

Managing Congregational Photographs:

Suggestions from the Mennonite Archives of Ontario

The Archives collects photographs as part of its mandate. You may be wondering how to collect and manage congregational photographs before passing them along to the Archives. Here are some suggestions.

Photography captures moments in time. Photographs document people, events, and settings, make artistic statements, and invite speculation about the motive or biases of the photographer. The invention of photography continues to be a gift to any institution wanting to capture and preserve its story.

Commissioned professional photographers, media photographers, staff, and amateur photographers may all contribute to a collection. Photographs are regularly taken for external and internal uses. External uses include outreach and publicity publications, while internal uses include remembering friends and colleagues, producing yearbooks and directories, documenting the physical plant, and marking historical milestones.

Appraisal of Photographs

In recent decades, the capture, development and reproduction of photographs has become increasingly easy and inexpensive. Consequently, many of the photographs that result are duplicates, of poor quality, or redundant. To deal with these issues, and to build a foundation for a cohesive, accessible collection that documents as fully as possible the many aspects of a congregation's life, consider the following appraisal strategies:

1. **Weeding** (removal) of the following is suggested:
 - a. Duplicates. Keep the copy in the best condition. If the choice is between a cropped and uncropped photo, chose the uncropped. Copies that have separate functions should usually not be weeded.¹ Exceptions to the "one copy" recommendation include rare and early photographs, duplicates that could be kept for display purposes, or rare images (eg. the only image of a long-serving pastor).
 - b. Close variant images. (For example, several shots of the same group of people with minimal difference between them.) Keep the copy, or a sampling of copies in the best condition that provides the most informational value. If an image was used for publicity purposes (eg. published in a newsletter), this also weighs heavily in favour of retaining that particular image.
 - c. Portraits for yearbooks, directories. These may become too volumous over time, and are often unidentified. If a publication using these images has been printed, consider making this publication the "official" copy these images, and weed the individual photographs.

¹ For example, if a photograph forms part of a legal document, don't detach it simply because you are keeping the same photograph elsewhere for another purpose.

2. **Sampling** of the following is suggested²:
 - a. Regular events within the yearly cycle (eg. worship services, picnics, banquets, annual meetings, committee meetings, child dedications, Christmas plays, workdays, retreats)
 - b. Photos documenting informal community life (eg. pranks, skits, baby showers)
 - c. Teachers and classes
 - d. Pastors/Staff/Volunteers at work
 - e. Construction/renovation
 - f. Building interiors/exterior
 - g. Photographs taken with artistic intent
 - h. Photographs of congregants doing the work of the congregation in the community or larger world (eg. serving at a soup kitchen, an overseas service project)
 - i. Photographs of congregants pursuing work or avocation in the community or larger world (eg. concerts, school plays, individual volunteer efforts, overseas work terms, businesses owned by congregants)
 - j. Photographs of special events (eg. special speakers, ordinations, anniversaries, commemorations, weddings, retirements, funerals)
3. **Retention** of the following is suggested (keep at least one):
 - a. Headshots, portraits and/or group photos of pastors, lay leaders and staff
 - b. Photographs of newly renovated or constructed church spaces

Care of photographs:

1. Store in a cool, dry and dark place, one without significant annual fluctuations in temperature or humidity.
2. Store each photo separately in acid free photo envelopes. If acid free envelopes are not readily available, interleave acid free paper between the photographs.
3. A big problem with photos is that the information about them gets lost over time. An easy way to retain this is to write as much as you know about the photo in pencil on the outside of the envelope or interleaving paper.
4. If photos are in an album, remove them *only if* the album shows signs of deterioration. If you do take an album apart, note for each picture that they were a part of that particular album.
5. Don't discard a good photo just because you have minimal information about it. Once it enters an archives, another researcher may be able to identify it.
6. For digital photographs:
 - a. Keep 2-3 digital copies of each photograph in different locations.
 - b. Use common file formats (eg. .raw, .tiff, .jpg)
 - c. Identify born-digital photos! Number each electronic file and record information about it in a list. Print out a copy of the list.

² Sampling is "the process of selecting items from a collection to stand for the collection as a whole" (Society of American Archivists glossary, 2005). For example, keep photographs from one typical worship service per year, rather than photographs of every typical worship service.

- d. If possible, print out digital photographs and store as print photos.

Copyright in Photographs

Copyright law can be difficult to follow and subject to change. The following information on Canadian copyright law based on the *Copyright Modernization Act* (2012) is presented as a guideline only, and is no substitute for legal advice.

Copyright in photos taken *on or before 31 December 1948* has expired; these photographs are in the public domain. This means that anyone can use these photographs freely without seeking permission of the first owner or heirs.

Copyright in photos taken *after 6 November 2012* remains with the photographer and heirs until 50 years after his/her death. Permission must be sought to reproduce these photographs.

For photographs taken *between 1949 and 2012*, the rules are more complicated. Consult an archivist for advice.

The law does not prevent churches from collecting photographs that they do not hold copyright to, or passing them along to archives. However, if photographs are to be reproduced, published or transmitted, permission from the copyright owner may be required.

For more information

Contact:

Laureen Harder-Gissing, Archivist

Mennonite Archives of Ontario

140 Westmount Rd N

Waterloo, ON N2L 3G6

519-885-0220 x24238

lharderg@uwaterloo.ca