

Congregational Archives Quick Guide

Archives contain documents, photographs and other materials that are meant to be preserved forever. The reason archives are kept are to support legal rights and accountability, aid in future planning and decision-making, and preserve history to enhance research and understanding of past events and relationships. Scripture tells us very clearly that we are to remember God's many gifts of mercy and love to us (Luke 1:1-4).

The aim of any archives is to document the daily activities of an organization and/or person. Records created or gathered by one organization or individual (aka creator) must be maintained together and not mixed with the records of another creator. This is known as the principle of provenance and is a fundamental principle of archives.

Another principle of archives is that records must be maintained in the order in which they are received at the archives, also known as original order. Archives do not refile materials based on subject, chronology, or document types but respect the original filing system of the creator.

The following guide has been prepared to assist congregations in setting up their own in-house archives.

What to keep in the Archives

- Original and revised constitutions, Articles of Incorporation, and a list of charter members.
- Vital records including birth, baptism, marriage, burial and death records.
- Church policies, procedures and supporting documentation (e.g correspondence, emails relating to them)
- Property/building records including deeds, leases, surveys, maps and architectural drawings.
- Financial records such as general ledgers and monthly treasurers' records.
- Reports on activities, plans, projections, and annual reports.
- Minutes of voters' meetings, council meetings, and committee and organization meetings.
- Planning and program related records.
- Records of calls extended to pastors and church workers, if accepted.
- Education records including enrollment numbers, curriculum, and relevant course materials.
- Records of events, including photographs, films, tapes and slides.

What not to keep in the Archives

- Employee files - these should be kept for 36 months after an employee leaves the organization in accordance with [Federal Employment Standards](#)
- Invoices, bank statements, cancelled cheques, packing slips
- Tax records - these should be retained in accordance with the [Canada Revenue Agency](#) requirements.

Preparing Materials

Archival records are unique materials that are meant to be preserved forever. In order to minimize their deterioration over time, the following preparation requirements should be followed.

Minimum

- Put papers and photos into file folders and place them into clean, sturdy cardboard boxes.
- Use a soft lead pencil or archival pencil for writing or numbering. Do not use markers or pens.
- Label storage boxes with a unique number. Most archives assign an “accession number” to materials which consists of the year materials are moved to the archives, followed by a sequential number and the box number (e.g. 2024-001, box 1; 2024-001, box 2; etc)
- Number each file folder sequentially, including the unique box ID on the folder (e.g. 2024-001, box 1, file 1; 2024-001, box 1, file 2).
- Create a list of box contents so that you may find information. Avoid overfilling boxes.
- Place small to medium books upright on shelves. Lay large books flat and avoid stacking them too high.

Medium

Do everything listed above and the following:

- Put papers and photos into acid-free folders and boxes, or acid-free scrapbooks or photo albums (non-adhesive).
- When putting papers into file folders, remove metal paper clips and staples from pages and replace with plastic paper clips.
- Remove rubber bands from stacks of papers before putting them into acid-free file folders.
- Photocopy newspaper clippings. Keep the photocopies and discard the newsprint as it is highly acidic and deteriorates rapidly.

Optimum

Do everything listed above and the following:

- Gently flatten materials and unfold documents for permanent filing and storage. Extremely large items like blueprints may be rolled and stored in acid-free storage tubes.
- Interleave large, oversize documents with acid-free tissue paper and place into oversize acid-free boxes.
- Place photographs and negatives into buffered, archival envelopes or polyester sleeves. Do not use sleeves made from PVC (polyvinyl chloride) even if they are labeled “archive-safe” or “archival”.
- Wear white cotton gloves when handling photographs and negatives.
- Place books into archival book boxes or cover with acid-free covers.

Enemies of Preservation

- Ultraviolet light (from either sunlight or light bulbs)
- Fluctuations of and/or extremes in temperature and humidity
- Dirt and dust
- Insects, rodents and other pests
- Mould
- Poor quality paper products
- Adhesives
- Contaminants (ink, rust, rubber bands, chemicals, plastics, paint fumes, dyes, etc)

Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta

Storage Area(s)

Archival materials require secure, clean areas free of pests, mould and harsh lighting. When setting up an archives, the following requirements should be considered.

Minimum

- Try to maintain a consistent moderate temperature in the room (ca. 20 degrees C /68 degrees F). Temperature fluctuations are damaging to archival materials.
- Try to avoid areas that are near pipes or on outside walls to avoid condensation, cold or dampness. Basements and attics are not recommended.
- Try to avoid areas near furnace rooms or with lots of windows to avoid heat and light fluctuations.
- If it is not possible to avoid light or damp, make sure boxes are stored off of the floor on shelving units, keep blinds or curtains closed, and turn off lights when not in use.

Medium

Do everything listed above and the following:

- Choose a room, area or cabinet that can be locked.
- Use open metal shelves for storage instead of wooden shelving. Wood releases gasses that deteriorate records.
- Consider having a fire-proof filing cabinet for additional record protection.

Optimum

Do everything listed above and the following:

- Ideally, archival storage areas should be fireproof, with controlled temperature and humidity, away from environmental hazards, and preferably on an inside wall.
- Store archival materials at a temperature of 18-20 degrees C/65-68 degrees F and a relative humidity of 35%-45%
- Ensure your storage area has no windows to limit exposure to UV light, or install UV shields on windows and light fixtures.
- Use open, baked enamel shelving capable of holding approximately 100 kg/220 lbs per shelf for optimal storage.
- Label shelves and/or cabinets with unique ID numbers and create a register that indicates the boxes on the shelves.

Friends of Preservation

- Darkness
- Moderate, consistent temperature and humidity
- Cleanliness
- Acid-free folders scrapbooking materials and non-adhesive photo albums

Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta

Preservation of other media

Materials such as paper, photographs and negatives can be preserved for a very long time under the right conditions. Unfortunately, other media does not have the same longevity. Video and audio cassettes, compact disks (CDs), DVDs, floppy disks and other electronic media have much shorter life spans. The following are some tips to help preserve some of the content on these media.

Video and audio cassettes

- Videos will only last approximately 20 years at best. For longest life, do not store videos near your television or any other device that produces an electrical field.
- Store vertically, wound all the way to the beginning or the end.
- Remove record tabs to ensure video archives are not accidentally recorded over.
- Rewind your tapes every five years.
- You can digitize content on these media and preserve both the original carrier and the digital file, but proper digital preservation is costly and requires specialized equipment and expertise.

Computer media

- CDs, DVDs, floppy disks and other electronic formats have the shortest life spans at about five years. Consider printing valuable images and documents as conversion will eventually be necessary due to obsolete equipment and software.