Pass or file?

How to get excited about filing!

A1 Articles series: Administration

This article is designed for all who work in a church office, and for Ministers and other Christian workers who are based in a study at home.

It is not really aimed at those who last saw their office or study carpet five years ago (I offer specific advice and an emergency black-sack visit for people in desperate need). It is more for those who would value a fresh approach to a tired subject plus some practical help on how to file paperwork (and computer files).

It focuses more on thinking of filing in a new light, rather than giving you a system that you can put into immediate operation (if such exists). So if you are prepared to look at this subject in a new way and are ready to have your preconceptions challenged, read on. You may well find that just one of the many ideas included here could change your life.

And if you want to take it further, ask me to run a paper-management training day for your church or local Ministers, or ask me for a one-to-one half-day in your study.

A misunderstood subject

It's amazing how many misconceptions people have about that office or study routine known as FILING. The word itself is enough to induce a yawn so I probably only have a few more words to catch your attention.

Here are three statements that I want to demonstrate.

'Filing' has the wrong image.

- **'Filing' is the wrong word.**

- **'Filing' gives the wrong impression.**

I take them in turn.

Why do we make it so dull?

The subject of filing definitely needs a makeover. For most of us it's just plain dull. Nothing makes the heart sink more than a heaped tray marked 'to be filed'.

I am a realist and so I appreciate that, if you find anything to do with administration dull and lack-lustre, no amount of talk of filing will make your whole body tingle with excitement!

But for me, an enthusiast for good administration, filing presents a challenge. It's a topic to conquer, a battle to win. That gives it excitement.

My aim is to raise enthusiasm for this poor relation of paperwork by a notch or two wherever you are starting from. In this article I want to give you the basis for a new attitude to this Cinderella subject.

The fault here is entirely ours for we go out of our way to make the subject boring. For example, have you ever wondered why we make most 'filing cabinets' (more about this in a minute) dark grey or dark green? They are rarely bright red, or blue, or yellow or black and white striped! Perhaps we do it to hide the coffee stains – or perhaps it indicates a wrong attitude, a wrong image.

Our kitchens sparkle with super-gloss-white equipment. Our bathroom units glisten in white or pastel shades. But in our studies or offices many of our filing cabinets are boring old grey. We need to call in the designers of those stunning Apple iMacs.

There's no doubt about it, the term 'file' has the wrong image. This is a pity for a wonderful word that anagrams to LIFE. But for most people FILE and LIFE are poles apart.

Before we can start to correct this, we need to understand what the word means. And here we run up against another of my initial statements, 'filing' is the wrong word. Let me explain what I have in mind when I say this.

In which direction do you file?

It may sound an odd question, but it holds the key to the meaning and understanding of our subject. For most people they file when they open a filing drawer, stuff some papers inside it and close the drawer again. They file things *away*.

But if 'file' is the verb we use to put things in those dull, grey cabinets, what is the verb for the opposite action of opening the drawer again and taking out the piece of paper we want? Do we 'unfile' it at that point?

The verb actually used is to 'retrieve'. Enlightened people refer to filing cabinets as 'retrieval systems'. Full marks for clear thinking.

But 'filing' remains the popular word, and so our thinking stubbornly remains on putting things away, of putting them out of sight. But (vital principle) we should only file something if we want to get it out again. Otherwise we should bin it, recycle it, give it to someone for Christmas, or whatever. But we should never keep it.

So if you imagine 'filing' relating to putting away, think again! It is the wrong word because it gives the wrong idea. But if you feel 'retrieval' is clumsy, why not talk about 'Finding systems' and 'Finding cabinets' instead? You only have to change two letters out of four to go from FILE to FIND and you then have a completely different concept. The right one.

Any fool can stuff things away in a drawer. It's a skilled operator who can put away so that, within a matter of a few seconds, he or she can locate any item again.

So, in your mind at least, think FIND whenever you use FILE. It's the way to LIFE!

Moving into other rooms in your house

So far we have made a start on improving the image by understanding that filing has little to do with putting away and everything to do with finding things easily. So good filing saves time and frustration – it enables you to relax! Remember that next time you waste five minutes searching for something.

But what are these 'things'? If we just think of A4 sheets of paper, we are very narrow-minded. I don't just mean adding computer records. In fact let's stay in the non-IT world just for the moment.

I've got a filing/finding system in my bedroom. It's called a wardrobe. I put my clothes in there when they are clean (well, if I am honest, my wife puts them in there when they are clean but that's another story) because I find it cheaper to wear them a second time, and a third, and so on. I want to find them again.

The strange thing is that we are all reasonably imaginative about 'filing' our clothes, even if we don't normally use the word. We know that underwear needs a different system from suits. So most wardrobes are built on the principle that some things are best put away flat on a shelf or in a drawer, others are much better put on hangers which then fit over a rail, some items such as shoes go well on the floor, and other things, like bedding, get put out of the way in

high-up cupboard spaces that you can only reach by standing on a chair.

It is quite the done thing to have new filing cabinets, sorry – bedroom units, in nice wood, or white, or matching the rest of the room's décor. Many people think nothing of spending thousands of pounds for a makeover of their bedroom when what they are in fact doing is fitting new filing cabinets.

The same is true in your kitchen (where desks are called, much more sensibly, 'work surfaces', and filing cabinets are called 'kitchen units' or 'cabinets'). In your dining-room the principle is the same, only the desk is called a 'dining-room table' and the filing cabinet is called a 'sideboard'. But they are all to do with filing. Our impression of the word is totally wrong if we narrow it down to A4 paper.

Meanwhile, back in the study

But in our studies and offices our imagination seems to run dry. Not only is the filing cabinet a dull colour, we forget that it is only one of a range of filing systems we have. Consider the following:

- **Book-shelves**

  In the Minister's study the bookcases are the most important filing cabinets of all. The books are placed on them so that they can be found quickly. Conventional wisdom dictates that open shelves are quite a good way of doing this. Fixed shelves look nice in mahogany, but racking chipboard shelves, where you can change the vertical positions whenever you want and play around with different shelf widths too, are far more useful.

  Some clergy, of course, put books on their bookcases not because they will read them again but to impress their visitors ("Well, well. Seventeen different commentaries on 3 John. That's pretty good, Vicar".) But that's a different issue.

- **Plastic stacking boxes**

  Best not used for dumping things that belong elsewhere, but they can be good as the equivalent of the child's toy box, especially for things that do not fit easily elsewhere such as visual aids.

- **Desk drawers**

  Good for stationery that you need to have to hand of course, although dangerous as lots of things can be jammed in one of them and the drawer then shut. This

hides the evil mess therein and makes finding a slow process.

- **Stacking trays**

  These, and their equivalent, are good for what are usually called 'working' files which we will deal with in more detail later in this article.

- **Stationery drawers**

  Small, floor-standing cabinets usually with ten thin drawers for different types of paper, envelopes, and so on.

and of course:

- **Your computer**

  A fascinating type of filing because, physically, you cannot see the things (which is great if you are trying to hide junk). When you press the Print button the clever machine searches around inside itself until it finds the bit of paper you are after, then pops a copy of it out through a slot called a printer. Or something like that, anyway.

All of these are different kinds of filing or finding systems. Just as your bedroom filing or wardrobe has different types of section, the four drawer metal monster in the study or office is only one, very limited, kind of office filing system.

But if those are the main frameworks for office or study filing, there is plenty of different sub-structures to fit within them. For example, I am writing this article in my study and looking at my shelves I can see the following.

- Bookshelves
- Magazine holders
- Boxes for booklets
- A4 box files
- A4 ring binders

and so on.

Each of these houses different items I need to find quickly.

So, we have seen that the word 'filing' has the wrong image, is in fact the wrong word, and gives the wrong, narrow, impression of what it relates to. So, by now, are you ready at least to rethink your attitude to filing? It does not have to be dull and it is all about getting out not putting away. We are doing this in every room of our house each day, and even in the office it is a much broader subject than just a metal filing cabinet.

Having done all this, let's now consider what kinds of filing there are.

Three different types of filing

In this part we look at different sorts of filing. Understand the differences between them and the effect could be dramatic. For a start, you will be able to ditch most of your metal filing cabinets.

Let's start by considering what we can do with a sheet of paper that arrives on our desk. It's probably best to look at this in a hard-copy context. It is not difficult to apply it to computer files.

Five things you can do with paper

As paper arrives on my desk I can sort it in one of five ways. What I must NOT do is to pick it up and put it down again, pick it up and put it down again. But, we all do this at times.

The five are to

- BIN it
- PASS it
- HOLD it
- FILE it
- STORE it.

The final three are the types of filing I want to introduce you to, although I only use that word for one of them. I include the first two in the list for completeness although I want to talk a bit about the first. Of the last three I will focus on 'holding' and 'storing', to show how they differ from normal 'filing'.

To say you must only handle each piece of paper once is a nice sound-bite but a fraction too simplistic. I aim to handle it once in placing it where it belongs and then come back to it when I need to work on it. So this analysis deals with putting it in the right place ready to be worked on when necessary.

1: **Bin it**

(For BIN read 'recycle', 'shred', or anything that involves getting rid of it in a way you are happy with.)

Bin everything you possibly can the moment it comes into your hands. How many times in the last few months have you regretted binning something you should have kept? If the answer is zero, you are not throwing enough away. I really mean that. You should be making a few mistakes. If you are not you have no idea how much more you could get rid of. Take more risks! Most of us are squirrels by nature.

Your WPB is one of the greatest tools to efficiency in your office or study. Use it regularly. Delight in filling it; but never screw paper up before chucking it ten feet across the room: (a) you will normally miss, (b) screwed up paper takes up far too much space, (c) you should be shredding or recycling it. Place the bin near your feet instead. Less fun, but more efficient.

Bin everything you can the moment you can. You open a letter from the bank. Bin the envelope immediately. Bin the insurance advert that came with it. Bin the extra statement sheet telling you your overdraft limit. Then you only have the actual statement to deal with. You probably need to check it then 'file' it. Dare to be a PB – a proactive binner!

The latest stationery catalogue arrives (the many of you who use a certain firm with a Norse sounding name will understand what follows). If it's for products you never need, skim to check and then bin it. If you see it's identical to one you already have except for the special offer cover, keep the cover and bin the rest. If it's one of a series with a use-by date on it, file it but bin the one it replaces. If the dates overlap check all your present catalogues and bin those now out of date. This of course assumes you can find the earlier ones – but we will come to filing shortly. We are doing 'binning' at the moment.

You also need SBTs, Special Bin Times, 'spring cleans' if you like. I adore taking a block of old paperwork and reducing it to a tenth of its original weight and volume when I discover I no longer need to keep the rest. It keeps space down and means I can much more easily find what is left. SBTs are a tonic when you are tired and need a lift, such as the final hour on Friday afternoon in the church office, or an annual day in August in the clergy study.

If you get a chance to see the French and Saunders DVD 'The paper chase', take it! (Video Arts, 68 Oxford Street, London W1N OLH – https://www.videoarts.com). But don't try to buy it – you will find it is rather expensive.

When you are at your computer the same principle applies with WPB translated into the Recycle Bin and 'bin' translated into pressing the DELETE button. Delete every incoming and outgoing email you can, delete every file you no longer need. Don't save files unless you need the same text again and, of course, if you don't need to print something out, don't.

2: **Pass it**

If it's not for you, pass it straight on. Click on Forward if it's an email. Easy. Enough said.

3: **Hold it**

This is the first of my three types of filing. You are going to make real progress if you can understand the three and differentiate between them.

By HOLD I mean it's something you want to work on now or very soon. The technical term is a 'working file'. It's something that needs to be more immediate than being put away somewhere, but that does not mean you just place it on the last remaining spot of your desk where the surface is still visible. Key point: your desk is a working surface, not a storage area. Never put things on it as a temporary resting place unless you are about to work on them.

'Holding files' can come in various forms. An in-tray is one, so is a pile of items to be posted. A set of letters or emails to be replied to is another. But so are items you are currently working on which you need to pick up today or tomorrow: notes for a sermon or talk you are preparing, items for an article you are writing, a longer term project currently on the go, and so on.

So HOLD items are special types of files, ones we want to be even more accessible than something on a shelf or in a filing cabinet. The number must be strictly limited, and I work on the principle that, with a few exceptions, FILE items (see below) are placed vertically (whether on a bookcase or in a cabinet) and HOLD items are placed horizontally (perhaps on a stacking filing tray or on a special surface within an arm's reach of your desk). In my cramped study I do sometimes use parts of the carpet for HOLD – but never for FILE of course. Well, hardly ever – I don't want you to think I'm perfect!

I like to keep papers on HOLD held together in a neat way; for some years now I have been recommending the use of clear plastic (or 'cut-sheet') folders for these, especially as you can continue to keep items in these when they move from HOLD to FILE and later on to STORE.

These are relatively cheap see-through A4 wallets open on two sides. They come in different colours if you like a bit of life or want to code them. What you cannot do is write on them, so I simply stick a self-adhesive label to the top right hand corner and write on that. Lots of people who have come on my training days about paper-management have told me later that they started to use these and it changed the way they worked.

For emails I tend to use the Inbox as a holding file (as well as in-tray) unless I have kept a paper copy. But for paper, it is very helpful to see 'holding' as a separate kind of filing.

4: **File it**

I don't need to say much about this because this is what you will understand by filing. The key thing about any filing system be it ring binders, paper in a cabinet, computer files, bookcases, or whatever, is to be able to find what you are looking for within a few seconds. If you are on the phone and hold the other party while you go and find the filed item you need and then have to apologise for the delay, your filing system is not good enough! I usually work on 20 seconds max. Note that if it had been a HOLD item that you needed during the phone call, you should have been able to reach it without putting a fixed phone down.

A key issue here, whether in paper or in the computer, is to get a helpful categorisation system. I come back to that shortly.

5: **Store it**

This is the category that most people have never thought about or worked at. Many have told me how liberating it is to devise a proper storage system because it frees up the filing area.

The principle is this: if there are items you don't need at all, you BIN or PASS. If there are items you are currently working on you HOLD (horizontally, I suggest, very near at hand). If there are items you may need to refer to from time to time, you FILE them (in such a way that you can find and extract them in a matter of seconds). If there are things that have been filed that you no longer have any need of, you have a clear out and BIN them (to complete the circle).

But this leaves a huge area: all those items you need to keep because you may well need them again, but for which there is no need to get access within seconds; perhaps two or three minutes would be quite sufficient. They are probably items you would not need to get hold of more than once a year at most.

These are items you STORE. If you can distinguish STORE from FILE, you are on to a winner!

The liberating point is that these items do not need to go into a filing cabinet in your study or office. My suggestion is that they go in carefully labelled boxes in another room where they can be accessed easily but where they are out of the way and not causing clutter. It's an important

principle that the more you STORE, the fewer FILES you will have and so the quicker you can find items filed.

If you use clear plastic folders, then they drop very nicely into storage boxes (see your stationery catalogue). But it is much cheaper to keep and use five-ream paper boxes (if you order five reams of paper at a time, they come in free, white, cardboard boxes with lids – ideal for storing papers in folders vertically).

Example

Let me give an example. I run training events. For each event I have a number of papers including correspondence, a map for the venue, details of what I cover on the day, perhaps sample hand-outs or a handbook I put together, the invoice, and so on. One clear plastic folder is fine for the papers for each event.

When the event is first booked I FILE the details (perhaps with a diary note of when I need to reactivate things). In the week of the event it moves out of a filing cabinet and becomes a HOLD item. It goes in a tray by my desk with other hold items.

It probably goes back into FILE after the event while any follow-up takes place (which will usually be a matter of a few days). But after this there is no need to keep it in FILE where it is taking up valuable space. But I cannot BIN it all as I may be asked to run another event for the same church or I may need to run a similar event for another church. So I may BIN any items in the folder I can but then STORE the rest in a box

of past training events. Each folder has the place and event and date on and they go into the box in date order.

If three years later I am asked to return to that church, I check my training lists for the date I was last there, go into the room where the storage boxes are kept, locate the box I need in a matter of seconds, take it out and find the folder. This takes no more than two minutes.

This system keeps a huge volume of paperwork out of the study and allows me to use just one two-drawer filing cabinet for all my filing (as opposed to my storage). The key to success in filing is to have very little of it!

OK, so if I am honest, something sometimes goes wrong and it takes me longer to find something. And, just like you, I get in a mess when life is hectic. This writer on filing is, as he has said already, not quite perfect! But the principles are right and by and large the system serves me well. I know others have found new freedom too when they have introduced the idea. You still need to BIN out-of-date storage items (once a year perhaps), but it is not so critical if the storage is out of the way in the first place.

Applying this to your computer files, why not set up special folders for STORE items (sometimes known as archives although I feel this term has too many connotations with antiquity). You may need one system for emails (though I delete them after a certain time), another for your main files. Then your FILE folders are not too big and you can find items much more easily. The 'other room' principle may be a sub-folder or a CD or memory stick if disk space is tight.

Setting up a filing system

Back to filing itself now. The tricks of good filing, so you find the item again in a few seconds, are as follows:

- to choose a good system for the items in question;
- to choose a good method of categorisation within each system;
- to choose a good method of ordering within each category.

System

Some things are clear: for example, books go best on bookshelves.

But other items are not so straightforward. I keep quite a number of magazine articles, newspaper features, and other items like that as resource material. I have a number of options for system here: I could punch them and keep them in ring binders, I could pack them tightly into magazine folders, I could even use an ordinary paper filing system.

After experimenting with a number of options, I now group them by topic (I have a system for this which I explain shortly), place them in plastic cut-sheet folders which I label, and then keep them in A4 box files. I do not need to keep them in any order within the plastic folder.

I suspect that most people keep too much in filing cabinets, and too little in other means such as

ring binders and box files. The filing cabinets then multiply out of hand and the filing breaks down because the finding becomes slower.

So, when considering systems, think of all the possibilities. Filing cabinets should be the last option.

Category and order

What kind of headings or categories do I use to create a filing system that works brilliantly – ie. which means I can find things when I want them?

The trouble is that this is something better bespoke than off-the-peg. Those reading this will be doing very different types of job. Many of you are Ministers (but even here there are major differences between denominations and between different types of role). Others are administrators, or managers. To compound the problem our personalities play a crucial part in designing a good filing system because different people file different things in different ways.

So let me give you three key principles, illustrated from my own experience. You will have to apply these to the way you work.

Principle 1

Choose the right filing METHODS for everything before you consider CATEGORIES. Then be ready to have different categories for each method of filing. The categories should serve you, not put you in a strait-jacket.

Example 1: Resource articles in box files

Let's go back to my magazine and newspaper cuttings, various other articles and resource sheets relating to my work. I add to these continuously and refer to them regularly, so they need to be 'filed' not 'stored'.

Within each box I keep items in plastic folders (as described above) under a categorisation system I have devised for myself over the years. I tweak it from time to time, but the system became clear once I had collected quite a number of such articles and cuttings. In other words I could not have started with the categorisation system. And no one else's system would have fitted me.

This system is quite separate and different from the categories I use for filing letters and other A4 sheets of paper. It is all about different aspects of my subject (church organisation and people-skills), whereas categories for my filing cabinet are more administrative.

I list the main headings of this system on the next page.

Example 2: Books on shelves

I keep my work and faith-related books in only four categories.

1: Books relating to my work – which I keep all together by alphabetical name of author. It might make more sense to break these into the same broad categories as my cuttings and articles and I would probably do this if I had double the number. But many books span more than one of these categories and I therefore prefer to keep them all together. Many people with large libraries will probably need a number of categories here.

I have sub-sections here for work-books or booklets in A4 and A5 formats which either do not fit onto a normal bookshelf or don't stand up on their own. They go in magazine holders on their own shelf (adjustable shelves are vital for a good book filing system) by type or in series order.

2: Commentaries and Bible reference books – which are ordered on my shelves by book of the Bible (Genesis to Revelation), not author surname, as I am much more likely to want to find one of my many commentaries on 3 John than I am to look at all commentaries written by Professor Hermeneutic.

3: Doctrinal and study books – which in my case are more for personal use than work.

4: Christian living – again classed as personal not work. Biographies are kept separately.

As filing is all about finding, you will see that I use as simple a system as possible. But putting all my work books in one sequence does give me a problem: if you ask me what I can lend you on church communication I have to scan several shelves of books. That is not good. So I have a simple database on computer listing all my work books and against each one I am showing the same category codes that I use for my cuttings. Some books have several codes, but it is easy to spot all the communication codes. I can do it from the print-out, or let the computer sort and print me out a list.

Example 3: Training material in ring binders

As a trainer in a wide range of different topics, I have built up a considerable amount of material. I find that what works best for me is to keep all this in A4 ring binders (since I use an A4 ring binder when I am leading an event), one for each

topic I train in. So I have about 30 such ring binders on a shelf. In other words my categories are simply the individual topics (which are broadly grouped). Within each ring binder I then have a further categorisation, with card dividers to separate the units, eg. current handbook and my notes, variations on this event, back-up material, etc.

So there are three examples of different systems of category related to the type of item I am filing and the method I am using to file it.

Principle 2

For general systems, aim for no more than about eight categories and then sub-divide. Expect to expand the system when necessary, so design it with this in mind.

The point here is to keep everything very simple. If you are going to find things easily, the system must fit you as a person.

Here are three examples of systems I have found to be right for me, but some of these have emerged over many years and would not have been obvious from the start. Note that I try to avoid titles like 'sundry' or else everything gets heaped there.

Example 1: Resource material

We return to my first example under the previous principle. This system will not be right for you, but it is given here as an example of a simple system in three tiers.

Primary categories (I have four)

P   Issues to do with church people
A   Issues to do with church organisation *
L   Issues to do with church life
C   Issues to do with church context
D   Issues to do with discipleship (personal)

*   'A' originally stood for administration

Secondary categories

P1   Leaders
P2   Managers
P3   Trustees

A1   Planners
A2   Communicators
A3   Administrators

L1   God-ward
L2   Us-ward
L3   Out-ward

C1   Health
C2   Issues
C3   Overview

D1   Study
D2   Bible
D3   Life

Each of these is then divided into up to about six tertiary categories, which are the titles for the plastic folders I use to keep the items in (I use the same for all my books). An example:

L31   Mission-shaped
L32   Outreach
L33   Culture
L34   Networks
L35   Global mission
L36   Compassion

You will see I use a letter plus two digits code. I check and amend the system once a year to ensure that it still fits my work.

Example 2: Filing cabinet items

I only need just over one filing cabinet drawer for all my work at the moment (and a drawer for my personal files). That is because I 'store' everything I do not need regularly, and as already explained use box files and ring binders for several items (so I have several shelves).

Primary categories (three for areas of work, three others):

- Consultancy and training
- Writing and projects
- Church Administrator work
- Administration
- Promotion
- Networking

I use vertical files with plastic tabs. These have white card inserts which I then run a high-lighter pen over to create a different colour for each primary category. My maximum number of files in each category is at present nine although I would increase this if there was a need.

To give an example of actual files (ie. secondary classification) for Administration I have the following:

- Legal
- Finance (current)
- Payment vouchers
- Office equipment
- Software
- Stationery
- Time sheets
- Plans
- Plans - Retreats

… but I adapt this from time to time after an annual review in August. I do not use any numbers. The colour coded tabs are quite sufficient for so simple a system.

Example 3: Computer folders and files

I use the following folders in my computer.

- Consultancy
- One-to-one
- Workshops
- Writing
- Website
- Network (Church Administrators)
- General (all my admin files)
- Promotion

I try not to use too many layers of sub-folders. In some folders I have a large number of individual files which I can easily manage with a good alphabetical system.

Don't forget to introduce new folders into your email system so you file incoming emails under a number of different headings. I use these folders for all 'sent' emails too and keep the 'Sent' box empty. See Training Notes TN53 for details.

You will need a similar system for your web browser 'favorites' or 'bookmarks'. Here the size of list in each category is determined by whether you can see them all on one screen.

Principle 3

For large numbers of specific items that need to be put in an order, choose the most sensible and simple order for finding them.

This is so obvious, but does need to be stated. Order can be very important in helping you find things when large numbers are involved.

Example 1: Books

You may want to have a number of broad categories whose order is probably not that important (one example for a Minister might be books on preaching and teaching). But within this category order may be crucial. Alphabetical by author surname will be the normal choice, but if you are the kind of person who remembers book titles but not authors, then go by title.

I have already remarked that commentaries will normally be filed by book of the Bible rather than author. But if you want to keep one series in one group together, that is fine if it works for you.

What you must not do is to copy what I used to do. Being a tidy person I liked my bookcases to look really neat, so I tended to file books within a category by ….. size! I had the tidiest bookcases in the worldwide Church (with height creeping gradually up from the left end of the shelf to the right) but it wasn't a good filing system! One day I woke up to this and changed it.

Example 2: Events by date

Sometimes date order will be important. I store details of all training events I have run for an individual organisation or church. Each one is in a plastic folder with the place and date marked on the outside. So I keep these in boxes in date order. This makes much more sense than alphabetical by place name when I need to find one. For many people papers and minutes for meetings will need to be kept in this order (and, probably, in A4 ring binders).

It is not always clear which method is going to be best. For those who want to file sermon notes, they can choose date, book of the Bible, place, type of service, etc. This is where personal preference comes in, but it must be based on the need to find the item quickly. You can of course introduce a cross-referencing system. And most software packages will allow you to view computer files in a range of orders (date forwards, backwards, alphabetical forwards, backwards, etc.). Put yourself in the position of the most likely need-to-find scenario, and base your order on that.

This article may not have given you an off-the-shelf system to use, but I hope it has made you think, and given you some fresh ideas about filing. There is much more to paper-management than I have mentioned here and I can cover a wider canvas on a training day.