

## **TO KEEP OR NOT TO KEEP: THE VALUE OF A RETENTION SCHEDULE**

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**KYLE ROBERTS:** Hello and welcome back to another program designed to empower you to preserve your church's archive.

My name is Kyle Roberts, and I am the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Thank you for joining me for today's virtual workshop with the CLA's archivists, Zachary Bodnar and Billy McCarthy on "To Keep or Not to Keep: The Value of a Retention Schedule."

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusett people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those of you joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, and our digital archive of more than 110,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's Influence on the American story. Please check our website, [congregationallibrary.org](http://congregationallibrary.org), to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

At the Congregational Library & Archives, we're committed to supporting churches struggling to engage in effective records management. From reference requests to in-person feedback, the archivists at the Congregational Library have long recognized the desire among churches to better understand how to steward their church records and maintain the memories and mission of their church community. They also recognize the challenge of not knowing where to begin.

This is our sixth program in our series, all of which can be found on our library's YouTube page. Today's presentation comes from survey feedback from all of you who viewed earlier programs. So please do continue to reach out and let us know what you want to learn.

Now, let me go ahead and introduce our speakers.

Zachary Bodnar graduated with a Masters of Library and Information Science from Simmons University with a concentration in Archives Management in 2018. Prior to his work at the CLA, Zachary worked at the Bellamy Faraday House and Garden Archives, the Vassar College Special Collections, the Harvard Law School Library, and the Harvard Botany Libraries. Zachary joined the CLA as an Archives Assistant in 2017, helping to prepare materials for digitization through our New England's Hidden Histories project. In 2018, he took on the title of Archivist. His professional interests include metadata collection and management, digital archiving, audio visual preservation, and archives management.

Billy McCarthy graduated with a library, Masters of Library and Information Science degree at Simmons University with a concentration in Archival Management. He started working at the CLA through a graduate internship and was hired full time as an Archivist in 2018. He's the head of Reader Services, helping the CLA's visitors with reference requests and facilitating in-person research. Billy also serves as the collection manager for the archives, working with the CLA's offsite vendor to protect and maintain the organization's archival records. Some of his professional interests include increasing access, collection management, processing and complex materials, and facilitating research.

So I'm gonna invite Zachary up first to join us to start off the program, and then he'll bring Billy up.

So thanks again for being here.

**ZACHARY BODNAR:** Thank you Kyle, and good day to everyone who has tuned in to today's program: "To Keep or Not to Keep: The Value of the Retention Schedule."

I believe that today's programing has had a number, record number, record-breaking number of people signed up. And we are all so very, very excited to have you all here.

Today's program is a part of the CLA's Church Stewardship Initiative. This initiative includes webinars and workshops, all focused on helping churches develop their own stewardship programs. We believe that church communities are uniquely positioned to best preserve the memories of their communities and keep the mission of their churches accessible for future generations.

Our goal for this program is to create programs and resources which will help churches engage with the topics of stewardship, and support those churches in their efforts to keep and preserve their own records.

The Church Stewardship program has been going on for over a year now, and the program is still going strong, with a whole year's worth of programming planned already.

For those who are interested, every one of our past webinars is currently available to view at your leisure on the CLA's YouTube page. There's a handy playlist that includes all of our past programming in chronological order. And we hope that, as you think about the stewardship of your church's records, that you go back and listen to these past programs.

And now I turn it over to my colleague Billy to introduce today's primary topic: records management.

**BILLY MCCARTHY:** All right. Thank you, Zachary, and welcome to everyone joining us today.

So to get started, I'm gonna give out some basic definitions based on today's topic. We believe it is helpful to make all of you more knowledgeable about how archivists talk about the work that we, as well as you, do.

Most of this information will be coming from the Society of American Archivists' "Dictionary of Archive Terminology." We've mentioned this dictionary in several past workshops, and I really encourage everyone to keep it in mind as a helpful reference source going forward.

In no way feel that you have to walk away knowing every definition word for word. The point here is to just get you familiar with the words that will help you engage in better church stewardship.

So, first up we have records management, which is "the systematic and administrative control of records throughout their lifecycle to ensure efficiency and economy in their creation, use, handling, control, maintenance, and disposition." Taking this a little further, the general purpose of a system of records management is that of providing the creator with the records necessary to support the efficient continuation of its activities, whether for internal purposes or for regulatory compliance.

In practice, records management includes all of the steps needed to keep your collections safe and secure. This can include, you know, who has readily available access to the collection, the climate the collection is housed in, boxes and folders being used, the creation of a finding aid and inventory, and the transfer of that material to another institution if necessary.

I would highly suggest you review our previous events, as we've already discussed, as they can provide a bunch of additional information on these topics, especially our one on housing.

One part of this I just wanted to highlight while we're talking about it is temperature control. At the CLA, we are able to set our archives to about 68 degrees, which is about the optimal temperature. We very much recognize that most of you will not be able to achieve this perfect temperature control, but we really want to make sure that you're not placing your collections in precarious situations.

Do not place valuable material in places that have fluctuating and extreme temperatures: your hot attics and your damp basements being the biggest offenders.

Not addressing this will damage your records in the long term, making effective records management quite difficult.

So the next term is the one that has brought us all together today, that being the retention schedule.

A retention schedule is "a document that identifies and describes an organization's records, usually at the series level, and provides instructions for the disposition of records throughout their lifecycle."

Not all of your church records need to be kept indefinitely, and some should really only be kept for a specific period, especially in the case of certain employee files. A retention schedule lays out how long to keep something, be it forever or x number of years.

We'll be providing a template for all of you today to help get you started.

Zachary will dive deeper into the retention schedule during his portion, but I do want to keep in mind the model retention schedule is just that. It's a model, and we are not lawyers. Be sure to seek legal advice as required.

Either way, the retention schedule provides you with the overarching information needed to engage in safe records management.

Up next are two words that go hand in hand with one another, that being active and inactive records.

As the names imply, an active record is one that is used with sufficient frequency to justify keeping them within reach. An active record's primary value is administrative and informational, as it is indispensable to the daily operations of your churches. Some examples of records that would be active could include things like your administrative reports, committee records, correspondences, meeting minutes, audit reports, 990 forms, and others.

For the group that I was just talking about, as you'll see in the future retention schedule, you keep those as active for usually around four years, and then they would transition to being inactive records.

Inactive records are those that are no longer used in the regular course of business, but which may be preserved and occasionally used for legal, historical, or operational purposes. Our example retention schedule will help you better define what your active and inactive records are. And like anything else, there will be needs for slight changes depending on your individual circumstances.

One example of an inactive record which would hold historical value would be all of your various membership records. Questions related to genealogy is something I expect all of you will be receiving if you haven't already. So I figured it was a good example to call out.

When a record becomes inactive and no longer has a reason to remain in your church's archives, you'll want to destroy these records.

Destruction is "the disposal process that results in the obliteration of records." At minimum, destruction can be no more complicated than just taking your materials and putting it in the trash. In other instances, the manner of destruction is appropriate to the sensitivity of the information contained in the materials and that may need to involve something like shredding or incineration.

For electronic records, a simple destruction could be accomplished by just deleting the record. For more sensitive information in electronic format, that media may need to be overwritten numerous times or physically destroyed in order to make it impossible to recover the data.

When it comes to new material that we take on personally as an archive, I would like to note that we most often see people not destroying very sensitive records such as bank accounts, Social Security numbers, and all forms of various HR records.

All of these can be massive invasions of privacy, and we really encourage all of you to prioritize identifying and disposing of this kind of material in a safe and proper manner. We obviously will shred that material as soon as we personally come across it, but by implementing a proper records retention schedule, you will slowly be doing this kind of work anyway.

And then, depending on the amount of material you have that needs to be destroyed, you may need to require contracting out with a third party company that engages in mass shredding. There are plenty of them available.

Again, most of you won't need to worry about that if you're implementing a proper retention schedule as you engage in records management, and your simple paper shredder will be more than enough for what you need.

The final word I'm gonna define here is disposition. Disposition is "a given material's, final destruction or transfer to an archive as determined by its owners."

Keep in mind that transfer to any archive requires a discussion on what material that archive does and does not take. But that is a conversation that will take place when you reach out to these places directly.

At the CLA, we will only take on collections if all applicable material is coming to us. Having archival collections split between multiple locations is just something we really don't like doing because... for many different reasons. But most of all, it's simply a logistical nightmare.

For material we don't take on, some of those examples being artifacts, artworks, or pulpit Bibles, we highly encourage you to reach out to your church members, your community members, or neighboring communities to find new homes.

One example I can always think of is we were asked to take on a baptismal font from a closing church. When we unfortunately had to say no, I encouraged the church to try and reach out to surrounding churches, and they were able to find it a new home relatively quickly.

Typically, disposition would be done either through mail delivery or having someone drop off material directly to our offices. We recognize this may not be possible for those of you that are not local to the Boston area, but we will always work with you on a case by case basis. At a minimum, always be sure to acquire tracking numbers for any archival material you send in the mail.

So again, that was just some brief definitions to set the groundwork for this more in-depth discussion on retention schedules.

So I just wanted to take a moment and discuss what's called the records lifecycle model. The model shows the distinct phases of a record's existence from its creation to its final disposition. Different models will kind of have a different way of looking at it, but all models will use some form of the words: creation, use, and disposition. Like I said, some of their models might make more out of active and inactive records as well as destruction and archival preservation.

So the first stage of the lifecycle model is creation, which, as the name implies, is when records are created.

The second stage, maintenance or use, is where the terms active and inactive records come back into play. As discussed before, an active record for... an active period, excuse me, for a

set of records is when it has maximum primary value and is used or referred to frequently by the creating church and others involved in day to day decision making.

This step also includes that sort of proper maintenance of the collection. You know, this is putting your records in archivally sound folders and boxes. You know, when those records are eventually determined inactive, we still highly recommend keeping those... especially, excuse me, with those records determined, inactive, but still worth keeping for those legal, historical, or administrative purposes, we really still want you to go through proper maintenance. But they can be shelved further away, you can send them to an offset storage facility if you use one, or to the archive if you have an active relationship with one.

Finally, we have the final step of the model, which is that disposition I mentioned earlier. This process has two parts: the destruction of material not intended to be transferred to an archive, and those that will be transferred.

For the material that is transferred to an archive, they will then head into our own archival processes, which include steps like accessioning, processing, the creation of a finding aid, and several others.

You know, the lifecycle model is really helpful in contextualizing the work you're gonna be doing in records management. And the retention schedule can be seen as that rubric, which you use when making informed decisions.

Following this talk, we will share some additional helpful resources, including a wonderful document created by the New York State Archives and an excellent article by Philip Bantin. Both go deeper and give that extra level knowledge on the lifecycle.

Finally, I just wanted to briefly discuss something I hear all the time when doing this sort of archival work, which is why does any of this even matter?

So it matters because records of today have equal value to the records of yesterday, and both need to be treated with equal care and respect. The records you are working with describe the mission, community, and history of yourselves, your families, and those that interacted with your individual churches.

The entire Church Stewardship Initiative was launched to provide the tools needed to do the work of records management. And I'm really happy that we've been able to put in the retention schedule because I feel it is so integral to this process.

You know, this work is confusing even for trained archivists like me and Zachary. But I cannot begin to describe the amount of communities that have lost physical and now electronic connections to their past, both the good and the bad, because of not having the tools and guidelines needed to engage in proper archival work.

No one here should think that they'll get 100% of the work correct. That's simply impossible. We can't even do that. But what you can do is use this retention schedule as a framework for a proper archive, one that will have, frankly innumerable uses in things like community events, other forms of get togethers, genealogical work that connects families with their past, to things like properly caring for photos that are physical and digital reminders of those of us still here today, as well as those that have and will eventually pass on.

I truly hope everyone with us today can see the value that we're trying to describe in doing this work. And please remember that we are always here to serve as a resource, even if we are not the final destination for your archives.

Thank you so much for listening. And now I'm gonna pass it on to Zachary to tackle the retention schedule.

**ZACHARY:** Thank you so much, Billy.

So now that we have introduced the topic of records management and the idea of a retention schedule, let's actually take a closer look at one and discuss some strategies for how such a document might be implemented within your own church.

Pictured here is a screengrab of the first few lines of a model retention schedule that we developed here at the CLA for this program. A copy of the full document will be sent to all who registered for this event via email. And for those watching after the fact, there will be a place to download a copy for yourself.

Unfortunately, we do not have time today to go over the whole document in extreme detail, but instead we'll be covering the document as a whole, talking about how to read the document and some of the ways that we have organized this document.

So within each record series, there are four columns which describe the types of records covered and the disposition of those records.

The description column contains examples of and/or clarifications for the records contained within the document type column, which just describes simply the types of records you might expect to be producing. The retention period describes how long a document or record should be retained, measured in years. The final column then indicates whether materials should either enter the archive after the retention period ends, or whether they should not enter the archive.

In some cases you will see records here on this model retention schedule that have a permanent retention period but are not marked to be sent to the archive. These are records which should be maintained permanently but which should not be archived as historic records.

The prime example of this is going to be many financial and personnel records, which for various legal reasons, do need to be kept for as long as a church organization is active. But after a church closes, those are records that, due to their sensitive nature, shouldn't ever really enter into the historical record.

In many cases, we have not given direct guidelines for how long a document should be maintained before it is moved to the archive. We leave this decision to those doing the work of records management at your church, as you will know best, how long such records remain useful in your day to day administration of the church.

However, a quick guideline here would be that unless otherwise stated, permanent records can be safely moved to the archive after seven years. Seven years is kind of a pretty common cut off point for most records retention.

The model retention policy has been broken up into six records series, listed here on this slide. These records series closely resemble the types of records that we often see here at the CLA. And our work processing church collections has very much influenced how we created this model retention policy. We hope, further, that by splitting the retention schedule into these six series will help you to start thinking about the types of records that you are creating now at this very minute and how you might categorize them so that they can be easily archived or retrieved during their maintenance state.

I also want to mention at this point that the model isn't the be all, end all. A model is just that: a model.

And there may be record types listed here that you do not create at your church, just as there may be records that you do create at your church that are not listed here. We've tried to cover most everything that we could think of, but we are only human, after all. This is a document that honestly, we fully expect will end up being heavily edited by each individual church or organization to best fit the needs of your church and community.

We should also mention that this model doesn't cover records that are created externally from your church: handouts and flyers created by denominational bodies, informational brochures from vendors, and ephemera created by outside sources aren't really covered by this model retention schedule. Generally speaking, such materials do not need to be archived as they are not created by your church or your church community. But still, you should consider their status as you do begin to implement a retention policy.

So before going much further, I do have a couple of disclaimers.

As Billy has already said, and I'm going to repeat, we are not lawyers.

Though our model policy matches closely to the guidelines we have seen elsewhere, ultimately, there may be local, state or other jurisdictional guidelines that supersede our model policy. Your denominational bodies at the national and regional level might also have their own guidelines for records and their retention schedules. When it comes to legal matters, always double check with a professional.

I also want to make sure I'm giving credit where credit is due. This model retention schedule was created based primarily on two different sources. One was a resource put out by the United Methodist General Commission on Archives and History. And the other is a model guidelines produced as an online resource that is unfortunately no longer available by a nonprofit based organization called Mission Box.

We also used our own experience processing church records to further tailor our model guidelines to the types of records that we most frequently see within church records. Now let's talk a little bit about implementation.

A retention schedule is not something that can simply just be introduced as a policy. Implementation of a retention schedule is a long, iterative process that requires both buy in from stakeholders and some means of accountability.

Buy in is especially necessary. Retention schedules affect every, every single person who creates documents at your church. And they must be consulted with, and on board with, the kinds of policy changes that a retention schedule necessitates.

Implementing a retention schedule is also a slow process because every part of the policy needs to be documented. I'll be going into more detail about the kinds of things that need to be documented a little bit later. But to say there's a lot would possibly be an understatement.

Because no process is ever perfect on first pass, implementing a retention policy will need to be iterative, with changes gradually introduced as new situations or scenarios arise within just this simple day to day operation and administration of your church.

Our general guideline here then, is that introducing a retention policy must be a slow, deliberate process which can probably be measured in years. This isn't a plug and play kind of policy, but one which must be tackled deliberately, methodically, and with constant conversation and feedback.

Again, buy in really is one of the most important parts to having a successful retention policy and records management program. Because so many people are involved in the creation of records, if it isn't clear to everyone who's involved, then the whole program can start to crack and crumble.

That's also why accountability is key. There needs to be some way to check that the work that is always ongoing with records management is in fact ongoing and have means to correct it if something is moving outside of the schedule.

So let's discuss some strategies then for the maintenance of active records and the eventual disposition of those records into your church's archive.

The majority of records you are creating today will spend the better part of their life as active documents existing in the maintenance phase of the records lifecycle. So it's important to discuss the storage of records during this stage. This is also when I will start talking about all of the various things your eventual retention policy needs to be documenting.

The biggest thing is to have... to find the locations where records are stored. This can be an office shelf, a file cabinet, or a set of binders that are kept in the conference room. While having everything in a single location is probably ideal, the best example might be just sort of like the administrative office of your church is probably the ideal location where most of these active records should be stored. But as long as you document where every record type is being kept, you're doing well, and you are ensuring that those records can be easily pulled if there's ever a need to refer back to them.

You should also be documenting how labels are created. Consistent labels, especially in file cabinets, are the key to good record keeping. I'm probably gonna say the word consistency a few more times today, but consistency is clear, and straightforward folder labels will help save you so much time when you find yourself needing to track down that one insurance letter you got from your insurance provider four years ago that you need at this exact moment.

I would also suggest, when possible, grouping record types by years. So for example, let's think of your church council meeting minutes. You might want to keep those all in annualized folders. So you'll just have a group of folders that's, "Council Minutes 2015," "Council Minutes 2016," "Council Minutes 2017," etc. This will make it significantly easier for you during the disposition phase of the records lifecycle, and it'll also make it easier for you when you need to find those minutes from that one meeting in the spring of 2017.

Another thing to keep in mind is the schedule of records creation. For records that are created on consistent schedules, for example, meeting minutes that are created on a quarterly basis, or a type of financial record that is always produced at the end of the month. You can document when, if you can document when exactly those records will enter their maintenance state, you should. Knowing this information is especially useful for keeping track of the records schedule, and ensuring that records that are being moved into maintenance mode are being moved regularly.

It's... if you have a calendar basically of when records are being created, you can essentially have a means to self-audit yourself to help make sure that you are in fact moving records to where they're supposed to be at a timely manner. And that it is, that your records program is working as intended. It also helps to give some peace of mind as you try to build up a calendar for when and what types of records are being created at your church.

And finally, it is important to document access. Billy's already covered this a little bit, but just to reiterate, certain types of records, especially those of financial and HR nature, are inherently sensitive and require restricted access.

Use your church's organizational chart to define which roles have access to which document types. And then use that information to ensure that those record types are being filed in an appropriately secure way. The two biggest examples of this is going to be filing cabinets that have locks and certain folders on hard drives or elsewhere that have, that are password protected.

Speaking of digital records, digital records are going to be a large portion of the records that you are currently creating at this very time. And so we do need to talk about some basic digital preservation strategies for them.

To basically sum it up, everything I've said about physical records also applies to digital records. But there are some additional notes to be given at this phase.

First off, whether you store records in a cloud or in an office hard drive, you need to create a defined file structure. Creating ad hoc folders whenever something new comes in to the cloud server or to your local hard drive is just going to end up becoming a recipe for record keeping disaster.

You, one of the first things you'll want to do as you start thinking about the digital maintenance of your digital records is to create and document a defined file structure with instructions on where exactly the record types in the retention schedule should be stored.

There's a couple, there's many ways you can go about this. The two that come to mind immediately off the top of my head are you can take a sort of org chart approach to how you make, or, have a file structure so that, you know, your one department has its own file system. Another department has its own file system, etc. Or you can also use the various series that we created for the retention schedule itself. So church records, building records, financial records... and use that as a basis for creating a defined file structure.

Secondarily to this, you want to create a consistent file naming system. There's a lot of, so many different ways you can create file naming systems. But the big point that I really do just want to be making here is again, that consistency is key. Being consistent with your file

naming can help to ensure that no files get lost due to poor or confusing naming conventions. The example here is just using the department, then a file type, and then a date.

But the big thing to keep here too is that if you're looking at a file, ideally you should be able to know what that file is about without having to open the file. If you have to open the file to kind of know what that file actually is, you probably need to rename the file.

Eventually, most records, outside of those that are permanently active, will need to be removed from maintenance and either archived or destroyed. This is the disposition phase and also requires some careful documentation.

The first and perhaps most important thing for disposition is its scheduling. Disposition can be done throughout a year, but unless you have a records manager whose pretty much entire job is just records management, the other approach then would be to just make a time every year annually to schedule all disposition tasks.

For most church situations, we'd really recommend the latter approach as it makes things easier to track and minimizes labor spent on disposition throughout the year, focusing it all really to just one point in the year. A new calendar year or a new fiscal year make very obvious times when disposition as a whole can be done. But there are plenty of other times in the year, and the most important thing really is just that it's done at an annual and regular basis.

You should also be documenting how certain records will be destroyed whenever possible. Basically, this is the point where you want to be documenting records that need to be destroyed, can they be safely destroyed by simply throwing it into a recycle bin or do they need to be shredded?

That's really the main point here, is identifying the types of records that need to be shredded. And those are going to be pretty much any document that has anything that's personally identifiable, or bank account numbers, or checks, or anything like that.

When moving materials to the archive, make sure too that you are updating any maps or inventories you have created for your archive. Our past program, "What's in a Collection," covers inventories and maps in some great detail. So if you used that program in the past to start inventorying your church, then disposition basically then just becomes I move this folder from the filing cabinet in the administrative office, to I move it into the archival box in our archives room, and then just updating your inventory for the box that it was moved into.

So quick disclaimer right off the bat, the topic of digital preservation is way too big to cover here in great detail. Digital archiving is a topic that we know there is a lot of interest about. And we want to cover it in great, in the greater depth that it requires.

That said, let's dive into some things you can do right now that can help with your digital... the archiving of your digital files without going too, too in-depth into this very complex topic.

First, I'm pretty sure Billy and I have said this before, and we'll probably end up saying it again in future programs, but if you have any record that is considered critical, it should be printed out and stored in the archive as a physical object.

Physical records are far more stable and far less likely to be lost to time than their digital counterparts. So if there is a document that would be problematic to lose for either legal reasons, most likely for legal reasons, but for pretty much any kind of reason, and it only exists in a digital format, you should absolutely just print it out. It is going to be far safer in its physical format than it is going to be in its digital format.

So, moving from the physical side of digital records preservation, let's actually move to pure digital preservation.

Your digital archive should have the same defined file structure and file naming structure as your active records. This will make the transfer easier and helps preserve the concept of original order within your archive. So basically you'll end up just having sort of a file structure that is a complete mirror of your active file structure. And then you just move the folder when it goes into the archive, into the appropriate spot in the same spot on the archive. And then you're done.

One thing, too, to mention here is that when possible, you should also consider converting your digital documents into PDFs, specifically PDF/A if that's the option, but that's getting into perhaps more detail than necessary. But PDFs are significantly more interoperable than pretty much any other basic format. The most common example being sort of your Microsoft Office suite formats: Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, all those. PDF versions of those are going to be far more interoperable. And in fact PDF/A is an official preservation format as recognized basically by the US Federal Government.

PDFs are also more difficult to edit after archiving them. This is a very niche concern. However, once a document is officially in the archive, whether digital or physical, there should be no editing of that document ever happening. And PDFs do help to prevent editing after archiving.

Finally, a note on storage. Cloud storage isn't ideal by a long shot, due both to the costs associated with cloud storage and also the fact that cloud storage relies on faceless tech corporations to actually keep those servers running forever more. However, for most situations, they are going to be sufficient to meet your digital archival storage needs.

Local hard drives are likely to fail over time. CDs and flash drives have an even shorter shelf life than a hard drive. And most churches probably don't have local servers that are constantly being backed up by an IT department, internal or external.

So while I recognize that cloud storage solutions are not ideal, and they really aren't, they will probably be the most sufficient option available to a church. So do consider cloud storage solutions as a possible solution to your digital archival needs.

All right, we're coming to the end.

I apologize for probably how much information I have just unloaded. There's a lot. And even for us, it's a lot to parse.

But here's some final words from us to you. Records management is hard. There is an entire professional landscape, separated from archivists even, that is devoted entirely to proper records management. So we understand that there's probably a lot of information in this presentation that is difficult to parse right away.

But we also want to ensure you that the introduction of a records management program at your church will be rewarding, if slow. The records of today will soon enough become the records of tomorrow, and the memories they hold are just as important as those already found within your church's archive. Ensuring that these memories, which document the mission of your church and its community can eventually make it into your archive, is an incredibly important step to take, and it's one that we encourage everyone to start thinking about at the very least.

And we are here to help. Please, please never hesitate to reach out to us here at the CLA if you have a question. It is literally a part of our mission. We are always happy to answer any question you might have to the best of our knowledge.

So we deeply encourage you to give us a call, email us, or come visit.

And that's it for today. I ended up almost exactly right on time. Thank you so much for joining us. We hope you will consider following us on our socials and joining the newsletter if you haven't already.

And of course, if you have any questions, please email us at [info@14beacon.org](mailto:info@14beacon.org).

Now I will turn it over to Kyle, who will lead us through some Q&A.

**KYLE:** Thank you so much, Zachary and Billy. This is great.

I wonder, you know, as a way to kind of start our conversation, you know, this is the work that you, what you're talking about here is not just the committee, not just the work of the committee of the folks who want to think about the archives, right? It really is the work of anybody who touches on any sort of records that are being produced in a church today.

So I wonder, maybe we might think a little bit aloud if we were, you know, say we're sitting in our church, and we're trying to think about who should be at the table for that first conversation. You know, so who are some of the folks you'd want to make sure get invited?

**ZACHARY:** I would probably lean towards being more open than less for this as a process.

This is a process that's going to probably involve anyone who is on a church council or any of the sort of administrative committees of the church.

If you have a church administrator or someone who's sort of just the secretary of the church, they are absolutely someone who needs, needs, needs to be involved in these conversations.

If you have an archives committee, they should all... someone from that committee or multiple people from that committee should also be a part of this conversation.

As Kyle said, and as we said in the program, this is a process that ultimately effects a lot of different people. So it is a process that should probably be open to quite a few people, the major stakeholders in all sort of departments within your church that are producing records today.

**BILLY:** I was gonna say, yeah, just to echo what Zack's saying, if you have a large staff, it might be a good idea to start with gathering a couple of people together as an archives committee and then start from there. Because you'll know better which stakeholders and which individuals are doing this sort of work, and then you can actually use the retention schedule and compare it to who's doing and who's creating that work. And then from there, identify the people, and move on.

If you're a smaller church, I would recommend as many... if you, if you only have six or seven people on staff, you should all gather together, if possible, would be my recommendation.

**KYLE:** And for our friends out there, a small church might be a minister and a half-time assistant, right?

So that, you know, thinking that this is, you know, this is scalable, right? That this is something that you won't be able to do overnight, but is one that if you commit to having the conversations and using the model retention schedule that we're gonna share with you, you can make it, you can make a really good start.

And you can go from maybe sometimes feeling like, I don't know where anything is, to feeling confident that you're doing the right work, and that you can find things, and that you're preserving what needs to be preserved.

So Susan Annear asked, you know, will you be able to print out the model retention schedule to have on hand?

The answer to that is yes. You will be getting a PDF after we, after we wrap up this program.

The... great question here from Toby Bishop, who asked how many hours of staff or volunteer time do you estimate this process would take each year? We're a small church with limited resources, and this process sounds like it could be a quite a lot of work.

**BILLY:** I don't know if I can... and I'll... Zack can speak after.

I don't know if I can put a number to it. But one thing I will... and I can, I can hear it coming through the question is, please don't think of this as: I have to have it done next year. Think of it as: I hopefully can get this done this decade.

From small to large churches, we work with some of the largest churches in Boston, and I can tell you they share very similar issues to some of the smallest churches in Boston.

You, you know, do not think of this as a five-alarm fire. Think about it as preparing for a five-alarm fire.

And if it takes you a couple of years, if it takes you five, six, seven years, that's okay. What we're trying to get you to do is just start somewhere. So if you can only do three hours a week, that's better than zero. If you can only do 30 minutes a week, that's better than zero.

**ZACHARY:** Yeah. The only thing I would really add to that is to at least make it consistent in terms of how often you are doing something. Even if it's only once a month, have it as part of a council meeting or some sort of committee meeting that just meets once a month.

Even then you are putting time towards this. You are starting to think about the types of records you're creating, identifying how and where they are now. And that is already putting you on an incredibly positive path forward.

And from there you can probably start figuring out how much time you need to devote if you want to hit certain milestones that you will probably start developing in such a committee.

**KYLE:** I'm gonna pull up that records series that you shared. And everyone's gonna see this in the PDF that comes this afternoon.

So Zack and Billy, and both of you have been engaged in this work in our own institutional records here. And one thing that I can share is, we've done it for a lot of the historical records, but we're still working through how we do it with our, with the records that we make every day.

And, you know, Zack, you were telling me the other week that you had done some of this work in 2019, 2020 and then had to sort of put it aside. And we're gonna, you know, we're gonna start back up with it again this fall.

As you look at this, you know, is a strategy to think about if you're just, you know, starting from scratch, to... And you only have maybe a few hours a month that you can give to it, would a strategy be to take one of these six areas and maybe focus on that? Or would a strategy be to try to do a little bit of everything?

**ZACHARY:** I think starting with one of these series and going from there is actually probably a really good way to start it. Because then you can just, for that specific series, you can start basically creating pilots for how processes are working. And it helps to minimize how overwhelming the task can be.

I know, I know part of our plan for this year is in fact to start tackling internally some of our own records management concerns. And it definitely does feel overwhelming to think about.

So yeah, any way to start making smaller chunks can do a lot to help on that front.

**KYLE:** I would recommend maybe legal records...

[LAUGHTER]

**BILLY:** I would second that recommendation.

We get a lot of people that reach out to us through reader services saying we have a legal problem, x. Can you help us? And often we can't.

So yeah, in order of importance that, for some of you that might, that might be worth doing.

**KYLE:** Maybe followed by membership records. I think an area like that, as Billy you had said, is an area where you're gonna get a lot of inquiries.

You know, people want to remember when their grandparents were married. Somebody wants to remember when they were confirmed in the church, you know, maybe if they're joining a new church. So that's great.

Let's... we've got lots of questions here.

A common question I think that you all get from Steven Hall: How many copies of old documents should be kept? For example, Steven says that in his church there are five copies of a 1908 installation service.

**BILLY:** You don't need five, that's for sure. I would say for most things like that, you really only need one copy.

For items that might hold particular importance, you might want to hold on to one or two copies.

If you, if all five copies are in really poor condition, and it's very important, you might consider holding on to two copies or three copies. But it really comes down to, sort of deciding, you know, the status of those items and its level of importance.

But if it's in good condition, one is more than enough.

**KYLE:** Good, you know, question along those same lines from Bob Kalayjian: Is there any reason to keep more than one copy of something? Are there are instances where might it be good to have two or three copies?

**ZACHARY:** For the most part, no.

But as Billy has mentioned, for certain key documents that if, for some reason, some horrible event happened and one part of your building burned down, for those key documents that really are incredibly important, having a second copy, if one exists, can be important.

And in those cases, that's sort of in the case where you're keeping something in multiple places, so that if something horrible happens in one place, it doesn't actually destroy everything. But that's the most salient example I can think of.

For 98% of most records, it really is just a one document is sufficient.

**KYLE:** I think what's interesting here at the library is our policy is for something that might get a lot of use—a yearbook, a history that you know a lot of hands will be on in the course of its life—it's always good to have a backup copy, you know, in case somebody is using it and spills their coffee over it or something like that.

But in general, we've also tried to, you know, keep one copy in the best location that we can keep it.

Great question from Denise Inman who says, if we have sent material to your archives, is it possible to get a list of what we have sent?

You know, so as you work with partner institutions, how can they maybe keep track of the things, and what, and how can they reach out to the archives to know more about it?

You know, Denise is saying that they're a of two churches merging and has, you know, both sets of records from the previous churches which might not need to be held on to, right, in the, in the current community. But they still want to know what they have.

**BILLY:** Yeah, I mean, again, everything here is case by case basis.

So when you send something to us or engage with us, we try to sort of parse out what kinds of material that you actually have. So in that part of it, you know, hopefully you'll start to see some of what that material is.

Once material gets here, I mentioned it in the definitions, you know, we have our own archival processes. And one step of that processing is doing that work.

However, like anything else, we gather and take on lots of material per year. And we're not always able to process all of the things that come in. So there will be some situations where we might not be able to get you a folder by folder list.

However, if you do send material here, it does not get locked up and you never get to see it again. We are always more than happy to try and look into what you've sent if you're looking for something specific.

But again, it depends. If you've only sent us a single box, we have a better chance of giving you some more information of what's in there. But if you sent us 18, it might be a little more difficult for us to, sort of, do that.

Again if you, and if you're able to come to us, we can work together collaboratively to maybe, you know, have you look through a couple of boxes yourself.

It all, unfortunately, varies wildly on a numerous amount of factors.

**KYLE:** Great question, kind of building on something that one of you had said earlier in the program under, when you're talking about disposition.

So when an archive comes from a church... when an archive comes from a church to a place like the Congregational Library, does the entire archive need to have to come at once? Or is it possible for part of the archive to come and then part to be held by the church in the, in the time being?

**ZACHARY:** Certainly all things are possible.

The... whenever a, there is the question of the donation of records from a church to the CLA, every situation is unique. And so we work as best as we can with every donor to determine the timeline and how best to ensure that records arrive at the CLA in a safe and reasonable fashion.

So, absolutely, there are scenarios where we have taken portions of the records while another portion is being prepared. And then at a later date and come back for that second portion. And we have had plenty of situations where everything came all at once.

Again, it really just depends on specific situations and the needs of the donor.

**KYLE:** Great. Thank you.

Susanne Veal writes, great presentation. I'm a retired records manager from the biomanufacturing industry. Thanks for clarifying that this is a team effort and needs to be transparent with buy in all along the way.

**BILLY:** Thank you, Susan.

**ZACHARY:** Thank you.

**KYLE:** Nice question here from Michael Cady: What role should the church historian have in the archival process?

**BILLY:** Great question.

I would say one thing, from my personal perspective as well as doing reader services, you have a lot of knowledge that others in your community probably don't have.

And if it's... so, take the example of a church that might, that is gonna give material to us. Sort of the download your brain would be extremely helpful. Anything you know about the history of your church should be written down and transferred to us.

You know, plenty of churches do their own individual church histories. We've helped people with writing those all the time. But again, you know, you have knowledge that can't be replicated, that is likely unable to be replicated elsewhere. If you can consolidate that knowledge into a single document, doesn't have to be printed, it could just be a PDF, doesn't matter the form. That would be extremely helpful.

You know, when we're doing processing on the other side, one of the things we're doing is creating historical and content notes. And, you know, we have to try and parse things out if there isn't information available to us. And if you have that information, I mean, that makes it better for all of us.

**ZACHARY:** And just to follow on what Billy has already said, everything there, perfect. Within your own church organization, your knowledge can also be very helpful for identifying how records might have been created in the past.

There are many times when records come to us and we're very confused by the name change of the women's sewing circle into the women's connection circle, to things like that, where it's sometimes, it's not clear if it's the same club or if it's a different club. And if so, how should they be filed within the archive?

So if you have that kind of knowledge, that can also be really, really useful to your own church as you're trying, as the archival process is trying to define how and where records should be stored within your own church's archive.

**KYLE:** I can't imagine who's gonna be a better advocate for saving the records of today than the church historian.

**ZACHARY:** Yes.

**BILLY:** Yes.

**KYLE:** And so, thank you so much, Michael, for playing that role. And I hope everyone out there will continue to play that role, right? Because it becomes... we can't write the histories that we write now if we don't preserve the records of today.

And I want to thank Billy and Zachary for not shying away from the really hard part, which are the digital records, right? And how we, how we think about preserving Congregationalism over the last 50 years.

Paper, as you have pointed out many times, has been, has proven to last. The papers that I wrote for college in a word processing program, I could never get off that hard disk... if I could ever, if I could ever find a place to actually, that would boot up, and that would read that hard disk. So...

**BILLY:** If you have things that are incredibly important that are only available digitally, you don't have to... just print it out. If you can still have access to it, don't...

And even me, from my undergrad work, I have plenty of papers I wish I could pull out. They are lost, lost to time.

**KYLE:** And you're, and you're not that old. I'm ancient.

[LAUGHTER]

**BILLY:** Don't sell yourself short.

**KYLE:** Well, there are many, many more questions in here. I'm gonna share these with Zachary and Billy, and they will follow up with you directly.

Thank you all so much for joining us.

Stay tuned. We're looking forward to having more workshops and more virtual programs for you in the coming months and years.

And thank you all for joining us today and for taking seriously doing this work, right, of thinking about creating a retention schedule for your community's archive, for your church's archive, and helping us preserve the past.

So take care, everyone.

**BILLY:** Thank you. Have a good day, everyone.

**ZACHARY:** Thank you.