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Norwegian soul registers (sjeleregister) as sources of literacy, knowledge and morality in the 17th and 18th centuries

1 The legacy of the Lutheran Reformation: from Martin Luther to Erik Pontoppidan

After the Lutheran Reformation in Denmark-Norway (1536/37), Church teaching mainly followed the program as stated in the preface to Luther's *Little Catechism* (1529). First, one should learn the texts of catechism, that is, the commandments, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the institution words for baptism and communion. The next step was to learn and understand the meaning of these texts. In practice, it was about learning the explanations of Luther's little catechism. This was followed by the catechism sermons on Sunday, which were again elaborated through the relevant sermons at the Church festivals, especially Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Also this step had its texts, Luther's great catechism and other relevant printed sermons.¹

Catechism knowledge should not just be a goal. It also had to be tried and examined. The obligatory test finally took place during confession before the Lord's Supper. This requirement is mentioned in *Confessio augustana* (1530), Articles 24 and 25. In addition to confession and absolution, it was especially important to be properly prepared for the sacrament of the Eucharist. The knowledge required was, of course, not limited to confession and the Lord's Supper. The prerequisite was that all the basic catechism knowledge was acquired. In the mentioned preface, Martin Luther generally wrote the following about all five parts of the catechism:

Welche es aber nicht lernen wollen, dass man denselbigen sage, wie sie Christum verleugnen und keine Christen sind, sollen auch nicht zum Sakrament gelassen werden, kein Kind aus der Taufe heben.²

The ecclesiastical conditions in Denmark-Norway were further regulated by the Church ordinance of 1537/39 with the introduction of the Reformation. The central text for teaching was also Luther's little catechism, often referred to simply as *Børnelærdommen*. This was mainly the framework for teaching Church doctrines for the next 200 years, right up to the introduction of compulsory confirmation in 1736.

¹ Jensen, Kirkelig undervisning.

² Bekenntnisschriften (BSLK) 503,33–44. See further on the meaning of the sacrament of the Eucharist 505,47–506,45.

An illustrative example of how this should be practiced can be found in the so-called *Børnelærdoms Visitatz* from 1627.³ It is of course also made clear there that at first the necessary knowledge of the catechism substance had to be tested, then the confession itself would follow:

Eenfoldige Spørmaal for Børn / til ad løbe Luthers lille Catechismi Parter igiennem med / i almindelig Visitatz oc ofuerhørelse / oc siden for Skriftemaal / paa det kortiste.

It is difficult to determine to what extent this program was realized. Luther himself complained strongly about the state of affairs as he experienced it towards the end of the 1520s in the course of the visitations by himself and Melancthon. The knowledge was anything but satisfactory.⁴ At this time it must be assumed that conditions have also varied in both Denmark and Norway. This applies not least to Norway, where the distances were geographically large and the conditions otherwise demanding enough.

Although the Lutheran Reformation was established by law as early as 1536/37, it took time to put the Reformation into practice, in several places a century or more. With regard to catechizing, it was a matter of giving the material a clear Lutheran content in line with the explanation in Luther's little catechism. The texts of the catechism, however, were partly medieval. The "Visitation of Childhood" (*Børnelærdoms Visitatz*) from 1627 thus continued both the old pre-Reformation catechesis and marked the necessity of teaching it in the Reformation sense.

With the introduction of the confirmation in 1736, teaching material were copied again, but at the same time everything was regulated. The teaching material was standardized by the so-called "Explanation".⁵ This was the new explanation of Luther's little catechism that came out in 1737 and was authorized in 1738. The main author was the court priest, later Bishop of Bergen, Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764). Pontoppidan's explanation was largely based on Philip Jacob Spener's catechism explanation from 1667.⁶ It was to replace all previous explanations from the 17th century that were in use. Like Spener's explanation, Pontoppidan's was relatively comprehensive. It included 759 questions and answers, Spener's the incredible number of 1283. Already in the year after the authorization of the new explanation, a type of common schools was established (1739). Thus, the last of the three key elements of this state-pietistic program was in place, the explanation concerning authorized teaching, the common school that institutionalized the education of all children of the kingdom and the confirmation as the ceremonial summary of the whole program with a public exam and the confession of faith to end.

³ Bang, *Børnelærdom*, 139–166.

⁴ BSLK 501,8–502,19.

⁵ Pontoppidan, *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed*.

⁶ Spener, *Erklärung*.

With the establishment of the common school in 1739, so to speak, everything was in place. The subject matter was defined. The institution that was to take care of the education, the common school, was established. The confirmation was introduced as both a knowledge control body and a personal confession of the belief in pietistic tapping. The results were recorded in minutes, the “confirmation protocols”, already invented some years after the introduction of confirmation.

Legislation was essentially the same for Denmark and Norway until the dissolution of the union in 1814, but the conditions were different. Confirmation could be quickly introduced everywhere, also in Norway, but the same did not automatically apply to the common school and the authorized textbooks. There are several factors indicating that the ambitions were too high, especially for the rural areas of Norway. As early as 1741, a moderate ordinance was passed for the common school, which took this into account for some years.⁷ The knowledge requirement was significantly reduced as early as in 1771. At that time, an abridged version, an Excerpt from Pontoppidan’s explanation, was authorized.⁸ The content was roughly reduced to 50% and the number of questions to 541. An important addition about the order of salvation (*Ordo salutis*) in Pontoppidan was removed. This edition of 1771 only seems to have been in use in some places for a short time at the end of the 18th century before the ambitions were raised again.

After Erik Pontoppidan had become Bishop of Bergen in 1745, he visited the entire diocese within a few years. In many places a great lack of implementation of the new arrangements was identified. The school system was down and the authorized explanation had not been introduced. Whereas the level of knowledge was still reasonably good (and it was in some places), it turned out that the old system of home education still worked well.

When confirmation was introduced in 1736 and the common school in 1739, one would think that these two institutions together with the Church records made the need for further control superfluous, but this is only a short way off. In addition, the soul registers come as a separate type of control of all inhabitants, or a selection of them. These soul registers represented a kind of material for which there are no parallels in the other kinds of registers. The confirmation lists documented the conditions for confirmation. The school protocols documented schooling. However, the best soul registers covered the entire population, from the youngest to the oldest with the family as a framework.

⁷ Placat Angaaende Skolerne paa Landet i Norge 1741.

⁸ Saxtorph, Udtog.

2 The soul registers as sources

The importance of the Norwegian soul registers as sources of the common people's level of knowledge has often been underestimated. I became seriously aware of this situation during Professor Knut Tveit's (1939–2012) dissertation in Oslo in 1989.⁹ The first opponent was Professor Egil Johansson (1933–2012) from Umeå University. In accordance with what also Johannes Helgheim had shown,¹⁰ Johansson pointed out that the soul registers were not sufficiently utilized in Tveit's otherwise extensive and impressive work. The framework for Tveit's dissertation was the elementary school. Johansson wanted to make the institutional history more congruent with the traditional view, according to which home and Church had been closely connected. The framework for education was not the school as an institution alone, but to a large extent also the religious life at home and in the Church. Even if one assumes that the school was a Church institution with a clear religious purpose, there is a difference between looking at the development of knowledge in the context of school and in the context of religious life at home and in the social community.

The difference between traditional education at home and the new school education produced conflicts. When, for example, the farmers in Sogndal, a small settlement in Western Norway, opposed the establishment of schools in the 1750s, this was for several reasons. The building of schoolhouses and payment for teachers produced costs. The way to school could be long and dangerous in winter. More important, however, was the fact that they were of the opinion that education at home was good enough, because they were used to it.¹¹ Although the Bishop wanted schools and was prepared to use his power to enforce them, the 18th century was a time of transition when the soul registers provided the best-possible access to traditional domestic education.

3 The soul registers in Norway

The oldest soul registers in Norway date back to the 17th century, but the largest numbers come from the 18th century. A few date to the early 19th century.¹² The emergence of these registers, like all new registers, must be seen in connection with the state's growing interest in controlling the people. Most important were the standardized Church records of birth and baptism, marriage, death and burial. These

⁹ Tveit, *Allmugeskolen*.

¹⁰ Helgheim, *Allmugeskolen*.

¹¹ Jensen, *Sjeleregistret*.

¹² [https://www.digitalarkivet.no/search/sources?s=sjeleregister&from=&to=&archive_key=\(01.09.2021\)](https://www.digitalarkivet.no/search/sources?s=sjeleregister&from=&to=&archive_key=(01.09.2021)).

registers largely date back to the mid-17th century. After 1736, as mentioned, the confirmation registers were added. In addition, it gradually became relevant to document things like compulsory communion and vaccinations, and in this context the soul registers became common.

The soul registers are the priest's register of the souls for which he has been responsible at all times. Unlike other relevant records that continuously registered what happened, the materials in the soul registers are a contemporary image, classified by place of residence and family, as we see it in the later censuses.

The soul registers could cover the entire population, from the youngest to the oldest, or just the young and unmarried. Depending on the sample of the population covered by these registers, they can be divided into two groups. They are those that cover the entire population and those that only cover a given sample. At the same time, there was also a difference in the kind of the information given. It can be pure personal data, only giving name and age, or more comprehensive and detailed material. In addition to name and age, it could include knowledge of books and information about living.

The soul registers fell into disuse in the early 19th century. At this time, the censuses replaced pure listing. The first nationwide census was in 1801. In a similar way, school protocols and confirmation lists gradually took over the documentation of knowledge and other conditions that could previously be found in the more comprehensive soul registers.

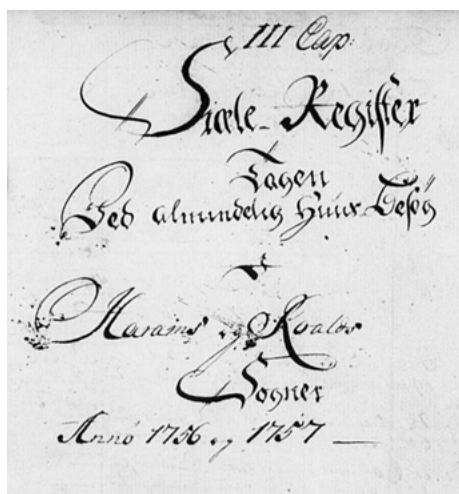


Fig. 1: Title page of a Sjeleregister (soul register) from Haram og Roalds sogn 1756/57 (Statsarkivet Trondheim: SAT/A-1020/1/1/I3/I3a/L0001).

In the following I will have a closer look at one such soul register, the soul register from Haram 1756/57 (Fig. 1 and 2). This register covers the entire population of Haram and provides rich information. It covers 326 people in 56 families. A family consists of

parents, children and servants. The information includes gender, age, name, family status, place of residence and whether the person has been confirmed. Furthermore, reading skills in books (*libris*) and knowledge without books (*extra*) have been registered. Secondly, there is a section for living (*vita*). In a recent column, the pastor also listed which books the families owned. The book list includes 337 books, about 6 books for each family. Overall, this provides a good picture of the conditions in Haram. The question then is whether, in addition to studying the conditions in Haram in the 1750s, research can compare the figures with those from other parishes and finally for the whole country? There is no comparable nationwide material. For example, I do not know any registers with book lists other than the Haram records; it seems to be unique. You may then have to use other sources, as Jostein Fet has done through the use of shift protocols.¹³

Nomena	Alder	Stand	Vita	Libri
Anders Jørgen	78	ordnar	læs og skrifte	1. Molles gienf. b. 1. 2. N. T. b. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100. 101. 102. 103. 104. 105. 106. 107. 108. 109. 110. 111. 112. 113. 114. 115. 116. 117. 118. 119. 120. 121. 122. 123. 124. 125. 126. 127. 128. 129. 130. 131. 132. 133. 134. 135. 136. 137. 138. 139. 140. 141. 142. 143. 144. 145. 146. 147. 148. 149. 150. 151. 152. 153. 154. 155. 156. 157. 158. 159. 160. 161. 162. 163. 164. 165. 166. 167. 168. 169. 170. 171. 172. 173. 174. 175. 176. 177. 178. 179. 180. 181. 182. 183. 184. 185. 186. 187. 188. 189. 190. 191. 192. 193. 194. 195. 196. 197. 198. 199. 200. 201. 202. 203. 204. 205. 206. 207. 208. 209. 210. 211. 212. 213. 214. 215. 216. 217. 218. 219. 220. 221. 222. 223. 224. 225. 226. 227. 228. 229. 230. 231. 232. 233. 234. 235. 236. 237. 238. 239. 240. 241. 242. 243. 244. 245. 246. 247. 248. 249. 250. 251. 252. 253. 254. 255. 256. 257. 258. 259. 260. 261. 262. 263. 264. 265. 266. 267. 268. 269. 270. 271. 272. 273. 274. 275. 276. 277. 278. 279. 280. 281. 282. 283. 284. 285. 286. 287. 288. 289. 290. 291. 292. 293. 294. 295. 296. 297. 298. 299. 300. 301. 302. 303. 304. 305. 306. 307. 308. 309. 310. 311. 312. 313. 314. 315. 316. 317. 318. 319. 320. 321. 322. 323. 324. 325. 326. 327. 328. 329. 330. 331. 332. 333. 334. 335. 336. 337.

Fig. 2: First page of a Sjeleregister (soul register) from Haram og Roalds sogn 1756/57 (Statsarkivet Trondheim: SAT/A-1020/1/1/13/13a/L0001).

13 Fet, Lesande bønder.

So it is not self-evident that an analysis of the conditions in Haram 1756/57 allows for any generalisation. The quality of other relevant registers varies greatly, so this complicates comparative analyses. Even for Haram, I would like to have access to more registers over a larger period of time and with more of those running them. However, there is only this one register, done by one minister. The source material must therefore be used with caution. However, it still provides a more comprehensive picture of knowledge and skills in Norway in the 18th century. Although the conditions in Haram cannot be generalized, there is no reason to believe that they were unique. However, some registers are of such good quality that they can halfway be compared with that of Haram. This applies, for example, to Nannestad 1730, Kvam 1738 and Sogndal 1760. But even though these are registers providing information that can be compared at a detailed level, it is easy to see the difficulties. They cover three different villages and three different ministers. They represent a period of 30 years at a time when a rather primitive school system is being established. Nannestad 1730 covers almost the entire population and was written before the confirmation scheme of 1736 and the building of a common school in 1739. Kvam 1738 covers only a selection of the population: children, young people and those being unmarried.¹⁴ The closest parallel to Haram 1756/57 in term of chronology is Sogndal 1760. This register covers the entire population and provides the same kind of information as Haram 1756/57 but lacks information about the families' books.

The Norwegian Archives has systematized the well-known soul register materials, it currently comprises about 140 of them. Several may be undiscovered in the archives. Many have been lost because the ministers, in the absence of any standardized system, proceeded in their own ways and used a kind of loose leaf system. The Haram registry is preserved because it is entered into the hymnbook for Haram.

4 Haram 1756/57: The priest and the parish

Henning Abelseth (1723–1774) came to Haram as a parish priest in 1755. He was both well-educated and wealthy and had completed his theological studies in Copenhagen in 1748. For a short time he was a house teacher with Bishop Erik Pontoppidan in Bergen. Then he was first a chaplain, then a parish priest in Holmedal. This was a demanding vocation which he eventually left in favor of the Haram parish which he took over in 1755.

The Abelseth register of souls was created at the beginning of his ministry in Haram. From the appointment in the royal letter of 28 February 1755 until the register was completed, only about two years passed. This means that what he documented was mainly the result of the work of his predecessors, the parish priests Niels Knudsen

¹⁴ Bjørke, katekisme- og leseopplæring i Kvam.

Leem 1694–1737 and Andreas Hanssen Schytte, parish priest 1737–1754. Above all, Schytte was a skilled and industrious minister.¹⁵ The register of souls must be read as a report on the results of his and his predecessor's work, together with the families in the parish.

Abelseth clearly assessed the individual knowledge of his parishioners. For the very youngest it is natural that nothing is stated. The first quotation we find on Marte Andersdatter. She is only four years old, from the farm Haram and has “started” to read a book. The oldest is 84-year-old Ingelev Pedersdatter from Ulle farm. She does not read books but knows things by heart. There is no reason known why she does not read. Marte and Ingelev represent the extremes. The picture is otherwise nuanced and varied. About the 78-year-old Knud Sjursen from the farm Haram it says that he is blind. It is unclear whether he may have been able to read but then lost his sight or whether he has been illiterate all his time, like Ingelev. One might think that this was age-specific, but 75-year-old Ole Andersen both was well able to read books and was also well-informed. He is also referred to as “Christian”. The reading of the register leaves the same impression. The parish priest carefully tried each parishioner and conscientiously wrote his remarks. The soul register for Haram parish provides a nuanced and above all a credible picture of the conditions.

5 The catechism knowledge

My main interest in the analyses of the soul register for Haram parish is to get an overview of the parishioner's mentality and their knowledge of the Christian faith. Especially I try to understand how profound the basic catechism knowledge and reading skills were and if this was related primarily to catechizing and education. This corresponds reasonably well to what is also the aim of the soul register. Prior to confirmation, the goal was simply to acquire sufficient knowledge to be confirmed, become a full participant in the religious community and then the adult community.

Before the introduction of confirmation in 1736, the minister was provided with many opportunities to test the candidates' knowledge. The point was to check the knowledge of the individuals before their first communion. With the introduction of confirmation, this test was changed to a public interrogation in front of the congregation. The standard by which it was examined was, as mentioned, the explanation of Luther's little catechism. After 1738 it was only the explanation of the Pontoppidan text.

The road to confirmation started with the ABC. This was an ABC based on the texts of the catechism. The first text was Our Father, then the Creed and then the Ten Commandments. This collection of texts normally also contained the inaugural words for baptism and communion. These are the texts of the catechism which

¹⁵ Hove, Haram kyrkjesoge.

should already be known in the first place. If one followed the prayers in Luther's little catechism, the father prayed at least seven times a day, morning and evening, before and after each meal. The creed was to be used for both the morning prayer and the evening prayer. The Ten Commandments had their place in the morning prayer. This is the daily liturgy Luther's little catechism prescribes.

The method of learning how to read was first to memorize the texts of the catechism by using it. If one imagines a family that regularly uses *Our Father*, this was not a question of obedience but of taking part in the family's daily liturgy. Thus the texts of the catechism became well-known texts. After learning the familiar texts, there came the next step, learning letters and syllables that could be found in the ABC edition of the catechism texts, beginning with *Our Father*. Now, of course, it is not possible to say much about the extent to which each individual family followed the liturgy of the catechism. The daily struggle for survival certainly set limits to what one could find space for, even when someone was willing to follow the rules. It is all the more interesting to see what the minister knew about this and what he wrote down in the soul register.

If we sort the personal information in the register by age, we find the following results: The first recorded information is about just mentioned four-year-old Marte Andersdatter from the farm Haram. She just "begins". About four-and-a-half-year-old Tore Sjørusen from Møchlebust the entry says "has started with ABC". Both pieces of information are in the box in *Libris*. It may mean that Marte has started to take part in *Our Father* as a common prayer and is at the beginning of learning the ABC, while Tore has moved on and is working on the same material in the ABC. In any case, they are both expressions of the same state of art, a development from the use of the catechism texts as liturgical texts to the process of being able to read the same texts in a book.

These four-year-olds were out early, otherwise the age of starting seems to have been six years. After this, only the exceptions have not either begun or have moved on to the catechism as the next step. This is entirely in line with the system Luther states in his preface to the little catechism, that at first one must learn the text, then also the explanation.

The first to go on to read in the catechism is six-and-a-half-year-old Stephen at Nøre Fjærtøft. He is obviously reading all of Luther's little catechism. This corresponds with the fact that he was the first to be drawn in the section Extra, "knowledge without a book". In terms of family, he is listed as a servant on the farm Nøre Fjærtøft. Overall, I see no difference between children living with their own families and children as servants. These groups are similar, but there are some exceptions. The fifteen-year-old servant boy Sjur Olsen reads poorly (barely) in a book, knows nothing and is "disobedient".

Relatively quickly, Abelseth goes on to say how far the individual has come for general grades of literacy. The first example is seven-year-old Christoffer Rasmusen from the farm Møchlebust. He reads well in books. Without a book, he has come to

the first part of the catechism, that is, the Ten Commandments. Christoffer belongs to the servants and is doing well. Amund Torsen of the same age does not belong to the servants. He has come almost as far as Christoffer but has not acquired the same reading skills. While Christoffer reads well, Amund just reads some small booklets. However, both of these boys are out early. But from the age of ten to eleven, almost everyone is in the same phase. They read more or less well in books and have started with Luther's little catechism. How far they have come with the knowledge of the catechism is indicated by the chapter they had advanced to. The next step after this is that they begin to learn Pontoppidan's explanation, or just the Explanation. The ten-year-old servant boy, Rasmus Rasmussen, at Møchlebust reads well and knows all five parts of Luther's little catechism, and he has also started with the Explanation. This picture becomes clearer as the children get older. Reading skills vary, but the development follows a fixed pattern, from the first cautious beginning with Our Father in the ABC via the Explanation and confirmation.

When the Haram register was written down in 1756/57, the transition from the old private interrogation to the new public one was confirmed. In this case, this is also registered by a separate note: A "C" means that the person has been confirmed.

If we take 17 years as the normal confirmation age and assume that the young people were interrogated according to the old system before 1738, when the confirmation system was implemented, we should expect that about three cohorts were confirmed: 17-, 18- and 19-year-olds. However, this is not the case. The age of confirmation ranges from 17 years to 51 years. Even stranger is the fact that the elderly are also confirmed. Between the ages of 30 and 50, one out of three has been confirmed. Between the ages of 20 and 30 about 50% has been confirmed. In the next few years from the age of 18 it is common for almost everyone to be confirmed. The exception is, for example, the 22-year-old maid Marie Nilsdatter at Nøre Fjætorft. She reads "very poorly", knows "almost nothing" and "is pregnant before confirmation".

An explanation for the late confirmations must be sought in the confirmation theology. In addition to the required knowledge, the confirmands were invited to profess their faith and to take over the baptismal vows parents and godparents had once made. The youngest to be confirmed is the 17-year-old maid Magnilde Jørgensdatter on the farm Aakre. It is noticed that she reads well in books but has poor knowledge of the Explanation. She was also "self-willed". This means that she does not meet the requirements to be confirmed, except that she was old enough. This means that the minister has not made too strict demands or made an exception in this case. The allegations are mainly positive. The register includes 118 people under the age of 15 and 209 older than 15. Of these, only 12 have not learned how to read and have been given the grade "nothing" or "no". In addition, there are three who are blind. A larger group are those who know something but do not qualify for "well" or "good". This group consists of 59 people. As many as 132 people read well. The weak readers can generally do "a little to their senses" without a book. The good readers are mostly "well-informed" even without a book. Furthermore, there is a clear difference between

young and old. The register includes 22 people older than 60. Of these, 10 are good readers, 8 weak, 3 illiterate and 2 blind. For the 59 young people between the ages of 20 and 30, the corresponding figures are: 47 good readers, 11 weak and 1 illiterate. In other words, the level of knowledge is clearly evolving towards better knowledge both in books and without books.

6 Conclusion

Despite the reservations I initially reported on a limited supply of comparable sources, the soul register from Haram provides a fairly clear picture. This applies to both those who were trained and tested according to the old scheme before the introduction of confirmation in 1736 and those who were tested according to the new regulations. We find the basis in the catechism texts integrated in the catechism ABCs: first Our Father, then the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments, possibly also the inaugural words for baptism and communion. The goals were good reading skills and a good understanding in accordance with Pontoppidan's explanation.

This material can be studied more in depth with regard to the importance of family affiliation, access to books and comparisons with materials from other parishes. Already this study, however, shows the importance of the soul registers as source material, even though the material would have been more comprehensive, also in isolation for Haram parish. We are provided with clear evidence that the Church teaching program works. It is a given that everything is a Church matter and controlled "from above", but it also represents a matter "from below". The 4-year-olds must be assumed to have received everything from home. But also the education of the older children has been a matter of the family. The material documents such an interaction between the Church leadership and the members of the congregation.

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