



Records Retention Schedule for the Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Your records have a life cycle! You create and maintain the records of your congregation in order to have the information you need when you need it; in the format from which you can most easily retrieve it; and in such a way that partners working in your congregation, today and in the future, can readily find the information. As you set about preserving information for future reference, plan from the beginning for the entire life cycle of the records you are creating. If you do this, you should never need to spend time purging files going through old material to determine the potential administrative or historical value.

Your records are born digital! Today, the records of your life together as a congregation begin as digital files. Your financial records and parish register may be kept in a database. Minutes, reports, newsletters, and other documents are created using word processing software. Correspondence is usually by e-mail. Much of the information you use and distribute to parishioners is created in formats to be read by a Web browser. Even the photographs of your congregation's activities are now in digital formats. These guidelines address the ways in which you can efficiently maintain your active records for use today and assure future generations that records of historic value will still be available for their use long after hardware, software, and file formats have changed.

Consistency Consistency is important in the care of records. Any records retention policy has validity, once accepted by the congregation council as the policy of the organization, only as it is uniformly practiced. It should be neither selectively implemented nor disregarded at the whim of the custodians of the records. Never purge records in the face of potential litigation. Information that is retained in hard copy or in electronic files is the property of the congregation. Such information is not the property of the pastor or of officers of the congregation to be removed, retained personally, or destroyed at will. All staff members are custodians of the records they maintain.

Change in the congregation status

1. If the status of the congregation changes through merger or consolidation, records of archival value become part of the archives of the new congregation.
2. If the status of the status of the congregation changes through dissolution, records of archival value should be sent to the synod or regional archives.
3. If the status of the congregation changes through withdrawal, the records of archival value are retained by the congregation.

Most of the records retained by a congregation for its daily operation, legal protection, financial security, and responsibility to history fit into one of the following categories. For the well-being of the congregation, each type of record has a specific life cycle and needs appropriate care.



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Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
Parish Register		
<p>The Parish register includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Baptisms ▪ Confirmations ▪ Marriages ▪ Funerals ▪ Communion participation ▪ Pastors of the congregation ▪ ELCA-rostered lay workers ▪ Other professional lay workers of the congregation such as organists and choir directors ▪ Roster of officers of the congregation 	<p>The parish register is a permanent record and requires the utmost care. The parish register is a hard-copy record and should be kept in a fire-proof safe. You may use a computer program for managing the parish register in the administration of your congregation. This database itself does not constitute a parish register.</p> <p>According to the Model Constitution for Congregations, the pastorⁱ is responsible for maintaining the parish register (*C9.12.a)ⁱⁱ For further instruction, please refer to the document, Maintaining the Parish Register.</p>	<p>Place old parish registers in a fire-proof safe in the congregation's archives, or in a bank safe-deposit box.</p>



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Legal and Vital Records		
<p>Vital legal and property related documents include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Charter or articles of incorporation ▪ Constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions ▪ Deeds, titles, surveys, leases, mortgages, easements, and blueprints, construction drawings ▪ Insurance policies (current and retired) ▪ Copies of letters of call to the pastors and ELCA rostered church workers ▪ Documentation creating endowment funds and for bequests, gifts, and endowments 	<p>Secure these documents by placing them in a fire-proof safe or maintaining copies in an off-site location.</p> <p>Keep the constitution current and send a copy to the synod for approval.</p>	<p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Minutes of regular and special congregational meetings▪ Minutes of the congregation council and its executive committee		Place in the congregation's archives
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tax-exempt status reports and documentation or the congregation's nine-digit federal employer identification number▪ Current service or construction contracts and warranties▪ Employment contracts▪ Policy documents (which may be in continuing resolutions)▪ Personnel handbooks and employee benefit programs	Maintain while current	Destroy as replaced or when no longer valid.



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Financial Records		
<p>You may have a financial management database that handles all of your accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents.ⁱⁱⁱ</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Annual audit reports ▪ Treasurer's annual report to the congregation ▪ Budget approved by the congregation ▪ Bequests & endowments 	<p>Preserve permanent records in hard copy.</p> <p>The audit report, treasurer's annual report, and the annual budget approved by the congregation should be part of the minutes of the congregation's annual meeting.</p>	<p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Investments in asset management ▪ Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks ▪ Bank reconciliations ▪ Payroll administration records such as W-2, W-4 forms and payroll registers ▪ Cash receipt journals ▪ Record of member giving 	<p>The IRS mandates that you preserve these records for four years. For administrative purposes, you may wish to keep these records for seven years. <i>Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations IRS p1821</i></p> <p>All records related to congregational spending are open. All records related to member giving are confidential and should be secured.</p>	<p>Whether maintained as paper or electronic files, destroy these records at the end of the retention period.</p>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General invoices 	For insurance purposes, you may wish to retain receipts or cancelled checks for major purchases as evidence of ownership.	Shred after three years.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offering envelopes 	Do not retain	Destroy after counting and entering the data.
Detailed guidelines for the congregation's treasurer and financial secretary are found in Resources for Congregational Treasurers and Bookkeepers .		
Information on Persons		
Files containing some or all of these documents may exist for the pastor, other rostered persons, employees, registered seminary students, and volunteers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Letters of call ▪ Letters of employment ▪ Letters of application ▪ Job descriptions ▪ Resumes ▪ Correspondence ▪ Honors and clippings 	Right to privacy laws dictate that these files must be held in strictest confidence, However, the file must be made available to the employee upon request. Keep this file locked at all times.	Place biographical information and career history for the congregation's staff in the congregation's archives.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emergency notification forms ▪ Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation ▪ Letters of recommendation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If information, including background checks and letters of recommendation, attest to the employee or volunteer's fitness to fulfill a responsibility or perform a service, it should be retained for 25 years. 2. If information relates to a worker's compensation or other claim by the employee, this should be retained 	Destroy all other material upon completion of service.



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Background and reference checks ▪ Performance appraisals and letters of discipline ▪ Contracts ▪ Continuing education documentation ▪ Documents related to compensation and benefits 	<p>until the matter is resolved.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Similarly, if information relates to a possible claim or lawsuit by others involving the employee's conduct or duties, that also should be retained. 4. As required, the file for a seminary student is sent to the seminary after he or she has signed for its release. It is not preserved in the congregation. 	
<p>Pastoral Care Files</p>		
<p>When the pastor, or other authorized staff member, provides pastoral care to parishioners, such as marriage counseling or personal spiritual direction, the pastor may create a file containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Date and time of consultation ▪ Persons present ▪ Observation notes ▪ Tests, such as personality inventories ▪ Correspondence 	<p>The pastor, or other authorized staff member, must use good judgment in establishing the nature of each relationship and in creating documentation of it.</p> <p>The principle of confessional confidences, which applies to all ordained ministers of this church, is specified by ELCA churchwide constitutional provision (7.45.)^{iv}</p> <p>These files must be kept locked and in strictest confidence as they involve a relationship at the highest level of trust and are usually subject to the clergy and penitent privilege. The parishioner should sign a release if any information is to leave the file at any time.</p> <p><i>In all states, suspected cases of child abuse are required to be reported to the authorities. Whether such reporting requirements apply to pastors may vary. Consult an attorney in your state for guidance on such matters.</i></p>	<p>Destroy these records at the termination of the relationship.</p>



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Correspondence		
<p>The pastor and staff may have correspondence of various types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ex-officio as chief executive officer of the congregation ▪ Correspondence to and from officers of the congregation and the bishop of the synod ▪ Personal correspondence 	<p>E-mail is especially vulnerable to loss. E-mail that represents the policies, program, and ongoing life of the congregation should be printed out.</p>	<p>Place only letters that describe the program and ongoing life of the congregation in the congregation's archives.</p>
Programmatic Material		
<p>These materials produced by the congregation to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the parish and tell the congregation's story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Congregation histories ▪ Membership directories, including picture directories on computer disc ▪ Newsletters ▪ News releases 	<p>Remember digital files never survive by accident! Today, all of these documents are created— and may be used— electronically but are preserved as paper documents. It is inevitable that hardware, software, and file formats will change.</p> <p>Use quality photographic paper to print out copies of pictures for the congregation's archives.</p>	<p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p>



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Program and training material produced by the congregation ▪ Audio and visual materials such as photographs of the congregation's events 		
<p>The World Wide Web site may contain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promotional material ▪ Membership directory ▪ Sermons ▪ Podcasts ▪ Blogs ▪ Audio visual materials ▪ Programmatic material created by members 	<p>The World Wide Web site is a constantly changing program delivery platform.</p> <p>Because the Web site may contain unique information about the life of congregation and its community, some effort should be made to preserve this record.</p> <p>The membership directory must be password protected.</p>	<p>You may wish to see if an archival site is collecting snapshots of your congregation Web site. http://www.archive.org</p> <p>If you find no archiving service, print out snapshots of unique Web delivered material to be preserved in the congregation's archives.</p>
Sermons		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sermons 	<p>Sermons, in whatever format, are considered intellectual property and belong to the pastor.</p>	<p>The pastor may choose to place manuscripts of sermons commemorating special occasions in the archives of the congregation.</p>



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Resource Materials		
Resource material received from the synodical or the churchwide office for the support of the activity of the congregation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hymnals ▪ Worship materials ▪ Curriculum ▪ Programmatic materials 	For congregations, such materials seldom have permanent value, and the files should be culled annually. These materials are collected in the churchwide and synod or region archives.	Samples of hymnals and parish education materials may be important for recording the history of the congregation. Discard other resource materials when they have been superseded by newer materials.
<i>See also these additional guidelines. . .</i>	<p><u>Maintaining the Parish Register: Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</u></p> <p><u>Congregational Treasurers Financial & Accounting Guide</u></p> <p><u>Certification of Congregation Records at the Time of a Pastoral Transition (form)</u></p> <p><u>Disposition of Records for Disbanding Congregations</u></p> <p><u>A Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</u></p> <p><u>The Work of a Congregational Archivist and/or Archives Committee.</u></p> <p><u>Comparison of Microfilming and Digital Preservation Technologies.</u></p>	
<i>For additional information contact. . .</i>	Director for Records Management and Library <i>Office of the Secretary</i> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 8765 West Higgins Road Chicago, Illinois 60631 Telephone: 800/638-3522, ext. 2811 e-mail <u>claire.buettner@elca.org</u>	Archives of the ELCA <i>Office of the Secretary</i> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 321 Bonnie Lane Elk Grove Village, IL 60007 Telephone: 800/638-3522, ext. 2818 e-mail: <u>archives@elca.org</u>



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Notes:

ⁱA representative of the synodical bishop is required to verify that these records exist and are in good order at the time of a pastoral transition. (S14.15) in the [Constitution for Synods](#)).

ⁱⁱ "The pastor shall keep accurate parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members dismissed, or members excluded from the congregation, and shall submit a summary of such statistics annually to the synod." (*C9.12.a.and b.) in the [Model Constitution for Congregations](#)).

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Congregation Council shall ascertain that the financial affairs of this congregation are being conducted efficiently, giving particular attention to the prompt payment of all obligations and to the regular forwarding of benevolence monies to the synodical treasurer. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for this congregation's investments and its total insurance program." (C12.05.e. and f.) in the Model Constitution for Congregations).

^{iv} "In keeping with the historic discipline and practice of the Lutheran Church and to be true to a sacred trust inherent in the nature of the pastoral office, no ordained minister of this church shall divulge any confidential disclosure received in the course of the care of souls or otherwise in a professional capacity, nor testify concerning conduct observed by the ordained minister while working in a pastoral capacity, except with the express permission of the person who has given confidential information to the ordained minister or who was observed by the ordained minister, or if the person intends great harm to self or others" (churchwide constitutional provision 7.45. in the [Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#)).