CHAPTER 3

Balancing the Books

A Practical Approach to Navigating Emerging Challenges in Small Academic Theological Libraries

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Conducted in 2017, an Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL) Benchmarking Survey highlighted that small academic theological libraries in the UK and Ireland are often run by solo librarians; with one staff member as the average number of full-time equivalent library staff of the 16 libraries surveyed (2018, slide 11). For small academic theological libraries, the ever-changing needs of their overarching institutions and the individual characteristics of the libraries, combined with the expertise and strengths of their frequently solo librarians, results in challenges being met in distinctive ways; creating these bespoke solutions can often feel like a balancing act. As Kennedy Stephens observes, "simply translating trends that may have been established in a different, larger setting to a small theological library context" (2016, 30) is not the answer. What works in one theological college may not work for another.

In addressing the challenges we face, we must consider both the broader context of issues affecting both larger libraries and similar institutions to our own, before reflecting on what best suits our own situation. To help us to "*understand* and to *translate*" (Kennedy Stephens 2016, 30), my aim is to outline some of the current challenges and suggest skills, methods, and strategies that can help us navigate not only the present landscape but future developments as well.

To source current challenges, I have examined literature about higher education (HE) libraries, small libraries, theological libraries and solo librarians as well as any information specifically from small academic theological libraries. For the purpose of this chapter, small academic theological libraries are those that consider themselves to come under this banner and self-identify as small (Kennedy Stephens 2016, 29; Ebertz and Stutzman 2020, 76).

What I have aimed to do is not to create an exhaustive list, but to gather those challenges that are the ones we really need to know about; the ones that are maybe on our minds or that we are perhaps pushing to the back of our minds. Some of the challenges have been with us for a while, while other more recent challenges are generated by trends and developments within the librarianship profession, library management or the wider world.

To discover the broader trends in university libraries, the initial documents I consulted were by professional organisations, both from the UK and Ireland, and internationally, which have produced recent reports about trends and challenges for libraries. These three reports were the SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) Report, *Mapping the Future of Academic Libraries* (Pinfield et al. 2017), the ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries*)* report *2024 Top Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues* (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee 2024) and the *IFLA (*International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) *Trend Report 2024: Facing the Future of Information with Confidence* (Dezuanni and Osman 2024).

The content of these reports tends to focus more on larger HE institutions, and in some cases, from other countries. As a result, they highlight challenges that I have not included; such as anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee 2024, 235), which is not currently a pressing issue for libraries in the UK and Ireland, and climate change (Dezuanni and Osman 2024, 41) which small academic theological libraries are more likely to address through broader institutional initiatives. To identify

challenges more specific to the context of small academic theological libraries, I also consulted scholarly articles and publications about HE libraries in general, as well as those focusing on small libraries, solo librarianship, and theological libraries.

Artificial Intelligence

Though varied technological advances may impact small academic theological libraries, by far the most pervasive is the development of artificial intelligence (AI), and more specifically in our context, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). AI is a challenge to society as a whole and Prime Minister Keir Starmer stresses this in the *Policy Paper: AI Opportunities Action Plan* saying, "Artificial Intelligence is the defining opportunity of our generation. It is not a technology that is coming . . . It is already here", and following up with "in the coming years, there is barely an aspect of our society that will remain untouched by this force of change" (2025, para. 1–3).

There was common thinking among the three broader reports about advances in technology, and specifically that AI and AI literacy will continue to be a challenge in the coming years (Pinfield et al. 2017, 10; ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee 2024, 231; Dezuanni and Osman 2024, 19). This view is echoed from within professional librarianship in the Library and Information Association (CILIP) report, *The impact of AI, machine learning, automation and robotics on the information professions*, where CILIP's CEO Nick Poole describes us as "in the middle of a Fourth Industrial Revolution," highlighting that "Every day, the technologies associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution – AI, machine learning, automation and robotics – are finding new applications" (2021, 5). It is for this reason that I spend a little longer discussing AI as a challenge, alongside the fact that there is a significantly large pool of scholarly reports and articles on this subject.

It is the way AI analyses text that clearly overlaps with our sphere of work. We deal with text in many formats. We organise it and support library users in accessing the content that they need and using it correctly. Cox, in the CILIP report, notes that "it is most likely the changes in how text can be processed that will impact information professional work most strongly, because historically much of our work revolves around text in various forms" (2021, 13). This report was published in 2021 and the speed at which AI has already developed can

feel dizzying. In the CILIP report, Cox states that "The ability of AI to analyse the content of texts may shift search away from being primarily through structured bibliographic databases to search of full text items or whole collections using multiple potential algorithms," and this shift is already beginning to happen (2021, 14). One recent development is that the Library of Congress is investigating whether AI can generate metadata and MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloguing) records; they are still in the experimental phase of the project, but already they are looking towards a pilot programme (Brador 2024). Another development is by a commercial digital subscription library Perlego, which has an optional "Smart Search" where you can ask a question, and it will suggest titles that may have the content you need (Perlego 2025). The Smart Search feature is currently in BETA but from my observations, it can suggest titles that are very useful and some that you would be unlikely to find using traditional search methods.

Some of us may feel cautious about becoming familiar with the AI resources within our sphere of work, perhaps feeling that it is outside our remit or that it should not have a place in scholarly thinking. However, if students are using AI tools and GenAI already, we need to be able to teach them how to use them – from the ethically-unacceptable typing their assignment title into a chatbot (such as ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot) and copying the answer, to knowing how to use a chatbot effectively to highlight trends in the research data and statistics they have collected. Cox reminds us that the "role of information professionals has always been to enable our users and communities to profit from new advances in technology and to make better use of information for their own advancement" (2021, 6).

Part of our unease may regard having protection and regulation in place. The European Union (2024) enacted "the world's first comprehensive AI law" in 2024 but the UK has no statutory regulation of AI in place yet (McCallum et al. 2024). The UK Government produced some guidance about ethics and safety (Office for Artificial Intelligence 2019) and more recently produced a white paper describing the contents as the "plans for implementing a pro-innovation approach to AI regulation" (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 2023). It is clear there is some way to go before there is legislation in place; however, the Association of Research Libraries has produced *Research Libraries Guiding Principles for Artificial Intelligence*, designed as a "foundational framework for the ethical and transparent use of AI" (Association of Research Libraries 2024), and other library groups and associations are likely to follow.

It is then of no surprise that we may be wary of how to proceed in approaching AI. Cox identifies some of the many concerns that impinge upon our thinking, highlighting concerns about "artificially created life" and dystopian futures alongside the "techno-utopianism" painted by big tech companies, plus ethical questions, and concerns about the impact on jobs (2024, 1–2). There have been some concerning developments about intellectual property rights, recently with a publisher selling access to its data (Palmer 2024). There are also warnings about accuracy and misinformation (Pierce 2025). Cox further highlights the rapid speed of technological change and that all these variables must sit within government strategies and policies (2024). He finishes by saying that "in a sense responding strategically to AI is almost impossible", and it can certainly feel like that. However, the consistent recommendation in the literature, that we cannot ignore AI, is backed up by Cox, who adds that "it seems equally true that a merely passive 'wait and see' posture is inadequate" (2024, 2).

Though focused on law librarians and written some while ago in terms of advances in AI, Callister summarises the task in hand for us all: "the best we librarians can do in the face of uncertainty is to teach our users about the limitations of these systems, disillusioning them of computer intelligence doing the work for them – at least for now. If anything, AI is a tool and, one day perhaps – assuming a humanistic techno-central vision – a partner" (2020, 210). Similarly, the *Pulse of the Library 2024* report states, "The question is no longer whether to embrace AI but rather what to adopt and how to do so responsibly" (Clarivate 2024, 2).

Though incorporating AI in our work is important, it does not mean that it will be the defining challenge for small academic theological libraries, or in fact any libraries, but rather a pervasive challenge. If you have been questioning the importance of AI for libraries, this difference is key. AI is not changing everything about libraries, but it is a new tool that we need to embrace to provide a full service. This distinction is described in the SCONUL report, noting that "For libraries the question is not so much what technology will be affected, but rather what technology, if any, will remain unaffected by AI" (Pinfield et al. 2017, 1); but highlighting that "Technology trends, although attracting a lot of attention, were rarely seen by participants in our study as decisive in themselves" (Pinfield et al. 2017, 14). We need to understand what AI technology is about and bring it to sit alongside the other information literacy skills that we teach. This recommendation appears again and again. In the CILIP magazine *Information*

Professional, Carrigan states that "Ensuring that baseline level of AI literacy is important" (2023, 26); Dott and Charlton, in considering whether AI Literacy is an information skill, describe AI as "a natural extension" to their information literacy framework (2024, para. 4); Pierce asserts about AI and specifically ChatGPT that "this topic is relevant to information literacy, and we should be speaking up" (2025, 68). It is clear that this challenge is one we need to accept.

Library Services

Another challenge is the change in how libraries provide services. This is made up of a number of connected issues: the growth in digital collections, the inside-out library and the concept of the library itself.

Continuing to build digital collections and resources is something to which many of us have become accustomed. As small academic theological libraries, things were perhaps moving more slowly and steadily for us, unless fortunate enough to be partnered with a large university that shared access to all its online resources. In March 2020, Covid-19 radically changed the speed of this process for everyone. Suddenly, we had to be able to arrange access to online resources for our students (Baxter et al. 2021, 324; Cucksey et al. 2023, 1–2). This also highlighted how much we were still regarded as primarily physical spaces. Since then, the pace of change has increased, and digital content is a much greater part of the services offered. Opinions appear to be split about the future and where digitisation will end (Pinfield et al. 2017, 19). Some suggest it will be with almost all books digitised with only small special collections of printed books remaining (Askey 2023) and others see the "the digital shift not as a simple transition or replacement from analogue to digital but rather as an ongoing transformation and blending of both" (Baxter et al. 2021, 323). However, there is clear evidence that theological libraries still have a genuine need for physical collections, as library users continue to visit the library and borrow books (Van Dyk et al. 2020).

Whichever scenario comes to fruition, what we are also experiencing is a change directly related to the move to digitisation, a shift from one library model to another; from an outside-in model to an inside-out model. These distinctions have been defined by Lorcan Dempsey:

> The dominant library model of collections has been an outside-in one, where the library is buying or licensing materials from external providers

> and making them accessible to a local audience . . . . In the inside-out model, by contrast, the university, and the library, supports resources which may be unique to an institution, and the audience is both local and external. (2016, 340-341)

A part of this shift is changing our position from how the user fits in with the library to how the library fits in with the user. Previously this was sometimes perceived as a battle between libraries and search engines (Ross and Sennyey 2008) but more recently we are looking at ways to fit in with all the resources available to students, for whom Google Scholar and library systems are perhaps seen on an equal footing (Oh and Colón-Aguirre 2019).

More practically it is a shift in thinking from opening times and restrictions to always available content that fits in with the user's workflow; it's a move from collection focus to user focus (Dahl 2018, 3; Dempsey 2016, 342; Pinfield et al. 2017, 5). However, these models are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other. We retain what works in the outside-in library model but seek out ways to develop the inside-out model, interlacing the two into one library service: "These new services build on a foundation of traditional library services" (Dahl 2018, 18). In their research, Pinfield, Cox, and Rutter noted that the "need for libraries to move from emphasising collections to services (or at least, collections as one service amongst others) was widely acknowledged" (2017, 5). This emphasis on services spotlights our expertise as librarians; "moving from invisible to visible" as the changes "position the library staff as partners in the process of scholarly inquiry" (Dahl 2018, 3).

Dahl identifies these new inside-out services as special collections, digital scholarship, scholarly communication (institutional repository, consulting services), and data services (2018). This list can feel off-putting as it is written with large libraries in mind and Pinfield, Cox, and Rutter agree that "the extent to which this is relevant for all libraries is likely to vary" (2017, 18). However, some small academic theological libraries may already be following the inside-out model in some way, perhaps having special collections with an audience that "extends out to a wider community beyond the institution" (Dahl 2018, 6). Something that small theological libraries might consider is an institutional repository, perhaps in collaboration with other ABTAPL libraries. Dahl identifies an institutional repository "as a first step in library scholarly communication and publishing services" (2018, 13). Similarly, digital scholarship includes technical assistance and

classroom instruction, both of which may be delivered in some way by library staff (Dahl 2018, 8). For inside-out services, we need to see them through the lens of our own situation. Making the best of our collections as part of services keeps us not only as a vital part of our own institution but also contributes to the wider academic community.

Decolonising

There is a popularised quote attributed to Desmond Tutu that summarises succinctly why we should include decolonising in our collection development policies: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality" (2017).

Decolonising library collections can be traced back to at least 2011, but became more prominent by 2015 and has since gained traction within higher education in the UK (OCLC 2017, Charles 2019). It is of note that the three broader reports I consulted do not use the term decolonisation. Pinfield, Cox, and Rutter in the SCONUL Report recommend that "traditional library 'mantras'" should be questioned, one of these being, "the library is neutral" (2017, 49). Dezuanni and Osman in the IFLA Report discuss the "demand for diverse voices" (2024, 14) and the ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee discuss Critical Librarianship and "challenges librarians to take active steps toward antiracist and antioppresive practices," asserting "there are numerous opportunities for librarians to fight inequity, racism, sexism, and other problems through concrete action" (2024, 249). This omission may reflect that larger universities have already incorporated decolonising into their workflows and policies, or perhaps that different terminology such as "diversifying" and "liberating" are being used (Kamposiori 2023, 24). Janssen highlights that some "consider the term misleading as it is not possible to 'decolonize' colonial collections in the sense of removing colonial influence from them" and that "the word may suggest that colonialism belongs to the past when this is manifestly not the case" (2023, 96–97).

However, for those of us in small academic theological libraries, decolonising our collections is a current challenge. Regardless of what we call this process, there is a need to reassess our collection development policies and to consider whether our collections are balanced

or whether they embody the beliefs and formation of our institutions (Wilson 2021, 2). As highlighted by Crilly and Everitt,

> Coloniality is evident everywhere in academia, in the persistent Whiteness of institutions, including libraries; in the legacy of Eurocentric collections; the colonial roots of the academic subjects that form collections in libraries; the dominance of English language and of academic publishing centred in Europe and the US, and many other aspects of scholarly communication. (2021, xxiii)

This includes the classification systems we use, which can have in-built biases (Albright 2019; Adler 2017; O'Hara 2018), particularly so in the area of religion (Igwe and Ayandokun 2024).

Even though as librarians having a neutral stance is embedded in our thinking, neutral is no longer considered an appropriate description of libraries because it has morally ambivalent connotations and there is agreement in the literature that libraries are not neutral (Fuchs and Ball 2023, 352; Johnson 2016; Jones and Wilson 2021, 57; Quinn and Bates 2017, para. 1; Wilson 2021, 2). Johnson also evidences that even with the best intentions, people are not able to fully put their inbuilt biases aside and so cannot be neutral (2016).

The way that we implement decolonisation will differ from one institution to another, in part because there is a "lack of formal guidelines" but also because our policies and procedures and institutional needs are different (Kamposiori 2023, 26). Needham and Appleton (2025) point to three areas of significance in the success of decolonising collections – proactive librarians, critical library leadership and institutional support. We are in a unique position where we can help in motivating our institutions in their decolonising strategies and aligning with them. We should see decolonising as an ongoing feature of our collection policies, rather than "a definable, finite and measurable process, like so many processes that constitute the organisation of libraries, the implication that we can start and one day finish this project" (Crilly and Everitt 2021, xxi). We can look to other HE institutions, libraries, theological collections and perhaps collaboration with organisations such as the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL), alongside discussions and decisions within our own institutions, to guide how we approach decolonisation.

> It is not about removing white male authors from the reading list. It is about creating the space for critical analysis that can help us identify

> some of the problematic assumptions that can be carried, often silently, by the materials that we use and the ways in which we teach. It is about wider engagement with theologians from around the world, who can help us identify the ways in which our voices and the voices of those we habitually engage with don't tell the whole story. And it is about encouraging students and teachers alike to address the legacies of colonialism that continue to impact people's lives today, including in the form of racism and structural inequalities. (Common Awards 2024)

Fuchs and Ball sum this up well when they consider how we should move ahead with this by saying "essentially, the answer is slowly, thoughtfully, intentionally, by honoring a variety of perspectives, and through identifying a strategic pathway towards developing the fundamental steps for success" (2023, 350).

Learning Support

One of the steadily increasing challenges faced by HE libraries is the additional learning support required by students. Recent research has highlighted the "year on year" rise in the number of students with specific learning differences (SpLD) entering HE during 2007–2019 and further notes that these students are more likely to attend "specialist HE institutions" (Brunswick et al. 2025, 2). Theological colleges are not mentioned specifically in this research (Brunswick et al. 2025, 4), but the broader term of humanities is employed, within which theology is located. Alongside the rise in students with SpLD, the ways in which we can help have also improved; the IFLA Guidelines for Making Libraries Accessible for People with Disabilities highlights that there "has been notable progress in the field of library services to persons with disabilities, particularly in the areas of assistive technology, electronic formats, and online communication tools" (Winkelstein et al. 2024, 1).

This general rise will also impact theological colleges and their libraries, but in addition to this, the higher age demographic of students attending theological colleges may add to these numbers. Whereas many universities tend to have larger numbers of enrolled students under thirty years of age, for theological and bible colleges that teach degree programmes, a larger proportion of students are over the age of thirty (HESA 2024). There is additional evidence pointing towards this different age balance for theological colleges. It has been noted that older students are actively encouraged to apply and are in significant

numbers in theological colleges (Lothian 2024). This correlates with my own experience, dealing with many students over the age of fifty and some over sixty-five.

There are different challenges in meeting the needs of an older demographic. Some of these students will not have the digital literacy required for degree-level study, perhaps having used a mobile phone or a tablet computer but not a laptop or desktop computer. Others may have last been in formal education at age sixteen and are lacking in confidence. Others were schooled at a time when learning differences such as dyslexia and dyscalculia were not routinely picked up and conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were frequently attributed to bad behaviour. Butcher asserts the result is that "many [older students] who enter HE lack confidence and experience fragile self-esteem . . . [and] when appended to deeply held memories of ineffective learning at school, it is hardly surprising that some mature students may appear 'needy' in terms of institutional support and seem more likely to withdraw when life events disrupt their studies" (2023, 198–199).

However, we should not assume that these issues will be ongoing. Broady, Chan and Caputi undertook research into computer attitudes in older and younger adults, which concluded,

> Research has shown that negative stereotypes of older people being avoidant of technology and incapable of its use are outdated. With proper encouragement, clear explanations of the personal benefits and an appropriate time schedule, older people certainly have the potential to become equally effective in using technology and computers as younger age groups. (2010, 483)

Similarly, Staddon more recently concludes that our support "may involve giving students enough time to adapt to new technologies, particularly if they do not use it often, and potentially providing explicit training sessions on new or unfamiliar technologies" (2020, 17).

With a larger proportion of students aged thirty-plus, alongside the tendency of students with SpLD's applying to smaller specialist colleges, it is likely that there will continue to be a significant proportion of students who need targeted help in some form or another, alongside a need to elevate our knowledge about how we can help.

There are some challenges for libraries that can be felt more acutely in small academic theological libraries; these challenges, though not an exclusive list, include shrinking budgets, access to

technological advances, staffing, shifting student expectations and limited visibility.

Budget Limitations

As a profession, librarians are acutely aware that "staffing and budget make a difference in what we can offer" (Cucksey et al. 2023, 2). With these fundamental restrictions we need to ensure that we have the skills to enable us to develop creative strategies to address present and emerging issues (Gwyer 2018, 14). Restricted budgets are a given for most small academic theological libraries and we are on a much smaller scale than many of our counterparts in the United States. Kennedy Stephens (2016) and Ebertz, Young Miller, and Kennedy Stephens (2020) suggest a budget figure of under $500,000 for small theological libraries. I suspect, even including staff costs, there are many theological libraries in the UK and Ireland where the budget is not even close to a fifth of that total, though my hope is that some may be closer. Nevertheless, within our own libraries we have all learnt to be creative with the resources available to us and with the purchases we make. However, the shift to digital content and the rising costs of resources are stretching already stretched budgets and these can sometimes far exceed what our budgets can allow. Gale expresses the problem well in his discussion about the pros and cons of digital library, Perlego, stating that an "An annual subscription for all our students would wipe out the entire library budget, even at the lower rate which we have been offered" (2022, 17). It is difficult for us to keep up with informational and technological developments when we are sometimes unable to choose any of them. This still leaves us with many difficult decisions to make and more creative routes to try and stretch our budgets even further.

Solo Librarians

For solo librarians, these decisions can sometimes feel weighty, even with the support of library committees and supportive line management. Day-to-day tasks can take over the role, not allowing time for bigger projects (Gale 2020, 31; Veldheer 2024, 84). Veldheer succinctly puts the task for solo theological librarians, stating, "There is no good way to say it, but this is a big job" (2024, 79–80). Roper points out that

"every solo librarian has the opportunity to create their position, the roles and responsibilities within and the overall library vision and have a certain amount of freedom when deciding what to focus upon and how time should be spent during each working day" (2024, 82). This allows us to fulfil a role that we love and in which we want to excel, but also gives us the responsibility to continually adjust as new challenges appear. Veldheer goes on to highlight the overarching challenge for us: "Even if you are aware of another library facing a similar situation, it is important to remember that the librarian in that case is working with a distinct administration and a different collection of books compared to your own" (2024, 80). It may be that those of us who are solo librarians never think of the enormity of our responsibilities all at once, but instead focus on the broader projects and individual tasks in hand. Having recent and thorough books covering the broad scope of both theological librarianship (Veldheer 2024) and solo librarianship (Roper 2024) underscores the complexities of our roles and the challenges we face.

User Expectations

The shift towards digital has changed the way that everyone lives, and this has brought a change in library user expectations. Having been catapulted into providing a more hybrid service during Covid-19, going back to the steadier pace of change we were experiencing previously is not possible. Student and staff expectations have changed and they expect to see technology from their interactions in daily life reflected in the library services available to them. Davies contends that "when they see a news report on a new technology they think this is a promise and that it will be available on their laptop in the morning" (2012, 12). Though this sounds extreme the effect does lead to perceived barriers, such as a book being available via Amazon's Kindle but not being available as an e-book that we can provide as a library. Similarly, a book can be ordered online and arrive the next day, or even the same day, but ordering and delivery from library book suppliers can take longer. A student can print wirelessly at home but in the library, they must log in to a library computer in order to be able to print. This is described by an interviewee in Gwyer's research as "Amazon v. university infrastructure" (2018, 18). Our challenge is to "understand student expectations by listening to students – not as feedback but as part of the service development process" (Davies 2012, 12).

Visibility

The final challenge that I will highlight is about the perception of library services. Libraries can be perceived differently by those who don't work within libraries and if students and staff do not understand what the library is, we become invisible. Pinfield, Cox and Rutter recorded in their study that some participants who were not based in the library were "thinking of the library in very traditional ways" and that "There is clearly a need for libraries to communicate their current and future role better" (2017, 7). The danger of not being visible is that the library can be overlooked and undervalued with limited impact. Harland, Stewart and Bruce interviewed library directors who highlighted a possible cause of being overlooked, saying there is an "attitude that libraries and librarians always cope with whatever you throw at them and that they're good managers and they do very well in their universities, therefore you don't have to pay attention to them" (2017, 403). Being comfortable with the status quo or being resistant to change are potentially routes for the library to be less effective.

Practical and Tactical Approaches

In considering the challenges I have highlighted as particularly relevant to our context as small academic theological libraries, it is clear that addressing them is far from straightforward. Some challenges appear to demand budgets well beyond what we have available to us; others seem to require significant time, while we are already operating at full capacity; some are so complex that we may worry we will not fully understand them. At times, the scale of these challenges can feel overwhelming, and the rapid pace of change in this "Fourth Industrial Revolution" can feel like it's leaving us behind (Cox 2021, 5). Nevertheless, as Murray reminds us, "The librarian must not only stay abreast (or ahead) of changes in the information landscape, but must help reluctant end users to navigate these changes while keeping up with their primary job responsibilities" (2018, 4).

Leadership

Leadership is seen as a vital part of being a librarian, not only for those in roles such as heads or directors of library services but on

all levels: "The information professional in a small special library needs leadership and management skills just as much as his or her counterparts in larger libraries, but the emphasis and the way these skills are applied will differ" (Murray 2018, 5). Furthermore, one of the four contexts for our professional future introduced by CILIP is leadership (CILIP 2025). In this context their "members will move from 'Information Managers to Information Leaders' – enabling their users, communities and organisations to harness the power of information, knowledge and data to fulfil their potential" (CILIP 2025).

Le's survey of 38 senior leaders from medium and large American academic libraries identified the leadership skills they considered most important (2015). The responses were gathered into 10 areas: vision; management skills; integrity; collaboration; communication skills; mentorship; professional development; apprenticeship; leadership roles; self-awareness (Le 2015, 306–308). This is a long and daunting list, however Le goes on to point out that "many of these leadership attributes can be developed or acquired through professional development, advanced studies, mentorship [being mentored], leadership roles in learned and professional societies, and apprenticeship [experience]" (2015, 312).

Leadership is what is going to carry us through the challenges ahead. It will help us with the creativity and vision to effectively navigate our way through the current challenges, to inspire those around us to do similarly and to demonstrate to the wider organisation the "changing yet important role that libraries and librarians have in advancing learning and research" (Le 2015). I will return to this subject in the next section.

The growing emphasis on soft skills and emotional intelligence in leadership has brought the concept of kind leadership to the fore and this has been suggested as a way forward for librarians. Rimmer in her book *The Kind Librarian* states that the "future of library leadership is being shaped by a confluence of technological advancements and evolving societal needs. To navigate this landscape effectively, library leaders must integrate emerging trends with foundational principles of kindness and wellbeing" (2024, 257).

Professional Membership and Professional Currency

Joining a professional body gives you access to resources and professional standards, opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, to

communicate with other professionals and to contribute to the wider profession. For any librarian, it is important to connect with other professionals, but for solo librarians it is vital to make these connections to meet the challenges discussed in this chapter and to grow as a professional.

ABTAPL provides members with access to e-books for professional development, the ABTAPL *Bulletin* is published three times a year, there is the more informal monthly lunchtime "ABchaTL" online meetings, which is an ideal place to catch up with members from other libraries plus an online discussion list where you can request interlibrary loans, share information or start a discussion. ABTAPL also offers regular training opportunities, both at the biannual in-person meetings and through online sessions, at little or no cost. These online options help remove common barriers such as time constraints and travel expenses. There are also opportunities to take on a role on the ABTAPL committee. The partnerships between ABTAPL and other theological library associations, Atla in America and BETH (*Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie*) in Europe, mean that there are opportunities to receive funding to attend their annual meetings and benefit from seeing theological librarianship in other locations. Atla and BETH also produce professional literature and resources, including open access e-books. Even considering only the resources available within our specialised sphere of theological librarianship, there are a wealth of resources that can support us in building our leadership and management skills.

With a wider scope for all information professionals, membership of CILIP also provides valuable benefits. There are a myriad of training opportunities and resources, the opportunity to become professionally accredited, discounts on books and multiple special interest groups with online discussion lists, where you can connect with others who share the same interests. Similarly, the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) provides opportunities for networking, professional development and specialist groups. Additionally, CILIP and LAI have a joint annual conference this year providing a forum for wider learning and sharing.

There are other ways to "stay informed through subscribing to listservs, forums, blogs, library news, and online journals" (Veldheer 2024, 84). Membership in a professional association provides a strong foundation for staying up-to-date and is key to connecting with other professionals. Development opportunities can be arranged around your own schedule, perhaps reading posts to the online discussion list as your first job of the day, or scheduling time in your calendar once a fortnight to check if there are any new learning opportunities from

the email subscriptions you have received. By prioritising professional activities, you will be better equipped to tackle future challenges, as this "remains crucial for your ongoing professional development and keeping up with current library trends" (Veldheer 2024, 91).

Collaboration

The need for librarians to collaborate to tackle the challenges ahead is stressed in the literature: "For academic libraries, effective collaboration is no longer an option but a necessity" (Atkinson 2019, 1); "For us to survive and thrive as individual libraries and librarians, we must work together" (Adams, 2021, 16); "The need to handle all library responsibilities alone makes it necessary for the solo librarian to build a network and create their own professional support system" (Veldheer 2024, 80); "Collaboration is one of the key abilities to manage change effectively" (Aslam 2020, 143).

There are already examples of collaboration among theological libraries in the UK, such as interlibrary loans via the ABTAPL discussion list, discounted journal prices through ABTAPL membership and the collaboration between the Church of England and Durham University, which has produced a shared online resource of e-books and eJournals, contributed to and accessed by theological colleges. ABTAPL itself is an embodiment of collaboration, with the committee and membership made up of librarians and those with an interest in the subject areas.

In his paper *A Collaborative Future within Atla*, Adams reviews the history of collaboration within Atla and then suggests numerous ways that Atla can collaborate to achieve success (2021). With the current challenges we are facing there are also many possibilities for us to collaborate so we may continue to thrive. Highlighted as areas for collaboration are "collection development, access/preservation, and information literacy – where theological librarians have collaborated before, and where they should collaborate again, but with a strategic vision" (Adams 2021, 32).

There will be similar areas where ABTAPL or small groups of libraries with similar needs might collaborate. Atkinson warns that "Many current issues and developments on the horizon are too large and complex for any department or library to deal with on their own" (2019, 1). Now is the time to look at how we can support each other, and the gains, as well as the obvious time-saving and money-saving aspects

that might "increase the profile, visibility, credibility, and influence of the library and library staff internally and externally, beyond the existing user base" (Atkinson 2019, 3).

In addition to these external collaborations, we should be looking out for opportunities for internal partnerships within our institutions. Collaboration with students has been a recent development, improving information literacy through open pedagogy (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee 2024, 232; Fields and Harper 2020); "Open pedagogy requires students to be actively involved in the design, creation, and curation of OER [Open Educational Resource] learning materials through renewable assignments" (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee 2024, 232).

Practical Strategies for Day-to-Day Impact

When reading literature on library management and related topics, I sometimes find myself thinking that the recommended actions aren't realistic for my situation, either because I don't have the time to implement them or the capacity to re-skill. I have encountered similar challenges in day-to-day library work, noticing tasks that clearly need attention but lacking the time to get them started.

Over the years, I have developed a few practical tactics that help me make progress without requiring large blocks of time. While I continue to rely on overarching strategies such as leadership, professional membership, staying professionally current, and collaboration, these additional, smaller-scale tactics have proven valuable in helping me move things forward.

Workstyle

Working in small academic theological libraries gives us the advantage of agility and we can often adapt our routines more easily than those in larger institutions. However, I often find that I am juggling multiple tasks at once. For years, I questioned whether I was doing something wrong, but I have come to realise that the nature of my role, combined with my particular skills and experience, makes this multitasking both necessary and appropriate. My desk is located within the library itself, which makes me highly accessible, and our policies

are centred around student needs and together these naturally shape the way I work each day.

It is interesting to note at this point that the literature showed different viewpoints on this type of working. Ebertz and Stutzman warn against tending "to urgent matters rather than what is truly important" (2020, 122), while Veldheer suggests "When faced with myriad tasks, focus on the most immediate of the needs . . . there isn't anyone else you can hand tasks off to" (2024, 83).

It is clear that situational factors play a significant role in this. My approach is simply this: do what works best for you. Whatever your preferred working style, as long as you are reflecting on your practice, open to exploring other approaches, and staying on top of your responsibilities, there is no need to make a change to your workstyle.

Making Small Changes and Incremental Improvements

As I go about my work, I am on the lookout for any small improvements I can make, or I can carry out a small part of a larger task. An example of this is the condition of library books. Some of our books are quite old and as I shelve books or help someone find a book, if I see a book that has become very brown with age or is looking tattered, I will pull the book off the shelf, and we will order a new copy to replace it. We don't have the budget or the time to replace all the worn books at once, but steadily, over the years I have been doing this, and the collection has begun to look newer and the books more enticing to read. In a similar vein we are replacing our old spine labels, which are faded and too small to read. As these books are returned, we re-label the worst ones a few at a time. The effect of these small actions is to steadily improve the condition of the collection over time. Veldheer notes something similar, "Because you are on your own, do the best you can to break each goal down into steps. Each of those steps can become a benchmark for achievement and help you measure your overall progress. Sometimes it will be hard for you to step back and realize you have actually been moving forward in pursuit of your goals because you may have to move slowly. But you are making progress" (2024, 81).

Making Things "Good Enough"

As information professionals, we often have a keen eye for detail and a natural inclination toward order and organisation. For a long time in my work, I aimed for what I believed was the perfect way to do things. However, as the challenges have grown, particularly with the shift to digital, it has become increasingly difficult to complete tasks to that ideal standard and I found this pursuit of "perfection" was not sustainable. I have come to understand that perfection is subjective. In our context, striving for excellence means aiming for what is "good enough" to meet our specific needs. In that sense, perfection is not about flawlessness but about delivering quality that serves our purpose effectively.

Each of these and other similar suggestions can make an overall difference to your workload; "Anything you can do to lighten your workload allows you to focus on higher-priority responsibilities" (Veldheer 2024, 83).

Conclusion

Rimmer provides a contented picture through "kind" lenses:

> These emerging trends paint a picture of a dynamic future in library leadership, demanding adaptability, digital proficiency, inclusivity and a strong focus on sustainability and well-being. By staying true to their core values, library leaders can steer their institutions through this changing landscape, ensuring that libraries remain essential, responsive and inclusive community resources. (2024, 258)

While Kennedy Stephens observes doubtfulness in the form of "a pervasive sense of skepticism, and questioning whether the small theological library is capable of adopting, adapting to, or developing trends" (2016, 29).

I selected the challenges that I believe may have the greatest impact, but there are challenges that I did not discuss at all, or perhaps made only a brief reference, such as the "McDonalidisation" of libraries, hybrid work environments, climate change, virtual places, open pedagogy and open access publishing, student wellbeing, and controlled digital lending, to name just a few. Whatever the challenges, we will not be able to thrive if we ignore them, and we cannot take them on

without adapting them to our own situation first (Kennedy Stephens 2016, 32): "Successful organizations are constantly evaluating and adjusting their priorities. In turn, the successful information professional will . . . strive to stay informed of these shifts and align library services with them" (Murray 2018, 6).

I'd like to close with a quotation from the late Donald J. D. Mitchell, a longstanding member of ABTAPL. Although he wrote these words in the context of challenges faced in service provision for distance learners, they remain just as relevant to the challenges we face today (2020, 85):

> All of this is only achievable if we are seen by our institutions and faculty as partners in the educational process and not merely technical support ancillary, and inferior to, the business of teaching. If a theology department or seminary is truly committed to preparation for a life of ministry, it must see the requirement not simply to provide foundations in theology but to equip the students to be life long learners with skills of criticality with respect to the information environment and understanding of the range and validity of sources they face. Librarians bring skillsets that support and develop such understanding as fellow educationalists and with a rich resource of experience and practice mediated through professional organisations like ABTAPL and Atla and through professional literature of the sort I have cited here. Can I encourage you all ... to lobby for this recognition (if you do not already have it) within your own institutions?

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