

## **Enfranchising witness: archiving guide for congregations**

### **Context**

The power of archives is well illustrated in Chapter 4 of the Book of Ezra. Opposition of other tribes to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem is launched not with a spear, but a letter written by the scribe Shimshai to King Artaxerxes alleging the hostile motivation of the Israelites in rebuilding Jerusalem. Artaxerxes then decides to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem after a search 'in the book of the records of thy fathers' (v.15). Religious traditions without archives can be vulnerable to others writing their history for them, sometimes with hostile intentions.

Individual congregations vary greatly in terms of their longevity and resources. Some churches in the UK can trace their origins back more than 1000 years with well-established archives dating back centuries such as the case of some English cathedrals while others are only a few years old and yet to establish a record keeping tradition of their own. However, the general principles and practical issues remain the same.

Churches established in more recent times, particularly those serving communities that have developed a presence in Britain since 1945, often experienced frequent moves of their places of worship, and lacked space for administrative purposes, both of which are unfavourable to methodical record keeping. It is only over the last few years that there has been a greater awareness of the need to capture the experiences of these bodies. Furthermore, many nonconformist and Pentecostal worshipping communities will have a very strong oral tradition and less emphasis on formal written procedures. This is certainly supported by the evidence of the Religious Archives Survey 2010, undertaken by The National Archives, the Religious Archives Group and the Archives and Records Association with the assistance of the Pilgrim Trust.

There are signs that this situation is changing amidst a growing self-confidence and sense of identity among newly emerging churches. So how can a church congregation in Britain seek into develop its archival activity and create a record keeping tradition?

Already there are pressures towards better record keeping as part of the good governance required by the Charities Act 2006. Most religious congregations will now be registered charities, along with other religious organisations, and this requires proper keeping of minutes and financial records, with audited accounts, so that in the future there should be better official records of decision-making and financial management being laid down for the future. At the same time however, the challenges are increasing, with difficulties associated with electronic record keeping

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and the need to arrange, list, preserve archive material and potentially make it accessible for research activities where sensitivities allow this.

#### **General Principles**

A helpful starting point is The National Archives' draft advice on '*Archival Principles and Practice: an introduction to archives for non-archivists*' (2011), which is included in the sources of basic advice attached to this guidance as Appendix 2:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/archive-principles-and-practice-an-introduction-to-archives-for-non-archivists.pdf>

The main areas of our advice embrace the following archival principles of

- Storage
- Packaging
- Selection
- Arrangement
- Cataloguing
- Access.

The church's records need to reflect all the activities of the church community as far as possible. Record keeping should not only encompass the official viewpoint created by its administration and functions but also the experiences of the community itself. Photographs, festival programmes, personal diaries, reminiscences and scrapbooks might capture the wider community perspective. There is a great opportunity to create your own tradition and make it as comprehensive as possible. Such a tradition can capture the history from your own community's perspective to complement the history created by government both centrally and locally and help ensure our archival landscape features the full diversity and pluralism of contemporary Britain.

#### **Practical Issues**

##### **Storage**

All material needs to be kept in secure accommodation, protected in a locked room with a cool environment where it can be suitably protected against fire, flood, theft, pests and other hazards including damp and mould. Access to the storage area should be restricted to authorised church members and officials.

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Cellars and attics should be avoided unless environmental conditions can be controlled and adequate protection against flooding is in place through drains in the floor and the avoidance of areas with water tanks, which might leak or burst. Radiators can be a particular problem.

Temperature between 13° and 20°C is now recommended by the latest BSI guidance (PD5454: 2012, Guide for the storage and exhibition of archival materials), with moisture content of the air at a Relative Humidity level between 35% and 60% for mixed archival collections including paper, photographs, leather bound volumes and other materials.

### **Packaging**

Records need to be protected by archival quality boxing and packaging in the long term to ensure they survive in good condition. In the shorter term, the main aim should be to box files of loose papers in containers and to label them with brief descriptions of the contents. Containers should not be airtight as lack of air circulation can lead to damp and mould attacks, but should be stout enough to give some protection against water damage. Plastic bags and containers should not be used. Bound volumes need not be boxed unless they have lost their covers completely, but can be shelved upright. Do not stick labels directly onto spines.

Digital and audio-visual records require specialist advice and preservation of digital records is still in its infancy. These inevitably will become much more significant over the next decade. Web sites can be nominated for archiving by the British Library.

### **Selection**

For any existing church, the most important step is to gather the historical records, which have passed out of current use, and to arrange them, following their original order, which reflects the activity of the creating body. This would involve keeping all the minutes of the church's governing council together.

Some material may not be of permanent value, containing little or no evidential worth. This judgment should not be made without professional archival advice. There is no need to keep multiple copies of ephemeral publicity material that is printed. One archival copy of each service sheet for example should normally be kept as evidence of this type of activity and of the event itself.

The Charity Commission for England and Wales has published '*Retention of Accounting Records*' that can help churches to appraise their current administrative and financial records and develop their own records retention schedule for these categories of records. This guidance should be used in conjunction with the archival schema attached to this paper:

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<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/guidance/Buzzacott%20Insight%20Retention%20of%20Accounting%20Records.pdf>

### **Arrangement**

The material can then be arranged according to an overall classification. Most institutions, including churches, can usually identify six or so key functions including material relating to their governance, finance and administration, worship and teaching, charitable relief, property holdings and staff. Personal papers of individuals may be added if desired. Attached as Appendix 1 to this paper is an archival schema identifying categories of records that are potentially significant either administratively or historically and how they might be arranged. It ought to be made clear whether records created by others are held as a gift or a loan and on what basis they are being cared for in case there are legal disputes over them later.

Individual files can be arranged on a subject basis, placing groups of records created by different officials, departments or groups together. Where material is artificially rearranged, vital evidence provided by the relationship of documents to one another is lost.

### **Cataloguing and listing**

In the course of arranging and boxing material, it should be possible to draw up a brief inventory or list (a box and volume list), to which locations by room and shelf can be added in order to identify the whereabouts. This can be done using basic word processing packages and does not require specialist archival software. *'Archival Principles and Practice'* gives more detail as to how to do this. Such a list will provide the basis of a more detailed catalogue down to file/volume level or where necessary down to item level, in the future. Damaged or fragile material can also be noted on this basic inventory for professional advice and treatment later.

### **Access**

Archives that in the longer term may be of considerable importance are not necessarily suitable for immediate access. If they contain information that is confidential, you may need to restrict access to them. You have responsibility under Data Protection legislation to protect the confidentiality of records containing personal information about living people. Any collection of private records is likely to include such material. It may be personal to the creator; it may refer to a third party; it may be semi-official material generated by an outside body.

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One way to protect records containing sensitive information is to close them to research access for a stated period after the death of the person or the date of the creation of the material, except by special permission. Such closure periods can range from 20 years for many categories of public records to 100 years applied to census and medical records. If in any doubt, it is better to seek advice, from either your local Record Office or the Private Archives Team at The National Archives: [asd@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:asd@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

The Community Archives and Heritage Group website includes links to various pieces of guidance relating to the handling personal information that would potentially be covered by the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts:

[http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/page\\_id\\_507\\_path\\_0p4p.aspx](http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/page_id_507_path_0p4p.aspx)

If public access is allowed, files or volumes should be produced in a separate reading area under constant supervision, with slips to check material in and out. Never let researchers into the archive storage area to help themselves, as this may lead to disarrangement of material or theft.

### **Sustainability**

What if this is beyond the resources of your congregation? It is possible that larger churches will be able to employ a professional archivist on a part time or even voluntary basis, or fund volunteers or administrative staff to undertake some basic training in archival skills. Guidance can be found from the sources appended to this paper. However, in other cases, it may be that depositing material with a local record office which can safely store archival material to national standards and make it available to researchers is the best solution, as it can be catalogued and made available usually free of charge. This is what many Christian denominations and other faith groups have done.

The whole of the UK is served by a network of local authority record offices (e.g. London Metropolitan Archives) and specialist record offices (e.g. the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York), which take in deposits of private records from the wider community and make them available to a variety of researchers. This can include deposits of personal papers made during an individual's lifetime with the stipulation that they should not be made available to researchers without special permission until after their death.

This leads to the issue of sustainability. Unless there is a continuing commitment of resources and staff (including volunteers) from the church itself, it will always be difficult to attract outside support. The long-term viability of the archive remaining in the custody of the church that created it will be difficult to demonstrate without such a visible commitment. This is likely therefore, to be a model for larger sized churches serving a greater number of members.

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For smaller churches, wishing to celebrate their ministry, it may be that a 'virtual community archive' approach may be more sustainable. This might involve putting up digitised copies of photographs, documents and the like on the Church website, which can be regularly revised. This provides accessibility in a way that avoids the need to make the original material available.

A link to the Community Archives and Heritage Group website is included in the sources appended to this paper.

### **Archival Catechism**

The following checklist of questions can help a church to decide whether to retain historical records or deposit them elsewhere:

1. What records survive which have significant value and evidence of the congregation, the local community it serves, and the church's history?
2. Can these be brought together and maintained by the congregation itself?
3. Will external funding be sought, with the implication of opening up public access, or will the community fund the archive itself?
4. How will appropriate care and access be provided? Is there, at least, a secure storage room and reading area, which can be supervised?
5. Where is professional advice going to be obtained if there is no professional archivist?
6. Who is going to arrange and list the archives?
7. Is deposit with a local or appropriate specialist record office a more viable option, perhaps combined with a community archive of photographs and other material created by church members, perhaps with documents and images published on the church's own website?
8. Are records from other communities or individuals going to be collected?
9. If so, are the necessary procedures in place to support the gift or loan and future preservation of archive material?

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10. How is sensitive material going to be handled in terms of access for research?  
Who is going to determine whether access is restricted and for how long?

These questions may be daunting for some, but they will perhaps help congregations to make realistic decisions as to the future of their records.

**Final reflections**

Let us not dwell too much on the difficulties. There is a real opportunity today to preserve the materials that record the strong and vigorous contribution made by Black majority churches to British Society. An archive captures through time your past, traces the journey you have taken and communicates that experience to future generations. It can inspire future members with the experience of previous generations that might otherwise be forgotten or discounted over time.

Archives provide a unique written, visual or oral form of communal memory that supports a sense of identity and provides a range of perspectives and that enable a church to exercise a greater degree of influence on shaping its own future, unlike the Israelites in the Book of Ezra.

Philip Gale

Revised, October 2012

## **Appendix 1: Possible archive schema for congregational archives**

This archival schema lists the types of records created by a congregation and its associated bodies (such as welfare charities) which have historical significance and should be retained for the future. The schema also can be used to help organise and arrange the current records created by the church's contemporary activities, including those created and stored electronically.

The following outline is a possible template for cataloguing the records created by church congregations in the United Kingdom.

Churches need to manage their archives properly for a number of reasons. Without proper organisation, the sheer volume of records (whether stored in paper or electronic format) can easily become overwhelming. Many areas of activity are subject to external regulation, for example in areas of child protection, finance, and planning regulations relating to buildings, which makes it essential to maintain proper records. Good record keeping, particularly in these areas, demonstrates the organisation's wider accountability to society in relation to its activities and reflects its complexity and diversity. However, only a relatively small proportion of the administrative records will be suitable for permanent preservation as part of the archive.

The Church also has theological reasons for managing its records as a testimony of its various activities and a part of its continuing witness to the local community, those of other faiths and those of none.

These guidelines are designed to help church members and officials to distinguish between the different kinds of records which may be encountered and identify those of historical significance that should be retained for inclusion in the archive.

### **Archive cataloguing schema for congregational records**

#### **Key general information**

Include the date of the establishment of the church, the denominational tradition (Pentecostal, Baptist etc), major events in its history such as a move to new premises and reference to prominent members (whether clerical or lay) associated with the church.

#### **General description of the archive**

Include information about the size of the collection, the format and languages of the material as well as how the collection is arranged physically and intellectually. Details of any available supplementary finding aids such as card indexes should be included with any published histories of the church.

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Classification of the records

**Governance**

Minutes of governing bodies

Trust deeds

Constitution

Charity Commission schemes of management

Annual reports

Membership records

Correspondence of the church authorities

**Worship and teaching**

Ministers' sermons (recorded and written)

Service registers for marriages, baptisms and funerals

Registrar-general's marriage registers where the church is licensed to conduct marriages

Service sheets

Sunday school records

Records of life events (birth, coming of age, death etc)

Pastoral advice

Visitors' books

**Finance and resources**

Annual accounts

Trust accounts

Fundraising appeal accounts and literature

**Church property**

Deeds

Tenders, specifications, architectural plans and drawings, photographs relating to major projects e.g. new buildings and extensions, etc

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Inventories

Logbooks

Correspondence

Library accession registers

**Church Charities**

Trustees' accounts

Annual accounts

**Staff**

Personnel files for key members of staff

**Publications**

Newsletters and magazines

Press releases

Invitation cards for events

Records of festivals and special events including invitation cards and other publicity material

Calendars

Scrapbooks and newspaper cuttings

**Personal papers**

Diaries

Correspondence including e-mails

Sermons

Study notes

Photographs

Newspaper cuttings

## **Appendix 2: Some basic sources of advice on archives**

### ***Where to start***

'*Archival Principles and Practice: an introduction to archivists for non-archivists*' is the draft advice published by The National Archives for institutions and people who own or look after archive material:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/archive-principles-and-practice-an-introduction-to-archives-for-non-archivists.pdf>

### ***How documents should be produced if members of the public are given access***

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/visit/document-handling.htm>

### ***Best practice followed by professionally-run repositories: The National Archives Standard for Record Repositories (2004)***

[nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/standard2005.pdf](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/standard2005.pdf)

### **What to do if you have a disaster**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/disaster-planning-risk-management.pdf>

### **Digital Records**

The Online Computer Library Center has produced useful starting information concerning unidentified physical media - floppy disks, CDs and other digital records - *You've Got to Walk Before You Can Run: First Steps for Managing Born-Digital Content Received on Physical Media*, by Ricky Erway, OCLC (2012):

<http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2012/2012-06.pdf>

### **Community archives**

<http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/>

### **The National Archives leadership role:**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/leading-archives.htm>

### **Contact The National Archives for advice**

[asd@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:asd@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

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**Useful books**

Jackie Bettington et al (editors) *Keeping Archives* (Australia: Australian Society of Archivists 2008). This is the third edition of this book, earlier editions are also useful.

Caroline Williams, *Managing Archives: Foundations, Principles and Practice* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2006)

Helen Ford, *Preserving Archives* (London: Facet Publishing 2007).