

SECTION 4: SORTING AND ARRANGEMENT

Sorting and arrangement is the first stage in the process of establishing physical control over archives. It is the intellectual and physical organisation of a group of documents. This leads on to description, the creation of an accurate representation of the results of that process which identifies the whole of an archive and its parts, and gives the contextual information needed to understand it and its creator.

Once the decision has been taken to retain or establish an archive, and a responsible person appointed, with suitable accommodation and working space, the next step is to assess the potential content. This may mean examining an existing collection or actively assembling scattered documents. If you undertake the latter, what are you looking for?

Taking the definition of archives used earlier, namely documents, irrespective of form, medium e.g. paper, parchment or other format, or age, intended for permanent preservation because of their continuing evidential value, we can look at what this means in practice.

At this stage, material for permanent preservation can encompass any such records relating to your community, its establishment and history, the fulfilment of its mission and documentation of its members and leaders. It can include governance documents, administrative records, records of the property owned or administered by the community, and the other communal activities. This may require investigation of locked cupboards and filing cabinets, desk drawers, attics, and basements to ensure that no material is overlooked. The archivist could ask members, particularly those of long-standing or serving in positions of authority, whether they have accumulated material themselves or are aware of records elsewhere.

Ideally, everything should be brought together into one space for sorting and storage, and one can begin by making a rough list of what archives there are, where they are located, and roughly how much there is. For example, 'Chapter minutes-filing cabinet A, top drawer', 'Trust Deed – framed on wall in meeting room'. Do not forget that some important recent records may only be available as electronic files: Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, e-mails.

Almost invariably groups of related records will have been kept together, though perhaps not in good order and with stray documents intermingled. As we shall see, these groups, or series, are the building blocks of archival arrangement, so they should be retained intact. Do not be tempted to rearrange them on the basis of chronology or subject matter.

It may be that papers relating to the same thing, for example, minutes of chapter/governing body meetings, are to be found in more than one place. Or material that one would expect to find, because it ought to have been kept, is missing, in whole or in part. If such records are absent, is it because they are in the hands of the current officers? Or have they been lost or destroyed? Try to establish as much information as you can, even if it is negative.

With the material identified, you can now begin to arrange it. First, you need to assess your resources.

- Time. How much time, and how often, will you have to devote to this?
- Space. Where is the process going to be undertaken? Where will it be stored once arranged?
- Labour. Are there any other suitable volunteers willing to help? How much of your time will training and supervision require?
- Money. What resources are available for purchasing shelving and packaging?

There is little to be gained in arranging a small proportion of the records beautifully if it means the rest has been completely neglected (this does not mean that all the material need be given equal attention).

Archival principles

With this stage complete, one can begin considering how to arrange or organise the archives. The three principles that should inform archival arrangement are the principles of provenance, original order and collective control.

- Provenance

The principle of provenance means that records which were created, assembled, and/or maintained by the community (or part of it) should be represented together, and distinguished from those of any other organisation or individual. This means, for example, that if your community administers two separate charities, this should be reflected in the arrangement: the sets of records should be kept as discrete groupings, not combined into one on the basis of subject, form or date.

Respecting this principle protects the integrity of archives. It means that records will be maintained as part of a group having the same origin, traceable to its creators, and this will be reflected in the arrangement.

- Original order

The principle of original order means that the order of the records that was established by the creator or user should be maintained to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidence that comes from that. Original order does not necessarily mean the order in which material was created; it can mean the order in which they were last used as working documents. So, for example, do not necessarily assume that an invoice found with a set of minutes should be placed in a series of invoices kept elsewhere. It may be that that document was presented as evidence at the meeting recorded by the minutes.

- Collective control

The principle of collective control arises from the first two principles. It means that archives should be managed as groupings, not as accumulations of individual items.

These groups are established according to their source (that is, provenance). It should be noted that a group of records from a single source may contain records with many different authors. Thus the archive of an individual member of a community could include letters from members of sister bodies, as well as family letters, and might contain papers of former members that had been passed on. Individual items should not be removed and placed in another group based on authorship or topic. The original order and integrity of material ought, therefore, to be preserved.

Original order, provenance and collective control are the key principles to be applied in the course of arrangement, but in themselves they do not always provide an overarching logic determining overall arrangement.

- Functional analysis

Functional analysis is an intellectual tool that looks at the roles of records creators and analyses how the archives reflect the ways in which these roles were fulfilled. In terms of a religious community or body it means focusing on the administrative structures and working processes designed to implement the mission and life of the community and organising the records accordingly.

- Common sense

In applying archival principles, there will be times when it is clear that a document found in a particular place should be placed elsewhere. There are times when parts of the same record sequence have been kept in two different locations for no good reason. Often there is no one right way to arrange archives, there are different ways, and a good knowledge of the life and work of the community can help in making decisions.

Basics of arrangement

Arranging archives is largely a matter of establishing hierarchy, from the top level, the 'Fonds' or collection, with levels beneath, going down to individual items. Perhaps the key level is the Series. This is defined by the International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD(G)) as 'Documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they result from the same accumulation or filing process, or the same activity; have a particular form; or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use.'

Series can be divided into sub-series, with the lowest units of arrangement often being the File ('An organized unit of documents grouped together either for current use by the creator or in the process of archival arrangement, because they relate to the same subject, activity, or transaction').

Most religious communities, regardless of their size and tradition, are likely to have certain commonalities and therefore create certain types of series of records. So initial categories for arrangement might be:

Foundation and history: the founding documents and material relating to the site (or sites) on which your religious body was first established, along with published histories.

Governance: there will be normally be documents dealing with governance and management, legal status and the ordering of the life of the community. These can include records such as trust deeds, Rules, minutes, annual reports, and official correspondence, and can be arranged in a single series or a number of series.

Core activities: archives that document the central work of the community; the way in which it fulfils its mission. For many active communities these will focus on records of service to God in the world - schools, orphanages, hospitals and other care institutions, missions at home and overseas. These are likely to comprise a number of discrete series. If the community has its own place of worship there may be series relating to conduct of worship and rites of passage. If that place of worship serves a wider parish or mission, the records could include: records of religious instruction, education and evangelisation, sermons and addresses, service registers for marriages, baptisms and funerals, pastoral material and visitors' books.

Essential support functions: documentation of those activities that are necessary for the community to continue its work, including perhaps series covering finance and resources (annual accounts, trust accounts, fund-raising appeal accounts and literature), property (deeds, tenders, specifications, architectural plans and drawings, photographs relating to major projects e.g. new buildings and extensions) and staff records (including those relating to personnel and volunteers).

It is quite likely that there will also be records relating to activities which support the overall mission but which are in themselves not essential. This might encompass education and outreach, single project working parties, newsletters and other communications and material relating to subsidiary organisations. Again, these are likely to comprise a number of discrete series.