsible for maintaining the parish register (*C9.12.). Please refer to the document, [Maintaining the Parish Register](#). The parish register is a permanent record and requires the utmost care. The parish register is a hard-copy record. You may use an electronic database program for managing the records that you maintain in the administration of your congregation. The database itself does not constitute a parish register.

Duplicate and disburse!

A duplicate copy, in one of the above formats, should be kept at a remote location, preferably a bank safe deposit box. Remember that digital information is not preserved by accident. If these methods are used, you must commit to reformatting the files as hardware and software change.

For additional information on the pros and cons of each of these formats please see the document,

[A Comparison of Microfilming and Scanning Technologies.](#) 

Electronic Databases

Congregations use personal computers for maintaining databases for the tasks of parish administration such as:

- Membership and other directories
- Parish register
- Accounting system
- Record of member giving
- Mailing lists

Two critical issues pertain to the SAFETY of electronically stored data:

1. Restoration of current information in the event of system failure or loss; and
2. Migration of entire databases to newer generations of hardware and software as systems become obsolete.

Care

To ensure the easy restoration of your database in the event of system failure, natural disaster, or human mischief, back up your personal computer's hard drive at least once each week and store the disks or tapes at a location removed from the personal computer.

Limit access by means of password protection.

Make certain that the structure of each database is documented—identifying the software, computer language, and report form—so that you are prepared, when the time comes, to migrate to a new generation of software or hardware.

Retention

A database, such as a membership management or accounting system, is a constantly changing record. An early decision must be made as to which reports generated by your database are necessary as permanent legal or historical records of the congregation. These should be printed out annually (see Parish Register above).

As you update and purge information from your databases, consider which records (i.e., transferred members, general ledger reports) should become part of a subdirectory permitting long-term storage and ease of access, and make certain that these directories migrate to software and hardware upgrades with the rest of the information in the database.

Electronic Documents

These Materials, produced by the congregation to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the parish and tell the congregation's story . . .

- Annual reports

- Minutes of regular and special congregational meetings
- Minutes of the congregation council and its executive committee
- Minutes or reports of committees and of auxiliary organizations for men, women, and youth
- Copies of yearly parochial reports sent to the synod office
- Constitutions and bylaws
- Worship bulletins
- Membership directories with or without photographs
- Newsletters
- News releases and other promotional material
- Congregation histories
- Devotional material
- Curricula
- World wide Web site

Care

Most of these are created electronically, but used and preserved as paper documents. Those documents that are also legal documents should be protected by keeping another copy in an off-site location. The World Wide Web site changes frequently. You may wish to print out “snapshots” of this site from time to time to preserve this record of your congregation’s story.

Retention

All of these documents tell the story of your congregation and should be collected in the congregation’s archives. If the congregation is disbanded, they should be moved to the archives of the region or synod.

Recognizing the need for preserving digital records of all kinds, the [Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative](#) is bringing together a variety of agencies who seek to standardize the formats and procedures for permanently preserving digital files. This is still a work in progress.

Legal and Property Related Documents

Vital legal and property related documents may include . . .

- Charter or articles of incorporation
- Constitution and bylaws
- Tax-exempt status reports and documentation or the congregation’s nine-digit federal employer identification number
- Deeds, titles, surveys, leases, mortgages, easements, and blueprints

- Current service contracts
- Insurance policies (current and retired)
- Copies of letters of call to the pastors and ELCA rostered church workers
- Other employment contracts
- Service contracts
- Documentation creating endowment funds and for bequests, gifts, and endowments
- Minutes of regular and special congregational meetings
- Minutes of the congregation council and its executive committee
- Personnel handbooks and employee benefit programs ;
- Legal claims and law suits

Care

1. You are advised to use copies of these legal documents for administrative purposes and deposit the originals in a bank safe deposit box.
2. Keep all insurance policies, even though you may have purchased a new policy from a new carrier. Send a copy of your insurance policy to the synod office.
3. The congregation will comply with any federal or state record retention requirements in relation to a legal claim or law suit.
4. Remember to update your constitution regularly and send a copy to your synod office.

Retention

With the exception of service contracts, these are permanent records.

Financial Records

Your financial records may include financial documents, such as . . .

- General ledger year end reports
- Budgets
- Treasurer's reports
- Annual audit reports
- Invoices
- Record of member giving
- Check register
- Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks
- Certificates of deposit or other evidence of savings
- Information on bequests, gifts, and endowments

Retention

You will have a financial management database that handles all of your accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents.

Permanent. . .

- Annual audit report
- Treasurer's report and the congregation's budget should be attached to the minutes of the annual congregational meeting
- Information on permanent bequests, gifts, and endowments

Seven Years. . .

- Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks
- Bank reconciliations
- Payroll administration records such as W-2, W-4 forms and payroll registers
- Cash receipt journals
- Record of member giving (All records related to congregational spending are open. All records related to member giving are confidential and should be secured)

Three Years . . .

- General invoices (For major purchases, you may wish to keep receipts or canceled checks as evidence of ownership for insurance purposes.)

No need to retain . . .

- Offering envelopes

Detailed guidelines for the congregation's treasurer and financial secretary are found in [Resources for Congregational Treasurers and Bookkeepers](#).

Information on Persons

Files, containing some or all of these documents may exist for the pastor, other rostered persons, employees, registered seminary students, and volunteers . . .

- Letters of call
- Letters of application
- Job descriptions
- Resumes
- Letters of recommendation
- Background and reference checks
- Performance appraisals
- Contracts
- Continuing education documentation
- Documents related to compensation and benefits

- Emergency notification forms
- Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation
- Correspondence
- Honors and clippings

Care

Right to privacy laws dictate that these files must be held in strictest confidence. Keep this file locked at all times.

Retention

If information, including background checks and letters of recommendation, attest to the employee or volunteer's fitness to fulfill a responsibility or perform a service, it should be retained for 25 years. If information relates to a worker's compensation or other claim by the employee, this should be retained. Similarly, if information relates to a possible claim or lawsuit by others involving the employee's conduct or duties, that also should be retained. Only biographical information and career history for rostered persons should be retained in the congregation archives. All other material should be destroyed upon completion of service.

As required, the file for a seminary student is sent to the seminary after he or she has signed for its release. It is not preserved in the congregation.

Pastoral Care Files

When the pastor provides pastoral care to parishioners, such as marriage counseling or personal spiritual direction, the pastor may create a file containing:

- Date and time of consultation and persons present
- Observation notes
- Tests, such as personality inventories
- Correspondence

Care

These files must be kept locked and in strictest confidence as they involve a relationship at the highest level of trust and are usually subject to the clergy and penitent privilege. The parishioner should sign a release if any information is to leave the file at any time. The pastor must use good judgment in establishing the nature of each relationship and in creating documentation of it. An understanding of the nature of this relationship will determine the appropriate disposition of the records.

Retention

If the relationship is said to be that of care of souls, the pastor may decide what should be retained at his or her own discretion. The principle of confessional confidences, which applies to all ordained ministers of this church, is specified by ELCA churchwide constitutional provision (7.45.).

"In keeping with the historic discipline and practice of the Lutheran Church and to be true to a sacred trust inherent in the nature of the pastoral office, no ordained minister of this church shall divulge any confidential disclosure received in the course of the care of souls or otherwise in a professional capacity, nor testify concerning conduct observed by the ordained minister while working in a pastoral capacity, except with the express permission of the person who has given confidential information to the ordained minister or who was observed by the ordained minister, or if the person intends great harm to self or others" (churchwide constitutional provision (7.45.) in the [*Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*](#)).

In all states, suspected cases of child abuse are required to be reported to the authorities. Whether such reporting requirements apply to pastors may vary. Consult an attorney in your state for guidance on such matters.

Correspondence, including e-mail

The pastor may have correspondence of various types:

- Ex officio as chief executive officer of the congregation
- Correspondence to and from the officers of the congregation or the bishop of the synod
- E-mail messages to the congregation or select individuals or groups
- Personal correspondence

Care

E-mail is especially vulnerable to loss. E-mail that represents the policies, program, and ongoing life of the congregation should be printed out.

Retention

The pastor's *ex officio* correspondence and the correspondence to and from the officers of the congregation or the bishop of the synod should be kept for the tenure of the pastor; the files then should be appraised for permanent value. Only letters with historical significance need be kept for the archives of the congregation. The pastor's personal correspondence should be maintained separately and removed from the office by the pastor at the end of the pastor's tenure.

Sermons

Retention

The pastor and the congregation may agree to place manuscripts of sermons commemorating special occasions in the archives of the congregation

Visuals

Such media records the significant events in the life of a congregation. They also are a permanent record of its history:

- Photographs and negatives
- Digital photographs on CDs
- DVD and Videotapes
- Films
- Audiotapes and CDs

Care

Digital files never survive by accident

Place photographs and negatives, properly identified (date, event, names of persons), in the archives of the congregation. Slides, films, and videotapes should be identified carefully and retained in a manner that respects their fragility. Digital photographs may be retained on laser discs, but remember that file formats, hardware and software will change. Make prints and negatives in order to preserve the pictures. Identify the images! Audiotapes of weekly worship services frequently are reused. Be sure to place sound and video recordings of special services in the archives of the congregation.

Retention

All of these visual media are permanent records of the ongoing life of the congregation and should be placed in the congregation's archives.

Resource Materials

Including:

- Resource materials received from the synodical or the churchwide office for the support of the activity of the congregation
- Hymnals

- Worship materials
- Curricula
- Minutes of the synod assembly
- Yearbooks and directories of the synod and the ELCA

Care

Resource materials should be distributed to the members of organizations and committees who can benefit from them. Current materials may be filed by subject and kept in an accessible location. Such materials seldom have long-term value and the files should be culled annually. These materials are collected in the churchwide and synod or region archives.

Retention

The congregation may wish to include the minutes of the synod in its own archives. Samples of hymnals and parish education materials are important for recording the history of the congregation. Other resource materials may be discarded when they have been superseded by newer materials.