

*A Guide  
for  
Parish Archives*



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## Documenting the Spirit

Each parish's archives document a unique community within the larger history of the Episcopal Church. Ideally, the archives show how faith in God manifests itself in that community and leads the parish to a fuller understanding of the Gospel.

The archives can do this through maintaining and collecting materials important to the life of the parish. These materials include sacramental registers, service books, parish bulletins, histories, and parish organizational records, among others.

Trying to document the spirit in a parish is more challenging than tracing the history of a secular company or organization because it is often difficult to provide documentary evidence of the work of faith in our lives. Developing parish archives is important work and can be a rewarding experience. The archives of a congregation can become its collective memory, making both the record of the past available to us now and ensuring that current activities will be understood in the future.

## Why a Parish Archives?

*Canon I, Section 1 states:*

In order to give effect to Title I, Canon 6, and Title III, Canon 15, of the General Convention, it is hereby required that every Minister of this Church shall keep a Register of all the baptisms, marriages, and funerals solemnized by him . . . If the Minister be in charge of a Parish, he shall make these entries in the Parish Register, and he shall also enter therein the names of persons confirmed, and shall keep in the said Register a list of the Communicants and a list of the families belonging to the Parish; which Register, in case of the Minister's removal from the Parish, shall be deposited with one of the Wardens; and in such case, the Wardens shall cause all needful entries to be made in the Register. . . .

*Canon I, Section 5 states:*

At every visitation it shall be the duty of the Minister of the Parish, and that of the Wardens or Vestry or some other officer, to submit the Parish Register to the Bishop for inspection, and to give information on the state of the congregation, spiritual and temporal, under such headings as shall have been previously signified to them in writing by the Bishop.

For the ongoing administration of a parish there is the necessity of having available the parish registers, the minutes of the meetings of the vestry, legal documents and financial records. The maintainance of all these records also is a way to preserve the heritage of the parish and the history of a people in the faith.



## Responsibility for the Parish Archives

The ultimate responsibility for the records of a parish belongs to the rector or vicar. It is recommended that he or she designate a Parish Archivist or an archives committee. Such a person or committee should be directly responsible to the rector or vicar and should be encouraged to report periodically to the vestry and contribute items of interest from the archives to the parish bulletin and newsletter. The archivist or archives committee should be concerned with continuity of record keeping and consistency in record saving for the parish. Those who have an interest in the history of the parish may be most interested in serving in this way. Additionally, the archival committee can seek out further assistance from the Diocesan Archivist on maintaining, organizing and caring for parish archives.

## Archival Materials

All materials that hold administrative, legal, fiscal and historical significance should be preserved. Usually these documents answer the who, what, when, where and, if possible, the why of history. The official papers, correspondence and other records created or received by the congregation belong in the parish. This includes the records of parish organizations. All should be preserved. None should be thought of as the property of the rector or vicar or any individual parish organization. (It would be wise for the parish to make a policy statement on the records which includes the issue of ownership.)

## What Should be Preserved?

### A. Records and documents that must be preserved and filed systematically

1. The parish registers recording the Sacramental Acts: Baptism, Confirmations, Marriages, Funerals and First Communions.
2. The minutes of the meetings of the vestry, parish committees, and organizations.
3. All official correspondence from the diocese and the clergy regarding parish, rather than personal, matters.

4. Copies of all reports sent to the diocesan office.
5. Copies of the Annual Report and reports of the vestry, committees, guilds, and organizations, together with a list of their officers.
6. Parish notices and newsletters.
7. Histories of the parish.
8. Copies of articles of incorporation and parish by-laws, and organizational constitutions.
9. A list of the founding members of the parish.
10. All contracts for construction of church buildings, plans, specifications, blueprints, drawings, etc. Copies of all blueprints of new additions or buildings should be deposited in the archives upon completion of a project.
11. Special liturgies of services, such as ordinations, celebration of new ministries, organ recitals and musical presentations.

*B. Printed materials and other media to be preserved*

1. Sunday bulletins (best if bound at the end of the year).
2. Promotional materials: newspaper clippings, etc.
3. Parish directories.
4. Photographs: church buildings, clergy, church school teachers and students, choir members, vestry members, parish officers and administrative personnel, special events, and parishioners (be sure to identify all photographs in pencil on the back).
5. Videotapes, films or oral histories of parish members or special events.
6. Artifacts (such as stained glass windows, altar vessels, old vestments) should be preserved although parishes may need to be guided by consideration of space in deciding what objects are kept.

## How Should Materials Be Preserved?

1. In one place. A fireproof filing cabinet, secure closet, or safe is best. The atmosphere should be neither very dry or humid. The area should not be near pipes that may burst or in a basement which could flood. 70 degrees F and 45% humidity are the ideal conditions.
2. Loose papers, minutes and official documents should be placed in file folders and boxes, ideally made of acid-free materials.
3. Bulletins should be bound at the end of the year.
4. All materials should be flattened out as much as possible without damaging the item. All metal staples and fasteners should be removed because they tend to rust.
5. Blueprints and oversize documents should be kept in their large rolls or flattened out in large drawers. Under no circumstances should they be folded to fit into normal files.
6. All archives should be inspected periodically for atmospheric, water or vermin damage.
7. If you are considering repair, restoration or rebinding, consult the Diocesan Archivist.
8. When identifying documents or photographs, write only on the back with a soft lead No. 2 pencil.
9. Photographs should be filed upright in mylar or polypropylene sleeves. Negatives should be stored separately.
10. If scrapbooks are assembled for anniversaries or other historical observances, be aware that most adhesives would permanently damage original documents and photographs. A scrapbook cannot be considered a method of permanently preserving materials, but rather a memento of a specific occasion.
11. Parish registers should be stored in a safe and never removed from the parish premises.
12. Parishes should consider microfilming their parish registers and vestry minutes on a regular basis and placing copies of the film in the Diocesan Archives or a safety deposit box.

## Cooperation with Others

Parish Archivists should send parish histories, either typescript or printed, to the Diocesan Archivist. Other items to be sent to the Diocesan Archivist include the bulletins from special services (consecration of churches, dedications of parish houses, laying of cornerstones, ordinations, etc.). Photographs of parish clergy and special events are also especially welcome in the archives.

## Using the Archives

Anyone with legitimate purpose should be permitted to use the archives. Discretion must be exercised when personal information and privacy is involved as in the case of parish registers. Under U.S. Census Privacy Regulations, parish registers may be considered open up to 1910. Genealogists should be encouraged to use the microfilm of these records at the Diocesan Archives if the parish records have been microfilmed and deposited with the diocese. If a person is using the parish archives, he or she must be supervised at all times. Information may be copied, but the person should not be allowed to remove the parish archives from the premises.



**Note:** For further information or purchasing of acid-free containers and archival supplies, or for assistance in creating your parish archives, contact the Rev. Robert G. Carroon, Archivist and Historiographer of the Diocese of Connecticut, Diocesan Archives, 1335 Asylum Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105-2295. Telephone: 203-233-4481 or 1-800-842-0126.