Using Religious Records

Are you ready to do a little soul searching?

Long before most governments got around to it, members of the clergy were dutifully recording names and dates associated with baptisms, marriages, burials, and other ceremonies within their congregations. In England alone, parish registers pre-date civil registration by almost 300 years.

**WHY RELIGIOUS RECORDS?**

Religious records can give your research a real boost. In addition to the fact that they often pre-date vital registration of births, marriages, and deaths, some records include the names of witnesses and sponsors, who were often family members. They can also include biographical details and clues for continuing research, which makes them highly valuable sources.

Finding death dates in religious records will often lead to cemeteries where other family members may have been buried. And marriage information in religious records will sometimes be the best means of finding maiden names – or even name changes.

**DETERMINING THE RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION**

If you’re not sure what religious affiliation your ancestor had, step one is to determine that. Most members in your family may have been of one faith, but consider the possibility that individuals and families may not always have been members of the same religious denomination. For a number of reasons, they may have switched their affiliation from one to another, including:

- Individuals who married into families of a different religion
- Living in places where their chosen or traditional religion was not represented by a house of worship, especially in rural areas that were dominated by a specific religion
- Conversions influenced by what may have going on in a particular time or place (there may have been local prejudices, or even laws in place, that prompted a conversion)

Religious affiliation can often be found in the pages of historic newspapers. Obituaries often suggest ties to a specific religion, and individuals were regularly mentioned in notices about events sponsored by a church group, such as picnics or other social events. Engagements and weddings announced in newspaper society pages may include clues as to religious denominations.

For account questions or technical help, call 1-800-262-3787.
Determining the Church Affiliation

If you have a civil record for your ancestor, it may hold clues to both a denomination and a specific religious institution. On marriage records, look for the name of the officiant. If the couple wasn't married by a civil authority, you may be able to determine religious affiliation by the church affiliation of the person who married them. Check for the officiant's name in a city directory. The officiant's directory listing may include the name of the church or an address that can be compared with religious institutions in the city directory.

Historical city directories can also serve as an excellent means for pinpointing your ancestor's address in a particular time period. Then, by browsing the list of churches and synagogues, you may be able to determine the closest church, meetinghouse, mosque, or synagogue. If your ancestor was an immigrant or a close descendant of your immigrant ancestor, pay special attention to religious institutions that mirror his or her ethnicity.

Make sure to look for clues to church affiliation on civil death records, which could name a place of burial that's affiliated with a particular denomination or even with a specific church.

In some religious groups funeral cards or programs were common. These and other home sources can name the church where funeral services were held. Obituaries are another good source.

Many religious institutions are described in county and local histories or histories about specific denominations. An internet search or a search of the Ancestry Card Catalog, filtered by your ancestor's location, may lead you to a wealth of information about the specific congregation your ancestors belonged to, even if it disbanded long ago.
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**Locating the Records**

If your ancestor’s place of worship is still active, this is the obvious place to start. An online search typically will bring up the institution’s website and contact information. If the records are not held onsite, the office should be able to direct you to them.

If the congregation merged with another, a yearbook or denominational directory may clue you in to the new congregation, which may now have the records.

Local churches and archives of the denomination often have such directories. In cases where the institution no longer exists, the records may be with a denominational archive. Here again, online searches for the denominational headquarters can help you locate the repository.

**Tip:** When contacting a church or synagogue, bear in mind that the office has to tend to the running of the institution. Your request may have to take a back seat to day-to-day duties. Patience and kindness go a long way, and donations to the institution may hasten your request along.

**Locating Records Online**

Fortunately, we’re seeing an increase of religious records online. Try some internet searches, or visit Cyndi’s List to see what resources are available for your ancestor’s denomination.

JewishGen.org is committed to preserving Jewish history and family history and has many resources available to assist researchers. JewishGen and other Jewish organizations have partnered to make many Jewish records available in the Jewish Collection on Ancestry.

You can find many other denominations represented in the collections on Ancestry as well. For instance, Ancestry is home to a huge collection of Quaker records. Quakers kept meticulous records from their earliest days, and their monthly meeting records can reveal rich details about your Quaker ancestors.

The Drouin Collection includes records from ecclesiastical archives of multiple denominations in parts of Canada and the U.S.

Some of the religious records on Ancestry are in geographically-based collections. The Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708-1985, database, like the Drouin Collection, includes the records of multiple denominations in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.
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LOCATING RELIGIOUS RECORDS ON ANCESTRY.COM

On Ancestry, the Card Catalog is a great place to start your search for religious records. Since baptisms, marriages, and burial records mentioned in religious records relate to births, marriages, and deaths, you’ll find these records in those categories. In the filters on the left of the Card Catalog page, select Birth, Marriage & Death, followed by the geographic location you’re searching in.

In addition to traditional church records, don’t overlook church histories and directories. They may include mentions of your ancestors and their place within the religious community. They can also add depth and color to your family history. To locate religious histories and directories on Ancestry, select the filter for your location and add Schools, Directories & Church Histories, and then the sub-category of Church Histories & Records.

Tip: When searching religious records, be aware that some records may be in Latin or in some other language. Many records in the Drouin Collection are in French. Use an online translator to find your ancestor’s name in that language and use that name in your search.