

GUIDELINES FOR RECORDKEEPING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Prepared by Julian Robinson and David G. Roebuck¹

The Biblical account is complete with records and documents that tell the story of God's work among humanity. Numerous genealogies, including those that record the lineage of Jesus, the Ten Commandments, and the Acts of the Apostles are all important documents given to us and preserved by God Himself. From the Biblical story it is clear that God values the recording and preservation of His work among His people

When the first general assembly of the Church of God met on January 26-27, 1906, they considered issues that were important to the local churches of their day. Among those was the belief that local churches should keep records of their progress. This was important in order to adequately record the work of the congregation and the blessings of God. According to the minutes, "The Assembly discussed the advisability of each local church making and preserving its own records. [We] Consider it in harmony with New Testament teaching, and advise each local church to make and preserve records of all church proceedings. The Acts of the Apostles as example."²

Why Keep Records?

Records establish historical facts such as membership, baptisms and pastoral service. They authenticate actions of committees and congregations. And they provide protection in case of any legal action the congregation or its officers might face.

What Are Records?

Records are all documents in every media (paper, audio, video, computer, etc.) that are produced or received by any office, officer or employee of the local church in the process of conducting the business of the local church. These include but are not limited to memberships records, property deeds, church conference minutes, financial reports, committee minutes, reports to state and international offices, correspondence, financial statements, computer files, equipment warranties, photographs, film, video, sound recordings, blueprints, drawings and publications.

With both growth and time, the number and types of records continue to increase. Records management is the attempt to systematically control the production, growth and disposition of records. Records management answers the questions of what should be kept, how long it should be kept, and when can it be removed from the church. "The goal of a records management program is to ensure that necessary records are kept and that appropriate access is provided; that records with enduring value are identified, preserved,

¹ Certain sections of these guidelines are based on General Commission on Archives and History, "Guidelines for Managing Records of the Local Church and General Conference" (Madison, NJ: The United Methodist Church). Used by permission. This article was updated by D. E. "Gene" Mills, Jr. August 4, 2020.

² *General Assembly Minutes, 1906-1914: Photographic Reproductions of the First Ten General Assemblies* (Cleveland, TN: White Wing Press and Publishing House, 1992), 8.

and protected; that records that have served their purpose are disposed of properly; and that all of the above is done in an efficient and cost-effective manner.”³

Reasons for Records Management

There are a variety of reasons for records management in the local church. These include the importance of maintaining our heritage, the necessity of providing basic legal evidence, and practical matters such as the cost of storage space. Every office is faced with problems of storage space, as well as decisions about which records to keep and which to discard. These guidelines are designed to assist with these problems and decisions. A records management program strives to achieve economy and efficiency in the creation, use, maintenance, and disposition of records.

Space Considerations. It is estimated that after personnel costs, records keeping is one of the largest expenditures of most offices. Record creation, maintenance, filing, office storage space, filing supplies, and equipment all contribute to the high cost of keeping records. In our usually limited office space we are often faced with the question of what can we remove in order to have room for what we need today?

Certain factors can help us make the most effective use of space:

- Dispose of records as soon as legally possible. It is estimated that between 90 to 95 percent of all records are non-permanent; an estimated 85 percent have a retention period of less than eleven years.
- In comparison to state and federal governments, the church has fewer restrictions on what we are required to keep. For the majority of the records we produce we can set our own guidelines. There are laws affecting financial, personnel and legal files. But the majority of the material in our files falls outside these regulations.
- Having a controlled filing system means a smaller system. This can save time and money by making record retrieval and refiling easier and faster, and reduces the number of misfiles.

Legal Protection. As a practical response to our litigious society, having a records management program in place can assure courts and litigants that records are being cared for and disposed of properly and in a routine manner, not maliciously or in a capricious way. Additionally, in the event that the local church or its offices must be involved in litigation, a records management program will assure that records necessary for evidence in the case have been preserved and are available.

Preservation of the Important and the Historical. In order for our future to have a past we must be concerned for the records of today. The development of a records management policy is the first step in preserving our past by deciding what needs to be kept today. A concern for the historical, the legal and the fiscal needs of our movement motivates us to faithfully preserve our most important records.

³ Diane Wells, “Developing Records Management for the Archives: The Life Cycle Approach,” *The Archival Spirit* Summer 2001, 3.

Who Is Responsible

Recordkeeping in the local church is primarily the responsibility of the Treasurer under the supervision of the Pastor and within guidelines established by the General Assembly, federal and state laws, and the church conference. According to the *Minutes of the Church of God General Assembly (2002)* the duties and responsibilities of the Treasurer are:

Duties and Responsibilities of Church Treasurer

The church treasurer shall

1. Determine and maintain an accurate record of the date of the organization of the church and all other vital information pertaining to the local church organization.
2. Keep an accurate record of names and addresses of all local church members.
3. Report monthly to the secretary general, on MAP (Moving Active Pentecostals) ministry forms, the names and addresses of all members moving from their local church to another area.
4. Record and maintain accurate minutes of all church conferences and business transactions (loans, property transactions, and so forth).
5. Maintain an accurate record of all the local church conferences and disbursements, at the church, where possible.
6. Prepare monthly reports and send one copy to the secretary general and one copy to the state overseer by the fifth of each month on the [reporting] forms provided by the secretary general's office.
7. Prepare a financial report for each quarterly conference.
8. Furnish an itemized list of all receipts and disbursements to the pastor each week.
9. Disburse money from the church treasury under the direction of the pastor. (The pastor and treasurer, or treasurer, are to sign all authorized checks.)

The Treasurer is often not the only person to create and maintain records, however. Other church officers and agencies who may create records include the pastor, any other staff such as secretary, music minister, youth minister, Christian education minister, directors and superintendents of programs such as the Sunday school and Family Training Hour, as well as various boards and officers of auxiliaries such as Women's Ministries. All persons involved in the production and maintenance of records should have a basic understanding of the church's recordkeeping policies and procedures.

How Long Records Should be Kept

In every office there are a variety of records that are related because they result from the same filing process, or the same function or the same activity, or have a similar form or contents. This group of related documents is called a *series*. For example, file folders of bank statements from different banks would be a series. A collection of check requests would be another series. Staff memos are yet another series. For each series there are two important concepts, or questions to be asked. The first is "how are these records used?"—this is referred to as the *records life cycle*. The second is "how significant are these records?"—this is referred to as *appraisal*.

Records Life Cycle. Records can be considered like a living organism; they are born, or created, mature during their use, and then are retired or removed. In records management the task is to recognize when a record has reached the end of its life cycle. That is to say that the record **no longer serves a useful administrative function**. In general, the less a record is consulted, the less useful it is administratively. There are some significant exceptions here, but the main focus is records occupying space in an office. There are some records which will always have value, and which need to be kept, but which don't need to be in the main office files occupying valuable space. When a record has reached the end of its useful administrative function it is ready to be retired from the office. It is the function of *appraisal* that helps us determine when to retire the record and what to do with the record once it is retired.

Records Appraisal. Appraisal is the process by which you determine the administrative, legal, and fiscal value (primary value) as well as the historical and long-term research value (secondary value) of records. Once the value of a record series has been determined, a realistic retention period can be assigned to it. Appraisal can take place at any point during a record series' life cycle, but is most frequently done when the records are no longer actively used.

There are several questions to be asked when appraising a series:

- *How frequently is the record used by those who created it?* If the record is still frequently consulted then it should probably remain in the office. But even for records that are not consulted frequently, is there still a consistent, although low, demand for the record?
- *Is there some legal or fiscal need to hold on to the record even though it is no longer consulted or used?* An example here might be financial information.
- *What is the historical significance of the record?* Always consider records as historical when they contain information about the office that created the record. Examples include church conference, staff, or board minutes.

Retention Periods. Records that have reached the end of their life cycle need to be removed from the office. This should be done on a regular or annual basis. The basic tool to guide in this task is the **records schedule**. This tool helps remove the old and obsolete records from the office, making room for more recent and active records. A records schedule identifies records series and lists the time period that they must be retained before they reach their ultimate fate or disposition. The disposition of a record, as determined by the records schedule, may range from immediate destruction, to destruction after a period of time, or to permanent retention in the church archives.

Several different retention period designations can be used, such as: "Permanent," "Until Superseded," "Until Obsolete," or a specific number of years. "Permanent" indicates that the record series will be kept indefinitely. Records with a permanent designation should be sent to the archives on a predetermined schedule. "Until Superseded" is a retention assigned to records that are routinely updated or revised and where the previous version has no continuing value. "Until Obsolete" is assigned to record series that become

valueless on a non-routine basis. Specific time period retention periods are based upon usage factors and legal requirements, such as audits.

Calculating Retention Periods. Retention periods begin at a chronological file break, such as the fiscal or calendar year. The retention period applies to all records created during the time period. For example, the official copy of many accounting records has a five-year retention period, by fiscal year. For the most part, church records are not governed by any specific legislation that affects their retention. Certain financial records have necessary time periods for tax purposes.

What Records to Keep

The local church should retain records that establish its history and document its activities. Examples of records the local church should keep include, but are not limited to: legal documents (charter, articles of incorporation, policy documents, property deeds, etc.), minutes (church conference, Church and Pastor’s Council, Board of Trustees, and other boards and committees), records that establish statistics and events (membership rolls, baptismal records, marriage records, death records), key correspondence (pastor, treasurer, staff), financial records (income and expenditures, gifts, loans), publications (church bulletins, special programs, policy manuals, etc.), and those that provide visual and audible images of the life of the congregation (photographs and recordings of special events).

An example of some records and a recommended retention schedule is:

<u>DOCUMENT</u>	<u>RETENTION PERIOD</u>
Charter Membership List	Permanent
Church Deeds	Permanent
Correspondence	
General	2 years
Minister’s Appointment	4 Years
Minister’s Disciplinary	Permanent
Equipment Purchases Invoices	Permanently or until obsolete
Monthly Journals	
Receipts and Disbursements	7 Years
Cancelled Checks	7 Years
Bank Statements	7 Years
Year-end Summaries	Permanent or Microfilmed
Monthly Reports	

Ministers	4 years
Churches	4 years

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Storing and Preserving Your Records

Where Records Should Be Kept

Most local church records should be kept and maintained at the church following standard filing practices. Locked and fire-resistant file cabinets will provide a measure of security. For additional protection and security the church may want to consider the purchase of a fire-resistant vault or the rental of a safe deposit box. Additional attention should be given to documents that have archival value.

Electronic Records

Computer records are increasingly replacing paper documents. Care should be taken to maintain a regular schedule of backups of all computer files. Additionally, whenever software or hardware is upgraded, the church should be certain that records created on earlier versions can be retrieved with the new hardware or software. This is especially true of backups. In some cases it may be necessary to print all records before upgrading computer hardware and software. If you only have one copy of an electronic record, you don't really have it. Best practices mandate three copies, in at least two storage formats, and in more than one location. For example, a file stored on the church's computer hard drive, plus a copy in an external thumb drive or digital tape stored off-site, plus a copy stored in the "cloud."

Archives

Every local church should establish an archives for the care and preservation of its records of permanent and historical value. Records should be transferred to the archives when they are no longer used on a regular basis.

Location. Basements and attics are poor locations for archives as they are subject to poor environmental conditions and water damage in the event of floods or plumbing problems. Inasmuch as possible the room in which the archives are located should have temperature and humidity controls. Ideally the temperature should remain under 70°, the relative humidity should be 50%, and there should be low light. Both temperature and humidity should be kept as constant as possible.

Storage Containers. Archival quality file folders, boxes, and other storage containers are readily available from companies that provide products for archives. Paperclips, staples, and other metal that will rust should be removed from the documents before storage. Documents should never be laminated, rather protective enclosures should be used. Tape and other adhesives should be avoided as these will eventually dry out and discolor the documents. Of course, budget will be an issue, but keep in mind the principle of "good, better, best." At least do something good, even if you can't do the best.

Handle with Care. All archival documents should be handled with care. Brittle documents should be touched as little as possible. Photographic materials, record albums and CDs should be held by their edges. Using white cotton or nitrile gloves will add to the life of the documents.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are records?

Records are the minutes, reports, budgets, correspondence, and other documents produced or received by the local church.

Who needs to be concerned about record keeping?

Everyone who is responsible for creating or storing records needs to be concerned about which ones are kept and which ones are discarded.

Should I keep every record?

No. Once a record is no longer used on a regular basis it can be moved to storage, assigned to the archives, or destroyed.

What records are kept permanently?

Records that detail the important business of the church should be kept permanently.

Should we keep all correspondence?

No. Do not keep routine correspondence that answers routine questions, announces meetings, etc. Do keep correspondence that details policies, procedures, and special events of the church.

When should we move records to storage?

Records should be moved to storage when they are no longer being used on a regular basis.

When should our records be transferred to the archives?

Records are generally moved to the archives according to a Records Schedule. See the sample in the article above.

What is a Records Schedule?

A Records Retention Schedule determines how often particular types of records are moved to storage or transferred to the archives.

Is e-mail a record?

E-mail sent or received and kept for official business is a record and must be retained for periods established by the Records Schedule.

Won't sorting records take a great deal of time?

Determining which records will go to storage and which records will eventually be transferred to the archives does take time. Some decisions are automatically determined by the Records Schedule. Correspondence and other records that may need individual decisions can be marked for future disposition at the time they are initially filed. For example, correspondence intended for the archives may be marked in a designated place, such as the upper left corner, with a designated symbol, such as an “A.”

Resources

Books

Aschner, Katherine. *Taking Control of Your Office Records: A Manager's Guide*. Knowledge Industry Publications: White Plains, NY, 1983.

Developing and Operating a Records Retention Program. ARMA International: Prairie Village, KS, 1989.

Franks, Patricia C. *Records & Information Management*. Neal-Schuman/American Library Association: Chicago, 2013.

Penn, Ira A., Gail Pennix, Jim Coulson. *Records Management Handbook*, 2nd edition. Gower Press: Aldershot, UK, 1994.

Skupsky, Donald S. *Record Keeping Requirements*. Information Clearinghouse: Denver, 1988.

Church of God Offices

For questions related to retention schedules: Church of God Records Committee, Church of God International Offices, P.O. Box 2340, Cleveland, TN 37320-2340.

For questions regarding church and ministerial reports: Church of God Department of Business and Records, Church of God International Offices, P.O. Box 2340, Cleveland, TN 37320-2340.

For questions regarding church and ministerial tax records: Church of God Benefits Board, P.O. Box 4608, Cleveland, TN 37320-4608. (423) 478-7131. (877) 478-7190.

For questions regarding preservation and archives: Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, 260 11th Street NE, Cleveland, TN 37311. (423) 614-8576. dixon_research@leeuniversity.edu.