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Ask the Archivist: What Makes a Useful Church Archives?

I am often asked what a good congregational archives needs to include and what it doesn't, particularly given space issues and volunteer commitments in most churches.

This is an important question and one that usually carries a bit of panic in the questioner's voice, especially if the person is the new archivist for the congregation and is faced with piles of old material stored in inadequate spaces.

Thankfully, there are some straightforward approaches to help the person, or ideally, the small heritage committee, get started on the work of building a useful church archives. I tend to advise congregations in terms of "must save, may save, and no need to save" when it comes to the initial sorting of records for retention or destruction.

First, here is a short list of items most needed in the church archives, the "must saves":

- Legal and financial records required by the state that the church is incorporated in, including articles of incorporation and constitution and bylaws
- Papers concerning the ownership of property and payment of major capital expenses
- The ministerial record book (baptisms, confirmations, marriages and funerals) of the church and its predecessors
- Published histories of the church - as many versions as possible
- Monthly church council records and annual meeting agenda, minutes and reports
- Insurance policies, both current and expired
- Irreplaceable historical photographs (originals and copies)
- Financial audits

Second, a list of "may saves" includes those items that contain important story-telling value for the life of the congregation:

- One set of confirmation photographs with negatives or electronic files backups
- Two copies of each church newsletter and worship bulletin
- News clippings about the church and its activities
- Two copies of each church directory
- A variety of photographs that show the church going about its many ministries

Third, the "no save" list includes items that take up considerable amounts of storage space:

- Multiple copies of old hymnals, song books, Sunday school and confirmation curriculum, etc. - save only 1 copy of each for possible display purposes
- Financial records 7 years and older, including cancelled checks and giving envelopes.
- Synodical and church wide materials that already exist in other archives, unless they provide important information about your church
- Large numbers of unidentified photos that add little or nothing to the church's story

Please note: this is a general list and only a starting point for building a congregational archives. I'll be happy to advise congregations in much more detail by email, phone, online materials and onsite visits.

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