

# 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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| Congregational Record   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Description of Records  | Care of the Records  | Final Disposition  |
| <p>The Congregational Record 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>• Rostered ministers 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 congregational record is a <b>permanent record</b> and requires utmost care. It is a hard-copy record and should be kept in a fire-proof safe. If you use software to manage the congregational record in the administration of your congregation, <b>the database itself does not constitute the congregational record.</b></p> <p>According to the <i>Model Constitution for Congregations</i>, the pastor <a href="#">[i]</a> is responsible for maintaining the congregational record (*C9.12.a) <a href="#">[ii]</a>. For further instruction, please refer to the document, <i>Maintaining the Congregational Record</i>.</p> | <p>Place old congregational records as well as printed reports constituting the congregational record (if the information is maintained electronically in a fire-proof safe in the congregation's archives, or in a bank safe-deposit box.</p> |

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## 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 rostered ministers</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.</p> <p>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>  |

| <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>  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Financial Records   |  |   |
| Description of Records  | Care of Records  | Final disposition   |
| <p>You may have a financial management database that handles accounting transactions. Retention of financial records refers to hard-copy documents. <a href="#">[iii]</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.<br/>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 you preserve these records <b>four</b> years. For administrative purposes, you may wish to keep these records <b>seven</b> years. <a href="#">Tax Guide for Churches and Religious IRS Pub.1828</a></p> <p>Records related to congregational spending are open. 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 resources for the congregation's treasurer and financial secretary are available to download from the ELCA web site at <https://elca.org/Resources/Financial#FinanceC>

### 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 these documents may exist for rostered ministers, 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>   | 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. | 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**

| Description of Records   | Care of Records   | Final Disposition   |
|--|---|---|
| <p>When the rostered minister, or other authorized staff member, provides pastoral care such as marriage counseling or personal spiritual direction, the rostered minister 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 rostered minister, 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 ministers of Word and Sacrament 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.</p> <p>The person should sign a release if any information is to leave the file at any time.</p> <p><i>In all states, suspected cases of child abuse are required to be reported to the authorities. Whether such reporting requirements apply to rostered ministers may vary. Consult an attorney in your state for guidance on such matters</i></p> | <p>An understanding of the nature of a particular pastoral care relationship will determine the appropriate disposition of its records.</p> |

| Correspondence   |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Description of Records   | Care of Records  | Final Disposition  |
| <p>The rostered minister and staff may have correspondence of various types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ex-officio as chief executive officer of the congregation</li> <li>• Correspondence to and from officers of the congregation and the bishop of the synod</li> <li>• Personal</li> </ul>  | <p>E-mail is especially vulnerable to loss. E-mail that represents the policies, program, and ongoing life of the congregation should be printed out.</p>          | <p>Place only letters that describe the program and ongoing life of the congregation in the congregation's archives.</p>                       |
| Youth Activities and Events  |  |  |
| Description of Records   | Care of Records  | Final Disposition  |
| <p>Materials generated and/or retained that pertain to planning, hosting, or attending youth activities and events.</p> <p>Planning material<br/>Correspondence (including email)<br/>Minutes (if applicable)<br/>Promotional and programmatic materials<br/>Audiovisual materials<br/>Sermons and/or speeches<br/>Contracts<br/>Insurance policies, claims, incident information<br/>Permission slips<br/>Release forms<br/>Medical release forms<br/>Waivers<br/>Attendance lists<br/>Chaperone/monitor lists<br/>Staffing lists<br/>Registrations</p> | <p>Due to recent changes in the statutes of limitations regarding claims of abuse of minors, the recommendation is to retain these records <b>permanently</b>.</p> | <p>Retain these records permanently in a secure location in the congregation's office or a secure location in the congregation's archives.</p> |

| Programmatic Material   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Description of Records  | Care of Records  | Final Disposition   |
| <p>Materials produced by the congregation to assist its programs and promote its activity, document the life of the congregation and tell its story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Congregation histories</li> <li>• Membership directories, including picture directories on computer disc</li> <li>• Newsletters</li> <li>• News releases</li> <li>• Program and training material produced by the congregation</li> <li>• Audiovisual materials such as photographs of the congregation events.</li> </ul> <p>The congregation website 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>• Audiovisual materials</li> </ul> <p>Programmatic material created by members</p> | <p><b>Digital files never survive by accident!</b></p> <p>These documents are created—and may be used—electronically and depending on the congregations' situation may be preserved as paper or electronic documents. If you are preserving these records electronically, you need to preserve them in a readable, non-proprietary format and you must regularly backup the files for preservation purposes.</p> <p>If printing out photographs for archival preservation, use quality photographic paper.</p> <p>The congregation website is a constantly changing program delivery platform. Because the website 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>Place in the congregation's archives.</p> <p>You may wish to see if an archival site is collecting snapshots of your congregation website. <a href="http://www.archive.org">http://www.archive.org</a> If you find no archiving service, print out snapshots of unique congregation website material to be preserved in the congregation's archives.</p> |

| Sermons  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Description of Records   | Care of Records  | Final Disposition  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sermons</li> </ul>  | The rostered minister and congregation should agree <b>in writing</b> as to who owns the intellectual property.  | The rostered minister and congregation may, in agreement, choose to place manuscripts of the rostered minister's sermons commemorating special occasions in the archives of the congregation.  |
| Resource Materials   |  |  |
| Description of Records   | Care of Records  | Final Disposition  |
| Resource material from the synod or the churchwide organization for the support of the activity of the congregation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hymnals</li> <li>Worship materials</li> <li>Curriculum</li> <li>Program materials</li> </ul> | For congregations, such materials seldom have permanent value. Files should be culled annually. These materials are collected in the ELCA Archives and synod or regional archives.   | Samples of hymnals and education materials may be important for recording the history of the congregation. Discard other resource materials when they have been superseded by newer materials. |
| <b>See also these additional guidelines:</b>   | <i>Maintaining the Congregational Record: Advice for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</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 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> |  |



**For additional information contact:**

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
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Elk Grove Village, IL 60007  
800-638-3522 ext. 2818  
[archives@elca.org](mailto:archives@elca.org)

Office of the Secretary  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
8765 West Higgins Road  
Chicago, IL 60631  
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[i] "The pastor of this congregation shall keep accurate parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members dismissed, or members excluded from this 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 synod bishop is required to verify that these records exist and are in good order at the time of a pastoral transition. (S14. 21; S14. 23 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 mission support monies to the synod 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 minister of Word and Sacrament 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 minister of Word and Sacrament while working in a pastoral capacity, except with the express permission of the person who has given confidential information to the minister of Word and Sacrament or who was observed by the minister of Word and Sacrament, 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*).