



SCHEDULES FOR THE RETENTION AND DESTRUCTION OF AGENCY AND PARISH RECORDS

*T*he local parish cannot retain a copy of each item it produces. A congregation that has just been organized may retain a copy of “everything” during its early years. Older congregations, however, would have their basements and storage areas flooded with a mountain of materials that no member or historian would ever be interested in examining, if “one copy of each” had been preserved. To aid congregations in deciding which materials may be destroyed after certain periods of time have elapsed and which must be preserved permanently, the following guidelines have been prepared.

I. Determining Historical and Legal Value

Papers and materials may have varying degrees of historical and legal value. Consider the following:

- A) Papers with primary value accomplish the purpose for which an agency is created. They are administrative, fiscal, legal or operational in their account.
- B) Secondary values are contained in papers not related to the agency that created them. Nevertheless, they may have value for the congregation, individuals or agencies. Examples are reports issued by others on the parish agency, such as by the Synod, district or congregational officers.
- C) Papers with evidentiary value contain evidence of the congregation’s or agency’s existence or achievements. These may include information about persons, corporate bodies, problems, conditions and the like involving the congregation or the agency. Usually such records are of primary importance to the historian.
- D) Evidentiary records may be divided between:
 1. Records on origins, including minutes, memoranda, opinions of individuals, etc. These may be rather scanty during the organizational period of an agency. Individuals may have produced them and controlled them and their existence, destroying them or limiting their circulation.
 2. Records on substantive programs. These are of four types:
 - a. Summary narrative accounts, including annual reports, historical summaries and the like
 - b. Policy documents, directives, regulations, achievement reports, legal opinions, charts, research reports, budget matters, etc. with special em-

- phasis on showing how a program or an event came into being
- c. Public relations material such as bulletins, pamphlets, circulars, press and radio releases, charts, posters and such, created for publicity purposes
 - d. Internal management or housekeeping records relating to personnel, property, supplies, travel, etc.
- E) Records having informational value should be tested on the basis of:
- 1) Uniqueness—Is the information available elsewhere, or is this the only one of its kind?
 - 2) Extent—Is the information extensive, intensive, or diversified? Where intensive, diversified information is contained in papers, these ought regularly to be preserved. However, the form in which such records are available may suggest destruction; for example, if the records are preserved in an illegible shorthand, or IBM punch cards which are indecipherable and meaningless.
 - 3) The test of importance will always vary from one situation to the next, even from one historian to the next.
- F) The retention and destruction decisions need to be based chiefly on uniqueness and form. Wherever possible, congregations or agencies ought to preserve summary information rather than preserving it in a voluminous form. A good case in point would be the presentation of a summary of a questionnaire rather than all of the questionnaires together.

II. Records to be Preserved in Perpetuity

On the basis of these preliminary definitions and considerations, which are some of the records to be preserved or destroyed? Obviously each agency or congregation has the option of preserving everything which, in its opinion, it considers essential to its well-being, for historical purposes and legal identification. Here are some suggestions based on past experience:

- A) **Constitutions and Articles of Incorporation**, at least one copy of each edition, including also auxiliaries, affiliated agencies or subsidiaries
- B) **Calls**, issued and accepted by the pastors, teachers and workers serving the parish or the agency
- C) **Deeds**, leases, titles, policies, surveys and descriptions of church properties
- D) **Contracts**, blueprints, plans, specifications, mortgages, even if retired
- E) **Charter member lists**
- F) **Minutes** of the voter's assembly and related documents which have produced resolutions or actions
- G) **Ledgers of Official Acts**—baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial records
- H) **Sunday Bulletins**, newsletters and announcements to congregational membership, etc.
- I) **Official Correspondence** relating specifically to membership status, pastors and teachers or other servants of the congregation, relating to policy modifications, external business corporations, policy and legal matters
- J) **Treasurer's Reports** and financial files required by law
- K) **Histories** of the congregation including chronology and statistics
- L) **School Records**, including those on teachers, enrollment, policies, terms, record of textbooks, courses, tuition, special problems, entrance requirements, disciplinary cases, etc.
- M) **Reports** of all official committees and commissions, societies, auxiliary and subsidiary organizations
- N) **Minutes of the Church Council**, building committees and other committees of vital importance

- O) **Reports** issued annually to the *Statistical Yearbook*
- P) **Membership Changes**, transfers, disciplinary cases, excommunications, expulsions, etc.
- Q) **Officers**, lists of the congregation and all boards, committees, commissions, auxiliary organizations, etc.

III. Records Retained Only Temporarily

There are some parish records which are created during the normal course of a parish's activity which have value for a limited time. Some parishes may wish to retain such items longer than others. In any event, it is urged that items for temporary preservation be separated from those required for permanent preservation. This may seem like an insignificant matter, but it will simplify destruction. A clerk can destroy an entire file without having to rethink or to reprocess materials and re-examine the entire contents before decisions are made. A stamping device can also be utilized to distinguish the permanent from the temporary. Temporary retention materials can be stamped including also the date by which such records are scheduled to be destroyed.

Materials recommended for destruction at certain intervals include:

- A) After each year
 - a. Communion announcement cards
 - b. Mimeographed materials, save one copy for a general file in chronological order of production, destroy all duplicates at the end of each year
- B) After two years
 - General correspondence
 - a. Copies of all calls and contracts not accepted, especially after the composite summary has been filed.
 - b. Communications with members of the congregation that do not contain information related to the structure of the congregation or have no legal or historical value, such as those that are congratulatory in nature and contain merely secondary, limited information
 - c. Program materials, save only one set revealing evidential values and summaries
- C) After five years
 - a. Financial records:
 - Remittance envelopes
 - Deposit slips
 - Cancelled checks
 - Weekly financial reports
 - b. Miscellaneous items not meeting the above appraisal standards or not specifically referred to in the first category of permanent retention

A good rule of thumb, however, is to remember: *When in doubt, retain.*

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