Archives 101

A Brief Guide to Parish Records Management for Churches without the Time or Money to Do a "Professional Job"

What we do today makes the history of tomorrow. We belong to a church whose scripture, tradition, and history go back thousands of years and are at the very core of its being. We are part of an ongoing stream of believers and one of our responsibilities is to pass on the record of what we do today to those who come after us.

In this brief handbook, I've tried to present a practical guide for not-very-big parishes which would like to maintain their historical records, but don't have either the money or the people to do complex, state of the art, archives management. Although it does include background and next step information on such matters as conserving paper documents for those who are interested, its primary focus is on basic methods of caring for records. It is not intended to be either daunting or overwhelming.

Evelyn Payson

Historiographer Diocese of Milwaukee

cepayson@charter.net

Note: Much of the material in this booklet is from <u>Archives for Congregations</u> published by the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists. For more information see the note on sources at the end of this booklet.

Introduction

Maintaining church historical records involves four main types of actions.

The first is identifying what should be kept.

The second is preserving it and keeping it safe from the ravages of time.

The third is making it possible for people to find specific records.

The fourth is sharing with those who want or need to use the records.

In order for these activities to be carried out successfully, someone reasonably committed and competent should be in charge. This is <u>not</u> necessarily the rector or priest-in-charge although a parish is blessed if it has a clergy person who is a local history "nut" and has good organizational skills. Even if the parish does not intend to provide intensive records management, whoever is in charge of the church's archival materials should be someone who enjoys the work and has the managerial skills to carry it through successfully. The job can be done either by a single person or by a committee. If it is done by one person, it is important that one or more other people should be know how the system words and be able to serve as back-up. Having a written procedural manual, even a very brief one, can also help ensure continuity if the parish archivist changes.

If a parish wants a mission statement, creating one is a good idea and indicates that the parish supports historical records management, but it is by no means necessary. NEHA, the national organization of Episcopal historians and archivists, provides the following sample as a model (<u>Archives for Congregations</u>, p. 3):

> The purpose of the Archives of [name of congregation] is to identify, collect, preserve, organize and share historical materials and official records of [name of congregation].

> The [leadership body (e.g. vestry or bishop's committee)] of [name of congregation] commits itself to providing the support and resources necessary to implement this purpose and will appoint an Archivist with authority to implement archival policies and procedures consistent with this policy.

I. Selecting What to Retain

Churches produce many different kinds of records. Bulletins, newsletters, web pages, financial records, annual meeting minutes, Facebook pages, photographs, correspondence, gift records, e-mails, and sermons are only a few of the types.   In addition there are materials pertaining to the church that appear in local newspapers, diocesan publications, etc.

Some of these records are ephemeral, and others should be kept as long as the church exists, or even longer.   Most will be stored on site somewhere in the church, but some may have made their way to a local historical society or public library.   Some sort of sifting and winnowing process needs to be used to decide what needs to be kept for how long.

Two cardinal rules are 1) When in doubt, don't throw it out – at least not in the short run, and not if it's the only copy.   You can always decide to throw something out later, but once something has gone to the landfill, you can't bring it back.   Rule number 2 is that quality is more important than quantity.   You really don't need to keep 87 copies of last Sunday's bulletin.   The "winner" is not the church with the most boxes of "stuff."

What should be kept?   Here are the "Guidelines of What to Keep" list of the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists (Archives for Congregations, p.7)

- Essential legal information for future consultation.

  > Examples: bequests, wills, testaments, codicils, bylaws, incorporation papers, copyright registration, litigation, tax exemption information, trust documents, Church Registers (baptisms, marriages, burials),

- Information valuable in writing a congregational history by revealing its essential character, reflecting the community it serves, and explaining critical turning points. [I'd add that information useful to genealogists and people doing research on members of their families is also valuable.]

  > Examples: past church histories, membership directories, newsletters, bulletins, correspondence files, emails, website snapshots, vestry minutes, local media reports, memorial gift register.

- Statistical data about the growth and composition of the congregation and its financial condition.

  > Examples: annual Parochial Report, audit reports, annual financial statements, parish profiles. [I'd probably also put Service Registers in this category.]

- Essential information about major congregational organizations and projects.

  > Examples: reports to the annual meeting, flyers, brochures, membership lists, publications.

The NEHA guide adds that "these materials are often more than just written records and may be religious artifacts such as altar linens, vestments and liturgical objects. Pictures, audio and video recordings may be a part of the collection." (Archives for Congregations, p.7)

What are some types of materials that you can responsibly dispose of?

- Extra copies. Unless you really need a spare copy, don't keep one.

- Materials that someone else is keeping that don't contain items relevant to your church.   If there was an article in the Milwaukee Churchman about your parish, keep it – but you don't need to keep every issue.   The same thing holds true for local newspapers that don't contain articles about the church. Keep only what you need. Unless a book about another church in the diocese contains a significant amount of material on your church, don't hang on to it but instead see if you can find it a new home.   It's someone else's job to be the formal repository.   The same thing holds true for organizations that use the church building.   If Boy Scout Troop 137 meets at the church, keep a copy of the agreement that allows them to use the church but otherwise allow the troop to keep its own records.

- Some items only need to be kept for a short time.   If your church has a building project, you don't need to keep a permanent record of every last nail, just of important and significant items and decisions.   Manuals for equipment can be thrown out if the equipment is junked.   Outdated catalogs don't need to be retained.   Temporary financial and administrative records can be discarded once the final ones are available.

It's a good idea for a parish to draw up a retention guide stating what items should be kept and for how long. It helps provide consistency and reduces clutter.

Some materials in a parish archives may be of a sensitive or confidential nature. Routine access to such materials should not be allowed and developing policy guidelines may help forestall problems.

II. Electronic Media

The development of electronic media is radically changing archive practices. The situation is in such a state of flux that it's virtually impossible to draw up a lasting set of practices. Whatever a parish comes up with today is unlikely to be accepted practice in five years, or even two.

How should a parish handle this situation? There are actions one can take that don't cost a lot of money.

First, recognize the need to do something. Every day thousands, if not tens of thousands, of electronic records are being overwritten and changed across the Episcopal Church. Many of them are disappearing without a trace. Doing nothing is in fact accepting the destruction of important and useful parish information. Even if no one has any real idea of what programs or formats will be in use a decade from now, a parish can still try to have its data accessible.

Second, parishes should try to preserve the electronic newsletters, parish websites, Facebook pages, etc. that they are producing. Make and keep web snapshots, do screen captures or make printouts of webpages. Most parishes have members who are highly computer literate and can help with this. Before you put out a new version of a newsletter, make copies of the old one. If the diocesan electronic newsletter includes articles on the parish, make and keep copies (paper and/or electronic) of them.

One of the major problems with electronic media is the speed with which programs and formats change. Franklin Robinson of the National Museum of American History says that "Computer programs are like dinosaurs. They just die a lot quicker." Twenty-five or thirty years ago, people used square 5 ¼ inch disks. Nowadays almost nobody has the equipment needed to read them. Then they moved to 3 ½ inch disks, and by now very few people can read them either. About 25 years ago a number of parishes in the diocese paid to have their registers

microfilmed for preservation.   Today no one has the equipment to read them. CD's became a popular storage medium, but they are on the way out and being replaced by cloud storage.   Flash drives are used for some applications, but they will also undoubtedly soon be replaced with new technology and the data stored on them will become unreadable. Cloud storage is still relatively new and access to the cloud depends on having someone to continue to pay the ongoing bills. Computers can crash and permanently lose the data stored on their hard drives.

Adding to the problem of finding equipment to read older formats is the lack of durability of those formats.   Contrary to early popular belief, disks and CD's are not immortal.   Even if one keeps the equipment needed to read old disks and CD's, the disks and CD's themselves will deteriorate and become unreadable within 25 years or so.

How should a parish deal with these problems?   Flexibility and readiness to change is clearly essential.   If a format goes out of use, switch over to whatever is replacing it, even if it is time-consuming and expensive and much easier said than done.   Keeping copies of important material in more than one format may help protect against losing the ability to read the information.   Storing paper copies of selected materials may be a sensible stop-gap measure.   Low acid archival papers can last for hundreds of years and with the improvements in digitization technology they can be re-digitized.   (However, digitization is not always easy or simple, and it may strain parish resources.   Normally humans have to monitor the process.   Character recognition software has improved greatly, but it's not yet perfect and proofreading important material is still often necessary at this point. If a parish doesn't have the resources, future technology may make it easier and cheaper.)

Developing a plan and keeping it updated is important.   What are you going to retain?   How often do you want to take "snapshots" of a website?   What do you want to save of a Facebook page?   What are you doing with e-mail?   How are you backing up your computer files?

The person in charge of archival records does not have to be, and probably won't be, the person who handles the electronic data for a parish, but good communication is clearly essential.   There needs to be a clear understanding of what happens if the data person leaves and of how the transition is to be handled if data is not to be lost.   Someone needs to be responsible for preserving electronic newsletters and other electronic forms of communication

III. Storing and Preserving Materials

Often local parishes have very few choices about where they store their records and are operating on tight budgets that make it difficult to buy archival storage supplies. Not everyone will be able to follow all the following recommendations, but most parishes can provide at least moderately adequate storage conditions or at least improve their present practices.

- Find a suitable location. <u>This is the most important single step in conserving and preserving materials</u> and one that is possible to at least some extent for most parishes. Climate control is important. The storage area should be neither too hot nor too cold, neither too dry nor too damp. Heat and moisture are extremely damaging to archival materials. Minimizing temperature fluctuation is very important. A space with regular temperature fluctuations of ten degrees or more can degrade documents five or ten times faster than one with a steady temperature. The ideal humidity is between 45% and 65%. Too much humidity encourages the growth of mold; too little speeds up paper deterioration. Avoid basements and attics, especially ones that are not air-conditioned. Keep the area well ventilated but don't have air blowing directly on archival materials. It's desirable to monitor humidity and temperature if possible.

- Light is dangerous to paper. Most modern paper is quite acidic and will eventually turn brown and brittle. Light accelerates the process and causes fading. Avoid direct sunlight. It can cause temperature fluctuations, affects humidity, and fades covers and paper. If possible the documents storage area should be kept dark when not in use.

- Try to assure good air quality. Air pollutants can speed up damage to paper. Have building furnace filters changed regularly. Basic housekeeping such as careful dusting, vacuuming and/or damp-mopping can help alleviate damage.

- Avoid mold. Mold can be dangerous to handle and can cause health problems. It needs moisture to survive and thrives in damp conditions with little ventilation. If you are dealing with a limited amount of mold, the

following techniques may help.   Technique 1) Place item(s) in a Ziploc bag. Leave the bag open and place it in the freezer for at least 24 hours. Technique 2) Place document in the sun for several hours. (Mold is a worse problem than heat or light.)   When the mold is try, brush off the residue with a soft bristle brush outdoors.   Wear a protective facemask and gloves. To remove a musty or moldy odor, place items in a plastic garbage bag with plain charcoal briquettes (with no chemicals added to make them ignite faster.)   Seal up the bag and leave it for a week.   Uncooked rice may be used instead of the charcoal.   Hanging bags of crumbled volcanic rocks are available in some hardware stores and will also help deodorize the material. If you have a severe mold problem, don't panic and throw materials out. Insurance may pay for remediation.

- Don't put stored materials in contact with things that can damage paper. This again is something most parishes can do. Avoid non-archival tape. It's not very durable, eventually comes loose, and leaves gummy residues on paper. Some tapes also stain paper irreparably.   On the other hand, once a paper document has tape on it, trying to remove it may cause more damage than leaving it alone so it is not always desirable to remove tape. It's far better not to put tape on the document in the first place.   Avoid metal paper clips and staples and remove them carefully when it's possible to do so without damaging the document.   They rust and stain and damage paper. (Plastic paper clips (not vinyl) are better.)   Avoid rubber bands.   They dry up and, as they decompose, they may stain or stick to paper.

- Loose-leaf binders are not good for storage because the contents are either kept too tightly or too loosely packed and the prongs place stress on the holes in the sheets.   It's better archival practice to remove the contents of loose-leaf binders and store them in acid free folders.   The binders can then be discarded (or kept for some other use.)   The metal spirals of spiral notebooks are hard on paper.   If possible, they should be ripped out and discarded.   Avoid vinyl (PVC) binders and plastic enclosures.   Archival quality polyester or polypropylene should be used instead.   (Polyester (e.g. Mylar), polyethylene, and polypropylene are chemically stable; polyvinyl chloride is not.) It's not a good idea to use "magnetic" photo albums.

- If your parish can afford to, use acid-free folders and boxes for materials storage.   They do cost more than regular folders and boxes, but they will help paper last longer.   Especially avoid scrapbooks with the sort of paper that turns brown quickly.   They can ruin the items they contain.   Never paste or glue items into a scrapbook.   Polyester or polypropylene sleeves are useful for enclosing photographs, newspaper clippings, etc. but they are fairly expensive.   Unfold folded documents and store them flat if it's possible to do so.   The creases in the paper become weak spots and may crack.   Try not to allow papers to curl or slump.   Photographs may be kept in acid-free folders.   Use acid-free tissue paper to interleave them.

- Use pencil rather than ink for labelling photographs, folders, etc.   Acid-free archival marking pens may also be used on photographs.   Pencil leaves a removable residue on surfaces, while ink soaks into the paper and is not completely removable.   Some inks are caustic and actually eat away the paper.   When erasing pencil marks, make sure the eraser you are using is in good shape.   The rubber erasers on the ends of pencils tend to deteriorate and leave a not-completely-removable reddish smudged mark on the paper. Old Pink Pearl erasers also leave marks on paper.

- Some materials should be photocopied and/or digitized as soon as possible. Very frail clippings should be copied and then stored in an archival plastic envelope or sleeve if possible.   A photocopy of a badly browned or faded paper object is often more readable than the original.   The dye on "dittoes" (purple copies) fades very badly and becomes virtually unreadable with in about twenty-five years.   Old-fashioned thermal copies also deteriorate rapidly. Photocopy these items as soon as possible, while they are still readable.   Unless the original is valuable in its own right, it's not essential that it be kept because you'll be using the photocopy.   The copies can also be stored in an electronic format. Digitizing makes it possible to store the text of deteriorating materials in an electronic format, but remember that digitizing is only as good as the ability of the software to recognize the print characters.   Especially if the print uses an unusual type format or is hard to read, it may be necessary to proofread and correct the result.

IV Organizing Materials.

Almost all parishes have at least a rudimentary system of organizing their records. Church registers, vestry minutes, annual parochial reports and similar items are normally gathered together by type and arranged chronologically.   Larger parishes tend to organize their material in more complex ways than smaller ones.   If a parish has never had more than five or six children in Sunday School, it doesn't need a complicated organizational system for its Sunday School records.   Material can be kept in folders, in order by date.

However, even the smallest parish can benefit from deciding how to organize and index/catalog its materials.   For instance, if a parish has a box of miscellaneous photographs, it has four main choices.   It can keep them in a box (or boxes) just labelled "Photographs."   It can try to arrange them chronologically – "Photographs – 1940's", "Photographs – 1950's", "Photographs – 1960's" etc.   It can try to arrange them by subject matter – "Sunday School", "Christmas", "Choir" etc, with a "Miscellanous" box for the items that don't fit into any other category.   Finally, it can arrange the photographs by subject and date.   The pictures of the Sunday School from the 1950's can be kept together.   (Obviously, if it's possible, the pictures should all be labelled in pencil or with a special archival pen, saying who, of what, when and where the picture was taken. Mystery photographs really aren't very useful.)   The parish should also decide whether Sunday School photographs should be physically located with other Sunday School records or whether all photographs should be kept together, separate from other materials.

After the archives have been organized the next step is the creation of a "finding guide" – an index to the collection.   Without a finding guide, someone trying to find material can't learn what the collection holds.   Those who come after you really aren't likely to appreciate discovering that the parish records are stored in 23 cartons of miscellaneous items all jumbled together. Even the most rudimentary finding aid is much better than having no finding guide at all.   A very basic guide to the collection might consist of little more than the names and locations of the categories by which the collection is arranged.   A brief descriptive paragraph stating what is contained in each category/box/folder is useful, e.g. "Sunday school records from 1944-1967 ranged chronologically by year.   Includes photographs." Obviously, if one has the resources, especially the personnel time, one can create a far more detailed guide.   Entering data into a computer word processing program,

a spreadsheet or a database can allow people to find information that might not be otherwise available.   For instance, entering the names of people in photographs or documents into a computer can be very useful for someone who wants information on their grandmother who grew up in the church in the 1920's.

No one "best" system of organization exists.   Parishes vary too much in size and are too different from each other for one size to fit all.   The NEHA handbook has a section dealing with levels of arrangement and setting up a classification section. What really matters is 1) that there is a system, even if a very simple one 2) that it is written down so other people can use it to find items and 3) that it is consistently followed.

V. Making Materials Accessible to Users

"The value of an archives may be best measured by its use.   If no one uses the material, you may have a grand collection, but for what?" (Archives for Congregations, p. 23)   Providing information about what is the archives contains is a central part of the mission of the parish archivist/historian.   Copies of the finding aid should be given to the diocesan office, and to local historical societies and libraries.   The finding aid can also be available on the parish webpage.

The parish needs to decide what kind of access to materials it will provide.   If someone asks to go through the Sunday School records from the 1920's in order to see if there is any material on their grandmother, what is an appropriate reply?

First, physically safeguarding the records is critical.   Records are church property and should not be removed from the church.   They're too likely to vanish.   People using the archives should not be allowed to use the collections without supervision or monitoring, and should not be told to just lock the door when they leave. Obviously food and drink do not belong near archival records.

Some of the items in a parish archives may contain confidential material. Archivists traditionally have the right to limit or deny access to these items.   For instance, access may not be granted until a certain number of years after an event, or until none of the principals are living.

Sometimes a church will receive requests for research information.   Most parish archivists find these questions interesting and will try to answer them if they have the time.   However, some requests are too time-consuming or otherwise unreasonable or inappropriate, and the parish cannot handle them.   Sometimes a

request will involve copying items in the archives.   It is reasonable for a parish to charge for these services.

Paying attention to following copyright laws is important.   Many, probably most, items may legally be copied under the provisions of copyright law, but not all.   If the church holds the copyright to an item, the church is allowed to copy it.   If the item is in the public domain, the church is allowed to copy it.   In addition, under the principles of "fair use" documents may be copied for various "purposes such as criticism, comment, new reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research."

Publicizing the archives will make people aware of their existence and encourage their use.   Let your congregation know that the parish has an archives.   If you have time, you can write articles for your newsletter, create displays, present an adult forum, etc. Community publicity can also reap benefits.   Local historical societies and libraries can spread the word.   The local newspaper may be willing to write article(s) on your work.   You can join local historical groups and promote the archives by networking.

Archives are not created to get dank, dusty, or musty.   They are living history. To fulfill their purpose they need to be used, and obtaining good publicity, both in and out of the parish will help to develop their use and help them fulfill their mission.

Note on Sources

The basic source of information for this short handbook is Archives for Congregations: A Practical Guide to Developing a Church Archives, 2nd edition, cost $6.00, prepared by the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists (NEHA) and published in Salt Lake City in 2015.   It envisions a church archives on a grander scale than is possible in most, if not all, of the parishes of the Diocese of Milwaukee.   In this brief guide I've tried to scale down the recommendations to make them more useful for churches trying to operate with severely limited time and money.   Some of the preservation advice is taken from an archives workshop at the 2015 NEHA conference in Louisville, including the quote by Franklin Robinson.   Upon request I will send copies of the handouts from this workshop, including material on CD deterioration and how best to handle CD's and DVD's.