

# Norsk Bokforlag, the Norwegian Publishing House

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## Developments that Led to Establishment of the Publishing House

John Gotlieb Matteson was born on the Danish island of Langeland in 1835.<sup>1</sup> In 1855, together with his parents and his two sisters, he emigrated to the United States of America and settled in New Denmark in Wisconsin. In 1859 he joined the Baptist Church. The year afterward he started theology studies at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago, being ordained in 1862. In 1863 he read the *Review and Herald* and became an Adventist. The Baptist congregation in Poisippi that he served asked him to explain his new light, and within six months, almost all members of that church became Adventists. In 1864 Matteson visited Norwegian Adventists in Oakland and started to publish tracts and a small publication called *Det nye testamentes sabbat* (The New Testament Sabbath). In 1872 he began *Advent Tidende*, the first non-English Adventist periodical ever. In 1877 Matteson moved back to Denmark, starting an evangelistic series there, and in 1878 went to Norway. His meetings produced great interest in the capital, Kristiania (now Oslo), and in January 1879 he began to publish an eight-page weekly magazine called *Tidernes Tegn* (Signs of the Time), later named *Tidens Tale*. It consisted mainly of his presentations every Sunday evening. On the front page of the first edition he had also his own hymn "Gjennom verdens tåredal og mørke," a hymn still popular in many Norwegian Adventist congregations.

The first few months Matteson employed a commercial printer, but during the summer of 1879, he managed to buy a manual press machine. However, he had received ink that would not dry on the paper. That spoiled half of his 1,000, and the other half took days to dry. Matteson managed to buy the right ink from another printer, so the next edition went well. After two years, with help from Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, Matteson managed to buy a better press, but the old manual one continued in use for some small jobs until the early 1960s.

## Founding of the Publishing House

Matteson realized the importance of having both printed materials and good presentations of his topics. The first publication of *Tidernes Tegn* in 1879 is regarded as the foundation of what later became Norsk Bokforlag. Within a short time, he had eight employees. The Review and Herald began in 1849 and Pacific Press in 1875. Norsk Bokforlag was the third Adventist publisher founded and the first one outside of the U.S.A.

In the beginning the publishing activity was for all practical purposes one man's private business. But on July 27, 1882 a formal limited company organized, Den Skandinaviske Forlags- og Trykkeriforening. Twenty members of the first Adventist church in Norway, Bethel (later spelled Betel), became shareholders in the new entity<sup>2</sup>

Matteson remained in charge of the publishing house as manager, treasurer, and secretary.

In 1879 Matteson faced difficulties finding meeting facilities. Owners of suitable rooms did not want to have him as a tenant. He realized that he needed to buy his own property.

The first Adventist church in Norway was founded January 11, 1879, and held its meetings in Osterhausgaten 12.

<sup>3</sup> The number of members increased rapidly, and on February 5 Matteson reported that the new congregation had bought a property from the Eugenia Foundation. Today part of it is Akersgatan 74 in Kristiania (Oslo). The plan was to cover loan interest and taxes by having tenants in the building. The congregation had then the obligation of paying the loan installments of NOK 1,000 per year for the first five years, then 2,000 per year<sup>4</sup>

Ellen and James White wrote giving their support to purchasing the building, and promised that they would try to find funds in order to pay off the loan within five years. That was not possible, but the finances were acceptable even though the local church had to cover high costs to renovate the building while at the same time renting its meeting facilities in Osterhausgaten. Locating the publishing house in the basement, they renovated the second floor for meetings.<sup>5</sup> The dedication took place on June 1, 1879.<sup>6</sup>

*Sunnhetsbladet*, the health magazine, launched in 1881. In 1885 G. E. Bentzen, Stadsfysikus (state chief medical officer) became editor in chief. W. C. White and Dr. Kellogg were not satisfied with how Dr. Bentzen led the magazine, and at a board meeting in November 1885, Dr. Oscar Nissen, president of the Norwegian Temperance Society, succeeded him.

## History

Church members sold tracts and publications produced by the publishing house. In 1883 Hellig Surttén became the first full-time colporteur, a position he held for the next 40 years. Between 1884-1886 A. B. Oyen from the U.S.A. led the printing and publishing program in cooperation with Matteson. Then Niels Clausen replaced him.

Part of the church and publishing house building had to be demolished, and in 1886 Adventists established a new building at Akersgaten 74. On March 14, 1886, Matteson led the inauguration of the new building, with the publishing and press facilities still in the basement. The structure remains a key place for Adventist activities in

the capital of Norway. By 1888 the publishing house had 26 employees.

O. A. Olsen was born in Norway, but he grew up in the United States. In 1886 he moved to Norway, and in 1887 he became the president of the first Norwegian Conference. Ludvig Henriksen came from America in 1887 to manage the colporteur work. He organized a literature evangelist school with Olsen as its first principal. But his stay was short-lived when in 1888 the General Conference elected him its president.

Publishing activity increased rapidly during the next several years, but in 1897 the general economy in the region experienced a recession and many companies went bankrupt. The publishing house had serious debt and declining income. Scandinavian Adventists in the USA were willing to contribute, but their resources were not enough to cover the financial situation. A letter to the General Conference led to a special board meeting together with presidents of several American conferences. O. A. Olsen, former president of the General Conference, urged the board members to support the Norwegian Publishing House. Current president A. G. Daniells agreed, and the board voted to offer to repay the creditors over three years. In addition to this plan, Ellen G. White urged church members to contribute. On Sabbath July 6, 1901, USD 13,000 was collected. Total debt was USD 66,000, which was repaid USD 11,000 half-yearly. The public in Kristiania now knew they could trust the Adventists to keep their word and pay their debts.

In 1901 leadership established the Scandinavian Union Conference, and 10 years later began to coordinate the publishing activities in Scandinavia. Denmark and Sweden had their own publishing houses. Sweden founded their Skandinaviska Bokförlaget in 1886, and Denmark their Dansk Bokforlag in 1905. Skandinavisk Bogforlag began in 1911. The same general meeting nullified all stock shares in the publishing house.<sup>7</sup> The union now had more direct control of the publishing house.

The company experienced acceptable financial health for a few years, but once again had to reduce activity in the 1920s, because of inflation and a weaker world economy.

In 1938 administration voted the current name, Norsk Bokforlag, but it did not come into effect until 1940.

In 1965 Norsk Bokforlag started a summer program for students from other countries. In succeeding years students from many continents have served as colporteurs during their summer vacation, but the main focus has been on those from Africa.

In 1979, 100 years after its founding, the company moved into a new building in Oslo. It reflected another decision taken years before (in 1946), but required 33 years to accomplish. The publishing house had huge expectations for the future.

In 1994 the board discussed a crisis among literature evangelists. By then it had become next to impossible to recruit younger members for such work, while the older colporteurs were retiring or in reduced activity.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1980's and 1990's the printing industry in Norway faced severe competition from low-cost printing options in other countries. The printing world had become more global. At the same time, the market for the

health magazine started to decline. To meet the competition, new equipment was necessary, but outsourcing was probably a better model. The publishing house was the owner of the building but not the property, having to pay a rather substantial yearly rent. In 1995, the Oslo municipality offered the publishing house the option to buy the property for NOK 6 mill., which was just not affordable.<sup>9</sup> The board voted then to sell the building and the printing facilities.<sup>10</sup> Later that year a printing company offered NOK 7.8 mill. for the building and printing facilities. The board accepted the offer but realized that the publishing house would need to rent another place.<sup>11</sup> It moved to Grenseveien 91 within a few months.

The owner of the building informed the board toward the end of 1996 that the contract would expire by April 30, 1997, mainly because the publishing house had colporteurs and others living there. The building was not regulated for such purposes, only for business.<sup>12</sup> The publishing house managed to postpone the termination of the contract.

In 1996, The Norwegian Union voted to consider a common location for the church headquarters and the publishing house. The publishing house board voted September 23, 1996, to accept such a move.<sup>13</sup>

When asked to consider Akersgaten 74 as the new location, the board voted down the suggestion. The main reason was the existing use of the building and the plans for Betel Church to establish an outreach center.<sup>14</sup>

On April 20, 1998, the board voted to investigate the possibilities of erecting a new building close to the church-owned Tyrifjord Junior College, north of Oslo.<sup>15</sup> Then, on November 12, 1998, the board supported the union board proposal to purchase a building at Vik, a few kilometers from Tyrifjord Junior College,<sup>16</sup> and on March 24, 1999 the publishing house moved into the new location.<sup>17</sup>

The Student Program, consisting of colporteurs from Africa during their summer vacation, has been rather vulnerable, always depending on visa regulations and interaction with the immigration authorities (UDI). In 1998 the board discussed establishing a new legal entity to run the program, making it easier to close it down if the publishing house encountered severe problems with UDI.<sup>18</sup>

The new entity was not established at that time, but the discussion had not ended. On August 29, 2016, UDI called for a meeting with the publishing house leadership. At the meeting the UDI informed the administration that a limited company such as they were could not operate the student program. The program had always been under the non-profit section at UDI. The Norwegian Union and the publishing house formed a new entity and registered it as a non-profit association on March 19, 2017, and on June 11, 2017, agreed on the name "Studentprogrammet–Norsk Bokforlag".<sup>19</sup> All students were from then onward formally employees of the new organization, while the publishing house remains the legal entity for all business transactions.

## Historical Role of the Publishing House

The publishing house has been a primary tool for the church in reaching out to the general public and in nurturing members spiritually. That activity started with the publication *Tidernes Tegn* in 1879, later named *Tidens Tale*. The magazine continued in production until January 1, 2019, ceasing mainly because of a long-term decline in subscriptions.

The Norwegian Union formally took over the health magazine, *Sunnhetsbladet*, in July 2016.<sup>20</sup> The magazine had also experienced a drop in subscriptions that had led to financial losses for many years. From then on the union would run the magazine as part of their budget while the publishing house would facilitate the production and handle subscriptions and logistics.

While the magazines continue to face competition from social media and the Internet, paper books are still important. The general market for paper books is declining, but at a slower pace than for the magazines.

On October 9, 2015, the publishing house became a member of the Norwegian Literature Association, encompassing almost all publishing houses in Norway. That move has enabled the house to get easier access to all bookshops in Norway. Unfortunately, Norwegian society is becoming more and more secular, and bookshops in general are not key selling arenas for religious topics.

For many years, the publishing house has sold books via the Internet. The webshop remains a stable place to present and sell our products. Marketing is mainly conducted through social media.

The publishing house has gradually published more non-religious titles, thus enabling the students to reach their financial goals. Such titles cover the topics of health, nature, and society, and they do not conflict with the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In January 1995, the publishing house had started a book club, mainly for church members. It has been the main economic platform for publishing Adventist literature since it means that sales would be guaranteed an acceptable minimum. The club is still important, but younger church members are not eager to be members.

The student program remains the main financial resource, selling around 30.000 copies every summer. The students are probably the only Adventists the customers meet through the year.

The company has plans to expand the student program to Sweden in cooperation with the Swedish Union, and to have some other international initiatives.

## Outlook

The publishing industry is facing changes. The main task for the union and publishing house boards is to have tools enabling the church to nurture church members spiritually and to have resources for mission activities. Literature will probably remain one important avenue, but every organization needs to be up to date when it comes to products, market, communication, and technological changes.

## Publishing House Managers

John Gottlieb Matteson (1879-1890); Niels Clausen (1890-1892); R. Pettersen (1892-1899); A. C. Christensen (1899-1909), Jens Olsen (1909-1917); Erik Arnesen (1917-1920); A. C. Christensen (1920); G. L. Gulbrandson (1920-1921); Elias Bjaanæs (1921-1924); A. C. Christensen (1924-1935); Leif Nilsen (1935-1940); Paul Olsen (1940-1948); Elias Bjaanes (1948-1960); Olaf Vetne (1960-1979); Leiv Myklebust (1979-1980); Gunnar Aune (1980-1994); Lars Jørgen (Lasse) Stølen (1994-1997); Gunnar Jørgensen (1997-2001); Dagfinn Møller Nielsen (2001-2007); Lars Jørgen (Lasse) Stølen (2007-2013); Terje Wollan Dahl (2013- ).

## Names of the Norwegian Publishing House<sup>21</sup>

Den Skandinaviske Trykkeriforening (1882-1883); Syvende-Dags Adventistenes skandinaviske Trykkeriforening (1883-1884); Den skandinaviske Forlags- og Trykkeriforening Den norske Bogmission (1884-1911); Skandinavisk Bogforlag (1911-1938); Norsk Bokforlag (1938- ); <sup>22</sup>

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Board Meeting Protocol. Norsk Bokforlag, Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag Archives.

Helgesen, Kjell. *Da adventismen kom til Norge*. Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag AS, 2015.

Tjeransen, Torkel Kåre . "*Norsk Bokforlags historie (The History of Norsk Bokforlag)*." Oslo: Torkel Kåre Tjeransen, January 1966.

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### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise attributed this article is a short summary of Abrahamsen, *Norsk Bokforlag 100 år (years), 1879–1979* (Oslo: Norsk Bokforlag AS, 1979).
2. Torkel Kåre Tjeransen, "Norsk Bokforlags historie (The History of Norsk Bokforlag)" (Oslo: Torkel Kåre Tjeransen, January 1966), 74.
3. Kjell Helgesen, *Da adventismen kom til Norge*, (Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag AS, 2015), 35.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Tjeransen, 69.

6. Helgesen, 39.
7. Tjeransen, 89.
8. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, September 22, 1994," (Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag Archives), 1.
9. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, May 9, 1995."
10. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, February 7, 1995."
11. "Board Meeting (Phone) Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, December 13, 1995."
12. "Røwde & Co AS, letter October 31, 1996." (Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag Archives)
13. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, September 23, 1996."
14. Ibid.
15. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, April 20, 1998," Item 13/98.
16. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, November 12, 1998," Item 28/98.
17. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, March 21, 1999."
18. "Board Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, December 13, 1998."
19. "General Meeting Protocol, Norsk Bokforlag, June 11, 2017." (Royse, Norway: Norsk Bokforlag Archives)
20. "Board Meeting Protocol, The Norwegian Union, June 19, 2016."
21. Tjeransen, 95.
22. Karl Abrahamsen, *Norsk Bokforlag 100 år (years), 1879–1979*, (Oslo: Norsk Bokforlag AS, 1979), 59.

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