



Exploring “Church Records” in Norway

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Objectives:

Patrons will learn about

- church history
- how to use different types of church records

After the Reformation in 1536, the Evangelical Lutheran Church became the state church of Norway, and as such, was an arm of the national government. The head of the church was a cabinet member, *Kirke- og Undervisningsminister* (Secretary of Church and Education). There was no ordinary civil registration organized and in earlier times all registration was entrusted to the ministers of the Evangelical Church, and up to May of 2012 it was the clergy who, by entries in the church registers, were responsible for the greatest part of this work. Most of these records are available online at *Digitalarkivet* (Digital Archives) of Norway; as well as on microfilm at the Family History Library.

Den Norske Kirke (The Norwegian Church), or *Statskirken* (the State Church) was separated from the state May 21st 2012. From this date on the *Norwegian Lutheran Church* is not an arm of the state and does not have any more power than any other church (religion) in Norway.

You may also be able to find more recent family by contacting the *Folkeregister* (Register of Vital Statistics) but only if you are a direct line ancestor.

There was no civil registration organized in earlier times when all registration was entrusted to the minister of the Evangelical Church, and for the purpose of this class these are the records we will learn about.

See website: https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Norway_Church_Records

History of the church records

Many people have the misconception that there always were records kept, and that something has happened to the earlier ones. One common belief is that when the Catholic Church was outlawed, and the Lutheran Church took over after the Reformation, the Catholic priests took the records with them when they left. It was not so. There simply were no records. In many cases the last Catholic minister converted and became the first Lutheran minister.

Before 1876 there was no form of civil registration, but that year a law was passed to send all information about births, death, and marriage to *Statistisk Sentralbyrå* (Bureau of Central Statistics) for statistical purposes, and in 1905 a law was passed that a copy of the ministers

records of birth, death, and marriages should be sent to the bureau, but this information is not available for public use.

In 1915 the government established *Folkeregistre* on a community/city level. *Folkeregistret* may be contacted in a community/city where your ancestors lived in Norway. They have valuable information that can be obtained by direct line ancestors only. They are open Monday-Friday from 9:00 AM until 3:00 PM Norwegian time and can be contacted by phone 47 22 07 70 00 (for the English menu press 9), or check their website (only in Norwegian)
<http://www.skatteetaten.no/no/Person/Folkeregister/>

Language of the records

The language used in the early church records was the accepted written Norwegian, which was at that time closer to Danish as most ministers were educated in Copenhagen. The German influence on education was strong throughout Europe, and the script used in the church records in many countries was Gothic. This was also the case in Norway, until the middle of the 19th century.

See links to Norwegian and Latin word Lists below:

Norwegian word list: https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Norway_Word_List

Latin word list: https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List

Many Latin phrases were used as well. Some of these you will need to become familiar with.

Latin	English	Latin	English
Anno	In the year	Anno Domini	In the year of the Lord
Baptisma	Baptism	Conjugatus	Married
Copulatus	Married	Datum	Date
Denatus	Died	Dom.	Sunday
Eodem (die)	Same day	Feria	Day, Holiday

Dates in the records

Dates, in a great number of records, will be recorded according to the liturgical calendar, with Latin names and feast days. Often, the Latin name for a Sunday would indicate to the minister what scripture was to be the topic of his sermon of the day. There are two types of Feast Days. First there are Fixed feast days for example Christmas (Christmas will always be on December 25th). Second there is Movable Feast Days like Easter (Easter falls on different days each year). See link to Movable Feast Day Calendar below:

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Moveable_Feast_Day_Calendar_for_Norway

You may also search what is called a Fixed and Movable Feast Day Calendar for Norway. Here you may choose a letter and you will find a list of feast days starting with this letter. The dates in this fixed list does not change. Christmas will always be on December 25th. See link to calendar below:

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Fixed_and_Moveable_Feast_Days_for_Norway

Condition and quality of records

The condition of the records depends on where the records were kept. Some are excellent, even early on, while others are more difficult to use because they have been damaged by moisture or fire. The quality of the records also depends on who kept the records. Some record keepers had good handwriting, while others did not. Some kept them in format by christening, confirmation, marriage and burial; while others recorded everything together chronologically. Some underlined the name of each child christened while others did not. Some early records may include as little as only a date and the name of a child, later records usually include parents and witnesses.

Responsibility of records keeping

The highest level of ecclesiastical jurisdiction is the *bidpedømme* (diocese), and the next level down is the *prosti* (deanery). These are of little importance in regards to genealogical research. The next level is the *prestegjeld* (clerical district), then the *sogn* (parish). The clerical district and the parish are the ones we will use in searching the church records for Norway. A clerical district may contain one or more parishes.

Record keeping varies from one clerical district to the next. Thus in some, all parishes within the clerical district were kept in the same book, while in others, the records of the different parishes were kept in separate books. The *sogneprest* (parish priest) was the head of the clerical district. Sometimes he had a *residerende kappelän* (curate) serving with him in the annex parish. A *klokker* (sexton) – literally translated this means “bell ringer” resided in each parish. He was also the gravedigger, and sometimes the record keeper, teacher and general assistant to the minister. From 1814 a second set of books was kept by the sexton. This was discontinued in 1820, but in many clerical districts the duplicate recordkeeping was continued, and then it became compulsory again in 1870.

A set recorded which was recorded by the parish priest, may not have been sent to the archives for filing until 80 years after the last entry was made. If a set of records (usually post 1880) was not sent to the archive, you may contact the parish priest directly. The duplicate set of records, kept by the parish clerk should have been deposited in the archives as soon as they were completed, but this is not always the case.

Non-conformists/Dissenters

There was not a legally recognized dissenter church in Norway until 1845. The law simply did not allow anyone to dissent from the Lutheran Church. After dissenter churches were accepted in 1845, these congregations still had to report births and deaths to the local parish priest of the Lutheran Church within one month of the event. Sometimes we find that children of dissenters were not recorded as the law stated. Often a pastor would make this a very difficult visit, trying to persuade or even threaten people to “come back” to the Lutheran Church. If dissenters lived in a city where they could avoid being known by the church personnel, they sometimes did not comply with this law.

A new act in 1891 gave some dissenter groups permission to solemnize marriages, and from this time until 1919, the different groups were required to report births, deaths and marriages to the local Lutheran Church once a year. After 1919 they had to report to the local *Folkeregister*.

The law did not require a dissenter church to deposit their records in the state archives unless a congregation was dissolved. As the population grew, the percentage of dissenters in Norway increased. In 1875, 0.4% of the population did not belong to the, State church, while 1950, it was 3.76%.

Today even non- Christians are granted religious emancipation in Norway, so long as they do not come in conflict with the laws of decency. Until 1980, the Norwegian law did not consider Mormons as Christians, and therefore it was not considered a dissenter church.

Content/format of the records

Prior to 1814 there was no uniform format for the record keeping of the church records. The recorder used his own style and system as he recorded the information. In 1812 a law was passed regarding the format of the church records. These forms were printed and made available to the minister from about 1814. Some recorders chose to use up the book they were currently in, so for some parishes, it took several years after 1814 before the new format was used. See Parish Heading list in the familysearch.wiki:

https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/images/6/6e/Parish_Register_Headings_for_Norway.pdf

Even before 1814, some of the record keepers had formats that made the records easy to work with, by separating the various entries and types of events. However, often you will find that the recorder used a manuscript form with no clear separation of event type or not even starting a new line for each new entry. This makes searching the records much more difficult.

Names/Naming Customs

In the earlier history of man, people were known by their first name only. As the number of people increased, but the number of names stayed limited, the name of a person's father was added to help with identification. Most cultures used a patronymic naming system, but most of these became a fixed surname before written records appear. In the Bible we find frequent reference to a person's father's name as a means of identification. In Scotland, the tem Mc, as in McDonald, means "son of Donald". Armenian names ends in "ian", as in Gregorian, meaning son of Gregory. The English names Roberts or Robertson, means "son of Robert". In Norway the ending "sen" (Danish) was used after a father's given name for a boy, and "datter" after a father's given name for a girl, as in Jensen or Jensdatter.

The patronymic naming system lasted longer in Scandinavia than in any other country in the western cultures. In Iceland they still use patronymics today. In Norwegian cities, where the foreign influence was stronger, a change to permanent surnames started from around 1850. In the countryside it varied from area to area, in many places the patronymic naming system was used until after the turn of the century.

In 1923 a law was passed that required the use of family surnames and contained definite rules about what surname a person could use.

Besides the patronymic name, some people were recorded with their occupation as a means of identification, smed- smith, skredder- tailor or møller – miller.

Many of the craftsmen came from Germany (a few from other European countries) and kept their occupational surnames in their original language.

Noble families had fixed surnames, along with their patronymic name. Fixed surnames were also common among middle class families. Most of these names are foreign in origin, such as Welhaven, Collet, Michelet, Bergwitz, Hedin, etc. In the country parishes the name of the farm where a person lived was also used as a means of identification. When people emigrated from Norway, the farm name often became the surname in the new country.

Naming Customs

The custom of naming a child after close relatives is often helpful in providing a clue to the next generation back when we do research. This naming pattern also varies some from area to area, but generally the rule was this: The first son was named after the husband's father, the first daughter after the husband's mother, the second child of each sex was named after the wife's parents. If the wife's parents were deceased, or the couple was living on the wife's parent's farm, her folks may have the priority in the naming. The next children born would be named after the parents grandparents. If one of the spouses had been married previously, the first child of the same sex as the deceased spouse would be named after him or her.

If both the husband or wife had a father or mother with the same given name, two children, both growing up, may be named the same name, but after two different persons. In Norwegian this means to "oppkalle", meaning to "call up", and originally literally mean to call up from the grave. In many communities, the names of deceased parents would be used before the names of living parents.