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Some Basics of Document Retention and Records Sampling

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“Ask the Archivist” by Paul A. Daniels

Some Basics of Document Retention and Records Sampling

I am often asked very practical questions about how long certain materials should be retained in a congregational archives. It's a frequently asked question especially for “repetitive records” like newsletters and bulletins. This type of material can pose significant storage challenges in church offices and eventually in the congregational archives space. As with most things, there are a couple of different ways of looking at this issue and each person will need to tailor my comments to fit their own congregational setting.

First, as an archivist working with congregations, I'm most concerned that our churches document their community life as fully as possible. Some of the best sources for this type of historical documentation are newsletters and bulletins. They tell the reader important information about the congregation's mission and ministry priorities. Typically, they provide more of this rich material than do council meeting minutes and annual reports, even though the latter must be kept for legal and financial reasons. This is why bulletins and newsletters are so heavily used for writing a congregational history for an anniversary celebration.

Given the rich story-telling role that newsletters and bulletins provide, I wish every congregation could keep one copy of each, but this would be an ideal situation. This is only possible if newsletters and bulletins are scanned to CD's (or if they originate as digital files) and organized in folders by type (newsletter or bulletin) and then by year. This assumes that there are people to do this, of course. It would be a great project for volunteers from the archives or heritage committee to tackle.

If scanning large amounts of material is unrealistic, then there is the technique of sampling. This approach assumes that bulletins and newsletters contain much the same information from issue to issue, month to month, even year to year, so that if you saved 1 of 10, for instance you would not be losing valuable information. You'd still be able to study what makes this particular congregation “tick”. In the process, you've reduced the bulk of material considerably.

Even so, there can be some downsides to sampling, so if you are thinking this might be the approach for you, please contact me and we can discuss it in greater detail. In other words, please don't permanently dispose of material until we've talked. I'll be happy to help.

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