

Ten Steps In Building A Church Archives

[Written by Archives Chairman of Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI]

by Mark C. Brunner

All congregations regardless of age possess a history. When approached with the suggestion that their history be chronicled and preserved for future generations most congregations are receptive to the idea. Few congregations, however, ever realize the establishment of even a simple archives. Why? All too often it is left up to the pastor to be official church historian and the pastor, more often than not, does not have sufficient time to accommodate the role. The solution? Organize an archives committee!

The following is a discussion of ten basic steps you may find useful in establishing your church archives.

1. Seek Authorization

The key to establishing a church archives is committee recognition. It's very important that the effort to create and maintain an archive be a visible effort, one that is recognized by your church council. The reason for this is simple. You will need funding to start and maintain an archive. It is also quite important that your organizing efforts are publicized whenever possible. There is no better source for initial organizing funds than your congregation's operating budget. You should seek to become an authorized congregational committee or council subcommittee, receiving regular contributions from the operating budget.

2. Organize a Committee

An ideal archives committee should be made up of more than one individual. However, one is certainly a good start! You will find that adequate manpower is essential in setting up your archives library, especially in its initial stages. Committee structure might be as follows: *Archives Chairman*, the individual responsible for reporting to the church council and initiating cash and inventory contributions; one or more *Assistant Archivists*, the individual(s) responsible for examination, restoration and storage of the archives' inventory; and the *Archives Librarian*, the individual who catalogs the inventory and copies all documents and photographs which will be used in the archives borrowing program.

3. Requisition Space

While the pastor's bottom desk drawer or the church secretary's spare file drawer are common locations for most church archives, they are not preferred locations. The reasons for this are simple. The more space you provide for the archives, the more importance you afford it in the eyes of the parishioners. That importance will be instrumental in obtaining more important documents and photographs. A high degree of visibility will lend credence to your undertaking and prompt a greater number of contributions, both in inventory and cash.

There are also practical reasons which should be considered. It is inevitable that someone will donate a large painting, a bulky sculpture or a set of journals. You must be prepared to store these items as well.

The ideal location would be a locked room containing cabinet and shelf space. A locked room affords the necessary security and control for dealing with a multitude of sometimes valuable and irreplaceable holdings. Make every effort to find a room where you are able to

control both temperature and humidity. Temperatures should be kept cool throughout the year, between 55 and 62 degrees F. In addition, direct sunlight should be avoided as well as any pollutants such as aerosols and sprays.

Try to set up a display area in a high traffic area of the church or school building. Here you will be able to display copies of photographs and documents for the benefit of all to see. A locked glass display cabinet mounted on a wall will serve nicely. These may be purchased through any furniture supply store which carries office and clerical furniture.

4. Collect Your Holdings

Items for your collection may be found in unlikely places. Begin with the church building and scour the basement, offices and any other spaces likely to be hiding history's treasures. Old filing cabinets, committee lockers, desks and even boiler room tool drawers have been known to harbor precious records, pictures and correspondence. Search school rooms and parsonage . . . and don't forget the bell towers. I would suggest, however, that you obtain permission for your search before seeking your congregation's hidden history!

5. Organize and Appraise Your Holdings

Once you have assembled your initial collection you can begin the process of cataloging and appraisal. There is no set rule of organization. You must organize in a manner that is both practical to you as a cataloger and to those who will eventually use the information. You may simply wish to begin by placing all photographs on one table, all correspondence on another, all newspapers and bulletins on another and so forth. It is a good idea to identify each item with a number as it is evaluated. Make a corresponding list of numbers as you proceed. This is the beginning of your stores catalog which will prove an invaluable aid to you in the future.

Don't mark any item with pen or pencil in any way! Don't use tape or any other affixing device such as rubber bands or paper clips! These items contain acids which will in time destroy any surface with which they come in contact. Place items in clean, manilla envelopes or folders and mark each carrier with an identifying number.

You will find that some of the items that were initially collected may appear less collectable in the light of a new day. you may have collected an entire carton of Easter 1959 service bulletins or the school custodian's log of supplies on backorder—1971. These items may well be deemed expendable as your storage space begins to dwindle. The rule: use your best judgment. An archive should be a limited store of valuable information, not an unlimited storehouse of useless trivia. Some things were made to be tossed! Learn to distinguish between what is valuable and what is not.

6. Order Archives Supplies

Collecting and cataloging your inventory is only the first step in the archives gathering process. Now you must endeavor to preserve your collectables. The easiest way to accomplish this is to guard against the number one enemy of all items containing paper or paper products . . . *acids!*

All paper manufactured from lumber pulp will contain varying levels of naturally occurring acids. Unless the paper is chemically neutralized by the manufacturer, paper acids will, when combined with the right level of sunlight, moisture and temperature, begin to slowly eat away the paper fibres. Most papers manufactured between 1850 and the present contain a high acid content. Papers prior to 1850 usually contain a relatively low acid content due to the fact that many of these were made from natural vegetable fibres or rags. Hence, in many instances

books produced more than 130 years ago may be in better condition than a book which is only 30 years old!

To slow this deterioration process, it is very important that you store all your inventory in acid-free, ph-neutral envelopes and storage cases. Coupled with cool temperatures, low humidity and limited sunlight, your precious treasures will last decades longer if stored in containers with acid free surfaces. Here are two companies from which you may order these containers; both offer catalogs and price lists:

The Hollinger Corporation	TALAS
Post Office Box 6185	130 Fifth Avenue
Arlington, VA 22206 (703) 671-6600	New York, NY 10011 (212) 675-0718

7. Develop a Use Policy

It is essential that you develop a use policy for all the materials in your archives. As your stores grow, more and more requests will be made of you for genealogical information as well as other pertinent data. After seeking the advice of your church council, I would suggest that you publish guidelines on how material is to be used and what fees will be charged for researching. It is not advisable to lend material for indefinite periods of time. Nor is it advisable to lend original copies of manuscripts or photographs. If research can be done on the premises, it should be encouraged. Although this may not be a problem initially, as your inventory grows you may find that demand for its use will increase. Take steps now to circumvent future trouble.

8. Restore and Repair

You will find that most of the items making up your archives require very little restoration. Normally, service bulletins, correspondence, glossy photographs, slides, tapes and journals need only be properly stored to insure their preservation. But you may find that certain items such as original blueprints, photographs over 40 years old and manuscripts and documents containing brittle and yellowing pages may require special attention. Glasene sleeves, tissue interleaving and poly-encapsulating supplies are available from the same supply houses listed under item 6. You may also wish to seek the professional advice of an experienced archivist or some rather delicate restoration tasks. Most colleges and universities maintain rather sophisticated archives and advice may be sought there. Or you may wish to contact your local, county or state historical society.

9. Copy Your Holdings

As your documents and photographs get older and more fragile you will become very reluctant to use them in research projects since they simply will not withstand even minimal use. As stated earlier, it is never wise to allow your original inventory to be borrowed since there is always the danger of damage or loss. The solution is to make sure you have good, clean copies of those items you feel will be in demand. Most companies that offer acid-free storage containers also offer acid-free copier paper.

Make every effort to copy your original paper product inventory on acid-free copier paper. This paper will never deteriorate and will remain as a lasting record long after the original may have disappeared. In addition, try to make copies of all glossies and color transparencies you may have. Since these will inevitably become useful as they are needed for reproduction in

anniversary bulletins and the like, it is wise to insure that you are working with copies and not originals when the printer asks for finished art. In addition, if you have plans to set up a permanent archives display case, it is advisable to use photographic copies and not the originals for display; sunlight will yellow original photographs.

10. Request Ongoing Donations

When your archives is fully set up and functional don't expect that your work is completed. There still is much to do! To maintain your archives for future generations, it is important that you continue to seek contributions in the form of cash donations, bequests and, of course, inventory donations. Use your church bulletin and congregational meetings for an effective forum. In this manner you will keep your archives visible and viable.

Some useful publications to help you are:

Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs by Robert A. Weinstein and Larry Booth
Care and Conservation of Collections by Frederick L. Rath, Jr. and Merrilyn Rogers O'Connell
A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts by Lucile M. Kane

You may wish to contact the American Association for State and Local History, 1400 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37203. This organization offers many publications on every facet of archives work.