



The Ontario Provincial Synod

The Anglican Church of Canada

Box 1168, Sault Ste. Marie

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Note of Advice to Parishes

Confidentiality and Access to Parish Records

A number of parishes have experienced uncertainty about what to do in attempting to maintain the confidentiality of records which contain personal information relating to their parishioners, while also providing appropriate access to the public to those same records, and have asked for guidance.

Most of the requests from the public are for access to the Vestry Book (where the record is kept of services day-by-day) and the Service Register (where records are kept of particular services such as baptisms, confirmations, marriages and burials). The names used for these records may vary from parish to parish.

Parishes should transfer any filled Books or Registers to the diocesan archives, which will then control access using their established procedures. This will eliminate many of the problems parishes have encountered in making judgments about who should and should not have access and to what, and the problems they have often encountered in dealing with those who make these requests.

Requests for access to other parish records which might exist do not present a confidentiality problem if they do not contain personal information. If these records do contain personal information, then they should be treated in the same way as entries in a Vestry Book or Service Register.

A parish which allows *general fishing expeditions* through its records containing personal information is leaving itself open to possible civil liability for the manner in which the information it provides is subsequently used, as well as the justifiable anger of those parishioners whose information was released without their permission.

The principles that we recommend a parish apply in deciding whether or not to provide access to personal information are:

1. A person or family should be given access to entries containing their own information
2. Others should not be given this information without the specific (preferably written) permission of the person or family to whom it relates. This is often difficult to apply and those controlling access to the parish records will usually have to settle for asking the person making the request why they want the information, and then using their best judgement in granting or refusing this access.
3. We wish to encourage legitimate historical research and such researchers should be given access to parish records. It is for the Officers of the parish to decide what constitutes *legitimate* research and which specific requests to grant.
4. In the civil Province of Quebec parish records of births, marriages and burials were records of civil status. A duplicate copy of these registers was deposited with the Court, and these are available for public consultation up to 1900 on microfilm at the Archives nationales du Quebec. As these records are available to the public, there seems to be little reason to restrict access to them at the parish level.