

Records Retention Schedule for Bethany Lutheran Church

The following is based on the congregational records retention schedule provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

August 2011

Records have a life cycle!

Bethany Lutheran Church (Bethany) creates and maintains records of the congregation in order to have the information that is needed when it is needed; in the format from which it can be most easily retrieved; and in such a way that partners working with Bethany, today and in the future, can readily find the information. As information is preserved for future reference, it is important to plan from the beginning for the entire life cycle of the records being created. If this is done, Bethany 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, most of the records for Bethany begin as digital files. Our financial records 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 we use and distribute to our members is created in formats to be read online. Even the photographs of Bethany's activities are now in digital formats. The following guidelines address the ways in which Bethany can efficiently maintain our 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 for our 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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Parish Register		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<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. According to the <i>Model Constitution for Congregations</i>, the pastor is responsible for maintaining the parish register (*C9.12.a) For further instruction, please refer to the document, <u><i>Maintaining the Parish Register</i></u>.</p>	<p>Place old parish registers in a fire-proof safe in the congregation's archives, or in a bank safe-deposit box.</p>

Legal and Vital Records		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<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. 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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Administrative Records		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minutes of regular and special congregational meetings - Minutes of the congregation council and its executive committee - 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 	<p>Maintain while current</p>	<p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p> <p>Destroy as replaced or when no longer valid.</p>

Pastoral Care		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<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. The principle of confessional confidences, which applies to all ordained ministers of this church, is specified by ELCA church-wide constitutional provision (7.45.)^{iv} 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. <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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Financial Records		
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<p>Bethany has a financial management database that handles all of the accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents.</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. The audit report, treasurer's annual report, and the annual budget approved by the congregation should be part of the minutes of the Congregation Council.</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. <u>Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations IRS p1821</u> 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>
<p>General invoices</p>	<p>For insurance purposes, you may wish to retain receipts or cancelled checks for major purchases as evidence of ownership.</p>	<p>Shred after three years.</p>
<p>Offering envelopes</p>	<p>Do not retain</p>	<p>Destroy after counting and entering the data.</p>
Correspondence		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<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>

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Information on Persons	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<p>Description of Records</p> <p>Files containing some or all of these documents may exist for the pastor, other rostered persons, employees, registered seminary students, and volunteers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Letters of call - Letters of employment - Letters of application - Job descriptions - Resumes - Correspondence - Honors and clippings 	<p>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.</p>	<p>Place biographical information and career history for the congregation's staff in the congregation's archives.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emergency notification forms - Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation - Letters of recommendation - Background and reference checks - Performance appraisals and letters of discipline - Contracts - Continuing education documentation - Documents related to compensation and benefits 	<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 until the matter is resolved. 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>Destroy all other material upon completion of service.</p>

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Programmatic Material		
Description of Records	Care of the Records	Final Disposition
<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 - Program and training material produced by the congregation - Audio and visual materials such as photographs of the congregation's events 	<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>
<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. 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. The membership directory must be password protected.</p>	<p>Print out snapshots of unique Web delivered material to be preserved in the congregation's archives.</p>
<p>Sermons</p>	<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>
<p>Resource material received from the synodical or the church-wide office for the support of the activity of the congregation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hymnals - Worship materials - Curriculum - Programmatic materials 	<p>For congregations, such materials seldom have permanent value, and the files should be culled annually. These materials are collected in the church-wide and synod or region archives.</p>	<p>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.</p>

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Notes:

- i. A 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).