

# Records Management

## Records Retention Schedule



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

## Records Retention Schedule for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Most of the records retained by a congregation for its daily operation, legal protection, financial security, and responsibility to history fit into one of the following categories. For the well-being of the congregation, each type of record has a specific life cycle and needs appropriate care.

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| Parish Register  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Description of Records   | Care of the Records   | Final Disposition   |
| <p>The Parish Register includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baptisms</li> <li>• Confirmations</li> <li>• Marriages</li> <li>• Funerals</li> <li>• Communion participation</li> <li>• Pastors of the congregation</li> <li>• ELCA-rostered lay workers</li> <li>• Other professional lay workers of the congregation such as choir directors and organists</li> <li>• Roster of officers of the congregation</li> </ul> | <p>The parish register is a <b>permanent record</b> and requires the utmost care. The parish register is a hard-copy record and should be kept in a fire-proof safe. You may use a computer program for managing the parish register in the administration of your congregation. This database itself does not constitute a parish register.</p> <p>According to the <i>Model Constitution for Congregations</i>, the pastor [i] is responsible for maintaining the parish register (*C9.12.a) [ii]. For further instruction, please refer to the document,</p> | <p>Place old parish registers in a fire-proof safe in the congregation's archives, or in a bank safe-deposit box.</p> |

*Maintaining the Parish Register.*

**Legal and Vital Records**

| Description of Records  | Care of Records  | Final Disposition                            |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Vital legal and property related documents include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Charter or articles of incorporation</li> <li>• Constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions</li> <li>• Deeds, titles, surveys, leases, mortgages, easements, and blueprints, construction drawings</li> <li>• Insurance policies (current and retired)</li> <li>• Copies of letters of call to the pastors and ELCA rostered church workers</li> <li>• Documentation creating endowment funds and for bequests, gifts, and endowments</li> </ul> | <p>Secure these documents by placing them in a fire-proof safe or maintaining copies in an off-site location.<br/>Keep the constitution current and send a copy to the synod for approval.</p> | <p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minutes of regular and special congregational meetings</li> <li>• Minutes of the congregation council and its executive committee</li> </ul>   |  | <p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tax-exempt status reports and documentation or the congregation's nine-digit federal employer identification</li> </ul>  | <p>Maintain while current.</p>   | <p>Place in the congregation's archives</p>  |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>number</li> <li>• Current service or construction contracts and warranties</li> <li>• Employment contracts</li> <li>• Policy documents (which may be in continuing resolutions)</li> <li>• Personnel handbooks and employee benefit programs</li> </ul> |  |  |
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**Financial Records**

| Description of Records  | Care of Records  | Final disposition   |
|---|--|---|
| <p>You may have a financial management database that handles all of your accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents. <a href="#">iiiii</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual audit reports</li> <li>• Treasurer’s annual report to the congregation</li> <li>• Budget approved by the congregation</li> <li>• Bequests &amp; endowments</li> </ul> | <p>Preserve permanent records in hard copy. The audit report, treasurer’s annual report, and the annual budget approved by the congregation should be part of the minutes of the congregation’s annual meeting.</p>  | <p>Place in the congregation's archives.</p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investments in asset management</li> <li>• Canceled checks or copies of canceled checks</li> <li>• Bank reconciliations</li> <li>• Payroll administration records such as W-2, W-4 forms and payroll registers</li> <li>• Cash receipt journals</li> <li>• Record of member giving</li> </ul>  | <p>The IRS mandates that you preserve these records for <b>four</b> years. For administrative purposes, you may wish to keep these records for <b>seven</b> years. <a href="#">Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations IRS p1821</a></p> <p>All records related to congregational spending are open. All records related to member giving are confidential and should be secured.</p> | <p>Whether maintained as paper or electronic files, destroy these records at the end of the retention period.</p> |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General invoices</li> </ul>   | For insurance purposes, you may wish to retain receipts or cancelled checks for major purchases as evidence of ownership. | Shred after three years.                      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering envelopes</li> </ul> | Do not retain   | Destroy after counting and entering the data. |

Detailed guidelines for the congregation's treasurer and financial secretary are found in *Resources for Congregational Treasurers and Bookkeepers*.

### Congregation Statistics

| Description of Records   | Care of Records   | Final Disposition    |
|--|---|----------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congregation statistical reports (Forms A and C)</li> </ul> | Retain current reports (Forms A and C) in hard copy or in Portable Document Format (PDF) for 2 years. | Destroy as replaced. |

### Information on Persons

| Description of Records  | Care of Records  | Final Disposition  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Files containing some or all of these documents may exist for the pastor, other rostered persons, employees, registered seminary students, and volunteers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letters of call</li> <li>• Letters of employment</li> <li>• Letters of application</li> <li>• Job descriptions</li> <li>• Resumes</li> <li>• Correspondence</li> <li>• Honors and clippings</li> </ul> | Right to privacy laws dictate that these files must be held in strictest confidence. However, the file must be made available to the employee upon request. Keep this file locked at all times.  | Place biographical information and career history for the congregation's staff in the congregation's archives. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency notification forms</li> <li>• Health-related documents, such as worker's compensation</li> <li>• Letters of recommendation</li> <li>• Background and</li> </ul>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If information, including background checks and letters of recommendation, attest to the employee or volunteer's fitness to fulfill a responsibility or perform a service, it should be retained for <b>50 years</b> after completion of service.</li> </ol> | Shred either upon completion of service or after <b>50 years</b> , as noted to left.                           |

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| <p>reference checks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance appraisals and letters of discipline</li> <li>• Contracts</li> <li>• Continuing education documentation</li> <li>• Documents related to compensation and benefits</li> </ul> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. If information relates to a worker's compensation or other claim by the employee, this should be retained until the matter is resolved.</li> <li>3. If the information relates to a possible claim or lawsuit by others involving the employee's conduct or duties, it should be retained in the synod office or under controlled access in the synod or regional archives for <b>50 years</b> after completion of service.</li> <li>4. As required, the file for a seminary student is sent to the seminary after he or she has signed for its release. It is not preserved in the congregation.</li> </ol> |  |
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**Pastoral Care Files**

| <b>Description of Records</b>   | <b>Care of Records</b>   | <b>Final Disposition</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| <p>When the pastor, or other authorized staff member, provides pastoral care to parishioners, such as marriage counseling or personal spiritual direction, the pastor may create a file containing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Date and time of consultation</li> <li>• Persons present</li> <li>• Observation notes</li> <li>• Tests, such as personality inventories</li> <li>• Correspondence</li> </ul> | <p>The pastor, or other authorized staff member, must use good judgment in establishing the nature of each relationship and in creating documentation of it. The principle of confessional confidences, which applies to all ordained ministers of this church, is specified by ELCA churchwide constitutional provision (7.45.) <a href="#">[iv]</a>. These files must be kept locked and in strictest confidence as they involve a relationship at the highest level of trust and are usually subject to the clergy and penitent privilege. The parishioner should sign a release if any information is to leave the file at any time. <i>In all states, suspected cases of child abuse are required to be reported to the authorities. Whether such reporting</i></p> | <p>An understanding of the nature of a particular pastoral care relationship will determine the appropriate disposition of its records.</p> |

*requirements apply to pastors may vary. Consult an attorney in your state for guidance on such matters.*

## Correspondence

### Description of Records

The pastor and staff may have correspondence of various types:

- Ex-officio as chief executive officer of the congregation
- Correspondence to and from officers of the congregation and the bishop of the synod
- Personal correspondence

### Care of Records

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

### Final Disposition

Place only letters that describe the program and ongoing life of the congregation in the congregation's archives.

## Programmatic Material

### Description of Records

These materials produced by the congregation to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the parish and tell the congregation's story:

- Congregation histories
- Membership directories, including picture directories on computer disc
- Newsletters
- News releases
- Program and training material produced by the congregation
- Audio and visual materials such as photographs of the congregation's

### Care of Records

**Remember digital files never survive by accident!**  
 Today, all of these documents are created— and may be used— electronically but are preserved as paper documents. It is inevitable that hardware, software, and file formats will change.  
 Use quality photographic paper to print out copies of pictures for the congregation's archives.

### Final Disposition

Place in the congregation's archives.

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| events   |   |  |
| <p>The World Wide Web site may contain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotional material</li> <li>• Membership directory</li> <li>• Sermons</li> <li>• Podcasts</li> <li>• Blogs</li> <li>• Audio visual materials</li> <li>• Programmatic material created by members</li> </ul> | <p>The World Wide Web site is a constantly changing program delivery platform. Because the Web site may contain unique information about the life of congregation and its community, some effort should be made to preserve this record. The membership directory must be password protected.</p>   | <p>You may wish to see if an archival site is collecting snapshots of your congregation Web site. <a href="http://www.archive.org">http://www.archive.org</a> If you find no archiving service, print out snapshots of unique Web delivered material to be preserved in the congregation's archives.</p> |
| <b>Sermons</b>   |   |  |
| <b>Description of Records</b>  | <b>Care of Records</b>  | <b>Final Disposition</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sermons</li> </ul>  | <p>Sermons, in whatever format, are considered intellectual property and belong to the pastor.</p>  | <p>The pastor may choose to place manuscripts of sermons commemorating special occasions in the archives of the congregation.</p>  |
| <b>Resource Materials</b>  |   |  |
| <b>Description of Records</b>  | <b>Care of Records</b>  | <b>Final Disposition</b>   |
| <p>Resource material received from the synodical or the churchwide office for the support of the activity of the congregation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hymnals</li> <li>• Worship materials</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> <li>• Programmatic materials</li> </ul>                | <p>For congregations, such materials seldom have permanent value, and the files should be culled annually. These materials are collected in the churchwide and synod or region archives.</p>  | <p>Samples of hymnals and parish education materials may be important for recording the history of the congregation. Discard other resource materials when they have been superseded by newer materials.</p>   |
| <p><b>See also these additional guidelines. . .</b></p>  | <p><i>Maintaining the Parish Register: Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</i><br/> <i>Congregational Treasurers Financial &amp; Accounting Guide</i><br/> <i>Certification of Congregation Records at the Time of a Pastoral Transition (form)</i><br/> <i>Disposition of Records for Disbanding Congregations</i><br/> <i>A Brief Guide for Archives of Congregations of the</i></p> |  |

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|  | <p><i>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</i><br/> <i>The Work of a Congregational Archivist and/or Archives Committee.</i><br/> <i>Comparison of Microfilming and Digital Preservation Technologies.</i></p> |
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| <b>For additional information contact. . . .</b> | <p>Archives of the ELCA<br/> Office of the Secretary<br/> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America<br/> 321 Bonnie Lane<br/> Elk Grove Village, IL 60007<br/> Telephone: 800/638-3522, ext. 2818<br/> e-mail: <a href="mailto:archives@elca.org">archives@elca.org</a></p> | <p>Office of the Secretary<br/> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America<br/> 8765 West Higgins Road<br/> Chicago, Illinois 60631<br/> Telephone: 800/638-3522</p> |
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[i] "The pastor shall keep accurate parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members dismissed, or members excluded from the congregation, and shall submit a summary of such statistics annually to the synod." (\*C9.12.a. and b. in the *Model Constitution for Congregations*)

[ii] A representative of the synodical bishop is required to verify that these records exist and are in good order at the time of a pastoral transition. (S14.15. in the *Constitution for Synods*)

[iii] "The Congregation Council shall ascertain that the financial affairs of this congregation are being conducted efficiently, giving particular attention to the prompt payment of all obligations and to the regular forwarding of benevolence monies to the synodical treasurer. The Congregation Council shall be responsible for this congregation's investments and its total insurance program." (C12.05.e. and f. in the *Model Constitution for Congregations*)

[iv] "In keeping with the historic discipline and practice of the Lutheran Church and to be true to a sacred trust inherent in the nature of the pastoral office, no ordained minister of this church shall divulge any confidential disclosure received in the course of the care of souls or otherwise in a professional capacity, nor testify concerning conduct observed by the ordained minister while working in a pastoral capacity, except with the express permission of the person who has given confidential information to the ordained minister or who was observed by the ordained minister, or if the person intends great harm to self or others" (churchwide constitutional provision 7.45. in the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*).