

Advice from Stated Clerk Alyson Janke: Old Session Minutes & Congregational Records

What shall we do with those old minutes and roll books?

You may have wondered this, as you have cleaned and sorted dusty storage spaces in your church. Some even wonder why we have all this “old stuff” around and want to throw them away.

Church records have value for many reasons. They show the **history** of the congregation or council that maintained them. As congregations approach significant anniversaries of their founding many find interesting tidbits about the congregation’s life and its members and leaders searching through those old records.

Session records such as minutes and rolls and registers are also **legal documents**, which are sometimes used to settle disputes over property or matters of fact. These documents may be called on in either church (ecclesiastical) dispute settlement or in secular legal dispute settlement. Early in my life as a clerk I had several requests for baptismal records for persons who were applying for Social Security benefits. They had no birth certificate and the church’s record of infant baptism could be used as one piece of corroboration of their birth date claim.

Congregational and session records, especially roll books and registers are often used for **genealogical** searches. People track down birth, marriage, and death records to help them put together family trees and fill in information about their ancestors.

Finally, we hold on to those old records because **our PCUSA Constitution requires it**. The Form of Government, at G-3.0107, says: “Each council shall keep a full and accurate record of its proceedings. Minutes and all other official records of councils are the property in perpetuity of said councils or their legal successors.”

*So, what are we to do with the records when we are not using them for current research? Again, the Book of Order (Constitution of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], Part 2) addresses this in the Form of Government, at G-3.0107: “The clerk of each council shall make recommendation to that body for the permanent safekeeping of the body’s records with the **Presbyterian Historical Society** or in a temperature and humidity controlled environment of a seminary of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”*

Are all the old records and papers of a congregation of equal value and destined for archival storage, in perpetuity?

No, they are not. The Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS) has a very helpful “**records retention schedule**” on its website. This document lists the records that should be kept permanently and those that should be kept for some definite period. Find it here: https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/migrate/documents/Congregation_Schedule.pdf

What do we do with the records on the permanent retention list?

We recommend that these records be sent to the Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS), located in Philadelphia, PA, for safe, archival storage. At the recommendation of the clerk of session, the session would vote to approve depositing the records with the PHS and the action in the minutes would specify the records being sent by type, date range, and volume numbers if the records are so arranged.

What if we need information that is in those records after we send them?

After congregational or session records are deposited with the PHS, **they still belong to the session and can be retrieved**, if desired. PHS can also safely copy or digitize your records with copies returned to you. There are staff persons at the PHS who can search your records for specific information, upon request.

Information about what records to keep, how to deposit records, and all the services of the PHS are detailed on their website: <https://pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/historical-society>.

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