

From the Stated Clerk: Preservation of Church Records

Sometimes I get asked questions about storing and preserving church records. Records preservation is one of the more important duties of stated clerks and clerks of sessions in local churches. The Presbyterian Historical Society details the records that churches should keep. Session minutes and rolls/registers (members, baptisms, elders, deaths, pastors, marriages) are of primary importance and should be kept permanently. Minutes and documents of other church groups (trustees, Presbyterian Women groups and circles, deacons, deeds, titles, photos, etc.) are also considered permanent records. Check out the website of PHS for more information. (<http://www.history.pcusa.org/>)

Individual churches can deposit records for permanent storage. The records remain the property of the local church. In cases where a church has closed or been dismissed to another denomination, the records become the property of the presbytery and the presbytery retains title. Transylvania Presbytery stores historical records at the John C. Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, and the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, PA. If your church would like to deposit old records for archival storage, please contact me and I can help you with the process. Whatever you do, don't just ship the records to one of the sites! The archivists need notice that the records are coming, and they can help with proper packing instructions and shipping directions. The presbytery office is happy to help make connections with the archivists, if you need help.

It's a good idea to deposit old records and you know the records are safe and secure. A rule of thumb is any church records older than fifty years can be safely stored for posterity. Dampness destroys many old documents, and I imagine at least a few of our churches have their records in an old closet or basement room. You can make copies of the records if you like, or the library or historical society can make copies. (There are charges for these services to cover labor costs.) I'm happy to help our churches consider permanent storage and make all the necessary arrangements. Give me a call or send an email and we can talk further.

Blessings, Jerry