

Managing Church Records

A Guide

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The documentary records created by your church (such as minute books, membership rolls, newsletters and annual reports), are important sources of information about its life. These records will be needed by church officers who are responsible for planning and decision making in your church and denomination. Researchers from historical societies, students and the community will also find them useful in analysing the story of your church and district. These records may also be needed by the church for legal reasons. So it is vital that these records be carefully stored and well managed. Here are some guidelines to help in the process.

1. It is important to make sure that the all departments **create adequate records** of their work. Make sure such records are clearly identified as to who originated them, their purpose and especially their date. Keep in mind the possible future uses of the records (planning and review, denominational reporting, historical research and legal responsibilities), and ensure that official records of decisions, reports of developments and other relevant details are formally made. Computerised records should be printed out in hard copy on good quality paper, with the pages bound together firmly and/or pasted in strong books; arch-binders, clips and the like are not acceptable. Do not use sticky-tape.

Assign the **responsibility** of caring for the records so created to some specific person in the church. It is best if this is linked with an official position so it can be supervised by the church in its regular administration. It can be part of the work of the church secretary or administrator; however, ideally, a post of Church Archivist should be created. Be sure that all departments of the church are included in the process, and that those in charge know their responsibility, and act upon it.

2. The person/s responsible for church records should be given full **authority** to carry out the job together with the necessary **materials and supplies** and a clear statement of responsibilities. There also should be an adequate **financial** allocation to provide storage boxes and materials, and of course there should be **secure space** made available in the church building together with filing cabinets and shelving. Develop a proper accountability process to ensure the system is working.

Note that it is not desirable for church records to be stored in anyone's home or business office because access is awkward and security is too risky. Records that are likely to be consulted only rarely by the church or ones that are of particular public interest can be stored at an official or central archival repository such as the State Library, a University or the Baptist Union; make sure you are aware of the terms and conditions on which the material is held and who controls access to it.

Note that it is NOT the policy of the Baptist Union to seek the records of all local churches in its Archives, because under the Baptist system, these records are the responsibility in the first place of the local church. However, if churches wish voluntarily to hand these records over for safe keeping, arrangements can be made, and the records become the property of the Baptist Union.

3. The main **physical dangers** to documentary material are dust, heat and fire, damp and humidity, light, mould, insects and vermin, mechanical damage and pollution (especially the acid content of paper, containers and environment). So store material in secure, cool, dry, airy, fire-proof conditions on steel shelving, using strong lidded boxes and strong folders; wooden shelves should only be used if fully treated. Ideally, acid-free paper, interleaving and containers should be used; if paper is already deteriorating, have it photocopied or microfiched before it is too late.

Avoid **mechanical damage** caused by such over-tight or over-loose packing, crushing of papers due to

weight of material stored above, the pressure from heavy minute or financial books, and tearing etc caused by rough handling etc etc.

Remove pins, clips and staples that may rust, "scotch" tape and rubber bands that may deteriorate and stain/damage the paper, and unfold all papers; remove from mechanical binders and place material in suitable identified envelopes or folders instead.

Faxes and other material on thermal paper should be copied onto good quality paper for archival storage. Data should not be stored on computer disks of any kind (floppy, CD, DVD) but instead hard copy printouts on good quality paper should also be made of all such computer data.

4. All existing material should be carefully **sorted and labelled**; a list (in duplicate - one copy housed with the material and the other in the church's administrative centre) should be compiled indicating: (i) originating body and officer, (ii) date, (iii) type and (iv) number of items. (E.g., Women's Union - secretary's correspondence, 1980-90 - 3 folders) Send a **further copy** of the listing to the Baptist Archives. (The Baptist Historical Society of Queensland has published a *Church Archives Register* to facilitate this process.) Never sort material according to theme like in a library, but always leave it arranged according to the groups and sequences in which was originated, as mentioned above.

Loose papers such as correspondence or reports should be bound firmly together according to originating office and chronological order and clearly labelled. Use strong envelopes, manila folders, archival and document boxes for storage.

Photographs and recordings should be as fully identified as possible, stating date, place, occasion, participants, and placed in boxes and envelopes. (Do not use "magic" photo albums which destroy photos.) Paste newspaper cuttings into scrapbooks with full identification (date, paper, subject matter). As colour photos are likely to deteriorate after a few years, convert all important photos to black and white, and keep the negatives as well.

5. Clear **policies and procedures** should be set up to **acquire new material** on a regular basis (say, at the end of each church year) and to collect extra material (e.g., from leading church families) as it becomes available. You should aim to collect all the basic records of the church, including minutes, rolls & reports of all organizations, substantial correspondence, financial & general reports, publications, samples of promotional material, newspaper clippings, photographs, audio and video recordings of important events. (Memos, agendas, day-to-day financial documents and similar short-term material is not needed.) Newly accessioned material should be sorted, labelled & listed as above.

6. Be sure to **clarify conditions of ownership, access and publication**. It is best if any material acquired by the church from private individuals, families and other outside bodies is unencumbered - ie., there are no restrictions on its use and the archivist can make it available to clients on the normal basis (an exception may be made for sensitive, very recent and fragile material).

7. Establish **policies and procedures for use of the material** by bona fide church officials, members and researchers. Keep records of date and material used and the user including members and officers of the church. Clients should be required to apply in writing for permission to use material in published form, and should formally acknowledge the source of any material used. Physical access will be determined by local conditions.

8. Make use of the material in creative and helpful ways, such as displays, open days, access by local historical groups and students, and the publication of a local church history. See the guide *Your Local Church History* published by the Baptist Historical Society of Qld. for further information.