

A Guide to Congregational Records, Books, and Artifacts

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Do you wonder what to do with the papers and records that accumulate in your church office—which are important to keep and what to do with them? This guide is designed for congregational historians, pastors, and others responsible for maintaining church office files or other historical materials that may be housed in church buildings or elsewhere.

Congregational Records

Materials to Preserve

1. Minutes, reports, and records of various congregational committees or groups, such as church council, youth group, sewing circle, Sunday school, and worship team
2. Congregational records, such as membership, baptism, marriage, funerals, with place and date
3. Official or legal documents such as constitutions, bylaws, deeds, etc.
4. Official correspondence of pastors or other church leaders
5. Financial records which provide an overview, such as budgets and annual reports
6. Church bulletins
7. Printed matter such as brochures, programs, etc. of church-sponsored events
8. Church periodicals such as newsletters, yearbooks, annual reports, etc.
9. Audiovisual materials: oral histories, recordings of special events, etc.
10. Photographs of congregational life, including scrapbooks and albums

Other Materials to Consider Preserving

1. Letters and diaries of congregants, particularly those that relate to congregational life
2. Newspaper clippings related to the congregation or its members

3. Samples of congregational books such as hymnals or Bibles, especially those written in languages other than English and anything published earlier than 1850.
4. Artifacts (objects) connected to the congregation's story. This could include a wide variety of items, so check with the Historical Society if you have questions.

Materials to Discard

1. Notices of meetings and routine memos
2. Routine correspondence
3. Detailed financial records, most bank statements, receipts, and check stubs

Record Preservation and Access

The records listed in the first two sections above help to tell the story of your congregation. Many of these are unique materials that cannot be replaced so care should be taken to ensure that they are available to the multiple generations. The good news is that you are not alone in this work. One of the primary functions of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society is to provide a place for the records of your congregation to be preserved. Archival materials are placed in acid-free containers and stored in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment to maximize the life and usefulness of these records.

It is often useful for congregations to retain certain records for a period of time (about a decade) before transferring them to the Historical Society. Records may be important for legal reasons, historical and research purposes, or ongoing administrative and financial functions of an agency. These issues all influence judgments on record retention and disposition. Materials that have historical value should be transferred to the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society after they are no longer needed for active use by the agency that produced them.

Unless restrictions are placed on a collection or group of records, all materials in the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society archives are available to visitors who wish to view them, including members of your congregation. There is no charge for pastors or church workers who are doing research in connection with their work assignment to use the library and archives.

Recognizing that each congregation's story is unique and that the guidelines above are unlikely to address every situation a church may encounter, we welcome your questions. Please feel free to contact us for more information. Contact information is at the head of this document. The Society's normal operating hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.