



Active Records Management : Advice for the Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Your records have a life cycle! You create and maintain the records for your synod in order to have the information you need when you need it; in the format from which you can most easily retrieve it; and in such a way that partners working in your synod, today and in the future, can readily find the information. As you set about preserving information for future reference, plan for the entire life cycle of the records you are creating. If you do this, you should never need to spend time purging files going through old material to determine the potential administrative, legal, or historical value of the documents.

Ownership Information that is retained in hard copy, electronic format, or other media is the property of the synod. Such information is not the property of the synodical bishop or synodical staff members to remove, to retain personally, or to destroy at will. Synodical staff members are the custodians of the records they retain.

Consistency A pattern of consistency in the care of records is necessary. Any records retention policy has validity, once accepted by the organization, only as it is uniformly practiced. It should neither be selectively implemented, nor disregarded, at the whim of the custodians of the records. Bishops or members of the synodical staff frequently are called upon to use good judgment with regard to the disposition of individual documents. Retention policies should not be modified or disregarded solely because of possible litigation.

Protection Vital records are the records needed to protect the financial and legal status of the organization and to protect the rights of its people. Vital records are the organization's records that are essential for the continuation or reconstruction of the organization in the event of natural disaster, human error, or mischief. While such records are essential for operation at a specific time, only some have permanent archival value.

Duplication and dispersal of valuable documents, in identical or other formats, is the most effective and economical method of protection. It also would be the most efficient method of reconstruction, should on-site records inadvertently be destroyed. In many cases, timely transfer of copies of these documents to off-site synodical or regional archives would serve that need. You are advised to place the originals of legal documents in a bank safe-deposit box and to retain copies in



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the office for your use.

Electronic Databases

Synods use personal computers for maintaining databases for the tasks of synod administration such as . . .

- Directory of congregations
- Leadership directories for ordained and lay persons
- Accounting systems
- Statistical reports
- Mailing lists

Two critical issues pertain to the safety of electronically stored data . . .

1. Restoration of current information in the event of system failure or loss; and
2. Migration of entire databases to newer generations of hardware and software as systems become obsolete.

Care To ensure the easy restoration of your database in the event of system failure, natural disaster, or human mischief, back up your personal computer's hard drive at least once each week and store the disks or tapes at a location removed from the personal computer.

Limit access by means of password protection.

Make certain that the structure of each database is documented, identifying the software, computer language, and report form so that you are prepared, when the time comes, to migrate to a new generation of software or hardware.

Retention A database, such as a membership management or accounting system, is a constantly changing record. An early decision must be made as to which reports generated by your database are necessary as permanent legal or historical records of the synod. These should be printed out annually.

As you update and purge information from your databases, consider which records or reports should become part of a subdirectory, permitting ease of access, and make certain that these directories migrate when new or upgraded software is installed.



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Electronic Documents

- These materials, produced by the synod to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the synod . . .*
- Minutes of synod assembly
 - Minutes of the synod council and its executive committee
 - Synod constitutions and bylaws
 - Worship bulletins and program material for synod sponsored events
 - Reports from the synod to the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - Reports from the synod's staff or about various synod partnerships and activities
 - Membership directories with or without photographs
 - Synod newsletters and supplements for *The Lutheran*
 - News releases and other promotional material
 - Publications of the bishop
 - Training program materials
 - World Wide Web site

Care Most of these are created electronically, but used and preserved as paper documents. Those documents that are also legal documents should be protected by keeping another copy in an off-site location. The World Wide Web site changes frequently. You may wish to print out “snapshots” of this site from time to time to preserve this record of your synod’s story.

Retention All of these documents tell the story of your synod and should be collected in the archives of the synod or region.

Legal and Property Related Documents

- Vital legal and property related documents include . . .*
- Charter or articles of incorporation
 - Synod constitution and bylaws
 - Minutes of regular and special synod council meetings
 - Minutes of the synod assembly
 - Tax-exempt status reports and documentation or the synod’s nine-digit federal employer identification number
 - Deeds, titles, surveys, leases, mortgages, easements, and blueprints
 - Current service contracts
 - Insurance policies (current and retired)
 - Copies of letters of call to the pastors and ELCA rostered church workers
 - Other employment contracts
 - Documentation for bequests, gifts, and endowments
 - Reports from the synod to the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - Personnel handbooks and benefit policies



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- Care**
1. You are advised to use copies of these legal documents for administrative purposes and deposit the originals in a bank safe deposit box.
 2. Keep all insurance policies, even though you may have purchased a new policy from a new carrier.

Retention With the exception of temporary service contracts, these are permanent records.

Correspondence including e-mail

The bishop and the bishop's assistants may have correspondence of various types . . .

- **Ex officio as chief executive officer of the synod**
- **Correspondence to and from officers of the synod**
- **E-mail messages to the pastors of the synod or to individuals or select groups**
- **Personal correspondence**

Care E-mail is especially vulnerable to loss. E-mail that represents the policies, program, and ongoing life of the synod should be printed out.

Correspondence with pastors of the synod should be handled according to the guidelines in *Care of Information on Persons Rostered in the Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

Assistants to the bishop should follow the same procedure in regard to correspondence as recommended for the synod bishop

Retention The bishop's ex officio correspondence and correspondence to and from officers of the synod or with the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America should be kept for the tenure of the bishop; the files then should be appraised for permanent value. Only letters that describe the program and ongoing life of the synod need be kept for the synod's archives. The bishop's personal correspondence should be maintained separately and removed from the office by the bishop at the end of the bishop's tenure.



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Financial Records

- Your financial records may include documents such as . . .*
- General ledger year end reports
 - Budget
 - Treasurer's reports
 - Annual audit reports
 - Invoices
 - Record of benevolence forwarded by congregations
 - Check register
 - Cancelled checks or copies of cancelled checks
 - Certificates of deposit or other evidence of savings
 - Information on bequests, gifts, and endowments

Retention You will have a financial management database that handles all of your accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents.

- Permanent . . .**
- **Annual audit reports** (*copies must be submitted to the treasurer of the ELCA*)
 - **The treasurer's report and the synod's budget must be included in the minutes of the synod assembly**
 - **Information on permanent bequests, gifts, and endowments**
- Twenty years . . .**
- **Bequests after distribution, if not restricted**
 - **Mortgages paid in full**
 - **Legal files and notes on synodically owned real estate**
 - **Loans and notes receivable after sale or termination**
- Seven years . . .**
- **Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks**
 - **Cash receipt record**
 - **Special fund-raising appeals record**
 - **Bank reconciliations**
 - **Accounts payable vouchers, originals and documentation** (*Keep canceled checks or receipts for evidence of payment for property or equipment as long as owned.*)
 - **Payroll administration records such as W-2, W-4, 941 forms and payroll registers**
 - **Cash receipt journals**
 - **Record of benevolence forwarded to the churchwide expression**
- Three years . . .**
- **General invoices** (*For major purchases, you may wish to keep receipts or cancelled checks as evidence of ownership for insurance purposes.*)

Detailed guidelines and forms for the synod's treasurer and business administrator are found on the World Wide Web, under the Office of the Treasurer, "The Synod Connection."



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Information on Congregations

When working with the congregations of the synod, synodical staff may require the following . . .

Retention

- Permanent . . .** Retain copies of these documents in the congregations file:
- **Constitutions and bylaws of the congregation**
 - **Articles of Incorporations of the congregation**
 - **Copies of property related documents of the congregation**
 - **Letters of call** (*also place a copy in the individual's file*)
- Eight Years . . .** Retain for eight years, and then transfer to the archives of the synod:
- **Congregational histories and anniversary books**
 - **Congregational profiles**
 - **Statistical reports such as forms A and C**
 - **Congregation's annual reports**
 - **Reports of special congregation projects**
 - **Informal reports by synod staff**
 - **Congregation's newsletters, promotional pieces, sample bulletins**
 - **Photographs with negatives, films, sound recordings, videotapes and DVD.**
- Current year . . .** Retain for the current year, and destroy as replaced:
- **Annual agreement statement of pastor's duties, compensation, and benefits**
 - **Benevolence giving statements**
 - **Congregational leadership directory**

Information on Persons

Information on Rostered Persons Please refer to the document, *Care of Information on Persons Rostered in the Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2005*

Records of the Candidacy Committee Please refer to the documents, *Candidacy Manual, 2005*, or *Care of Information on Persons Rostered in the Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2005*.



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- Synod Employees**
- Letters of call
 - Letters of application
 - Job descriptions
 - Resumes
 - Letters of recommendation
 - Background checks and references
 - Mobility form relating to synod call
 - Performance appraisals
 - Contracts
 - Continuing education documentation
 - Documents related to compensation and benefits
 - Emergency notification forms
 - Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation
 - Correspondence
 - Honors and clippings

Care The right to privacy directs that these files must be held in strictest confidence. Keep this file locked at all times

- Retention**
1. If information, including background checks, references and letters of recommendation, attest to the employee's fitness to fulfill a responsibility or perform a service, it should be retained for 25 years after the end of employment.
 2. If information relates to a worker's compensation or other claim by the employee, this should be retained.
 3. Similarly, if information relates to a possible claim or lawsuit by others involving the employee's conduct or duties, that also should be retained.
 4. Only biographical information and career history for rostered persons should be transferred to the synod's archives. All other information should be destroyed upon completion of service.

Synodical Auxiliaries

- Auxiliaries of the synod may provide copies of the following records to the synod office . . .*
- Constitutions and bylaws
 - Minutes of boards
 - Assembly programs and documents
 - Correspondence with officers
 - Programmatic material
 - Newsletters
 - Membership directories
 - Audit reports
 - Photographs with negatives, films, DVD and videotapes, and sound recordings, all with proper identification



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Care Auxiliaries, agencies, schools and camps related to the synods of the Evangelical Lutheran church in America should be responsible for their own records management practices. Such auxiliaries, agencies, schools, and camps related to synods are encouraged to place appropriate materials in their synodical or regional archives.

Retention Such organizations also are encouraged to protect their vital records by duplication and dispersal. Copies of vital records placed in the synodical office may serve this purpose.

The synod may retain these documents until superseded by updated versions or until tenure of new officers, then transfer them to the archives of the synod or region.

Synodical Agencies and Schools

Agencies and schools related to the synod may provide copies of these documents to the office of the synod . . .

- **Constitutions and bylaws**
- **Articles of incorporation**
- **Minutes of boards**
- **Audit reports**
- **Copies of insurance policies or certificates of insurance**
- **Correspondence with officers**
- **Service delivery documentation**
- **Newsletters**
- **Histories and bulletins of special events**

Care Agencies and schools related to the synod are encouraged to protect their vital records by duplication and dispersal. Copies of vital records placed in the synod office may serve this purpose.

Retention The synod may retain these documents until superseded by updated versions or until tenure of new officers, then transfer them to the archives of the synod or region.



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See also these additional Guidelines . . .

- Care of Information on Persons Rostered in the Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Candidacy Manual (Division for Ministry)*
- Resources for the Synod Treasurer and Administrator (Office of the Treasurer)*
- Active Records Management : Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
- Maintaining the Parish Register : Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
- Resources for Congregational Treasurers and Bookkeepers (Office of the Treasurer)*
- Certification of Congregation Records at the Time of a Pastoral Transition (form)*
- Disposition of Records for Disbanding Congregations*
- A Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*
- A Comparison of Microfilming and Scanning Technologies*

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For additional information, contact . . .

Director for Records Management and Library
Office of the Secretary
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 West Higgins Road
Chicago, Illinois 60631
Telephone: 800/638-3522, ext. 2811
e-mail Claire.Buettner@elca.org

Archives of the ELCA
Office of the Secretary
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
321 Bonnie Lane
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
Telephone: 800/638-3522, ext. 2818
e-mail: archives@elca.org