

RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES GROUP

GUIDANCE ON THE CARE OF ARCHIVES OF
RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

2020

Introduction

This guidance focuses on the historical records of Anglican, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and other religious communities within the Christian tradition which are based in the United Kingdom. It does not specifically attempt to address other faith communities, although the principles on which it is based are undoubtedly more widely applicable, and the Religious Archives Group continues to work with other faiths as equal partners to provide support relevant to them. Nor does it seek to cover in detail the requirements of civil and canon law, but general issues of charity law and data protection are dealt with as many such religious bodies have charitable status, hold property and have control of personal data on individuals.

Religious communities by their very nature focus on the spiritual life. Some undertake important active work (maintaining schools, hospitals or care homes) and others pursue more contemplative paths. Certain looser communities or associations are scattered, living in society, bound together by a common rule and traditions but lacking a physical base. All however, have a material dimension to their existence, as they pursue their spiritual goals, perhaps involving the maintenance of places of worship and other buildings, liturgical goods, books, records of communications and transactions between members, along with other necessities which enable them to operate on a continuing basis and live some kind of common life or promote specific action. This guidance focuses on one such creation of such communities, the historical records recording their development and the lives of their members. It aims to help those with responsibility for such records and to show how they can be preserved to support, defend, inform and inspire others in future generations as an organised and managed archive.

In many religious bodies, maintenance of their records as they pass out of current use will be assigned to individuals within the community or their staff without any professional training. It may be on the basis of aptitude or simply the need for someone to undertake the task. This guidance is targeted at such individuals. Our objective is to help you in this work and to provide guidance which will enable you to exercise good stewardship in preserving such historic records for the future. As far as possible, we aim to give practical, easily-understood, assistance although a good deal of technical information is necessarily included.

Defining overall objectives and strategy: key questions

Archives can be defined as documents, irrespective of form, medium (e.g. paper, parchment or other format), or age, that are selected for permanent preservation because of their continuing evidential value, whether for the ongoing work of the community and the conduct of its administration, furtherance of mission, reasons of accountability, or for historical research. While some records should be kept permanently, this need not entail establishing a dedicated historical archive. The first

question is more fundamental: should you be keeping archives at all, or are other arrangements more appropriate?

Many religious communities will want to retain their historical records as a resource to draw upon, but looking after records of permanent evidential value requires a year on year investment of time, money and space. Some key issues need to be addressed at the beginning of any attempt by such bodies to put their archive onto a proper footing. Who will look after it and who will oversee that individual or individuals' efforts? Who will provide professional advice if it is not available in-house? What will be collected and how will records of the institution be reviewed, and those which do not need to be kept, weeded out? Where will accommodation be allocated for storage, processing and use by readers? Who will provide the resources (archival boxes and folders, facilities for constructing a descriptive list, for instance) be found to maintain it? How are electronic (computer-generated) and audio-visual materials to be treated as opposed to those in traditional form such as paper or older parchment documents?

Where sound answers to these questions cannot be given, an alternative course is to place your historical records which are no longer in current administrative use with an established archive service elsewhere, such as a local record office, university or denominational library or heritage centre, which will be able to care for archival material in the long term. This may also be the most suitable option for a community that is considering winding up, is very small and lacking in resources, or is undergoing a major change in direction. The primary consideration must be to ensure that historical records can be properly preserved for the future and made available under suitably controlled conditions. You can seek advice on the care and deposit of such material from your local authority record office or history centre, The National Archives or the Religious Archives Group.

In any attempt to preserve significant records permanently, the physical accommodation and environment is crucial. Material which charts the life of the community and its rights, obligations and actions, needs to be brought together in accommodation where it can be properly protected against the risks of damage, theft or destruction and where access to it can be controlled to ensure it survives in usable form. Risks to survival must be minimised and in the following pages the main threats to the preservation of records will be explored and appropriate defensive measures outlined.