

Collecting and Preserving Your Church's History

By Beth Patkus, New York Annual Conference Archivist

- ♦ “Can you provide me with a copy of my baptism record?”
- ♦ “I think my great-grandfather was a church member, can you confirm this?”

Could you answer these questions for your church? Unfortunately, sometimes the records that would provide the answers have been lost. This might be due to a tragedy such as a fire, but sometimes it is because records have been misplaced or mistakenly discarded.

The Book of Discipline specifies that records of active churches remain in the church, to be cared for by the church historian and a committee on archives and history – but caring for records can be a challenge in the face of multiple responsibilities, time limitations, and uncertainty about where to start.

The C. Wesley Christman Archives encourages you to make a resolution to safeguard your church's historical records! This article will get you started and direct you to additional resources.

Collecting and Organizing

The first step is to figure out what records are stored in the church. If there is an archives room (or closet!), survey the contents. It is likely that additional records will be stored in various church offices, and perhaps in more out-of-the-way spots, such as under a staircase or in the attic, due to lack of space.

You will want to make a basic list as you survey the records (a short description, dates, location, and condition for each group of records).

Don't forget to consider records that may be kept electronically, such as membership databases or financial records. Due to the relatively short life span of electronic media and the challenges involved in migrating data to new operating systems and software every few years, you should print important documents out on paper.

Create a list of all the groups that have existed within your church, both currently and in the past (e.g., church council, committees, fellowship groups, previous churches that might have merged with yours). This will help you figure out what records you should be finding and what records may be missing.

You may find that some church records have been removed to other locations for safekeeping over the years. Most frequently records are found stored in private homes. It may be difficult to convince church members to give up these records, but you can reassure them that the church will provide a safe space for storing the records, and remind them gently that the records belong where everyone in the church can access them.

What Records Should You Keep?

It is important to distinguish between permanent records and records that only need to be retained for a limited time. *Church Historian 2009-2012* notes that records to be kept permanently include:

- ♦ Administrative reports
- ♦ Charge conference reports, administrative board or church council reports
- ♦ Architectural drawings, blueprints, maps, legal documents, and deeds
- ♦ Annual budget
- ♦ Bulletins, directories, newsletters
- ♦ Church committee records
- ♦ Membership registers, baptisms, marriages, and transfers
- ♦ Scrapbooks, photographs, materials commemorating special occasions.

When organizing the records you have found, materials that were created by particular groups should be kept together (e.g., all materials from the 125th anniversary committee). Within a group, arrange the materials by type (e.g., minutes, reports, correspondence), and then either alphabetically or chronologically as appropriate.

Preservation

Now that you have collected and organized your church's records, how do you ensure that they are properly preserved? There are three major preservation issues to consider:

- ♦ **Storage space:** Locate a cool and dry space (avoid attics and basements!) with sufficient room to house all your records without overcrowding. Keep the storage area locked, and limit distribution of the key. Ideally, protect the space with smoke detectors and a wet-pipe sprinkler system, both of which are wired into the general alarm system and monitored 24 hours a day. Use steel shelving (wood can off-gas damaging chemicals over time), and do not store materials on the floor.
- ♦ **Environment:** Since high temperature and humidity accelerate the chemical reactions that cause paper to deteriorate, the temperature should be below 70°F and the relative humidity should be at about 40%. Maintaining these conditions consistently is one of the most important things you can do to preserve your records over the long term. It is a good idea to invest in an inexpensive digital thermometer/hygrometer to keep track of the environmental conditions in your storage space.



Records stored haphazardly will be damaged; use archival folders and boxes.

- ♦ **Storage Enclosures:** House paper records in archival folders and boxes, which are buffered with an alkaline material to slow acidic deterioration. When rehousing documents, unfold them and remove any damaging fasteners such as paper clips or rubber bands. Photocopy news clippings or other poor-quality papers so they do not damage other records. Old bound volumes or scrapbooks can be placed in flat archival boxes, and photographs are usually best placed in individual enclosures made from archival plastic (polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene) and then in appropriately-sized archival boxes.

Finally, make the history of your church come alive for its members! You might consider exhibits, lectures, a written church history, or even an oral history project. Also remember to document current church activities for those who will come after you by collecting clippings, photographs, and other records and artifacts of interest.

Additional Resources for Church Historians

The General Commission on Archives and History. *Church Historian: Remembering the Past and Inspiring the Future*. Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2008.

The General Commission on Archives and History. *Guidelines for Managing Records of the Annual Conference & the Local Church*. Madison, NJ: GCAH, 2009. See www.gcah.org to download.

The General Commission on Archives and History. *Guidelines for Managing Electronic Records*. Madison, NJ: GCAH, 2009. See www.gcah.org to download.

Canadian Conservation Institute. *Preserving My Heritage* website. See www.preservation.gc.ca/index-eng.asp.

American Institute for Conservation. *Resource Center-Caring for Your Treasures* website. See www.conservation-us.org.