



WATCHTOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

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SC:SD February 1, 2009

TO ALL BODIES OF ELDERS

Re: Retention of confidential records

Dear Brothers:

At this time, we are writing to provide further direction and clarification in regard to the retention of confidential records. Please note the following guidelines:

Matters resulting in disfellowshipping or disassociation: As you are aware, for all cases of disfellowshipping or disassociation an S-77 form must be completed along with a separate summation of the matter, usually no more than one page in length. These documents are forwarded to the branch office, processed, and a stamped copy of the S-77 form is returned to you. The chairman of the judicial committee then completes the back page of the S-77 form, and all other documents regarding the case should be destroyed, including any copy of the summation. The S-77 form (only) is then placed in a sealed envelope in the congregation's confidential file. (The only exception to this involves signed letters of disassociation, which are kept along with the stamped S-77 form.)

Other serious matters: We have, however, received many inquiries concerning document retention relating to serious matters that do not result in disfellowshipping. These may concern persons judicially reprovved, allegations of serious wrongdoing that cannot be established, and matters that are investigated and handled by two elders. In these and other similar situations, a summation of no more than one page should be written and held in the confidential file. All other documents and correspondence relating to the matter should then be destroyed. Summations concerning persons judicially reprovved should be kept for a minimum period of five years. All other summations may be retained for as long as the body of elders deems necessary.

Child abuse matters: In regard to all matters involving allegations or established cases of child abuse, the above-mentioned direction will apply, with one exception. All documents relating to the matter should be sent to the branch office, instead of being destroyed. This will facilitate the congregation retaining **only** a stamped S-77 form in matters resulting in disfellowshipping, or a single page summation for all other situations.

Summation of cases: In regard to the summation itself, it is reasonable to conclude that as each case is unique, the content and length (within one page) of each summation will vary. However, certain details should be included in each summation, such as:

- congregation name and date
- contact details for the coordinator of the body of elders
- names and signatures of each brother involved in investigating the matter or serving on the judicial committee

- details such as the specific nature of the allegation that has been raised, or clear proof of wrongdoing that Scripturally established the matter.

Letters of introduction: Generally speaking, when each elder has had opportunity to read the letter, there would be no need for it to be retained. However, when the letter of introduction recommends a brother to continue serving in an appointed capacity, the letter should be retained until that recommendation is handled, either at the time of the circuit overseer's visit, or by way of an S-52 appointment letter being supplied by the branch office between visits of the circuit overseer. Additionally, any letter of introduction that refers to matters of child abuse should be retained in the confidential file for as long as the accused person remains in the congregation. Should this person move, a new letter should be prepared and sent to the elders in the new congregation outlining the individual's background, current restrictions that apply, what the elders have been doing to protect minors and to assist him, and their present experience with him. In all such cases, a copy of the letter of introduction must be sent to the branch office in a special blue envelope. Any previous letter of introduction held in the congregation's file can then be destroyed.

Minutes of elders' meetings: We also understand that many congregations use and retain a minutes book, detailing items for discussion and attention at meetings of the body of elders. In this regard, please note the following direction provided to the presiding overseer, now known as the coordinator of the body of elders, as found in "*Pay Attention to Yourselves and to All the Flock*", page 71, paragraph 12: "Compiles Scriptural and practical *agendas* outlining points for discussion at regular elders' meetings throughout the year." In addition, page 70, paragraph 11 states: "Make sure that either you or another elder *takes notes* as to decisions made and who will carry them out." Therefore, it would be appropriate that notes taken at a meeting of the body of elders are made on the agenda itself, or on other loose-leaf sheets of paper. Once the noted items have been completed, perhaps in the weeks or months following the meeting, these agendas and notes should be destroyed. This would negate the need for a minutes book to be used or retained.

We appreciate that the direction provided in this letter does not cover every possible scenario involving documents that a congregation may come to possess. Reasonableness and good judgment will be necessary by the body of elders in determining the appropriate course of action concerning documents that have not been addressed herein. However, we trust that the clarification provided by means of this correspondence is of assistance to you, and it is our prayer that Jehovah may continue to bless your efforts to "shepherd the flock of God in your care." (1 Peter 5:2) We take this opportunity to send our warm Christian love and greetings.

Your brothers,

Watchtower B.S.J. Society
OF AUSTRALIA

c: All Travelling Overseers

PS to secretary: This letter should be retained in the "AUSTRALIA BRANCH" section of the congregation's permanent file of policy letters.