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Where should we store our old church records?

Where should my congregation's historical records best be preserved? The American Baptist Historical Society, our church, or some other place?

First, make copies of the originals, either by photocopying on acid-free paper or by microfilming. These copies can be handled and used for reference purposes, saving the originals from frequent, damaging or careless use.

Second, ABHS does accept congregational records – but only under special circumstances. We are reluctant to accept records for congregations still “in business,” since church members benefit from familiarity with their own history of ministry. Caring for the records of past ministry can strengthen the church identity and enhance ongoing and future ministries in the church. But if your congregation has voted to disband, ABHS might indeed be the place for your records.

Third, ABHS is also reluctant to accept records because of space/cost issues. In an ideal world, each congregation makes copies and keeps them in two very separate places, one a public repository (historical society or library) and the other on the church property – hopefully in a fireproof, climate-steady vault. Archivists strongly encourage local organizations to keep local records as close to home as possible. But of course, if the greater value of the records was the Baptist history contained in them (and not the pieces of community history), then turning over the records to ABHS might make sense.

The other two matters needing discussion before ABHS could accept a congregation's historical records are:

1. Would the church be able and willing to put something in its annual budget toward the costs of housing the records at ABHS?
2. What is the size of the collection you are interested in giving to ABHS?

Regardless of your decision in these important matters, it is important for the church to find a volunteer to create an inventory of the records; i.e. list each record book (or other grouping--if the records are in files, not record books) with a title and years covered; for example, Women's Society Minutes, 1843-1862, or Congregational Minutes, 1900-1905.

A list of the types of records we recommend be preserved is also available for free by calling 610-768-2260. A more detailed booklet and packet, *Doing Church History – Your Own*, (Spanish or English edition) is available for \$15 plus postage.

To discuss the possibility of giving your church records to the American Baptist Historical Society, contact us at the address above.