



ARCHIVES & HISTORY

General Commission on Archives and History

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Records Management Guidelines

Guidelines for Retaining the Records of Closed United Methodist Churches 2024 Edition

The United Methodist Church General Commission on Archives and History
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GUIDELINES FOR RETAINING THE RECORDS OF CLOSED UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES

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Purpose of this Document

This document is directed toward the annual conference archives and its policy-makers, including the conference archivist. This document should be considered a supplement to, not a replacement for, our *Guidelines for Managing Records of the Annual Conference and the Local Church*.

This document's focus is on records of a closed local church. When a local church is closed or abandoned the District Superintendent is required by the *Discipline* to retrieve the records of the local church, including the contents of the cornerstone, and turn them over to the annual conference archives (§ 2549.4). The question that arises is which records should be kept? The *Discipline* describes the records as: *All the deeds, records, and other official and legal papers, including the contents of the cornerstone . . .*

Even in this brief description there are several questions. Are the archival needs of a closed local church different from the archival needs of an active local congregation engaged in a variety of ministries? What are the primary concerns of the annual conference when preserving the records of a closed local church? What is an appropriate balance between space and the records which should be kept? This brief document offers some basic guidelines when dealing with the records of closed churches. For a comprehensive set of guidelines concerning recording keeping for the annual conference and the active local church see our *Guidelines for Managing Records of the Annual Conference and the Local Church*.

The Conference's Perspective

Deeds, official and legal papers need to be kept. These records are needed to demonstrate any obligation, or lack thereof, on the part of the Conference related to the local church's actions. The Annual Conference is responsible for the local church property and for any contractual obligations of the former church. A variety of documents may be needed by the Annual Conference for a period of time. Not all of these records will be permanently kept. Deeds and legal papers are relatively straight forward categories, but the category *official* is a broad term. So how do we determine what should be kept? A concise way to phrase this is the Archives needs to keep any records which would have a legal, ethical or financial impact on the Conference.

Disposition of Collected Records

Short Term Retention

The conference archives needs to realize that many of the records which come in from a closed church will not need to be kept permanently. Many of the records must be kept for a specific period of time and then can be safely disposed. These records need to be kept in order to answer any financial or administrative issues which might arise after the church has closed. Several Annual Conference agencies may have need to access these records. That is why they go to the Archives, so they can be centrally managed for the Annual Conference. For security

reasons, only copies, usually, should be sent out to the Annual Conference agencies. These are records which relate to the 'business' aspect of the local church. Part of the ministry of the Annual Conference Archives and History Commission is to manage these short-term records. The archives should refer to either GCAH's *Guidelines for Managing Records of the Annual Conference and the Local Church*, or its own conference's records management policies. Some of the records which would be held for a short period of time could include:

- Invoices
- Accounts Payable Records
- Bank Statements
- Contracts

If there is a large amount of non-permanent records, the archives may want to consider storing them off-site in a commercial records management warehouse. This would provide secure storage for little used records and the company could manage the final disposition of the records when the time arrived. It would also lessen storage demands on the actual archives.

Permanent Retention

It is not necessary to keep as many records for a closed church as it is for an active one. Its ministry is over, and its work can now be summarized. An active local church needs a larger archives in order to keep its corporate memory of its ministry. The local church never knows what direction its ministry will take it so the larger archives serves as one of the foundations for the possibilities in its ministry. This is no longer the case for a closed church. Its ministry is complete. Records should be kept which summarize its ministry in general.

A smaller set of records is recommended for permanent retention. The following table summarizes those records. Certain local church records are foundational and need to be kept. The most obvious are those that reflect our religious tradition and ministry. These are:

- Baptism records
- Membership records
- Marriage records
- Death records (usually in the form of cemetery burial records)

The above reflect the basic records of ministry and the purpose of the church. These need to be kept as a faithful remembrance on the part of the church. The fact that they also have use outside the life of the church (e.g. genealogy), may be significant, but are secondary.

The Charge Conference reports and minutes should be kept. The Charge Conference minutes are to the local church what the annual conference journal is to the Annual Conference – a fundamental document recording its ministry. If possible the minutes of the various boards of the church, including the Trustees, should be kept.

The table below recommends records to be kept in order of importance. Some must be kept, some are highly recommended to be kept and some are suggested. Essential records are the ones which satisfy the requirements of the *Discipline*. Desirable records may well need to be kept for a period of time, but are not considered permanent records. If there is room and

interest they can be kept. Local laws may affect the keeping of some of these records. Useful records give insight into the life of the church and can prove valuable for a variety of purposes. Of course, additional records can be added according to the interests and needs of the conference archives. Finally before disposing of any records make sure there is 1) no pending litigation, and 2) that the time has expired on the records retention period.

CLOSED LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS SCHEDULE		
RECORD SERIES TITLE	DESCRIPTION	COMMENTS
ESSENTIAL RECORDS		
Membership records	Membership register, baptisms, marriages, transfers, funeral or death records	
Administrative Reports	Charge Conference reports, Administrative Board reports, Council on Ministries report, or administrative council reports	
Deeds	Deeds, Conveyances, Covenants, easements, title papers	
Bequest and Estate papers	wills, gift agreements, bequests	
Official local church histories		
Benefits Policies and Procedures Records		
DESIRABLE RECORDS		
Architectural Drawings, Blueprints, and Maps		need to be kept while building is owned by the conference
Employment Policies and Procedures Records	Employment Policies	
Insurance Policies		
Annual Fiscal Reports	Closing of the Books Records, Financial Reports, Balance Reconciliation Records, State Accounts Reports	If not summarized in the Charge Conference reports
USEFUL ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS		
Audit Records		If not included in the Charge Conference reports

CLOSED LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS SCHEDULE

Budget Records	Annual Budget	If not included in the Charge Conference reports
Bylaws		
Committee Records	Local church committee records	
Contracts	repairs, maintenance, lease agreements, loans	
Property Files	deeds, title papers, repair history, permits, lease agreement	If not already included in the above deeds and contracts
Real Estate Surveys	surveys, plot plans and related correspondence	
Staff Meeting Records		
Tax-Exempt Certificates	Certificates and Form 990	
USEFUL HISTORICAL RECORDS		
Photographs		Anything that shows the life of the local church. In some cases certain photographs may need to be kept to satisfy some <i>essential</i> record.
Correspondence - subject	Correspondence on special or topic interest	
Bulletins	Sunday worship bulletins, special local church occasion bulletins	
Directories		
Newsletters	Church newsletters, UMW, UMM, UMYF and other church group's newsletters	