

Theological Library Services

*The Theological Librarian's Handbook –
Volume 6*

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Contents

Introduction..... *i*
KATHARINA PENNER

The Library as a Hospitable Place

1. *A Welcoming Library: Hospitality and Accessibility*1
CARISSE MICKEY BERRYHILL

2. *Library Anxiety*.....9
SIONG NG

3. *Stephanie and the Study Fern: Designing Restorative Library Spaces with Biophilia, Attention Restoration Theory, and Stress Reduction Theory*19
ELIZABETH “BUFFY” GREENTREE

4. *Theological Library as a Place of Learning, Contemplation, and Encounter*33
MATEJ SAKAČ

Theological School and Library

5. *Designing Library Services to Meet Curriculum Needs*.....43
VINCENT WILLIAMS
6. *Biblioteca Digital Pitts: A Narrative of Developing a Virtual Library for the Hispanic Bible Institutes / Narración del desarrollo de una biblioteca para los institutos bíblicos hispanos*.....53
DÉBORAH ENID ORTIZ-RIVERA
7. *Hungarian Theological Libraries in a New Role*.....63
JUDIT HEGYI AND GABRIELLA NAGYNÉ MAROS
8. *From Coffee to Community: Programming to Support Institutional Mission and Culture*77
JASON FOWLER AND JONATHAN LAWLER

Information Literacy

9. *Cultural Competence as Calling: Theological Librarianship in the Age of Global Theological Education*.....93
SAM NEULSAEM HA
10. *Empowering Theological Research: Promoting Information Literacy in the Digital Age*103
NICOLAS KUSSER
11. *Embedded Librarianship for Enhancing Information Literacy in Zimbabwean Theological Institutions*.....117
MUNYARADZI DECIDE MAGAZENI AND VIMBAI SUPERIOR GOREDEMA

Community Outreach and Engagement

12. *The Theological Library and Its Social Responsibility: A Balance Between Being and Doing*.....133
ASTRID ELENA MARTÍNEZ
13. *Library as a Bridge between the Past and the Present: Genealogy as a Library Service*143
KATARZYNA MARIA GOŁEMBICKA AND ANNA KATARZYNA KRYZA
- Contributors*157

Introduction

KATHARINA PENNER

***T**he *Theological Librarian's Handbook* is a multi-volume guide to theological librarianship, designed to support library staff worldwide who, although not possessing professional training, work in theological libraries. This sixth volume in the series focuses on the principles and practices of effective public services in theological libraries. The contributions that have come together here are as diverse as the felt needs of users whom theological libraries serve around the world. And while no library can provide all possible services, each aims to consider its own context, felt needs, and available personnel and resources when responding to users' needs in the most suitable and effective ways.*

Many best practice examples are shared throughout the volume, enriching everyday library operations, inspiring planning for prospective services, and providing practical solutions when budgets and personnel are tight. They also demonstrate the dedication of

these international authors to librarianship as a ministry, a calling to serve their theological schools and faith communities with their gifts, professional knowledge, and skills.

The contributions demonstrate a theological library's position as a connector: of people to resources, people to people, people to technology, people to physical space, and, through these connections, hopefully also users to themselves. Librarians find themselves at the intersection of and in dialogue with various constituents and departments of theological institutions. They learn to speak the languages and consider the subcultures and needs of students, faculty, and IT personnel. Awareness of such a key position in service requires the development of vital intercultural competencies while attending to diverse user groups. Examples of services for international, nontraditional, minority, and first-generation students are related in this volume, as are principles for considering accessibility issues for persons with visual and hearing impairments and those with physical, technical, and learning challenges. A library's value-driven services¹ must continually evolve and adapt; only by doing so can a theological library remain relevant.

The thirteen contributions are grouped into four sections.

The Library as a Hospitable Place. In a time when digital environments proliferate, the first chapters of the volume emphasize the importance of hospitable, welcoming, and stimulating library spaces.² Carisse Mickey Berryhill develops the concept of hospitable thinking marked by principles such as trust, welcome, imagination, and independence, and suggests applications with respect to library spaces, collections, and services. This chapter is followed by several examples of implementation from different geographical locations and with different emphases. Siong Ng suggests utilizing the Māori holistic model of a house in creating inclusive, spiritually and mentally hospitable spaces, while Elizabeth “Buffy” Greentree draws on Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) to help librarians reimagine their physical libraries as environments of restoration and well-being. Both discuss library anxiety—anecdotally, a common phenomenon—resulting for each generation of users from different causes but with similar symptoms and limitations. Matej Sakač recounts how the intentional redesign transformed a once-desolate seminary library into a vibrant hub of learning, contemplation, and encounter, hosting worship, art, exhibitions, and academic interactions within its space.

Theological School and Library. The subsequent section describes the design and implementation of various services resulting from interactions between constituents of a theological school and its library(ies). Vincent Williams discusses the importance of analyzing curricula and course syllabi for developing library services that effectively respond to users' learning goals and consider various delivery formats. Déborah Enid Ortiz-Rivera narrates the planning, design, and launch of La Biblioteca Digital Pitts, which provides access to high-quality resources for Hispanic Bible institutes, aiming to improve users' academic, theological, cultural, and digital fluencies. Hungarian theological and ecclesiastical libraries are taking on new roles, as observed by Judit Hegyi and Gabriella Nagyné Maros, in supporting academic research and making significant contributions to scholarly communication, visibility of publications, and lifelong learning. Fun educational events and archival exhibitions are the focus of Jason Fowler and Jonathan Lawler's contribution about supporting institutional mission and culture through event programming, which engages the community, tells the story, and fosters a sense of togetherness. While each of these implementations will require adaptation, they serve as inspiring models for librarians worldwide in shaping relevant services within their cultural, economic, and religious contexts.

Information Literacy. The much-discussed area of information literacy receives a specialized perspective in the third section of the volume. Sam Neulsaem Ha discusses how the intercultural sensitivity of a theological librarian can enhance their support for international students who struggle with academic critical thinking and the dynamics of authority, helping the librarian to move beyond sharing technical know-how to cultivating virtues such as humility, compassion, and discernment in theological research. Acknowledging the high degree of interdisciplinarity and methodological diversity in the discipline of theology, Nicolas Kusser encourages librarians to develop skills in supporting a broad spectrum of theological research practices as well as academic integrity, including critical and ethical engagement with information and artificial intelligence tools. Munyaradzi Decide Magazeni and Vimbai Superior Goredema expand the discussion with their empirical research on Zimbabwean theological schools, exploring the value of embedded librarianship in enhancing critical information literacy in faith-based institutions.

Community Outreach and Engagement. The volume concludes with two case studies from Colombia and Poland. Astrid Elena

Martínez, using the example of Fundación Universitaria Seminario Bíblico de Colombia, discusses the library's commitment to creating inclusive spaces for vulnerable populations, identifying educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, and forming ethical approaches to information use. Katarzyna Maria Gołembicka and Anna Katarzyna Kryza, finally, highlight the role of theological libraries, often holders of church archives and other grey literature, as a bridge between past and present and a natural place to support genealogical research. In this way, theological libraries support the preservation of memory, foster an understanding of their local communities' past, and cultivate intergenerational bonds.

We hope the international readership of this volume will be encouraged and inspired by the innovative initiatives and the clear user-orientedness of the authors—fellow librarians under personnel, time, and budget pressures. While understanding and embracing the ethical principles, values, and cultural competencies a theological librarian needs to pursue in their work in collaboration with various stakeholders, we learn together to utilize best practices and organize the library's physical and virtual spaces, as well as communicate and promote the theological library's collections and services.

References

- Carr, Nicholas. 2025. "Nicholas Carr on AI Doctors and Internet Edgelords." Interview by Russell Moore. *Christianity Today*, July-August. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/07/nicholas-carr-ai-doctors-internet-edgelord>.
- Keck, Andrew J. 2013. "The Value of Theological Libraries." *Summary of Proceedings: Sixty-Seventh Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association*: 10–15.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Andy Keck's (2013) affirmation that values in a theological library extend to their collections, to people (users, staff, other stakeholders), and to place, physical and digital; cf. also the contribution by Jason Fowler and Jonathan Lawler in this volume.
- 2 This resonates with observations by Nicholas Carr (2025), a long-time observer of developments in the digital sphere, who in a recent interview with Russell Moore in *Christianity Today* suggested that humans are "profoundly ill-suited" for online-only lives.

***The Library as a
Hospitable Place***

A Welcoming Library

Hospitality and Accessibility

“I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.”

– Revelation 3:20, New Revised
Standard Version Updated Edition

CARISSE MICKEY BERRYHILL

Since suffering a back injury, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of accessibility in public places. I recently spent a week at an academic conference at a grand old hotel, which, because of its “historic building” status, is mainly exempt from many current regulations about accessibility accommodations. I was constantly distracted by the numerous small discomforts and adjustments I had to make just to meet my needs and to navigate around using my walker. This required energy that, in a more considerate setting, could have been better invested in attention to the purposes of the conference.

While it’s true that there are often legal accessibility requirements in municipalities and states, those rules can be unevenly

applied or even absent. In locations affected by war or disaster, library staff must be sensitive to guests who have suffered debilitating injuries. Theological librarians are not dependent on laws to be hospitable. We have compelling ethical and spiritual resources that can be thoughtfully and prayerfully applied to improve access to library spaces, collections, and services. Among these resources, the principles of hospitality help ensure that libraries are welcoming spaces for visitors who have various limitations.

Principles of hospitality can be creatively adapted to various library settings, even when resources are scarce or local regulations are absent. Fundamentally, hospitality imagines the library experience differently by putting oneself in the guest's place.

To develop hospitable thinking, theological librarians attend to their own core values. Because theological communities value human life and virtues, librarians affiliated with these communities query their spiritual resources for principles of service to all readers. Welcome, not mere legal compliance, promotes the flourishing of the community as a whole.

1. **Principles of hospitality** enable the library to be gracious to its guests. Hospitality developed in antiquity as a social code to protect both villagers and traveling strangers. As sojourners, guests enter a social situation where they are not at home. Both the guest and the host are vulnerable because they are unknown to each other. Ancient humane principles of hospitality have guided hosts and guests around the world and throughout history in homes and communities. They are useful today in libraries, too.
2. The **principle of trust** protects both the guest and the host, providing confidence that the “do no harm” principle applies equally. The decision to trust is based on a social contract negotiated at entry. Both guest and host agree not to abuse that trust. In antiquity, the social contract was negotiated by testing the guest. A guest who passed the test was received into protected status. In modern societies, credentials or registration serve the function of identifying the guest. Reciprocally, the library provides access to the resources the guest seeks and protects confidential information about the guest.

3. The **principle of welcome** receives the presence of the guest as a gift, not a problem. In antiquity, the sojourner brought news, perhaps tales of adventures, or ballads. Theological librarians have the spiritual capacity to see every person as created by God and endowed with unique gifts. As the Lord said, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me” (NRSVUE, Rev. 3:20). The phrase, “and you with me,” shows hospitality is not one-way. In the divine economy, it is reciprocal. The guest brings a blessing. A librarian who understands this principle welcomes each guest.
4. The **principle of imagination** seeks attentive understanding of what the guest’s needs might be by imagining oneself as the guest, carefully observing the library’s spaces, decentering the librarian’s own experience, and centering the potential guest’s experience of the spaces and services. There are many resources to which a librarian can turn for help (see the list at the end of this chapter and the following essays). But the most important resource is the librarian’s commitment to imagining how a guest might experience the library so that a thoughtful welcome will meet the needs of the library’s visitors.
5. The **principle of independence** pre-considers strategies of accommodation so that the guest will not be required to ask for help to access the library and its resources. Autonomy and dignity go together. If instruction about the use of library tools is needed, the goal is to prepare the guest to function as independently as possible. A hospitable library has physical arrangements that liberate its guests to focus their energy not on gaining access but on achieving their information goals, consulting with the librarian if desired about sources useful to that end.

Spaces

As we consider hospitable thinking, the place to begin is with the physical spaces of the library, imagining ourselves with whatever

mobility, sensory, and communicative differences may characterize the guests we will welcome to the library.

If we stand outside the library, it is useful to ask the following: What approach to the library's doors is available for a mobility-limited visitor? Is that access route clearly marked? Are there stairs at the front of the library, or is there a ramp to the door? If not, can we imagine how to smooth the path for a visitor with mobility limitations? Is there an automatic door opener at the entry? If not, is there a doorbell to request entry? Failing that, can a library worker see that someone is at the door and go open the door? At the entry, is directional signage clearly visible, with good visual contrast? Are directional signs posted in local languages?

Once inside the library, can we visually identify the main service point? Does that service point have a lowered counter section so the guest can sit directly across from or beside a library worker? Are interior signs that direct visitors to emergency exits, restrooms, service points, collection areas, and worktables clear, posted at a visible height for a wheelchair user, and in local languages? If there is a separate help desk, does it have appropriate signage, seating, and consultation space?

As we imagine settling in to work, we evaluate whether readers' tables are at a height a wheelchair will fit under. Is there sufficient clearance around the tables for a visitor's assistive device, such as a scooter, wheelchair, walker, or crutches? Or are there too many chairs around tables? If so, who will notice that problem and move some chairs aside? If the guest is in a section of the library not visible from the help desk, can they request assistance via cell phone or a library pager?

At break time, are the restrooms accessible to people with disabilities? Are toilet compartments large enough for wheelchair entry and transfer? Are there handrails beside the toilets? Can a guest in a wheelchair reach the sink, the hand soap, and the paper towels? If the library is in an area where such fixtures are not required by law, assistance must be improvised. The library could even supply a trained gender-appropriate helper if the physical design of the building is inadequate for independent use.

Collections

Access to the library's collections must also be hospitably imagined from the perspective of the guest who may have mobility, sensory, or communicative differences. Most print collections are shelved in stacks that require reaching, lifting, or bending to get a book. How tall are the stacks? Are the aisles between ranges of shelves wide enough for access? Are library collections shelved on more than one floor? If so, is there an elevator or ramp? If not, how can a guest request help retrieving a book? Is there an alternative to patron retrieval, such as a paper call slip or a request system accessible through a cell phone? Does the catalog software provide an option to generate a list and send it to the library desk for retrieval?

Are sources available in local languages? Is directional signage available in local languages? Are descriptive materials about exhibits, services, and the building available in local languages in print or online? Is signage in large print with high contrast?

Electronic and media collections present significant challenges to people with sensory limitations, such as impaired vision. If we provide electronic collections, what assistive technologies should accompany them? If the library cannot afford assistive technologies, imagine how library staff will be trained to work effectively alongside guests. Is the library's catalog online? Where are the terminals to access the catalog? Do they require standing, or can a seated user reach them?

Even a small collection of children's books and child-sized furniture offer a welcome to a visiting parent and children who accompany them. I used to keep a box of small dime-store plastic critters—dinosaurs, reptiles, bugs—in a bottom drawer to give to children. As the parent and child left the library, the parent would report that the child had behaved well. I would open the drawer and say, "Pick the one that will gross out your mother the most." That produced giggles and continued good behavior on the next visit.

Services

For many librarians, the traditional "reference interview" is central to providing hospitable service. Library visitors, however, may think

asking for help is “interrupting.” A seated librarian may look “too busy” to be interrupted, barricaded behind a counter and computer monitor. Access and welcome are communicated not only by eye contact and a smile, but also by furniture placement that facilitates side-by-side conversation. Counter height can be a significant barrier, especially for guests who use wheelchairs. So, we must imagine creative ways to present ourselves as welcoming.

Imagine how different the welcome would be if a library staff member were to meet guests at the door and walk a little way with them into the library. Such a conversation will naturally lead to learning what the visitor has come to accomplish, guiding the guest to good resources, and assisting their getting settled at a workstation to search the library’s catalog or databases. This library welcome is also very useful in understanding what accessibility needs the guest may have, without the guest having to point them out.

When libraries provide programs, hospitality requires exhibits, special programs, and instructional sessions be thoughtfully designed to engage all guests, including those with sensory limitations such as impaired sight or hearing, mobility issues, or communicative differences. In some cases, programs may need to be presented in more than one language, with a translator present to provide sign language or oral interpretation. Illustrative materials should be designed for low vision or color blindness. A guest with speech difficulties might prefer to participate by writing or drawing. Library programs should not only be useful but also accessible to a wide range of guests. It might be effective to ask attendees to register in advance and to indicate which accommodations, if any, would be helpful.

In general, legal codes require architectural adaptations to ensure accessibility by large assistive devices, such as ramps for wheelchairs, wider doors, and electric door openers, among other measures. But where such remedies are not legally required, we must imagine a plan to create a welcoming space where the visitor can be as independent as possible. When the welcome requires direct assistance, the library staff provides it graciously and immediately. No one is too busy to be considerate.

Guests with disabilities may sometimes be accompanied by a caregiver. Librarians should communicate directly with the guest first, and only secondarily with the caregiver. People with accessibility limitations often prefer to help themselves and may even refuse offered help. Therefore, librarians, respecting the principle of

independence, need to have the sensitivity and imagination to have already, in advance, arranged the library's spaces and services so self-help is possible.

Some librarians may fear accessibility is expensive. The expenses of library hospitality may be less than expected. Even if funds may not allow for modifications of the building or shelving or the purchase of high-end technology, librarians with hospitable imaginations may use thoughtful furniture arrangement, a wooden ramp, some printed or hand-lettered signs with high contrast, cell phone apps, and—most of all—courteous interest to bridge the gaps between a guest's limitations and their successful use of the library. Where there are not sufficient financial resources to carry out physical modifications to the building, staff training and imagination can still welcome the guest with courtesy and dignity.

Training library staff for assistance to library guests should be routine. For example, library staff should try to navigate the library's entry, workspaces, restrooms, and stacks in a wheelchair or with crutches so their imaginations are informed by physical rehearsal. The librarian will incorporate accessibility training into the orientation of new library staff, such as seminary students. Asking student employees to conduct periodic accessibility audits will help them learn to see and correct impediments.

Employees of the library and library volunteers may themselves have mobility, sensory, or communicative limitations, either temporary or permanent. I know of one library whose most efficient shelver for many years was a barely verbal volunteer. In another case, a volunteer with severe mobility limitations cataloged hundreds of items. Attentive conversation and collaboration with such library workers will significantly help the librarian imagine how spaces, collections, and services can be more accessible.

The theological librarian's commitment to the principles of hospitality sets the tone for all the library's services, as manifested in its resources and physical layout. This commitment springs not merely from legal requirements but from the librarian's spiritual and ethical values, which affirm human dignity and agency. The hospitality principles of trust, welcome, imagination, and independence empower the librarian to welcome each guest as a blessing.

Recommended open-access resources

Library Accessibility Alliance. 2024. *Resources*. <https://libraryaccessibility.org/resources>.

Sherman, Melina. 2022. *Accessibility in Libraries: A Landscape Review*. American Library Association and Knology. <https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/tools/content/230317-ppo-ltc-access-landscape-review-UPDATE.pdf>.

Winkelstein, Julie A., and Nancy Bolt, eds. 2024. *IFLA Guidelines for Making Libraries Accessible for People with Disabilities*. IFLA Equitable and Accessible Library Services Section. <https://repository.ifla.org/handle/20.500.14598/3719>.

World Health Organization and World Bank. 2011. *World Report on Disability*. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/44575>.

Related material by Carisse Mickey Berryhill

Berryhill, Carisse M. 2005. "From Dreaded Guest to Welcoming Host: Paul and Hospitality in the Book of Acts." In *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement*, edited by Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann. Wipf and Stock.

Berryhill, Carisse M. 2013. "The Guest Brings the Blessing: Hospitality in Theological Librarianship." *Summary of Proceedings: Sixty-seventh Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association*: 84-89. <https://serials.atla.com/proceedings/issue/view/43>.

Library Anxiety

SIONG NG

In the twenty-first century, information professionals often juggle increasing workloads and conflicting priorities in their day-to-day jobs. As a result, users' well-being and needs might slip from their primary focus. Library anxiety is not a new phenomenon, as researchers such as Mellon (1986), Onwuegbuzie et al. (2004), and Shelmerdine (2018) have shown in their important studies on students' anxiety. They document feelings and behaviours that surface when using a library or, worse, that actually prevent students from using it. Carlile (2007) states that library anxiety is more prevalent in stressful situations, places, or contexts, and, unsurprisingly, it also occurs among students in theological academic libraries. The level of anxiety can be extreme. It varies from feeling less confident to outright phobia. The argument is supported by other researchers (Shelmerdine 2018), who suggest that librarians often inadvertently create barriers that hinder library access and use. However, they are

also the ones who can change the mindset of users and address student anxiety.

With the proliferation of online social media and artificial intelligence, library users may still struggle to form genuine community connections, despite their efforts to do so (Dezuanni and Osman 2024). The lack of connection and relationship is unsurprising, as users come with various life experiences. They could be mature returning students who are not entirely fitting in among their younger peers, or they might differ culturally and consequently not have been treated with respect. As a result, social isolation and detachment can lead to nervousness when entering public spaces, using library resources, or asking for librarian assistance.

Information professionals are key collaborators. For decades, librarians have worked diligently to address social issues, promote inclusion, ensure equal access to information, and foster digital literacy (Dezuanni and Osman 2024). Although numerous studies have shown that the provision of information literacy skills and structured access pathways by information professionals can alleviate student anxiety (Carlile 2007), this intervention alone may be insufficient. A more holistic and culturally responsive approach necessitates the integration of processes that build meaningful relationships. We, therefore, have an important role in creating a welcoming environment for users, whether online or in person, to reduce or eliminate any barriers that might cause them anxiety when accessing information.

Evaluating who our clients are and understanding their needs is crucial in the process. This work is supported by Hayes (2013), who argues that developing strategies must consider the cultural embeddedness of library users. For example, New Zealand should consider the *Kaupapa Māori* (Māori-focused) approach rather than relying primarily on Western ideas. Based on the Māori holistic model *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (Durie 1998, 69), this chapter discusses how librarians can holistically address barriers and feelings of intimidation, understand different cultural values and practices (*tikanga*), advocate for user accessibility in services, and encourage building relationships between library staff and students. The model is based on the four pillars of a house and emphasizes the importance of integrating and connecting the pillars (Durie 1998). By embedding this relational framework into library practice, professionals can more effectively address the complex and often under-recognized dimensions of library anxiety experienced by diverse user groups.

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

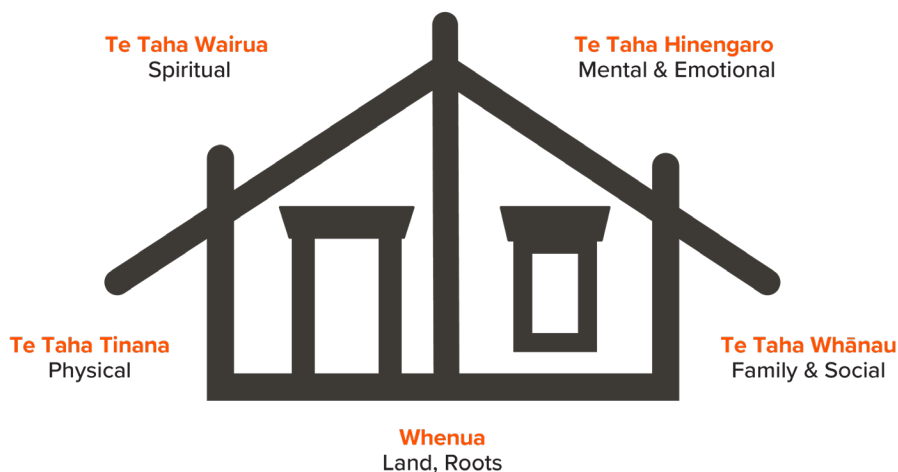


Fig. 1. Māori wellbeing model.

Taha Wairua (*Spiritual*)

As users come from diverse life experiences and have varying spiritual needs, providing a welcoming and respectful experience while meeting the user's library needs is therefore essential. For instance, in a physical library, is there a section where users can meditate or pray without interruption? Are users with different spiritual beliefs provided with the same level of support?

Ha and Verishagen (2015) state the importance of providing a space for “conversation learning, experimenting and reflecting” (189). This pillar includes not only a reflection of the person's spiritual stand but also the connection with the environment. It encourages connecting with the environment, such as “land, lakes, mountains, and reefs that have spiritual significance” (Durie 1998, 70). Do the physical and online library settings connect to the known and stimulating environment? The biophilic concept, which focuses on connecting users to the natural environment when designing spaces, has proven beneficial as it improves the mental health, well-being, and productivity of users in the library (Peters and D’Penna 2020). This concept is more crucial than ever in the post-COVID-19 era, when users might be anxious about entering indoor settings.

Taha Hinengaro (*Mental and Emotional*)

The next pillar focuses on “expressing thoughts and feelings” (Durie 1998, 70). Durie argues that communication goes beyond just words. Body expression can sometimes signal interest in communicating with the other party. Like many cultures, Māori emphasize building relationships (*whanaungatanga*). Such focus will help us understand our users’ thoughts and feelings. It requires time, energy, and *aroha* (love). To address the feeling of loss of community that can occur when users are reduced to accessing the library only remotely, creative efforts in building online connections are vital. They often have the advantages of enabling a more diverse spectrum of interactions and potentially reducing the fear of communicating face to face (Dezuanni and Osman 2024).

At the Carey Baptist College Library in Auckland, New Zealand, library staff created an asynchronous course, called First Steps, for distance students. The course covers an introduction to the college, library skills, academic integrity, referencing, and plagiarism. There are also sections on academic writing and learning skills. This course was developed six years ago to respond to the diversity among college students. Students experiencing limitations or those who are hesitant to ask for assistance due to cultural barriers can seek basic training through the course. In the course, students can express their concerns with one another using Padlets. There are also several recorded videos aimed at introducing key support staff to students and orienting them to study in the course. We believe this is one way we can connect to distance students.

Taha Tinana (*Physical*)

Taha tinana focuses on various issues that contribute to users’ physical well-being (Durie 1998) and, therefore, reduce library anxiety. Care and attentiveness in this area can be demonstrated by providing easy accessibility for users, such as ramps for wheelchair access to the building, or by supplying captions for recorded instructional videos to support users who have hearing difficulties. Moreover, the positive physical presence of a librarian or information professional can help alleviate anxiety, particularly in culturally inclusive

environments where foundational understanding is respected and access barriers have been removed.

Looking after the physical aspects of well-being involves not only librarians but also administrators, policymakers, and lecturers collaborating to develop support for users. The metaphor of *raranga* (weaving) illustrates this: it underlines that no single unit can be effective when standing alone; a collective effort is required. Many strings are needed to be suitably woven into a strong and usable item, such as a basket.

Taha Whānau (*Family and Social*)

Family, in a broad sense, and their beneficial influences can help overcome barriers, which will build confidence in addressing anxiety. A well-known Māori proverb states, “I come not with my own strengths but bring with me the gifts, talents, and strengths of my family, tribe, and ancestors” (*Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*). Family is understood not only in biological terms but also in cultural and emotional (Durie 1998). Moreover, it also “relates to identity and a sense of purpose” (72).

One example is the Cartonera project initiated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Special Interest Group, Religion: Libraries and Dialogue (RELINDIAL), which encourages the creation of handmade books from recycled materials (The Relindial Cartonera Project, n.d.). This inclusive and low-cost initiative fosters community engagement by bringing together individuals of diverse ages, backgrounds, and beliefs in a collaborative and creative process. By enabling participants to craft together and share their stories in an accessible and meaningful format, projects like Cartonera offer theological libraries a practical means of enhancing social inclusion and reducing anxiety associated with unfamiliar or unwelcoming spaces.

In the context of a theological library, several questions require reflection. Do we organize events that celebrate the family as a unit? For instance, we can invite family members to attend orientation. Does our collection take into account the languages and backgrounds of users? Do we welcome children in the library, and do the displays and signage in the library building reflect diversity? When the users’

mana (pride) has been respected, they will find their identity and purpose, and have confidence in asking for assistance.

Sometimes, the library is the *whānau* (family) for users. For example, international students with few friends or relatives in the country will find a library to be a social gathering space. When one user sees the library as a safe space, we are on the winning team, as they will likely promote it to their peers. However, we shall not overwhelm our users with knowledge, but rather connect and guide the information-seeking process, by which both parties can discover things together, and users feel they can contribute and learn something new in the process (Shelmerdine 2018). This is similar to a Māori concept of *ako* (learn), by which all parties can learn and discover things, and it is not solely based on a teacher-and-student way of learning.

Sadly, research has shown that theological libraries often do not welcome children, and this can cause anxiety during school holidays when parents need to juggle childcare and studies (Keyes 2017). In light of these challenges, it is essential to explore inclusive, community-centred strategies that foster connection across generations within library walls. A promising approach is to foster intergenerational storytelling, improving this way of expression and connection and contributing to users' mental health. Dezuanni and Osman (2024) suggest that shared storytelling across generations can help bridge social and cultural divides by creating spaces for mutual understanding and relationship-building.

Conclusion

Reducing library anxiety in the twenty-first century requires more than just addressing the physical or cognitive barriers users may face. A holistic approach, rooted in the Māori model of *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, provides a more inclusive and culturally sensitive framework that integrates the diverse needs of library users. Each of the four pillars plays a critical role in shaping a theological library's environment and fostering a welcoming space.

It is crucial that information professionals recognize library anxiety is not just an individual issue but a collective one that calls for a collaborative, relational approach. By building meaningful connections through *whanaungatanga* (relationships) and embracing the

richness of diverse cultural values and life experiences, librarians can alleviate the barriers that hinder users from fully engaging with library resources.

This requires more than attractive design and physical accessibility. It calls for a shift in mindset, one by which libraries become places of connection, reflection, and mutual learning. Whether through intergenerational storytelling initiatives, digital support systems like asynchronous courses, or creating spaces where users feel valued and respected in their own right, the library's role as a community hub can be a powerful tool for reducing anxiety.

Ultimately, by weaving these elements together in a supportive, inclusive, and culturally responsive manner, libraries can help transform the user experience and empower individuals to use library resources confidently and without fear. By embodying the principles of *ako*—by which learning is a shared process—libraries can stand as pillars of support and places where users not only gain knowledge but also experience a sense of belonging.

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Stephanie and the Study Fern

Designing Restorative Library Spaces with Biophilia, Attention Restoration Theory, and Stress Reduction Theory

ELIZABETH “BUFFY” GREENTREE

The Dread before the Door

Stephanie is nearing the end of her first year of a Master of Divinity and is about to cry. There is no single trigger—just the slow, cumulative unraveling of fatigue, shame, and mental exhaustion. Last night’s assignment is still unfinished; today’s three-hour Old Testament lecture was lost before it could even be remembered. She just wants to go home to bed. Instead, she is facing five more hours hunched over a desk in stifling silence. She has exhausted every online resource—the library is the only option left. She stares blankly at the keypad before trying the code a third time. Ready for the worst, she steps into the library and stops....

What happens next depends on how librarians view the library: as a static repository of printed material, or as a dynamic service that

shapes the user's experience. Whether we realise it or not, we help determine Stephanie's emotional state while she is in the library.

The Librarian's Challenge

Theological librarians serve diverse communities across a wide range of contexts—from academic institutions to church libraries and public collections. Whether patrons are preparing sermons, writing essays, or seeking spiritual insight, the work they do in the library demands deep focus. Like Stephanie, many arrive already fatigued by life, ministry, and study. These challenges are further compounded by the aftereffects of the pandemic's restrictions, resulting in lingering anxiety toward indoor environments. In such conditions, traditional library settings, characterised by silence, stillness, and prolonged concentration, may feel more suffocating than supportive. Librarians, therefore, are challenged to consider how to provide spaces that not only accommodate study but also actively restore well-being.

Mental Fatigue: Fruitless and Frustrating

Stephanie demonstrates several signs of mental fatigue, including making frequent errors (Kaplan 1995), difficulty focusing and planning (Pham and Sanocki 2024), and a negative attitude toward related tasks (Liu et al. 2024). Being in such a state not only makes the prospect of working in a library unappealing, but the results of that work can be fruitless and frustrating as well. “Directed attention plays an important role in human information processing: its fatigue, in turn, has far-reaching consequences” (Kaplan 1995, 169). William James first contrasted directed (or voluntary) and passive (nonvoluntary) attention in 1890. He defined directed attention as the mind's ability to focus on a particular object or thought while filtering out distractions. This active selection process requires sustained mental effort, which over time leads to its depletion and resulting mental fatigue. One hundred thirty years later, in a world constantly vying for our attention, our use of directed attention has grown (Rodwick 2022), but not our opportunities for recovery.

Stephanie's desire to cry is a sign that she is also suffering the physiological symptoms of stress. The negative effects of stress are being observed across society due to changes in modern lifestyles (Liu et al. 2024), particularly among university students as they contend with societal, life, and academic pressures (Song et al. 2024). Stress, as opposed to mental fatigue, refers to the psychological and physiological responses to a situation that threatens one's well-being (Ulrich et al. 1991). "This difference is important because stress does not always cause mental fatigue and mental fatigue does not always cause some of the most common symptoms of stress" (Diller 2014, 20). In simpler terms, attention fatigue is the feeling that one's brain just will not work anymore, while stress is the feeling of a body on high alert. The answer to both of these, supported by psychological and environmental research, lies significantly in our connection to nature.

Reduction and Restoration

Research in Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART), which originated in environmental psychology, consistently demonstrates the effectiveness of experiences with nature as a means of recovering from the physiological and psychological aspects of stress and rejuvenating depleted attentional resources.

The first of these two theories to emerge was SRT, primarily associated with Roger Ulrich and his work, which began in the 1980s. The theory suggests that exposure to natural settings triggers rapid, automatic physiological responses that reduce stress, such as lowered heart rate and blood pressure, in measurable ways.

One of Ulrich's (1984) original studies into the physiological effects of exposure to natural elements monitored patients recovering from surgery. Within the same hospital setting, some rooms were situated with a window view of a natural setting, while others had views of brick walls. He found that those with windows were discharged from the hospital earlier, took less potent pain medication, and nurses noted more positive behavioral patterns.

A decade later, Stephen Kaplan (1995) formalised the ART, which focuses on ways to restore the mental reserve of direct attention, rather than reducing the physiological effects of stress. Similar to SRT, studies have provided substantial evidence for the role of

experiences with nature in rejuvenating attention. In a study conducted at the University of Melbourne, 150 university students were required to complete an attention-intensive task and then given a forty-second micro-break before repeating the same task. In those forty seconds, some students had a view of a green rooftop, while others had a bare concrete one. Lee et al. (2015) found that, during the second attempt, those who had looked at the green rooftop had significantly higher accuracy and greater consistency in response time.

In summary, attention restoration is refreshing the mind, while stress reduction is calming the body. Underlying both ART and SRT is a more fundamental truth: our bond with the natural world is not incidental, but intrinsic. As theological librarians, these insights resonate deeply—they reflect values of creation care and our God-given connection to the world around us. Our libraries are not merely academic spaces, but places of formation, rest, and spiritual engagement. This is the heart of the biophilia hypothesis.

Biophilia: Life-Loving

The term “biophilia”—from the Greek *bios* (life) and *philia* (love)—was popularised by E. O. Wilson (1984) and later refined by Stephen Kellert (Kellert and Wilson 1993; see also Kellert et al. 2008).¹ It suggests that humans have an innate need to connect with nature. Kellert, in particular, explored how this affinity influences emotional, cognitive, and even spiritual well-being. Throughout his lifetime of work, he discovered that environments that reflect natural forms, processes, and patterns not only reduce stress but also support creativity, concentration, and overall well-being: “One of the great challenges of our time is to bring the beneficial experience of nature into the design of contemporary buildings, landscapes, communities, and cities. Devising strategies for including the natural experience in these built structures requires engaging all of the broad tenets and principles of biophilic design” (Kellert 2018, vii).


While initially applied to homes, workplaces, and hospitals, these insights are equally valuable in learning spaces—especially libraries. Biophilic design invites us to think beyond potted plants or skylights. It asks how space can evoke a sense of refuge, curiosity, and connection. For theological libraries, the implications are

deeply resonant: could our spaces not only house sacred texts, but also embody sacred rhythms of restoration?

Implementing Biophilic Design

Architects and environmental psychologists have developed many ways to incorporate biophilic elements. One organising structure that is often used was developed by Kellert and Calabrese (2015), who suggested grouping attributes of the natural world into three categories based on the type of experience they evoke. Browning et al. (2024) provided further details by identifying fifteen key biophilic design patterns within these three categories. The tables below introduce each element within its category, including a guide on how to recognise it in everyday spaces, an example and some initial ideas for practical implementation in theological libraries. For a guide on evaluating and applying these principles to one’s own library, please see the supplementary booklet *The Study Fern Workbook: A Practical Guide to Biophilic Design in Theological Libraries* on the Atla Open Press site: <https://books.atla.com/atlapress/catalog/book/109>.


I. Nature in the Space (Direct Experience): Providing connections to nature within the library environment, like bringing in plants.²



PATTERN	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	LIBRARY POSSIBILITIES	EXAMPLES
<p>Visual Connection with Nature</p>	<p>Can you see plants, water, or other natural elements from inside the library?</p>	<p>Position chairs near windows, add indoor plants, and hang landscape art.</p>	

<p>Nonvisual Connection with Nature</p>	<p>Can you hear natural sounds, feel a natural breeze, or smell natural scents?</p>	<p>Open windows for fresh air, introduce subtle natural sounds, and use gentle scents.</p>	
<p>Nonrhythmic Sensory Stimuli</p>	<p>Do you notice gentle, shifting movement or light, like dappled shadows or rustling leaves?</p>	<p>Let light filter through blinds or patterned window film; hang mobiles or gentle wind chimes.</p>	
<p>Thermal and Airflow Variability</p>	<p>Does the space feel the same everywhere, or are there natural shifts in temperature and airflow?</p>	<p>Open windows when possible; use fans to create gentle air movement; allow for cooler and warmer spots.</p>	
<p>Presence of Water</p>	<p>Can you see, hear, or touch water?</p>	<p>Add a tabletop fountain or aquarium; place seating near views of rain or outside water features.</p>	


<p>Dynamic and Diffuse Light</p>	<p>Does the light in the space change during the day, rather than staying flat and harsh?</p>	<p>Use sheer curtains or light-diffusing blinds; add lamps to create softer pools of light.</p>	
<p>Connection with Natural Systems</p>	<p>Do you notice signs of seasons, weather, or time of day in the space?</p>	<p>Place displays near windows to showcase changing seasons; use seasonal plants or decorations inside.</p>	





II. Natural Analogues (Indirect Experience): *Using representations of nature in material, form, and pattern.*

PATTERN	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	LIBRARY POSSIBILITIES	EXAMPLES
<p>Biomorphic Forms and Patterns</p>	<p>Do shapes, patterns, or decorations remind you of forms in nature?</p>	<p>Choose curved furniture; add textiles or artwork that have plant patterns; avoid only-straight lines.</p>	

<p>Material Connection with Nature</p>	<p>Do you see or touch natural materials, such as wood, stone, or wool?</p>	<p>Use wood finishes for furniture; add stone surfaces; include natural fabrics (cotton, wool).</p>	
<p>Complexity and Order</p>	<p>Does the space strike a balance between richness and variety, while maintaining a sense of order?</p>	<p>Layer textures and displays thoughtfully; create visual interest without clutter.</p>	

III. Nature of the Space (Spatial Experience): *Designing spatial configurations that reflect natural landscapes and evoke similar emotional responses.*

PATTERN	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	LIBRARY POSSIBILITIES	EXAMPLES
<p>Prospect</p>	<p>Can you look out over a distance, seeing clearly across a space?</p>	<p>Position study spaces to overlook the room or outdoors; clear shelves or partitions to provide a line of sight across the library.</p>	

<p>Refuge</p>	<p>Are there small, sheltered spots where someone can feel safe and enclosed?</p>	<p>Add high-back chairs; create cozy corners or screened-off study areas.</p>	
<p>Mystery</p>	<p>Does the layout invite you to explore, with partial views or hidden corners?</p>	<p>Arrange shelves or plants to create gentle pathways; tuck away a special reading nook for added comfort.</p>	
<p>Risk/ Peril</p>	<p>Is there a mild sense of excitement or thrill, paired with safety?</p>	<p>Display items in high places; create mezzanine or balcony study spots (if safe); use traditional library ladders.</p>	
<p>Awe</p>	<p>Does any part of the space make you feel wonder, reverence, or beauty?</p>	<p>Utilize uplighting for high ceilings; display sacred art or large-scale natural imagery to create a focal point for reflection.</p>	

Creating a Tapestry

While every biophilic intervention offers benefits, the consensus in biophilic design research and practice suggests layering multiple biophilic patterns: “Incorporating a diverse range of design strategies can accommodate the needs of various user groups from differing cultures and demographics and create an environment that is psycho-physiologically and cognitively restorative” (Browning et al. 2024, 16). This approach is particularly true when Browning et al.’s patterns are selected from across Kellert and Calabrese’s (2015) three categories, often leading to a more profound and synergistic effect than focusing solely on one category. The cross-selection helps create a rich tapestry of natural connections, by which each enhances the other, as can be seen in the examples below.

Example 1: The Contemplative Reading Nook

Position a high-back armchair (Refuge—Category III) upholstered in natural fabrics, such as wool or cotton (Material Connection with Nature—Category II), beside a window offering views of trees or the sky. Where views are limited, a high-quality landscape print can evoke a similar effect (Visual Connection with Nature—Category I).

Synergy: The visual connection with nature reduces cognitive fatigue; the sense of enclosure fosters emotional safety and focus; and natural materials lend warmth and a sense of grounding. Together, they create a haven for deep thought, spiritual reflection, or personal study.

Example 2: The Collaborative Study Table

Install a rounded, organically shaped study table (Biomorphic Forms and Patterns—Category II) in an area with abundant natural daylight (Dynamic and Diffuse Light—Category I). Arrange seating to offer clear outward views across the library or to windows (Prospect—Category III), allowing for soft visual breaks during study.

Synergy: Natural light boosts alertness and mood; gentle organic curves reduce tension.

Finally, Chucky the Study Fern

For all the theory and planning, sometimes it is the smallest change that makes the biggest difference. My initial step when I began exploring biophilic design was simple: I introduced a single potted plant—a maidenhair fern. One afternoon, noticing it was not getting enough light, I reached to move it when a student looked up in alarm:

“Not Chucky! He’s my study fern!”

And just like that, the little plant had a name, a role, and a quiet presence in someone’s learning experience. We negotiated a small shift in position—just a little closer to the sun—and then all returned to our work, Chucky included.

Designing with biophilia is not about grand gestures. It is about noticing what brings comfort, focus, and delight. As theological librarians, we are stewards of more than books—we are stewards of people, possibility, and peace. Even a fern can be part of that formation.

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Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge that the disconnect from nature since the industrial revolution is perhaps a particularly Western phenomenon, and that many cultures have continued to include natural elements within their architecture, landscapes, and spiritual spaces.
- 2 All photos in this chapter are of the author's own biophilic experiments in the Brisbane School of Theology library. Even the turtle.

Theological Library as a Place of Learning, Contemplation, and Encounter

MATEJ SAKAČ

Theological libraries have traditionally been integral to institutions devoted to the study of theology, philosophy, and related humanistic disciplines. From antiquity onward, books and written materials have been central to theological and philosophical communities, serving as the foundations for reading, interpretation, and scholarly dialogue. Today, many theological libraries remain part of larger institutions, such as seminaries and universities, serving as centers for study and research, and providing access to primary sources, scholarly journals, and the latest works in theology.

Although these resources continue to be beneficial for all users, libraries are facing challenges as their physical spaces are no longer the primary study areas for many. Library reading rooms that once buzzed with academic activity are now empty spaces with little-used collections, a stark contrast to their former selves. Challenges include declining visitor numbers, reduced acquisition of print resources,

financial constraints, and the rapid shift to digital formats. Digital resources, including databases, repositories, and online libraries, are increasingly replacing visits to physical libraries, reshaping how theological research is conducted.

Faced with these changes, the central question emerges: how can theological libraries remain relevant as spaces for research and formation in the digital age? This chapter proposes that a paradigm shift is necessary—one that reimagines the theological library not merely as a repository of books but as a dynamic space of learning, contemplation, and encounter. By creating environments that are attractive, interactive, and engaging, libraries can once again become vital centers within the academic and theological community, appreciated for their space. The purpose of this essay is to explore practical strategies for transforming theological libraries into spaces that foster intellectual growth, spiritual reflection, and meaningful academic engagement.

The Challenge of the Library Space

Upon entering a library, one is immediately surrounded by shelves of carefully organized book collections, desks, and classification systems reflected in both the arrangement of volumes and their call numbers. Many libraries also contain offices, circulation desks, reading lamps, bookstands, chairs and other seating, as well as conference rooms and other areas for library activities. Such spaces are designed to facilitate research and learning. As Bennett (2013) observes, “[t]he physical space is still a place where intellectual attention is refocused and formalized so that the distinct disciplinary context of a shallow and broad search is almost physically manifest or disciplined in the physical library space” (175). The library’s physical space intends to shape a user’s focus on research and investigation.

Even in our increasingly digital, individualized, and privatized world, libraries can offer structure, spaces for concentrated privacy, and areas for group work—features conditioned by the physical space itself (Bennett 2013). However, these days, physical libraries are faced with the question of legitimacy. As Elmborg (2011) notices, the current dominant narrative believes the digital world will replace libraries, forcing them to adapt to market pressures. Corporations like Google claim the information landscape, while bookstores and

coffee shops have become attractive, comfortable physical spaces that create competition for libraries. Libraries often need to find ways to revive their spaces and enhance interaction with their current and future users.

Library spaces are governed by their own internal rules and policies. Every aspect of library operations is designed and directed toward serving the community and its needs and interests. Entering a library means stepping into an environment that is intentionally ordered, in contrast to the often fragmented and disjointed digital world. In a culture of constant change, especially digital change, libraries must consider whether they are willing to adapt to social and cultural shifts and what such adaptation entails. Too often, change is resisted or ignored, rather than being redeemed and reimagined. As Elmborg (2011) continues, “Like cathedrals, temples, and other culturally symbolic spaces, libraries evolved to fill one sociocultural function, and they are so filled with the essence of their identities that they tend to resist appropriation or reinvention” (345). To attract physical visitors and remain relevant, theological libraries must embrace change and discover a pathway to a paradigm shift while continuing their mission. This approach requires creative thinking to adapt the design and atmosphere of available library space in ways that are both contextually relevant and visually appealing.

Library Space as a “Heterotopic Place” and “Third Place”

The library can be defined as a heterotopic place. In Foucault’s (1986) thought, heterotopias are “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). These spaces exist in relation to all other spaces.

The library is such a place with defined rules and spaces for specific use, connected to the outside world and other places and experiences. Nevertheless, it remains a place in its own right. Asserts Foucault (1986), outside relations are defined in written form or through the exchange of knowledge and information:

[T]here are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example, museums and libraries. Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit... the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to Western culture of the nineteenth century. (26)

In this sense, the library continues to play a vital role in society. However, in today's context, it might lose its appeal and function due to appearing strict and rigid—both in physical design and sometimes austere atmosphere (cf. Elmborg 2011, 347). And even though, in the twenty-first century, through digitization and electronic formats, we can build an online archive with more information and materials than any library building can contain, the physical library provides a sense of welcome, community, and enthusiasm for research. For users who haven't had much experience spending time in a physical library, these attributes can be great complements.

Theological libraries, in particular, can become dynamic places of learning, contemplation, and encounter with others, extending beyond their traditional storage function. This perspective requires space to be transformed as areas for open conversation, forums for intellectual exchange and interaction with fellow patrons, and spaces that welcome “positive noise” and engagement. Theological libraries are repositories of knowledge in written form; by utilizing these resources, they can also become spaces where spirituality is cultivated, for example, through practices such as reading scripture aloud, group prayer, or meditating on texts. This way, the library becomes an extension of chapel life and theology classes. Interaction with art, music, and the performing arts, as well as many innovative ideas, could further enrich the space, allowing imagination to play a role in shaping theological education and raising the library's status.

The library, in this way, becomes a “Third Place,” the environment beyond home and work for gathering, connecting, and building community (Elmborg 2011, 348). In interactions with other forms of experiences, the theological library becomes a place of encounter,

combining learning and contemplation, which impacts spiritual formation, intellectual growth, and community building.

The Library of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia

The Library of the Evangelical Theological Seminary represents a unique example of transformation. The seminary was founded fifty-five years ago in the context of Southeast Europe. The library holds around 105,000 volumes and 15,000 journals. For many years, however, a decline in student enrollment meant the library was used primarily by professors and visiting researchers. Despite its ample space for sitting and writing, it remained a sterile space with desks and shelves and was rarely visited by students.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the library and administrative staff recognized the need for change. The large reading room was emptied, and the space was redesigned with a warmer, more welcoming aesthetic. Classical furniture, reading lamps, antique chairs and tables, a wooden desk, carpets, and an exhibition wall were added. In 2023, Romanian evangelical artist Liviu Mocan donated a monumental sculpture, *Altars of Revelation*, measuring nearly four meters in width and five meters in height. Such changes attracted attention.

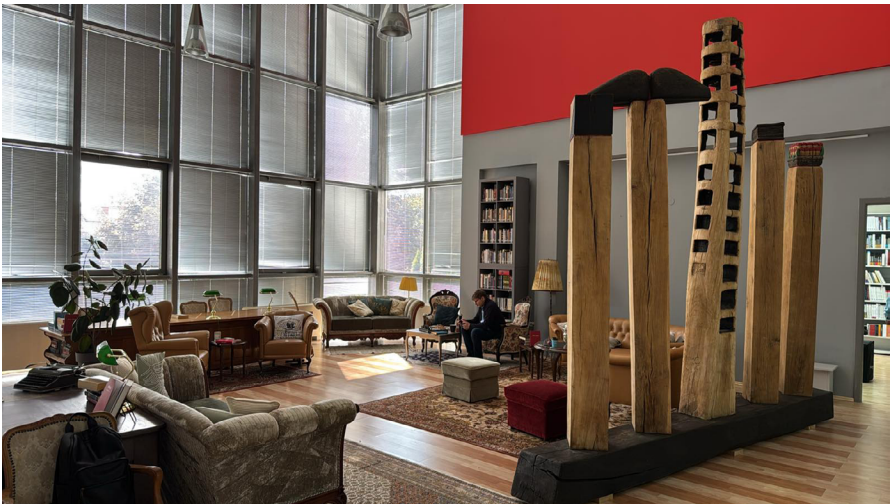


Fig. 1. "The Living Room" of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek

The library's open space was renamed The Living Room. Since then, the library has become the central place of the seminary. Each morning begins with worship, Bible reading, and prayer. After that, it becomes a place for coffee after classes and a gathering place to encounter others. The library hosts exhibitions every few months—book promotions, public lectures, and concerts. What was once an empty and silent room has become a vibrant, multifunctional space, visited by professors, students, administrative staff, and external users.

One professor described this transformation by comparing the library to J. R. R. Tolkien's Hall of Fire in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

Frodo found himself walking with Gandalf. 'This is the Hall of Fire,' said the wizard. 'Here you will hear many songs and tales—if you can keep awake. But except on high days, it usually stands empty and quiet, and people come here who wish for peace and thought. There is always a fire here, all the year round, but there is little other light' (Tolkien 2008, 300).

Similarly, The Living Room offers both quiet contemplation and vibrant communal life, embodying the theological library as a place of learning, encounter, and spiritual formation.

Conclusion

Like Tolkien's Hall of Fire, theological libraries can become lively places of interaction, full of songs and tales, but also places of quietness and meditation. The library can be intentionally designed as a space connected to other areas and human experiences. The community of the theological library can be shaped through various imaginative ideas of learning, contemplation, and encounter with others. In the challenges of the digital era, libraries have the opportunity to engage their users by transforming into community hubs, open spaces, and interactive places where people can share and reflect on their experiences.

The full potential of the library can be realized in today's context by embracing the challenge of change, even if it means a paradigm shift. While every library is different, theological seminaries and their libraries can discover their own approach by observing their

environment, listening to their users, and creatively rethinking how their spaces might invite connection. In doing so, they can reclaim the theological library as more than just a repository of books, but as a vibrant space where intellectual inquiry, spiritual growth, and communal life intersect.

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***Theological School
and Library***

Designing Library Services to Meet Curriculum Needs

VINCENT WILLIAMS

Library alignment with broader institutional goals helps to ensure the library is meeting the needs of its primary users. Without alignment, a library may offer services that are irrelevant to the institution it serves. Seminaries and theological schools, moreover, have a unique mission in forming pastors, clergy, or religious academics. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to library services in these unique contexts. Alignment with the curriculum and educational goals of the wider institution is paramount. Considering those broader goals, libraries should develop strategic plans or mission statements that clearly and explicitly reference the context of their institution. Not all readers will work at member institutions of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Still, the standards ATS has defined for libraries can provide a helpful starting point for ensuring alignment (ATS Commission on Accrediting 2020, 10).

Standard 6.1 reads as follows: “The library has a clear statement that identifies its purpose and role in the school and the ways

it contributes to achieving the school's educational mission." The library should take care that it contributes specifically to the needs of its users and has a purpose shaped by consideration of institutional priorities. In light of this, a mission statement should serve as the foundation for all service development and subsequent evaluation.

Standard 6.2 further explains how the library ought to be understood as "a central academic resource that enhances the school's educational programs." Library staff should regularly review their services. These reviews should check alignment with the library's mission and with institutional needs, which change over time.

Standard 6.6 expounds on this idea in further detail: "The library offers services that enhance student learning and formation and partners with faculty in teaching, learning, and research." Libraries, responding to the unique needs of theological schools, may offer services that serve both academic and spiritual formation purposes (see Elliott 2006 and Welch 2006 for a classic understanding of libraries serving theological schools).

The ATS standards are clear about the importance of aligning the library with the institution. They can guide any librarian, whether subject to ATS standards or not, toward services that directly support the curriculum, faculty, or student research. When determining whether or how to offer a service or program at the library, librarians would do well to ask how the potential program enhances the educational mission of their institution. Being able to offer a clear connection between the program and the educational need should be a prerequisite for implementing the service. While many standard library services will easily meet these criteria, most may be tweaked to deepen their alignment with one's context and therefore optimize the library's effectiveness. The following sections offer more practical guidance on identifying users' needs.

Identify the Curriculum

So, how does one know their institution's curriculum or primary learning objectives? Not all libraries benefit from clear communication from institutional leadership or teaching faculty, so librarians may lack the necessary knowledge to plan effective services. However, this problem is easily solved: just ask! Typically, schools will have foundational documents, such as academic handbooks or

degree plan outlines, that outline the overall objectives of the curriculum and its general sequence. Similarly, most institutions publicly communicate their missions or have strategic plans available to staff upon request.

In some cases, one may need to simply ask appropriate staff personnel for these documents or for access to institutional databases or learning management systems that include them. Even if this information has not yet reached the library, institutional leadership usually appreciates such efforts. Librarians who seek out these course details show a commitment to understanding user needs. Libraries must “take the initiative in determining what the library has to offer that will help,” rather than assuming others will communicate with the library first (Archambault and Masunaga 2015, 504). Librarians are their libraries’ best advocates. They often need to initiate the work of identifying institutional goals and aligning services, because others may not do so.

Review the Programs

If this knowledge is shared in the form of documents, such as handbooks or strategic plans, librarians should carefully review these materials to ensure accuracy and relevance. In my context as our library’s user services librarian, it was part of my job to support our doctoral students with library programming. However, for several years, I did not fully understand that degree program, its educational delivery format, and the primary sequences of assignments, proposals, and theses. While I was offering a standard suite of library services to this group, I was only able to be more effective in serving these students after I took the time to read and annotate the doctoral program handbook fully and set up meetings with the doctoral program staff. I changed the format and timing of library orientations. I also arranged to receive syllabi, which helped me purchase relevant e-books for distance and hybrid students. Finally, I revised my research workshops to better align with thesis requirements. Now, the students and faculty in the doctoral program view the library as a critical partner throughout the program, from year one to the submission of their theses. I have also been a better steward of my time in offering effective programs and a better steward of our collection development funds to meet their stated needs.

Analyze Course Syllabi

One of the primary methods for understanding an institution's overall curriculum is to analyze individual course syllabi, which is sometimes considered part of a wider process called "curriculum mapping" (see Archambault and Masunaga, 2015; LeMire and Graves 2019, for illustrative studies). These documents provide librarians with essential knowledge about how their users are likely to engage with the library in completing their readings, assignments, and papers. Users' needs will be met most effectively when library services are designed around coursework (Smith et al. 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for the library to acquire and analyze course syllabi. Embedding librarians in faculty meetings or giving them access to the institution's learning management system would be an ideal solution. Librarians can collaborate with department heads or academic affairs directors (or their equivalents) to develop policies for submitting syllabi to the library at the beginning of each academic term. However, librarians can also acquire syllabi by simply asking teaching faculty for them directly. The whole institution benefits when librarians are aware of course content and assignments. Librarians are better equipped to serve students and can allocate resources more effectively for collection development. As a result, a synergy develops between the library, teaching faculty, and the academic office as everyone works toward the shared goal of supporting student learning.

When analyzing syllabi, it is prudent to focus on courses in which library use is most central or on those with the largest number of enrolled students. In both cases, the benefit to the analysis is likely the highest, as librarians can design library services to meet the needs that impact the most students (Locker and Whelan 2024). For example, most theological institutions require students in their early years of study to take larger lecture-style classes that introduce them to biblical studies, theology, or preaching. By analyzing the syllabi for these high-enrollment courses, librarians can design services that effectively reach a large number of students. These courses also generally occur early in the academic program, helping set the tone for later library use.

Some libraries may have existing and long-standing instructional programs or relationships with specific faculty members. Nonetheless, librarians should use the results of their syllabus analysis to revisit the effectiveness of existing sessions and adjust them,

wherever necessary, to be more effective in meeting the institution's broader educational goals. It is possible that existing programs may not be as effective as potential new programs identified through this analysis (Alcock and Rose 2016).

In reading syllabi, librarians can ask questions pertaining to books that will be heavily used across courses, assignments that align well with information literacy workshops and classes, special collections content that will enhance coursework, and research guides that can be developed or updated to support students in specific courses. Reading syllabi can help librarians identify instructional opportunities and, crucially, identify ineffective services or programs (Miller 2019). At my institution, for example, I have categorized classes that require research papers, allowing me to target those students with reference or research consultation services. Similarly, I partner with our rare book curator to reach out to faculty members who teach classes with content that overlaps with the strengths of our special collections. For introductory courses, I contact faculty to offer a brief instructional session on the fundamentals of scholarly research in the field. I often use one or two ACRL Information Literacy Frames to shape these sessions (Association of College and Research Libraries 2016). Indeed, one method of reading through syllabi is to identify the specific information literacy skills required for the successful completion of those courses (Beuoy and Boss 2019; Dubicki 2019). At some institutions, syllabi might contain specific learning outcomes for the course that librarians can leverage in their planning. In all cases, it is crucial to design services that closely align with the assignments and content in the courses; therefore, examining the syllabi is paramount.

Deliver Effective Service

As alluded to, several different service-delivery formats may be practical, depending on the librarian's analysis of the syllabi. One might suggest a library-led instructional session during class time or as an optional supplemental activity for students. Other cases may require an asynchronous service model, by which librarians create videos or guides for students to consult as needed. Alternatively, librarians might offer services that are not explicitly tied to any one specific course but simultaneously meet the needs of several courses, such

as workshops intended to help develop students' writing or research skills more broadly. These sessions could still be timed to coincide with when students are working on major assignments, but they do not need to be done in concert with the teaching faculty for a course. If time allows, mix service-delivery formats across the semester. For example, a library may host some events in person and others online. Similarly, one could ensure instructional content is accessible on the library's website, including recorded videos, as well as live face-to-face events. This increases the chance of meeting students' needs, wherever and however they seek help.

As a final note about effective delivery, for librarians starting this process, it can be tempting to try to offer all kinds of services at once. However, they should carefully plan how much effort or change in job responsibilities any of these proposals might require. It is advisable to change only a few services at a time, allowing users to adjust, while also preventing librarians from becoming overwhelmed by trying to do too much. Effectively planning, implementing, and evaluating the types of services most likely to meet users' needs is a multiyear process that should be consciously planned and sequenced to optimize staff availability. For example, in my own context, our rare book outreach service, in partnership with our rare books librarian, has been very successful. However, in the first couple of semesters, we found ourselves overwhelmed with the amount of work required to plan, curate, and teach each session for several classes. To meet those commitments, I had to neglect some responsibilities. It would have been more prudent to start slowly and build up the rare book class program over the course of several semesters rather than getting burned out at the very beginning.

Measure and Communicate Impact

Librarians who undertake this type of curriculum mapping project can also use the results of their analysis to demonstrate the value of their libraries in support of their institutions' educational goals (Miller 2019). They will be able to point specifically to how services and programs have been designed to meet their users' needs and will eventually have data on how they have evaluated the relative success of those programs. To the latter end, maintaining statistics on participation in these services or programs is one effective way

to quantify their impact. Advises Saunders (2015), “[s]ince academic libraries are essentially cost centers rather than revenue producers, it is especially important that they provide evidence of a return on investment to stakeholders” (290). Similarly, analyzing syllabi can also help librarians uncover how faculty view the library or how faculty expect students to use the library (or not). Understanding how faculty position the library within their syllabi can lead to further outreach opportunities for librarians who partner with faculty to accomplish the shared goal of student learning (Jeffery et al. 2017).

When done well, investing upfront time in analyzing institutional context and mapping out curricular needs benefits everyone. Students are better served, faculty have deeper trust in the library, and the learning institution values the library’s contribution to its educational mission. Librarians, too, will sense a greater sense of fulfillment in doing work that best meets users’ needs. While there is certainly no one-size-fits-all approach, the steps described above can inspire libraries to carefully consider the services they offer. Ultimately, it is the librarian’s unique opportunity and responsibility to implement these strategies in accordance with their institution’s needs.

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Biblioteca Digital Pitts

A Narrative of Developing a Virtual Library for the Hispanic Bible Institutes / Narración del desarrollo de una biblioteca para los institutos bíblicos hispanos

DÉBORAH ENID ORTIZ-RIVERA

La Biblioteca Digital Pitts (BDP), a project of the Pitts Theology Library in collaboration with the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH), started services in spring 2024. This project was designed to provide digital library services to Hispanic Bible Institutes (HBIs) certified by AETH. Library services have become a central concern for the HBIs seeking to certify and expand their ministerial formation programs. In most cases, HBIs have relied on their small physical libraries, built mainly with the help of book donations. However, advancements in technology and information, combined with the shift toward distance learning models in theological education, have posed challenges for institutes in providing students with access to high-quality informational resources. HBIs have sought solutions such as sharing agreements with academic libraries in independent seminaries or their denominational schools, subscribing to digital content providers, using

open-access resources, or a combination of these (Hernández et al. 2016). These options have proven insufficient to meet the educational and contextual needs of the HBIs. La Biblioteca Digital Pitts is the first theological library project designed to address the informational needs of the HBIs.

This chapter narrates the planning, design, and launch of BDP, with the aim of providing a model for similar virtual library projects. The first section provides the context of the HBIs in Latino theological education and ministerial formation. The following sections will focus on the technical aspects of setting up the library's page, the informational needs of the HBIs, and content curation for the digital catalogs. We conclude with a summary of the lessons learned, challenges, and hopes for the future of la Biblioteca Digital Pitts.

Hispanic Bible Institutes and the Association for Hispanic Theological Education

The Bible institute, as a product of missionary work, has a long-established presence in Latino Catholic and Protestant communities in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Mexico (Espinosa 2002; Conde-Frazier 2021). Its endurance as a form of lay ministerial formation is linked to the historical limitations on access to formal theological training that Latinos, as an underrepresented group, encountered even in their own denominations (Conde-Frazier 2004; Hinojosa 2014). HBIs offer students a flexible schedule, affordability, and a contextualized education for engaging in lay and pastoral ministry within Latino communities (Espinosa 2002). They can be found as independent institutions within a particular theological tradition, programs preparing ministers for denominational credentials, and local church initiatives for training lay leaders (Conde-Frazier 2004). They have promoted education among Hispanics, serving as a step to pursue other professional training and higher education (Conde-Frazier 2016).

The Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH) was formally organized in 1992 as a network of educators, theologians, leaders, and pastors committed to supporting ministerial formation and theological educational efforts within the Hispanic community, primarily through the work of the HBIs (AETH 2025). It was also the

result of discussions and research on how to strengthen the preparation of Hispanic ministers seeking admission to graduate seminaries, especially since many of them begin their studies at a Bible institute (Hernández et al. 2016). AETH developed a certification process to help HBIs meet the baccalaureate equivalency required for admission to seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (Hernández et al. 2016). One of the requirements is to provide students with library services.

This historical background informed the process that led Pitts Theology Library to collaborate with AETH in the creation of BDP. In 2022, Candler School of Theology of Emory University invited AETH and other organizations to explore creative ways for supporting theological education initiatives aimed at training pastoral leaders in the margins. A series of listening sessions with Latino pastors around the United States provided guidance about their most urgent needs. Candler and AETH then drafted a proposal for a grant of Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative (Candler School of Theology 2022). Candler and AETH would use the grant to develop a series of educational projects, including providing HBIs with ongoing access to bilingual resources to support the formation of pastors and leaders across various traditions. Pitts was to create a bilingual reference and acquisitions librarian position to oversee the project's design and to curate the resources. AETH would partner with Pitts, creating a library services coordinator position for managing the accounts and communications with the HBIs.

Technical Aspects of the Project

Pitts began the digital library project in fall 2023. The first problem to be solved was to find an alternative for external users to access the digital library. Candler's regular students use Emory's Shibboleth system, a software used by universities to provide one sign-in password to students so they can access a variety of digital services, including the library's databases. Pitts was already using OpenAthens, a management and authentication service providing one single account for users in need of accessing multiple systems. OpenAthens was integrated to serve patrons participating in Candler's external programs, such as pastoral continuing education, and whose needs for resources were different than those of regular students. The library

project proposed to extend the same type of access to the students and faculty of participating HBIs. The HBIs are also a larger set of users unaffiliated with Candler's external programs. AETH initially planned for their library coordinator to manage the HBIs' accounts, but soon realized they needed a technician to handle this task. Pitts' digital team trained him on how to use OpenAthens and organize the incoming data from the institutes. AETH's technician eventually developed a platform for centralized data aggregation and management across affiliated institutes. Each institute can also set expiration dates for accounts as students complete their studies. This customized software is an example of the creative and dynamic solutions that have emerged from the virtual library.

Another critical technical aspect was selecting databases that contained academic articles and books. Pitts had already gathered a set of general databases to serve participants in Candler's external programs: Atla Religion Database, Theology and Religion Online, Oxford Reference, Very Short Introductions, and Ministry Matters. However, our digital project required providers that could facilitate curation of English and Spanish content from the United States, Latin America, and Spain. ProQuest Ebook Central (PQEC) seemed to represent our preferred catalog for academic works. An unexpected addition to the set was Overdrive (Libby), which is primarily used by public libraries and could serve as a tool to promote reading and audiobooks.

The final technical aspect for creating the digital library was determining the optimal hosting platform. The primary considerations were system compatibility and design simplicity, as we did not employ a content creator or designer. Securing information and data was also a significant aspect of our deliberations. Among the options were platforms such as Omeka and WordPress, but Springshare would make it easier to share information and tools within Pitts. Springshare enabled easier customization of the library guide for the digital library, helping to distinguish it from Pitts' general guides. Pitts upgraded its Springshare subscription by adding LibWizard and LibConnect to enhance the preparation of surveys, tutorials, documents, and communication sent to users.

Identifying the Needs

Hispanic American theologies emphasize the role of oral traditions and stories, known as *testimonios*, in creative and academic processes. Despite limited research on HBIs, a rich wealth of communal *testimonio* guided the development of the digital library project. Most of this information was derived from the dialogues sponsored by Candler and AETH with Hispanic educators, theologians, and pastors. AETH contributed the knowledge accumulated through decades of conducting studies and working closely with the institutes. Those working on the digital library project were also deeply integrated into the community of Bible institutes, both as learners and educators. However, more information was needed to define the services, as each institute has its own educational programs and methodologies.

We invited the directors of the twelve HBIs to a meeting about the project. We prepared two surveys: one on institutional infrastructure and the other on strategies faculty were using to find resources for their courses. The primary request from the instructors was for additional resources in English and Spanish concerning the context of Latinos in the United States. The information gathered from the surveys was supplemented by researching academic literature on Latino adult learners in the United States and Latin America, with a focus on integrating virtual and distance learning.

The information gathered from the surveys and research helped us to define BDP's mission as follows: "Our mission is to promote academic, theological, digital, and cultural fluency among the Latino communities in the US and Puerto Rico by providing the HBIs with perpetual access to a curated set of bilingual resources to aid the formation of pastoral leaders in many different traditions" (Biblioteca Digital Pitts 2025). The services and library instruction are grounded in helping users to improve their academic, theological, digital, and cultural fluency. It aims to broaden the role of theological libraries in resource sharing with non-higher theological programs.

Curation and Design

The results of the surveys also helped us curate the e-book collections in PQEC and Libby. HBIs were asked to submit lists of the textbooks

used in their courses. Historically, most institutes have relied on a standard curriculum that includes introductions to the Bible, systematic theology, homiletics, and hermeneutics with denominational emphases (Conde-Frazier 2021). Most of the Spanish resources in use were translations from English or Spanish-language titles dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. HBI instructors who had attended graduate seminaries were not sufficiently exposed to Hispanic American and Latin American theologies. We decided to focus on acquiring resources that represent Latina theologies in the United States and original works in Spanish from Latin America published since the 2000s. Finally, general works on Christian ministry and theology in English were also included.

The providers, PQEC and Libby, lacked sufficient experience to assist with finding theological and Christian ministry resources in Spanish. BDP took charge of the curation process, prioritizing books or topics found in the textbook lists submitted by the certified institutes and combining them with valid submissions from our content providers. Pitts' collection served to organize a list of classic and contemporary Hispanic and Latin American theological works. Furthermore, consideration was given to the Latin theologians and scholars who participate in AETH, the Hispanic Scholars Program, the Hispanic Theological Initiative, the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States, and the Society for Pentecostal Studies, among others. The websites of Catholic and Protestant Spanish publishers helped find more recent titles. Curation consisted of the time-consuming process of reviewing resources to see if they meet the criteria set for the collection.

The resulting collection is provided via a library guide organized into six sections: About the Library, Services, Education, Academic Writing, Open Access, and Exhibitions. Patrons have access to virtual reference, tutorials on how to use databases and digital tools, academic writing resources, and a curated list of digital centers specializing in Spanish and English composition. It also includes a section on open-access theological resources and virtual libraries, mainly from Latin America.

Outreach to Users

Since its inception, BDP has focused on building relationships with its users. Online meetings with the participating HBIs helped us address concerns related to the availability of resources, engaging with new textbooks, how to use the databases, as well as to seek their collaboration in promoting the services to students and faculty. These meetings provided us feedback about the services and content. Finally, we created a vlog series titled “Conversaciones” where Latino theologians and ministers are invited to dialogue about a topic related to the four core competencies of the library: academic, theological, digital, and cultural fluency. It also serves to familiarize our users with the Latino authors of some works in our catalogs. The “Conversaciones” vlog series is published on the library’s YouTube channel (Biblioteca Digital Pitts 2025a) and Facebook (BDP 2025b).

Final Reflection

La Biblioteca Digital Pitts (BDP) is a project of Pitts Theology Library in collaboration with the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH). It aims to provide access to high-quality resources to the certified Hispanic Bible Institutes (HBIs). This virtual library enables access to databases, virtual reference, online library instruction, and a vlog series. The technical challenges of finding an efficient process to manage external accounts have led to innovative solutions and creative approaches in virtual librarianship. The digital curation of content and resources has presented challenges and opportunities to explore different approaches to distance theological education.

There is still much to do in terms of outreach and educating users about the services and resources available. To fulfill its mission of supporting academic, theological, digital, and cultural literacies, the library will continue to host online orientations and workshops on various aspects of theological research with the goal of fostering trust among students and faculty as the program expands. The complexity of resourcing digital books in Spanish necessitates a multi-faceted approach, encompassing advocacy with content providers, educating users about open access, and exploring creative ways to engage self-published resources. In 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central

announced changes to the ebook platform that could potentially affect the availability of BDP's catalog for our users. Situations like these keep us engaged in adapting and revising our approach to digital librarianship. Despite these challenges, BDP is fulfilling the dream of supporting the ministerial formation and theological educational efforts of Latino communities in the United States.

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Hungarian Theological Libraries in a New Role

JUDIT HEGYI AND GABRIELLA NAGYNÉ MAROS

Universities and research institutes in Hungary rely heavily on the research-oriented services provided by theological libraries. These services play a crucial role throughout the entire research process, from planning to publication, as well as in the preservation and dissemination of research results. The libraries of ecclesiastical higher education institutions also increasingly support knowledge creation.

There are sixty-five church-run libraries in Hungary, of which thirty-four are academic theological libraries (OSZK MNMKK 2024).¹ Eleven of these libraries support research. Research support and research activities include the following library services:

- data transmission to the Hungarian Science Bibliography (MTMT)
- compilation of subject bibliographies

- research, carried out in an organised framework
- publishing activities
- DOI-registration service
- library training and user education

These library services represent the four pillars of publication: scholarly publishing, identification, preservation, and visibility (Bilicsi and Holl 2024).

In this paper, we discuss the following research support services that small church libraries in Hungary offer their users:

- MTMT data input
- supporting editorial work, and
- virtual library services

Data Management of Institutional and Authors' Publications in the Hungarian Science Bibliography

Many countries have their own national scientific bibliographic databases. Examples include the French Hyper Articles en Ligne (HAL) and the Polish Scientific Bibliography (POL-on). The Hungarian Science Bibliography (Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára, or MTMT) is the Hungarian unified system which aims to register and make visible the publications and citations produced by the Hungarian scientific community as well as to measure and present the scientific performance of individual researchers and research institutions (Hungarian Science Bibliography 2025). In addition to publications, MTMT also registers other intellectual products, including patents and products that are important for scientific performance and career development (Makara and Seres 2013).

The MTMT provides a useful opportunity for domestic theologians and researchers in the field of religious studies. Their work is typically published in Hungarian, sometimes in journals with no academic recognition. The journals in which they publish are often not listed in large international scientific databases, such as Scopus

or Web of Science, so their scientific output cannot be measured, even though this is crucial for their career progression. In MTMT, authors can input and manage their own publications and citations, and rely on the assistance of librarians skilled in continuous and accurate data management, knowledge of theological bibliographies and scientometrics, and experience in using various databases.

In 2023, librarians from twenty-two ecclesiastical libraries contributed nearly eighty thousand records (articles and citations) to MTMT. Notably, it was discovered that the Tittel Pál Library of Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger has been managing the faculty publications of the Eger College of Theology and has plans to extend this service to authors from additional professional fields, including doctors, engineers, priests, and lawyers located in Eger and the surrounding area. In doing so, the Tittel Pál Library is facilitating inclusion and discovery of these professionals' publications in MTMT (Gál 2023). By providing this service, these librarians ensure the visibility of theological research, enhance the work of their institutions by assisting in data reporting obligations, and support researchers' career development by providing bibliometric data.

Editorial Support: Institutional Journals

For institutions and researchers, in addition to their recognition in domestic scientific circles, international visibility, inclusion in relevant databases, and high numbers of citations are important. Journals published by ecclesiastical academic institutions also offer such opportunities, provided they are accessible worldwide and adhere to scientific conventions. Universities and research institutes are increasingly issuing electronic journals in which their researchers and academics can publish research results. Institutions are increasingly favouring open access, some even making it compulsory for their institutional journals.

Of the sixty-five Hungarian church-run libraries, the following were engaged in publishing activities and three of the libraries have released open-access publications:

- Cathedral Library of Esztergom
- Cathedral Library of Kalocsa

- Great Library, Scientific Collections, Sárospatak Reformed College (open access)
- John Wesley Theological College's Library (open access)
- Library and Archives of the Calvinist Church in Kecskemét (open access)
- The Theological and College Library of the Transilvanian Reformed Church District and the Reformed College of Debrecen

A concrete example from the John Wesley Theological College in Budapest demonstrates a library's editorial support in the publication of an institutional journal.

The college is a church-maintained higher education institution in Hungary, offering courses in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship, a Methodist church, sponsors it. A full-time librarian and a team of volunteers operate the library. In 2023, the college launched its academic journal, *Opuscula Theologica et Scientifica*. Open access was a priority in the preparation of the journal; thus, the Open Journal System (OJS), a worldwide open-source editorial system, was chosen for practical reasons such as usability and visibility, and because it is free of charge. OJS ensures the publication of high-quality scientific journals from submission to publication. Data can be easily exchanged with other databases, thereby increasing the journal's visibility and reach.

The college is the publisher, and the editorial board comprises members of the college's Academic Council. The librarian helped create the foundational conditions for establishing the journal by ensuring the correct format and by requesting an ISSN number and the DOI (prefix).

Publishing a journal involves several tasks that require librarians' competencies:

- bibliographic expertise
- knowledge of various document identifiers
- knowledge of the structure and data of a journal issue
- knowledge of classification

- information technology skills

As the college is in a difficult financial and personnel situation, more tasks were eventually handled by the librarian, including the following:

- linguistic and formal proofreading of submitted manuscripts
- formatting the list of references, and finding and assigning identifiers, such as DOIs for the references
- uploading final manuscripts to OJS²
- assigning and recording volume and article data (page number, DOI, etc.), and requesting activation from the DOI office
- defining and entering metadata for articles
- creating a journal issue
- publishing and dissemination³

These measures ensure the journal's international visibility and long-term preservation.

Virtual Library Services, or "Library on the Desktop"

A virtual library essentially mirrors everything that traditionally takes place within library walls, including catalogues, information services, links, circulation, subscriptions, renewals, interactive communication (such as a chat box), and, of course, full-text electronic document delivery or exhibition in the online space.

This service is much more widespread in Hungarian church libraries than are the services mentioned so far. Based on 2023 statistics, virtual offerings may include the following services:

- dedicated church library website
- Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC)
- communication (chat box)⁴
- remote services (subscription, payment, renewal)

- distance learning
- electronic document delivery (built or accessible databases, e-books)
- institutional repository

Smaller libraries—the focus of this chapter—also do not limit themselves to traditional library services hiding within their walls. They do not confine services to institutional members but include the outside world. Their tools are the website and the OPAC, where people, even without registration, can access literature, information, and services outside opening hours, from the comfort of their homes. In the following, we discuss how these libraries support teaching, research, and learning, enhance access to literature for those in remote locations, reflect the ethos of their institutions, and connect with users.

Library Websites

In 2023, forty-eight of the sixty-five church-maintained libraries had their own websites or appeared on the websites of their parent institutions. Information ranges from home pages with simple structures and static data to more complex structures with portal-like services, where data and information are updated daily. None of the latter types are found in small libraries. Libraries that do not have a website of their own are all small (e.g., school) libraries run by churches.

The static pages include a description of the library, opening hours, contact details, regularly updated news, information on library use, a searchable catalogue, bibliographies, as well as links to access them. An example is the independent website of the Library of the Baptist Theological Seminary (BTA könyvtár 2025), which can be accessed from the institution's website. In addition to its own services, the Useful Resources menu offers Baptist link collections, valuable resources for Bible studies, and national and international digital collections for research, study, and orientation.

Dharma Gate Buddhist College Library Website

The Dharma Gate Buddhist College library is more complex and multilingual, with basic information available in English, German, Spanish, Tibetan, Russian, and French, in addition to Hungarian (Tan Kapuja Buddhista Szakkönyvtár 2025). Accessibility tools are available upon request. The link to the library on the college's website is prominent, and so is the search box; these are the first things one sees on the library's website. The basic information is presented on the home page, followed by menus that provide access to more in-depth content.

Remote access to subscribed full-text resources (book and journal databases) with quick links is provided after identification. Help files, illustrated with screenshots, support use. The compulsory and recommended literature for bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and Buddhist Lifestyle Counselling Assistant courses is listed in the syllabi, along with direct links to the relevant items in the catalogue. The range of digital course materials, with library notes, is published on the college's website, complemented by recordings of lectures and roundtable discussions that reinforce the acquisition of knowledge through modern channels.

Online Catalogues

Most libraries have hybrid collections with catalogues that reflect the library's own collection, but also the contents of paid or open-access external databases (e.g., Atla, JSTOR). Digitized versions of holdings on the library's shelves can be accessed through the catalogue, allowing readers freedom to work in different formats. The library of the Sapientia College of Theology of Religious Orders, for example, does not lend books. However, its students and teachers can access documents available in other formats through the catalogue. It is useful to catalogue digitised texts uploaded to Google Drive, to which access (lending) can be flexibly controlled while respecting copyright. Some libraries also catalogue book chapters. If an institution does not have a repository, it can place works by its authors into external repositories (or a national library database) with a link (URL, DOI) from the

catalogue, making the content accessible. The catalogue, therefore, dually serves preservation and visibility functions.

Supporting Lifelong Learning of the Clergy

Besides supporting students during their studies, the library of the Lutheran Theological University also provides useful help and spiritual support (Mészáros 2020) for congregational, religious educational, and diaconal services. Two successful services resulted from the library's cooperation with the university and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary: (1) The Sermon Preparation Library (Igehirdetési Előkészítők Tára, or IHLET) and (2) the Lutheran Integrated Catalog.

Sermon Preparation Library Database

The Sermon Preparation Library (IHLET) database (Evangélikus Hittudományi Egyetem 2020) was created during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist pastors and theological students of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary in preparing sermons (Mészáros 2024). IHLET literally means “inspiration” in English. It turned out that more and more people were using the database, and it proved beneficial even after the pandemic, so it was further developed, cost-effectively and collaboratively. The interface was developed by the library using international sites (e.g., *textweek.com*, *workingpreacher.org*). Sources include Hungarian journals and licensed theological databases, including the Atla Religion Database. Volunteer students assist with processing content by performing the work of collecting and uploading materials. The library cooperates with the staff of the University's Institute of Practice in developing the appearance and structure of the site. The background is the university's WordPress-based website, and the searchable interface is available from the library's website.

Lutheran Integrated Catalogue

The academic activities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary are conducted in two areas: the Lutheran Theological University and the Lutheran Central Collection (Hubert 2022). The Library of the Lutheran Theological University manages the union catalogue of Protestant libraries (Evangélikus Hittudományi Egyetem Könyvtára 2025). In addition to its own printed and electronic holdings, the catalogue makes searchable and accessible holdings of the Lutheran Central Collection and the Ráth Mátyás Evangelical Collection, as well as the material of the Hungarian Evangelical Bibliography and the Hungarian Evangelical Digital Repository.

Service-Oriented Library

In his chapter titled “Size Doesn’t Matter” in Volume 4 of *The Theological Librarian’s Handbook*, Stutzman (2024) argues that even without significant human and financial resources, we can identify the good practices, tools, and methods needed in a particular field. The principles of best library practice, compiled by a team of international librarians (Penner 2021), are also relevant for theological libraries serving doctoral programs, as well as for research support as a service. For the services discussed here, principle two (prioritising individual needs) and principle eleven (emphasising proactivity) are particularly relevant. Librarians are well-positioned, Penner writes, to think creatively, propose solutions, and contribute to the research culture.

Through the library services described in this study, we contribute to the scholarly dialogue between our institution, the church that maintains it, and other ecclesiastical or secular actors worldwide. We support the institution’s teaching and learning efforts. Besides providing bibliographic information that transcends geographical limitations, we offer a channel for our staff to access the literature that our libraries do not possess.

The level of digital literacy and the needs of theological library users differ significantly. Many are still wary of the possibilities available on the Internet, yet more and more are turning to online resources. In turn, librarians are learning to use emerging

technologies to enhance services by tailoring them to patron needs, cultural backgrounds, and information-seeking habits and competencies.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 The Hungarian library statistics cited in this chapter are from the Library Institute of the OSZK MNMKK and are current through 2023.
- 2 As the editing process is coordinated also using tools outside the platform, manuscripts are sometimes sent to the editorial office and not uploaded by the authors directly to the platform.
- 3 Dissemination includes exporting or importing journal issues and articles to databases, liaising between different platforms, databases, catalogues, and editorial staff (MTMT, DOAJ, REAL projects [MTA Library Repository]).
- 4 There is no data on chat boxes in the statistics, but there is no doubt that sooner or later this will become an important segment of library services.

From Coffee to Community

Programming to Support Institutional Mission and Culture

JASON FOWLER AND JONATHAN LAWLER

Theological libraries add significant value to their parent institutions in numerous ways. Their collections offer a rich source of research material for students and faculty. Their personnel assist both novice and experienced researchers. Their spaces foster the flourishing of ideas through focused study and engaging conversations.¹ Libraries can also provide significant value by engaging their communities with programming that intentionally supports their institution's culture and values. Over the last decade at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS), we have leveraged library events and archival exhibitions to engage our community, support our institution, tell our story, and foster a sense of community. This chapter describes our mission-driven approach, providing details about the various types of library events and archival exhibitions we have designed, as well as offering insights from our experience.

Library Events: Our Story

When I (Jason) arrived at SEBTS eleven years ago, I knew I wanted our team to invest energy in library event programming. I believe libraries can impact their communities not only through their collections, but also through programming that enhances an institution's mission and creates avenues for community. Well-designed events bring energy, life, and community to a theological library.

We have a strong focus on mission and culture at SEBTS. Our institutional mission is “to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping students to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission” (SEBTS n.d.). Our library's mission statement is “to engage the Southeastern community with services and resources to equip them to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission” (Library at Southeastern n.d.). Our cultural values are lighthearted, others-focused, and mission-oriented.² These mission statements and values are integral to our event planning. While we care about incorporating traditional theological library emphases into our programming, we also aim to design programming that aligns with being an institution that takes the gospel seriously, yet not so much ourselves.

Hosting events was not entirely new to our staff. The library had hosted events in the past, but they tended to be occasional and were often coordinated by other campus units. We wanted to regularly host events that supported our institutional mission and fostered a sense of community on campus. Although we now offer several different types of programming, we initially envisioned two types of events—one that accommodated large groups and a smaller one that was more collegial. We called the first event a Library Talk and the second a Coffee Break.

Library Talks typically have thirty to seventy-five attendees and feature an interview with an individual or a small panel on a recently published book or a relevant subject.³ Generally, speakers are faculty members, visiting chapel speakers, or outside scholars invited by other campus units. When we started, we set a goal of offering two to three talks per semester. Over the past decade, we've hosted nearly fifty Library Talks on a wide range of topics, including missions, justice, spiritual formation, theology, cultural engagement, apologetics, and mental health. We've had stellar conversations with our outstanding faculty and with fantastic outside speakers, including Lee Strobel, J. P. Moreland, Russell Moore, Michael Bird, Rebecca

McLaughlin, Alistair Begg, Carl Trueman, and Gavin Ortlund. We typically conclude each Library Talk with a question-and-answer session, allowing attendees to engage with the speakers on a range of issues relevant to their lives and ministries.



Fig. 1. Library Talk on missionary endurance, 2024

Coffee Breaks originated as a venue for helping students get to know faculty outside of the traditional classroom setting. We host Coffee Breaks in a designated area of the library with comfortable seating. These conversations typically take place in the morning, and we provide coffee and tea for attendees. Anyone is welcome to attend, and we usually have between ten and twenty attendees. A library staff member hosts and begins the session with a brief introduction time that allows the featured faculty member and attendees to become acquainted. The staff member asks a few initial questions that focus on the faculty member's life, educational journey, and ministry formation. Following that introduction, the attendees ask questions that guide the conversation. These sessions usually last around an hour, but often the faculty member and attendees stay around and chat for a while after the formal Coffee Break ends.



Fig. 2. Coffee Break with Dr. Akin, 2025

Library Events: Lessons Learned

As we have planned events over the years, we have had to focus on what we had available. When we started, we noticed we didn't have access to many things we needed. We didn't have an event budget, a designated space for hosting, or a list of well-known speakers to draw upon. However, we had space that could be temporarily reconfigured, faculty members with interests we could draw upon, and library staff with ideas and questions that extended beyond what might be addressed in a typical classroom setting. For example, when one of our Old Testament professors started a superb local coffee shop and roastery, we hosted a Library Talk on the concept of business as mission. We offered pour-over samples to attendees and covered the cost from our staff coffee budget. Offering events doesn't require a huge budget or tons of space. In *Sacred Stacks* (2006), Nancy Kalikow Maxwell describes how she initiated a beloved author's reception

program in which faculty would “ceremoniously present their book to the library” (55). This event required relatively little space or financial commitment, but it was significant for their community.

To consider the mission and values of our institution has been important in our planning (Lear 2013; Sheppard and Murrain 2014). Every institution has its own unique mission and culture. At SEBTS, our primary focus is on serving the church and fulfilling the Great Commission. I doubt most theological librarians consider these as direct goals for their programming. Over the years, we’ve had planning conversations about an event idea and we ask, “How does this contribute to our mission?” If an idea does not contribute to our mission or align with who we are as an institution, we typically pass on it.

We’ve found significant value in listening to our stakeholders. Over the years, we have had numerous conversations with library staff, faculty, students, administrators, and visiting scholars about our programming. Stakeholders can provide ideas for new event topics and offer valuable feedback on how to improve them. Conversations with executive-level administrators can be particularly fruitful, especially in advance. They typically oversee the institution’s mission, money, and mindset. Conversations can help them understand the library’s work, offer them a chance to support the team, and allow them to provide guidance.

We also learned to consider our entire user community and strive to market our content to them. For example, since we have a large contingent of online students, we record videos of Library Talks and post them online. We also strive to think strategically about the types of students we have and the variety of degree programs we offer, providing content that reflects that variety. When marketing, we utilize every available avenue. We create and distribute flyers, table toppers, and signage. We post about events on social media. We reach out to campus units that oversee institutional messaging and ensure that ours is included. Most important, we discuss upcoming events with people on campus.

Finally, we learned to collaborate with other campus units to support them and to utilize their resources to enhance our events. One of our major campus events each year is Global Missions Week, organized by our Center for Great Commission Studies (CGCS). During that week, missionaries spend time on campus interacting with classes and individual students. Every year, we collaborate with the CGCS staff to develop and promote a Library Talk for that week

focused on missions. Since we are unable to provide honoraria for outside speakers, we often piggyback off other campus units that already invite speakers and compensate them. Likewise, our facilities department does an excellent job of reconfiguring our space by bringing in folding chairs, and our media services department provides the resources for recording the Library Talks.

Archival Exhibits: Our Story

The Archives and Special Collections (ASC) department of the Library at Southeastern crafts archival and rare book exhibits to support the mission and culture of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the years, ASC staff fine-tuned exhibit development and presentation while expanding the exhibits' role in advancing the institution's mission. Staff approach exhibit creation creatively to build community, foster conversation, and strengthen culture.

Beginning in the mid-2010s, ASC established a regular rotation of static exhibits for display in the library commons area, which is near the building entrance. These exhibits featured physical archival materials and rare books in two display cases: one five-shelf vertical case and one 1.35-square-meter flat case. These cases remain the two foundational resources for ASC exhibits.

Staff decided on an initial exhibit series titled "Equipped to Go," which ran from 2017 to 2022. This series consciously alluded to a key aspect of the institution's mission statement: "To glorify the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping students to serve the church and fulfill the Great Commission" (SEBTS n.d.). Featured institutional records highlighted how the seminary prepared and sent students for various ministries, including evangelistic missions, medical missions, youth ministry, women's ministry, biblical counseling, and military chaplaincy.

Individual exhibits ran from either January to August or September to December. The staff sought to provide fresh exhibits each semester to keep library patrons engaged with exhibit content. The library's foot traffic was too low to justify a third exhibit for the summer.



Fig. 3. Library commons display cases with typical exhibit design

The goal of this series, and the exhibit space more broadly, is to connect students, faculty, and staff with the institution's history. ASC helps build community by connecting the seminary's past and present. Our department fosters the campus's shared identity defined by the school's mission statement. ASC's archival material enables

students, faculty, and staff to place themselves within the context of the seminary’s larger story and mission.

Since 2022, ASC staff have consciously thought more creatively about strategically expanding or adapting exhibits to reach new community members and develop collaboration with other seminary departments. Rather than offering only static exhibits within the library, staff recognized opportunities to advance the school’s mission beyond the library walls.

As an entity of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), key partners of the seminary include alumni, local SBC congregations and their leaders, and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC). In 2019, ASC first developed a simple exhibit for presentation to attendees of the BSCNC annual meeting. Staff partnered with the convention’s historical committee every year to host a table in the exhibit hall.



Fig. 4. 2019 BSCNC Historical Committee and ASC partnership exhibit

Hundreds of North Carolina SBC leaders and church members attend the BSCNC annual meeting. Many are alumni, supporters, or prospective students of the seminary. ASC exhibits for this event presented material of interest to these attendees—including rare books

related to North Carolina Baptist history, personal papers of local Baptist leaders, and other relevant material. Through involvement in this event, and in accordance with the seminary's mission, ASC staff reached those who serve the church in North Carolina.

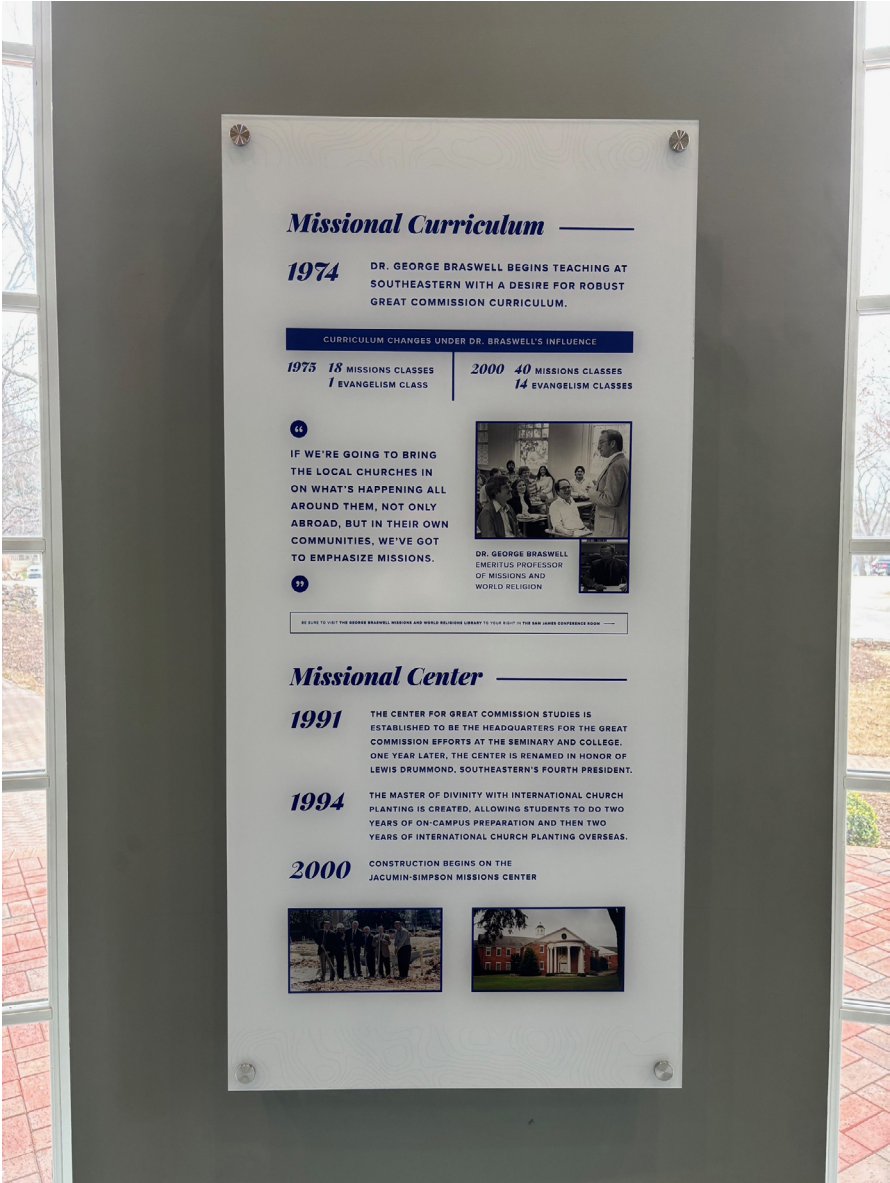


Fig. 5. An example of the exhibit panels in the Center for Great Commission Studies

Staff also considered how best to engage the seminary community in on-campus events and celebrations. ASC crafted exhibits for new student orientation, to mark anniversaries, and to honor long-serving professors. In 2022, ASC began featuring archival material on Preview Days, when prospective students visit the campus.

In 2024, ASC partnered with CGCS and the Communications Department to recognize the seminary's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2025. Specifically, staff developed an exhibit highlighting the seminary's commitment to missions throughout its history. ASC staff selected relevant information and engaging historical photographs. CGCS provided the funds to purchase display panels for placement in the Center. Communications staff designed graphics. Collaboration was key to the success of this exhibit.

Archival Exhibits: Lessons Learned

ASC's experience in developing mission-oriented exhibits reveals three key aspects for effectively engaging communities through exhibits: careful consideration of resources, strategic support for the institution's mission, and secure presentation of materials.

Many archivists and librarians face limited budgets, space constraints, and significant demands on staff time. Staff must shrewdly consider their resources when creating and presenting exhibits. Compelling exhibits do not require state-of-the-art resources. ASC is fortunate to have two display cases and book cradles. However, less expensive folding tables may allow for impactful exhibits, especially those that are short-term. ASC uses such tables for our temporary Preview Day exhibits.

One must also carefully consider staff time as a resource. At SEBTS, the research and design necessary for exhibit creation requires, on average, eighty-five hours of staff time per exhibit. Keeping dual purpose in mind helps when preparing exhibits. If another project required extensive research, perhaps that research can be turned into an exhibit.

Librarians and archivists should think strategically about the role archival exhibits play in supporting the parent institution's mission. ASC staff always choose archival and special collections material with an eye toward our mission. If an item is very interesting but does not advance the mission, it is not featured. ASC holds a Soviet

naval flag. While interesting, this item in an exhibit will not advance the school’s mission as would, for example, a photograph of student missionaries from the 1960s.



Fig. 6. The archivist engages with prospective students during a 2025 Preview Day

Finally, archival exhibits must consider preservation. Securing items from theft or damage is essential. When planning exhibits, ASC uses cases with locks, features facsimiles rather than original material, and ensures climate control. Coffee is fantastic for building community—but not when spilled on unique archival material. By shrewdly utilizing resources, strategically considering the institution’s mission, and securing materials, archival and rare book exhibits play a crucial role in engaging a library’s community members.

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Notes

- 1 We are indebted to Andy Keck's (2013) Atla Presidential Address, "The Value of Theological Libraries" for the idea of conceiving library values in terms of a collection, a people, and a place.
- 2 "Lighthearted" is admittedly a little difficult to define, but our institutional culture is easygoing and not overly formal. We joke a lot. We laugh a lot. We take God seriously. We take the gospel seriously. We don't take ourselves seriously.
- 3 Two members of our Public Services team, Dougald McLaurin (now of Louisiana Christian University) and Robb Coleman, have been instrumental in making our event programming a success. They tirelessly planned and implemented these and other programs to help engage our community.

Information Literacy

Cultural Competence as Calling

*Theological Librarianship in the Age of Global
Theological Education*

SAM NEULSAEM HA

There is no doubt that international students now make up a significant portion of contemporary theological education. In 2010, the Association of Theological Schools members in North America had 6,550 international students, and by 2017, the number had increased to 8,087 (of a total of 72,896 students) (Tanner 2015). In 2022, this development experienced a decline, which may have been caused by COVID-19 and other factors (Tanner 2022); however, the numbers are now increasing again. This shift in demographics certainly has bearings on theological librarianship. As students with diverse academic backgrounds, particularly those that differ from the Western or American model, enter theological schools and seminaries, theological librarians need to understand how library services can and should be adjusted to serve students from all constituencies as effectively as possible. This chapter examines two key challenges faced by international students: developing academic

critical thinking and navigating the dynamics of authority. It examines how culturally competent theological librarians can respond with wisdom and love.

Critical Thinking

One of the central challenges this chapter explores is academic critical thinking, particularly as it relates to international students' engagement with research.¹ Scholars have often pointed out that, for international students, critical thinking and other skills related to academic writing, such as argument building or constructing new concepts, do not come naturally (Shaheen 2012; see also Kelley 2008, Deakins 2009, and Cheng 2000). While those who have grown up in the West are often consistently exposed to critical thinking and are taught how to use it in their research and writing, this is not always the case for international students. For example, East Asian students have sometimes found it challenging to grasp the meaning of critical thinking or have been hesitant to use the skill due to their cultural background. While Western critical thinking theory and education often emphasize critical thinking as a skillful skepticism and encourage doubting one's own assumptions, beliefs, and traditions (Siegel 1988; Durkin 2008), students from East Asia tend to believe it is unhelpful or even absurd to try to contradict oneself, to argue with established scholars, or to confront other writers (Durkin 2008). Moreover, East Asian students tend to place more importance on maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict than on challenging others, even when seeking to identify what is more rational or reasonable. As a result, when discussing ideas, the focus is often on accepting others' input and aiming for respectful dialogue and compromise, rather than proving one's own rightness (Durkin 2008).

Another example concerns sub-Saharan Africa. While the governments in the region have emphasized critical thinking as a key outcome in education to improve their position in the global economy, it has been noted that many educational systems have not fully achieved the goal. Some scholars suggest the reason for this is that Western models of critical thinking are taught without being fully contextualized and without utilizing effective pedagogies (Giacomazzi et al. 2022). As a result, students from that region are

more likely to struggle with critical thinking when they move to the West to pursue a degree.

International students in theological schools and seminaries experience similar challenges. For those who have not been sufficiently trained in critical thinking or who are hesitant to apply this skill in their research due to discomfort with disagreement or confrontation, academic success can be challenging. International students often look up to their professors and try to align with their views or those of the scholars their teachers approve of or endorse. Their general tendency is then to seek out acceptable—and thus “good” and “authoritative”—sources and cite them to justify preexisting positions. Rather than evaluating sources and finding scholars to disagree with by thinking critically, the method they often employ is to gather all the resources they believe are respected and supported by their tradition or teachers. When they encounter voices that differ from what they or their community consider to be “right,” they often either ignore them or use them as examples of “those who got it wrong,” without delving deeper into why their argument is not as convincing. Their papers then sometimes become a collection of citations whereby their own voice is either weak or absent.

What is the theological librarian’s role in this issue? Some may say that teaching critical thinking skills is not our task, but as early as the 1980s and 1990s, it has been emphasized that the academic librarian’s job is not simply to explain how to do certain things in a “how-to-use approach” (Goetzfridt 1993, 6). Librarians must also teach students skills in critical evaluation of information they find and in discerning the validity of their arguments and views (McCormick 1983). This corrects the idea that librarians are merely to offer “a mechanistic, tool-based approach to library skills and will consider critical thinking outside the scope of their responsibilities” (Gibson 1995, 30).

Moreover, the kind of critical thinking librarians help cultivate is beyond source evaluation; it plays a vital role throughout the research process. We can help and teach students to develop a strong research question. Our instruction can also involve guiding students to develop a flexible and reasoned plan that will support their critical research. As research continues, the evaluation of the information should delve deeper, utilizing clear standards and thoughtful analysis (Gibson 1995). In this regard, theological librarians, accepting their role as educators, play a crucial part in supporting the development of critical thinking skills in international students. We have

a duty to teach students how to become active learners rather than passive receivers of knowledge (Phillips 2004).

There are, in fact, two reasons theological librarians may be more profoundly related to this particular matter. First, as noted earlier, theological schools and seminaries in affluent countries are admitting a large number of international students. As the population of students who are not accustomed to academic critical thinking increases in theological education, our responsibility also grows. Second, theological librarians need to be acutely perceptive in navigating this topic because it has deeply personal, emotional, spiritual, and ethical components. Teaching critical thinking to international theology students requires more than just instructional skills. It, in fact, demands cultural competence, spiritual sensitivity, and a pastoral attitude. Many international students come from educational or church contexts in which questioning a respected book, a renowned theologian, or an eminent scholar may be perceived as disrespectful or even spiritually dangerous. Theological librarians, then, should guide with cultural intelligence, remembering that this reluctance is not an intellectual deficiency but rather an attitude of reverence or communal identity. The virtues of humility and patience on our part is crucial.

It is also our duty to help students develop the virtues of bravery and discernment. On par with faculty, we reinforce that no theologian or scholar is beyond criticism (as no one is always right), and that it is allowed and even expected to challenge them, if students do so with sound reasoning and humility. Furthermore, it would be prudent not to insist that Western academic critical thinking is inherently superior. Instead, we can affirm the cultural backgrounds and intellectual traditions international students bring with them and support them in integrating these with the critical thinking expected of them in Western academia.

Finally, it is crucial to teach that critical thinking can be a practice of faithfulness. It can be taught as a discipline that allows students to love God with their minds and to discern what is excellent for the sake of the church and the world, rather than as a tool to demean or attack others.

Overcoming the Issue of Authority

Another important matter concerns the relational dynamic between theological librarians and international students. In general, students view academic librarians as faculty members who are respected for their subject expertise and associate research as their most important specific skill and area of strength (Fagan et al. 2021). While there is limited literature on how international students perceive academic librarians specifically, there is strong consensus that many international students tend to see faculty as authority figures (Unruh 2015; Times Higher Education 2023). As theological librarians often hold faculty status and interact with students in instructional roles, international students are likely to approach them as figures of authority. To be sure, this can be a beneficial mode of perception. When international students have respect for their theological librarians, it is easier to guide them effectively.

However, there is also a negative side to this. When librarians are perceived as authority figures, international students may be inclined to prioritize pleasing them over being transparent about their research progress and seeking help. The shame and honor culture can sometimes influence international students in a way that causes them to be more interested in trying to impress the faculty than in honestly sharing their struggles and growing through those experiences (Huang and Brown 2009). Some international students may also experience pressure to perform competently rather than actually develop their skills.

Here again, it seems prudent to cultivate cultural competencies and spiritual virtues. Cultural humility, sensitively communicated to a student, will open many doors. Rather than assuming one culture is inherently better than another, we approach it with a humble heart, recognizing that a student's starting point is valid and worthy of respect. International students from high-context cultures may not verbally express their struggles, so it is essential to be aware of their nonverbal cues and proactively ask gentle yet thorough questions to discover what is at stake.

In terms of spiritual virtues and a pastoral approach, perhaps the virtue of compassion best describes it. Without deeply caring for the international students and being keenly aware of their troubles and struggles, it is impossible to act upon it. To be alert and realize the perplexity shared among a specific group of students is the first, and

yet profound, step. Moreover, cultural competence means guiding international students with gentleness and discussing issues with them in a manner that builds up rather than tears down. Practicing patience, we are to walk with students as they grow while allowing time for their difficult journey of academic formation.

Another key virtue is discernment. While helping students develop discernment, librarians model this virtue by carefully observing whether a student genuinely understands and follows guidance, or whether they attempt to leave a good impression while missing the advice. For example, when a student repeatedly nods in agreement during a reference interview, it may not always indicate understanding. It could be a culturally conditioned expression of respect or an attempt to avoid appearing ignorant. Recognizing this, we should gently follow up with clarifying questions or offer additional support without making them feel exposed.

The goal of developing cultural competencies, spiritual virtues, and skills in pastoral guidance is not an abstract objective. Instead, these can also serve as means by which we foster authentic learning and empower students to grow in confidence and independence. The ultimate goal is to help students thrive in theological education, develop intellectual virtues, and grow to embrace the role God has called them to pursue.

Conclusion

As international students make up a significant and growing part of theological education, theological librarians face a new and unique way to reimagine our services. Among various challenges, we have explored issues such as academic critical thinking and the problem of authority. These aspects arise not due to a lack of international students' abilities, but stem from different traditions, cultures, and educational approaches. Theological librarians then serve not only as resource guides but also as educators and pastoral figures. The librarian must help bridge the gap between different academic expectations rather than endorse one culture over another. Moreover, compassion, gentleness, discernment, and many other spiritual virtues are indispensable in supporting international students. These responsibilities—and indeed callings—are undoubtedly all complex and challenging, but they are worthwhile, as the work of theological

librarians meaningfully contributes to students' academic, intellectual, and spiritual growth.

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Notes

- 1 When using “critical thinking,” I do not refer to the general sense of the word, the comprehensive idea that points to a process of analyzing information from observation or reasoning, as that is a common human trait across cultures. What I do in fact indicate is specifically academic critical thinking, which refers to evaluating sources, identifying underlying assumptions, engaging constructively with multiple perspectives, and, perhaps most important, filling a scholarly gap by disagreeing with preexisting arguments.

Empowering Theological Research

Promoting Information Literacy in the Digital Age

NICOLAS KUSSER

One might ask what a chapter on information literacy (IL) is doing in a handbook explicitly focused on theological library services. The question is understandable and indeed justified, as the term “information literacy” and the concept underlying it are still comparatively recent. They emerged in the 1970s (Griesbaum 2023, 582–83) and are therefore significantly younger than the libraries’ core services, which have been offered for centuries (Attar 2015).¹ This chapter, therefore, argues that promoting IL—especially in the digital age—is one of the most essential services of modern libraries and should be seen as integral to the service portfolio of theological libraries.

Information Literacy

To begin, we must clarify the concept of IL. Within the scope of this brief contribution, it is not possible to offer a comprehensive explanation of this complex and multifaceted term; for that, reference should be made to the extensive specialist literature.² For our purposes, however, two important definitions will suffice. The British Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), for instance, defines IL as “[...] the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society” (CILIP 2018, 3). IL is not regarded here as a special skill or competence, but rather as “a set of skills and abilities which everyone needs to undertake information-related tasks.”

A very similar understanding is also found in the *IL Framework* developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries, and can be considered the most widely adopted and comprehensive description of IL currently available. This framework likewise conceives of IL in terms of “metaliteracy” (ACRL 2016, 2) and defines it as follows: “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (3).³

The now-rescinded *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL 2000) likewise offers a lucid description of what IL can mean and which component skills must be developed in order to be considered fully information literate. According to the standards, “an information literate individual” must be able to “determine the extent of information needed,” “access the needed information effectively and efficiently,” “evaluate information and its sources critically,” “incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base,” “use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose,” and “understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally” (2–3). In summary, IL can be described as a *metaliteracy that encompasses a range of individual literacies, abilities, and skills that are necessary in order to search for, locate, evaluate, process, and use information in a targeted and responsible manner.*

Librarians possess special expertise in the area of IL, due to their intrinsic connection to literature and research. They are therefore exceptionally well-positioned to promote and convey this competence to their users. IL is required not exclusively, but especially in the context of academic work, where it is essential to identify and assess information and to place it creatively into new contexts. This is particularly true for all branches of academic theology, which explicitly employs scholarly methodologies and thus sees itself bound by strict adherence to academic principles (Müller 2016).⁴

The general objectives of academic theological libraries in the field of IL may therefore be understood to include the strengthening of theological research for their respective user groups, the assurance of high-quality research outcomes, and the empowerment of users to engage independently and competently with information in accordance with scholarly standards. As these libraries are typically based at universities, seminaries, and other theological institutions of higher education, the following section focuses on how they can help students and researchers develop the advanced IL skills needed for their studies and future professional roles.

Theology and IL

The most distinctive feature of theological libraries is rooted in the nature of theology itself. Theology is characterized by a high degree of interdisciplinarity, as few other disciplines within the humanities encompass such a broad range of subjects. Its fundamental division into historical, systematic, practical, and biblical theology makes it like a cross-section of the humanities (Raffelt 2012)—or, as Pascal (1958) put it, “Theology is a science, but at the same time, how many sciences?” (36).

Depending on the specific research focus and subfield, theology draws on a wide range of literature—from ancient and modern texts to manuscripts, digital publications, catalogs, and databases—alongside a broad spectrum of research methods. These range from quantitative-empirical approaches, for instance in religious education or Christian social sciences, to juridical methods as found in canon law, or to distinctly historical or literary methodologies used in church history or biblical studies. This breadth makes both theological study and research complex undertakings.

This complexity is reflected in the holdings and services of theological libraries, which must provide access to varied resources and discovery tools—from traditional catalogs to AI-supported systems—whose effective use requires user training. Teaching research techniques is thus central to promoting IL. Yet in today’s digital world, this must be complemented by instruction on information handling and critical reflection.

IL in Theological Contexts: Instructional Content

In light of these diverse requirements and responsibilities, the following provides an overview of various topics that may be addressed in IL instruction within theological libraries. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a representative selection that should be adapted to the specific needs of each institution. Overall, close collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty is strongly recommended to ensure that IL offerings are well aligned with the theological curriculum.

Navigating Library Collections and Services

Despite rapid digital developments, it remains essential to familiarize users with the library catalog and its technical features, even in an era of expanding digital services and artificial intelligence (AI). Especially in the humanities, research typically begins with one’s own library. Using electronic catalogs effectively requires a basic understanding of search techniques, such as truncation, faceted navigation, known-item and subject searches, and Boolean operators (Wiesenmüller 2012). Equally important is a general introduction to library services and facilities, including layout (particularly in larger institutions), opening hours, borrowing policies, interlibrary loan options, and available technologies.

Academic Search Engines

In contemporary scholarly research, academic search engines also play a central role, particularly for bibliographic searches and the

retrieval of journal articles. These platforms provide an easy entry point for accessing academic literature. At the same time, the landscape of search engines is utterly diverse, and different inquiries often require different tools. Academic search engines vary, for example, with regard to their coverage (open access versus licensed content), their underlying data sources (indexing services versus full-text databases), and their ranking algorithms. Understanding these differences is essential, as they directly affect the scope, quality, and transparency of search results. In this context it is clear that not every search engine is suitable for every purpose; therefore, users need training, which also offers the potential to improve their general search strategies (Lewandowski 2012).

Reference Management

Given the vast amount of literature identified through digital research, it is essential to collect and organize this material efficiently. Reference management software helps automate the archiving of sources and bibliographic data, reducing errors through consistent citations and supporting the writing process (for example, by inserting citations directly into text processing software and by allowing users to switch between different citation styles or types with minimal effort). Students and even researchers are not always familiar with these tools, and that is why training in their use represents a valuable element of a library's IL offerings. Beyond these basic functions, reference management systems support the structured organization of personal literature collections, enable the annotation and tagging of sources, and help users keep track of relevant literature over time, including collaboratively, which is particularly pertinent for longer-term or larger research projects. Given the large number of sources that must be cited in most scholarly work and the high standards of accuracy rightly expected in academic research, reference management software—widely available, including through open-source solutions—offers clear advantages over manual citation practices.

AI Literacy

Within the broader context of digital IL, the concept of “AI literacy” is gaining importance and should be reflected within IL-training programs. The term is defined as “a set of competencies that enables individuals to evaluate AI technologies critically; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace” (Long and Magerko 2020, 2). Since the release of ChatGPT in 2022, the potential of generative AI (GenAI) has gained widespread recognition and is now a common element in academic work. AI is used in various phases of research and teaching—from identifying topics and generating search strings to conducting literature searches, analyzing documents, supporting writing, and preparing presentations.⁵

Librarians face both the challenge and the responsibility of supporting users not only theoretically but also practically in the use of AI-based tools. Such approaches include low-threshold offerings, such as brief explanations of how GenAI works, its applications in literature research, and typical pitfalls, including hallucinations or bias. Instruction should also emphasize the importance of a critical and reflective approach to AI-generated content, including the careful verification of its authenticity and accuracy (Cox and de Brasdefer 2025).

In this context, AI literacy also includes the ability to critically assess the authenticity and quality of research outputs, including the identification of fabricated or misleading content that may resemble legitimate scientific work. Library users need to be supported in evaluating and processing information responsibly, so they can recognize misinformation, manipulation, and bias, and are able to identify and verify trustworthy sources. For libraries, fostering these competencies is therefore a key aim, enabling students and researchers to navigate the opportunities and risks of digital transformation independently (IFLA 2017).

Practical Implementation of IL Instruction in (Theological) Libraries

Teaching information and AI literacy also requires thoughtful consideration of its practical or instructional implementation in libraries—an implementation that must be tailored to the specific needs of various user groups.⁶ A long-term goal in this regard is the integration of IL offerings into the curricula of theological degree programs, thereby making them an integral part of academic study. As noted, the content should be closely linked to the respective disciplinary requirements. At the same time, embedding IL instruction into academic teaching presents challenges and requires persistence and long-term commitment on the part of the library (Farrell and Badke 2015).

Regarding concrete didactic implementation, various formats can be distinguished. Traditional in-person formats, such as training sessions and workshops, remain valuable for practicing specific tools and addressing individual questions. These are increasingly complemented by hybrid and fully digital formats, including webinars and e-learning platforms. Digital learning materials, particularly screencasts and instructional videos, enable flexible, location-independent learning.⁷ The concept of blended learning, which combines in-person and online components, offers particularly effective opportunities to ensure an optimal learning experience and to foster student engagement (de Bruijn-Smolters and Prinsen 2024).

Challenges

In practice, teaching comprehensive and differentiated IL presents theological libraries with several challenges. A key difficulty lies in the heterogeneity of users, who vary widely in prior knowledge and expectations. First-year students need basic introductions to library tools and academic standards, while researchers typically pose more advanced questions. This calls for a tiered IL program tailored to varying levels of competence. However, libraries in this case often face structural limitations, such as limited staff, funding, and technical infrastructure, as well as a lack of professional development in emerging areas. It is therefore essential to regularly evaluate existing

offerings to ensure their relevance and efficient use of the available resources. Such review processes should be firmly embedded within the library's overall IL strategy (Franke 2024).

Comprehensive IL

Promoting a comprehensive approach to IL goes beyond teaching technical research skills and tool usage. It is closely linked to research ethics and responsible information practices. Library instruction can therefore address core academic standards, such as preventing plagiarism, fostering a culture of deliberate citation, and understanding copyright and intellectual property. In the digital age—and especially with the spread of AI-generated content—these ethical principles are more important than ever. Because digital content often appears to be easily accessible and convenient, students and researchers must be empowered to examine it critically, with attention to its origin, authenticity, scholarly integrity, and lawful use. The goal is to educate users not only to be technically proficient but also to become responsible, ethically reflective scholars capable of navigating complex digital information environments (UNESCO and Frau-Meigs 2024).

Conclusion

IL is increasingly proving to be a strategic area of action for theological libraries. By continually developing their services and methods, libraries can respond flexibly to changes in the research, teaching, and digital technology landscapes, thereby ensuring their long-term viability. IL remains a central and indispensable prerequisite for preparing researchers and students to meet the ever-evolving demands of academia and society. As essential partners of theological faculties, libraries thus make a vital contribution to educating mature and responsible scholars who are equipped to engage with information critically and reflectively.

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Notes

- 1 For further information on the history of IL, see Leaning (2017, 33–51).
- 2 For example, Smiley (2019), Hicks et al. (2024), or Sühl-Strohmenger (2016).
- 3 A highly differentiated concept of metaliteracy in the context of IL can be found, for example, in Mackey and Jacobson (2014).
- 4 “Theology, if it is to fulfill its task, cannot limit itself to a simple discourse of faith or to a mere exposition of church doctrine. Such a limitation would entail, among other things, the risk of a fundamentalist approach to scriptural interpretation—one that makes no hermeneutical distinction between the content of a statement and its embedding within a particular worldview. It would also risk a fruitless, purely positivistic appeal to revelation or ecclesiastical authority. Yet faith is not merely an affective disposition of the soul; rather, it constitutes a personal relationship with God, who reveals Himself in word and event through His historical self-communication as the overarching guiding idea of human experience and the search for truth. Precisely for this reason, human beings are necessarily referred to reason, by which they respond appropriately to the entirety of their experience of the world” (Müller 2016, 21; translation by the author).
- 5 For a comprehensive overview of the topic from a general perspective, see Cox and Mazumdar (2024). For the specific context of literature searching with AI, see Walder (2025).
- 6 A detailed overview of the diverse tasks and organizational models of the teaching library is provided, for example, by Franke and Krähling-Pilarek (2024).
- 7 Comprehensive presentations of library instructional concepts, exercises, and teaching designs can be found, among others, in Burkhardt (2016) and Hanke and Sühl-Strohmenger (2016). For professional development possibilities in this field see Wong (2019).

Embedded Librarianship for Enhancing Information Literacy in Zimbabwean Theological Institutions

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Theological institutions in Zimbabwe face significant resource limitations, systemic barriers, and infrastructural underdevelopment, which restrict their efforts to provide quality education (Baloyi 2024). As a result, many continue to rely on conventional, teacher-centered methods that do not promote independent learning and development of information literacy (IL). Although IL is acknowledged globally as a vital academic competency, structured programs to teach it remain largely absent in Zimbabwean theological colleges. This reflects broader trends across sub-Saharan Africa, where technological limitations and weak policy frameworks hinder educational innovation.¹

Although librarians in these institutions acquire new competencies, their contributions are often constrained by a lack of institutional recognition and support. To bridge this gap, comprehensive reforms are necessary to embed librarianship within the teaching

and learning processes of theological institutions. This chapter analyses the international experience of embedded librarianship and its contribution to strengthening student engagement, research competency, and curriculum relevance. Theological institutions in Zimbabwe can draw on these global best practices in their local adaptations. Theoretical discussion on embedded librarianship is followed by empirical research conducted in Zimbabwean theological schools, offering insights into how embedded librarianship can be effectively implemented in this educational context.

Collaboration between Librarians and Faculty

Research indicates that embedded librarianship thrives when librarians and faculty collaborate, grounded in mutual respect and shared goals, an approach that faculty perceive as positively influencing student learning (Spangler and Casper 2023). Farrell and Badke (2015) also emphasize the necessity of cross-disciplinary trust and shared pedagogical responsibility to sustain embedded practices. In theological institutions, this collaboration can manifest through sermon-writing workshops,² exegetical research sessions, or thesis development seminars where librarians contribute to research skill-building. Treating IL as an ad hoc, stand-alone workshop or leaving it entirely to student discretion, as is often done in theological colleges, limits students' ability to conduct rigorous, critical theological research, especially in ministry preparation contexts. Farrell and Badke argue that the systemic integration of IL into discipline-specific curricula ensures students not only learn how to find sources but also develop scholarly habits of mind suited to their field.

Tewell (2018) highlights that when librarians are viewed as co-educators, they can effectively influence curriculum design and foster critical engagement with information across theological disciplines. This way, librarians become agents of pedagogical change, playing a transformative role by challenging dominant narratives and encouraging students to develop reflective and research skills. In theological education, where doctrinal authority and scriptural interpretation are central, embedding librarians into teaching teams creates opportunities to introduce Zimbabwean students to diverse interpretive traditions and scholarly inquiry, fostering deeper engagement with

theological texts and the application of critical information frameworks to faith-based study.

Farrell and Badke (2015) argue that librarians can reshape pedagogical approaches by integrating disciplinary literacy with academic inquiry, particularly in fields that rely heavily on tradition. Similarly, Abrizah et al. (2016) support the strategic placement of librarians within classroom contexts to foster intellectual independence and research competency. In spiritually oriented settings, librarians play a unique role in bridging academic rigor and affective engagement by supporting students' search for meaning and fostering ethical, critical interaction with information, as well as integrating emotional insight into instructional practice.

Institutional Support and Policy Development

For embedded librarianship to flourish in Zimbabwean theological colleges, sustained institutional support and enabling policies are essential. Abrizah et al. (2016) stress the need for structured embedded librarianship programs that include clear job descriptions, continuous training, and strategic alignment with institutional goals. Without such frameworks, even well-intentioned efforts risk becoming unsustainable or marginalized. In the Zimbabwean theological education context, the absence of formalized support structures often hinders librarians from participating fully in academic development, despite their growing expertise and willingness to contribute. Forming strategic partnerships with organizations such as the Association of Theological Education in Zimbabwe (ACTEZ) and the Zimbabwe Library Association to codevelop policies and training models will strengthen individual efforts.

Embedded librarianship presents a transformative opportunity for theological institutions in Zimbabwe to enhance the depth, relevance, and sustainability of IL instruction. By moving librarians into active pedagogical roles, theological colleges can cultivate student competencies in academic research, ethical information use, and theological inquiry. Tewell (2018) emphasizes that such integration not only enhances research skills but also promotes critical thinking and democratic engagement skills, which are vital for theological students who will assume roles as thought leaders and community influencers. For theological institutions in Zimbabwe, adopting a

curriculum-integrated, librarian-embedded model represents not only a pedagogical upgrade but also a strategic investment in the academic formation of future religious leaders.

Empirical Research

This study used a qualitative interpretivist research approach to investigate how embedded librarianship can enhance IL services in Zimbabwean theological institutions. It focused on capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of librarians, faculty, and students through semi-structured online interviews and focus group discussions involving participants from ACTEZ-affiliated institutions. A purposive sampling method ensured the selection of individuals with relevant insights into library and academic support. Overall, the explorative methodology aimed to generate practical insights to inform policy, curriculum development, and librarian training in theological education contexts.

Importance of Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

The study found that meaningful collaboration between librarians and faculty is critical for the success of embedded librarianship in theological institutions to enable the integration of IL instruction into academic programs. However, while faculty acknowledged the helpfulness of librarians, they remained uncertain about librarians' instructional qualifications, revealing ambiguity concerning the pedagogical role of librarians. Fleming-May and Douglass (2014) argue that this role ambiguity stems from a lack of organizational clarity, as librarians are often seen as service providers rather than academic partners. This leads to underutilization of librarians in curriculum delivery and strategic academic planning. Appleton (2021) advocates for a redefinition of the librarian's academic identity in interdisciplinary or spiritually oriented environments. Addressing role ambiguity through policy and awareness campaigns could empower librarians' full participation in instructional ecosystems.

Moreover, librarians reported being included in teaching roles based on prior relationships or at the discretion of faculty. One

participant stated, “Sometimes we are invited into classes because we have a good rapport with a lecturer, but this is not systematized,” which fosters dependency on interpersonal dynamics. Farrell and Badke (2015) argue that systemic, discipline-specific integration is crucial to establishing long-term instructional partnerships. Hope and Peterson (2002) also argue that embedded librarianship flourishes when there is a shared institutional vision that recognizes librarians as co-educators. Similarly, Withorn et al. (2021) show that the absence of formal frameworks in theological institutions often leads to inconsistent practices, limiting the role of librarians in pedagogical innovation. Institutional support is, therefore, essential to embed librarianship as an academic practice rather than a supplementary service.³ Theological accrediting bodies, such as ACTEZ, could promote best practices by issuing guidelines for embedded librarianship. These insights underscore the importance of theological institutions adopting formalized and strategically aligned collaborative models, thereby preventing the discontinuation of successful collaborations. Also, performance evaluation systems should reward faculty-librarian partnerships as part of teaching excellence to help transform informal collaboration into a stable academic norm.

Embedded Librarians as Agents of Pedagogical Change

As librarians consistently positioned themselves as facilitators of critical and theological engagement, the study revealed the need to redefine their roles. They reported involvement in classroom activities, particularly supporting exegetical assignments by teaching students to interrogate sources, assess authorial intent, and differentiate between doctrinal and academic interpretations. One librarian shared, “Our students often quote sources uncritically. We teach them how to question what they read, even sacred texts.” This aligns with Tewell (2018), who argues that librarians promote critical literacy and intellectual autonomy, challenging students to think deeply and reflectively. This evolving role marks a significant shift in the way librarians contribute to theological scholarship.

Faculty participants also supported the idea that librarian-facilitated sessions encouraged students to engage more rigorously with

theological literature, promoting critical IL. These sessions allowed students to explore alternative viewpoints, thereby enhancing their critical writing and academic reasoning skills. Tewell (2018) emphasizes that embedded librarianship can serve as a counterbalance to surface-level learning by encouraging deeper investigation of complex texts. Such engagement is crucial in theology, where information processing involves not only fact-finding but also interpretation and ethical reflection.

Librarians indicated their critical role in teaching ethical and theological information practices, helping students understand source credibility, citation ethics, and interpretive bias, thereby reinforcing both academic integrity and theological depth. Noted again was that students often struggle to differentiate devotional, polemical, and scholarly sources. This finding aligns with Elmborg's (2006) concept of critical IL as a means to challenge epistemological norms while fostering inclusive academic conversations. In this sense, librarians are not neutral facilitators, but active shapers of academic and theological integrity who strengthen students' ability to think theologically, ethically, and critically across multiple frameworks.

Institutional Support and Policy-Driven Reform

Participants emphasized the urgent need for institutional policies that support embedded librarianship as a formal pedagogical strategy, evidenced by librarians across institutions reporting limited structural support. One librarian shared, "We do all this on top of our normal duties. There is no institutional framework for teaching roles," underscoring the burden of dual responsibilities without institutional compensation or support. This aligns with findings that effective embedded librarianship hinges on strong administrative legitimacy, particularly in resource-constrained settings where the absence of financial and institutional support significantly undermines its viability (Munshi et al. 2024). Suggestions provided by respondents included embedding librarianship into institutional strategic plans, creating dedicated instructional roles, and incorporating teaching responsibilities into performance appraisals. Policy frameworks could be informed by partnerships between theological bodies, such as ACTEZ, and professional library associations.

Without policy alignment, embedded librarianship remains vulnerable to leadership changes and institutional inertia.

Another consistent finding was the lack of structured professional development for librarians in instructional roles. Participants expressed a desire for pedagogical training, classroom engagement strategies, and curriculum design skills for effective embedded practice. Saunders (2015) found that librarians often feel underprepared for teaching roles due to limited exposure to educational theory or teaching methodologies during their professional training. Participants proposed capacity-building workshops jointly facilitated by ACTEZ and the Zimbabwe Library Association, to not only upskill librarians but also signal institutional investment in their evolving academic roles. Participants further noted that in institutions where leadership was receptive, librarians were more involved in teaching and policy dialogue.⁴ This echoes Appleton (2021), who contends that institutional culture transformation, not just librarian enthusiasm and pedagogical development, is required to advance embedded practice. Therefore, embedded librarianship relies significantly on the support of institutional leaders to cocreate models that align librarianship with the goals of theological education.

Curriculum Integration: Current Gaps and Future Potential

The findings revealed that significant gaps persist in the integration of IL into theological curricula across Zimbabwean institutions. Many institutions continue to treat IL as peripheral, ad hoc, or optional workshops.⁵ One student noted, “We only go to the library when we need books; no one teaches us how to research.” This causes inconsistent research and writing competencies among students. Lincoln (2013) affirms that structured, ongoing IL training strengthens the sermon preparation and theological engagement skills that are foundational to ministry. When these competencies are absent or inconsistently applied, students struggle to critically engage with theological texts. Theological institutions’ goals of producing thoughtful graduates are undermined. Therefore, the most effective way to close this literacy gap is to embed librarians directly into curriculum development and course design processes.

Librarians also shared that early involvement in syllabus development helps them align instruction with learning objectives and assignments. This aligns with Abrizah et al. (2016), who advocate for curriculum-aligned literacy instruction. When IL is integrated across multiple levels, such as introductory courses, fieldwork, and thesis preparation, students internalize skills as part of their academic identity. Librarians expressed that although some classroom invitations led to meaningful impact, the lack of sustained curricular integration limited long-term learning outcomes. The sporadic nature of these sessions creates a perception that IL is auxiliary rather than essential. Participants suggested the development of cross-departmental committees, curriculum integration policies, and librarian-faculty teaching teams through administrative commitment, strategic policy formulation, and capacity building among librarians. For theological institutions in Zimbabwe, the transition from workshop-based to embedded literacy instruction would represent not only an academic enhancement but also a commitment to holistic, mission-driven education through embedded librarianship.

Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative potential of embedded librarianship in enhancing IL within Zimbabwean theological institutions. Insights from librarians, faculty, and students revealed four key themes: collaboration with faculty, pedagogical integration, institutional support, and inclusion of IL into the curriculum. Librarians are increasingly recognized as co-educators who contribute meaningfully to theological inquiry, although they often face barriers such as limited support and unclear roles. Despite these challenges, enthusiasm is strong among librarians and faculty for deeper integration of library services. The study recommends that institutions and bodies, such as ACTEZ, formally recognize librarians as academic partners. Ultimately, embedded librarianship represents a pedagogical shift that supports the mission of theological institutions by cultivating reflective, research-literate graduates.

Recommendations to Theological Institutions

- Formalize the role of librarians as academic staff by including them in curriculum development, teaching teams, and academic committees.
- Develop institutional policies that support embedded librarianship as a strategic tool for academic and spiritual formation.
- Invest in professional development programs that equip librarians with instructional and pedagogical competencies aligned with theological education.
- Foster partnerships with national bodies such as ACTEZ and the Zimbabwe Library Association to codevelop guidelines, training, and assessment tools for embedded literacy instruction.

Recommendations to Librarians

- Advocate for an instructional role by demonstrating the value of embedded practices through pilot projects, teaching portfolios, and documented student outcomes.
- Seek professional development in pedagogy, curriculum design, and theological literacy to strengthen the integration of librarians into teaching environments.
- Initiate collaborative relationships with faculty by proposing joint teaching sessions, codesigned assessments, and embedded workshops tailored to theological content.

Recommendations to Researchers

- Investigate student outcomes linked to librarian-led instruction in theological education to quantify the academic and cognitive impact of these embedded practices.

- Explore interdisciplinary collaborations between library science and theology faculties to identify models that enhance critical literacy through faith-based curricula.

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Notes

- 1 Vhembo (2019), in a case study of Murray Theological College, notes the lack of financial resources as a challenge to supporting core academic services such as book acquisition, research skill development, and infrastructure upgrades. Such resource scarcity restricts the institution's ability to support theological education effectively.
- 2 Lincoln (2013) highlighted that theological students demonstrate enhanced sermon preparation and scriptural engagement when equipped with structured training in research methodology and source evaluation.
- 3 Abrizah et al (2016) emphasize the importance of defining and formalizing the librarian's instructional role to ensure equitable participation in academic delivery. Without such recognition, the co-educator identity remains informal and inconsistently applied. Therefore, legitimizing this identity and pedagogical potential of embedded librarianship is critical.
- 4 This observation supports Hope and Peterson's (2002) argument that embedded librarianship flourishes in environments where leadership actively champions collaborative instruction models. Where leadership remains indifferent, librarians are relegated to marginal roles regardless of their expertise.
- 5 See also Julien and Barker (2009), who find that one-shot library sessions are insufficient for deep and transferable research skills and fall short of addressing research needs of students.

Community Outreach and Engagement

The Theological Library and Its Social Responsibility

A Balance Between Being and Doing

ASTRID ELENA MARTÍNEZ

This chapter aims to raise awareness about the realities of the Latin American context, identify the work carried out by theological libraries within this environment, and understand how information professionals connect with the users and communities they serve under diverse circumstances. These insights will enable readers to renew their vision regarding the service the theological library offers to academia, the church, and society. Likewise, it will serve as an opportunity to reconsider the perspective and concept that information professionals and library support staff have regarding the user.

The theological library, beyond being a space for preservation and research, also bears a social responsibility that links it actively to its surroundings. Such responsibility implies an ethical commitment to the communities it serves. Throughout this text, we explore how the theological library can align its practices with users' real

needs by promoting inclusive practices, transformative dialogue, and information management that responds to social challenges and contributes to the building of more just and caring communities.

Historical and Social Challenges for the Theological Library in Colombia

It is not surprising that in Colombia, where widespread violence has been a dominant factor for more than eighty years, it was often instrumentalized to victimize countless people. González Arano and Molineros Guerrero (2010) argue that armed groups in Colombia have used violence as a tool of pressure to achieve various objectives: “Violence that has historically been used to resolve differences manifests itself in social, political, economic, and family spheres”¹ (353).²

It is necessary to examine the current reality in light of the historical events that marked the beginnings of the church in Colombia and Latin America. According to Bucana (1995), between 1841 and 1900, there were strong waves of generalized violence on Colombian territory, stemming from public dissatisfaction with the ruling government. During that period, the church faced significant challenges that tested its resilience and commitment to its mission.³

Violence has also hindered progress and education for decades. As a result, some users in theological libraries are victims of displacement, uprooted from their homes and families, often without the possibility of returning. Displacement and its impact must be understood from the perspective of those who have fled due to violence or extreme poverty. In fact, some students come from rural churches and arrive with the hope of improving their living conditions. As Meneses (2008) explains, “Poverty is not only a matter of lack of income but also of human and intellectual development”⁴ (50; author’s translation). In this context, as Hays (2018) expresses, “displaced persons need accompaniment to heal”⁵ (22). The institution—and therefore the library—becomes a space that receives and embraces each story, taking on the academic, technological, and restorative challenges students bring with them.

These educational barriers not only hinder access to knowledge but also impact the self-perception and integral development of individuals from rural backgrounds. Luz Peña, a seminary

student, experienced this reality and found in the library a space for transformation.

Luz Peña arrived at the seminary in 2023, at age nineteen, from a rural village. A shy young woman with limited resources, often made invisible by her fears and insecurities, she shares (personal communication, February 27, 2025), “I arrived after trying to get into other universities. At that time, I struggled significantly with writing, as the education I received was not of the highest quality. However, the library has been fundamental to my formation, because in the pages of books is the knowledge of many people. In fact, I recently started reading novels.”⁶

Working in the library helped her develop communication skills, discipline, punctuality, and a heart for service. It also strengthened her spiritual and ministerial life, as she became actively involved in missionary and evangelistic groups.

To meet users’ needs, it is necessary to draw closer to the church and understand its context and surrounding circumstances. As Meneses (2008) emphasizes, “A library service for those who suffer a diminished dignity is a matter of justice that should move and inspire us to develop and consolidate social inclusion policies”⁷ (48). Justice involves principles of equity, equality, and opportunity for all, which implies ensuring all users can access information.

The Social Responsibility of the Theological Library

The theological library carries a dual responsibility: it must contribute to the formative development of its users and respond to the social needs of its community. The Fundación Universitaria Seminario Bíblico de Colombia (FUSBC) library is located in an intercultural context where students face separation from their families and places of origin. The library, therefore, aims to integrate social well-being policies for “creating spaces that guarantee peace of mind and human satisfaction through reading and promote the full development of individuals”⁸ (Meneses 2008, 48). The library needs to offer comprehensive support, foster spaces for social interaction, and guide students’ reading of the world so they may overcome the past, be critical of the present, and contribute to the future.

The violence and displacement, far from being confined to the media or reduced to statistics, manifest themselves in the daily

experiences of those who arrive at theological libraries. Deiner José Espitia Diaz, a graduate of FUSBC, is a concrete example of this reality. Having been born in Planeta Rica, Córdoba, at the age of 42 he has already experienced three forced displacements due to violence (personal communication, March 28, 2025). His family was affected by massacres, kidnappings, and extortion, forcing him to relocate multiple times in search of safety. Despite these difficulties, he, together with his wife, began a ministry for children and planted a church. However, new threats forced him to flee once again.

Thanks to the seminary's Sabbatical Plan, he received psychological support, housing, and the opportunity to take some courses. This marked the beginning of his theological training, which culminated in his graduation in 2024. He highlights the fundamental role the library played in both his academic and ministerial development: "Among all the things the seminary taught me, it taught me how to read well—not only books, but also contexts and people—and how to write well."⁹ Deiner believes the library gave him the necessary tools to carry out his ministry. He now serves in two ministries with the Prison Fellowship of Colombia, where he works with ex-combatants and shares the gospel through audio and video with people deprived of liberty.

Deiner's testimony reveals the potential of the library as a space for restoration and formation. His story demonstrates not only the value of academic resources but also the importance of institutional support in contexts of suffering. It is a call to extend library services to those who cannot easily access them. In response to this need, the FUSBC library has developed a project called Repositorio Cristiano Interinstitucional (REPCI, a Digital Repository for Latin America and the Caribbean, <https://repci.co>), which integrates resources from various institutions across Latin America, preserves the historical heritage of the church, and offers open access to these resources.

The theological library supports the work of forming and strengthening ministries that contribute to the recovery of vulnerable populations, understanding vulnerability as the condition of those who, "due to their social, economic, and cultural conditions—on the one hand—and their physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological conditions—on the other—may suffer violations of their human rights"¹⁰ (Meneses 2008, 51).

The Ethical Contribution of the Librarian in a Context Marked by Corruption

The theological librarian assumes an even greater ethical responsibility in the face of the moral challenges posed by contemporary culture, in which misconduct tends to be normalized and corruption has infiltrated all spheres of society. This issue originates in the home, reproduces in schools, and becomes evident in the workplace.

In many environments, the boundaries between right and wrong have become blurred, giving rise to practices, such as corruption, that contradict the values of the gospel. As Acosta (2018) rightly states, “Corruption is the improper use of power granted by a position or social role to obtain personal benefits or to benefit third parties”¹¹ (12). Corruption is often linked to power, specifically the ability to access resources due to one’s position or opportunity, as well as the power to belong to a particular group or access certain information. Corruption is the misuse of power, whether exclusive or privileged, to gain personal advantage or recognition.

This phenomenon is a part of Latin American culture, in which personal relationships often take precedence over adherence to rules. When writing about corruption in Latin America, Acosta (2018) also addresses the understanding that many people believe they cannot let their friends down, as they consider family ties and friendships to be of paramount importance.¹²

Related to this reality are the results of a study the library conducted among students in the seminary’s nonformal program, to evaluate the decrease in resource use and the frequency of library visits. It found some students did not consider it necessary to go to the library because they had a classmate who was a ‘wizard’ at finding any book on the web and would then circulate it freely. This reveals an ethical problem not only in those who distribute the material but also in those who make use of it. Steps must be taken to address these challenges, and the participation of all actors involved is essential. This includes implementing educational campaigns, encouraging faculty commitment to legality, and providing support in the use and acquisition of appropriate resources. In the same spirit, teachers should promote the library as a safe, consistent, and relevant space.

Additionally, the same study found that of eighty students surveyed, 50% complete their assignments by searching the web. This

trend has become a significant challenge for education, as current generations struggle to invest the required time and effort in searching for information. They prefer everything ‘easy and fast,’ often starting their work by copying ideas from the Internet and AI tools without analyzing them or giving credit to the authors.

The FUSBC library aligns itself with the institutional mission as a foundational axis: “to train persons called by God” (FUSBC) who prepare to bring transformation to their communities and respond faithfully to their calling. Thus, the library actively integrates the institutional mission of forming men and women called by God, prepared to bring transformation to their communities from an ethical perspective. Within this framework, access to bibliographic resources is not only an academic issue, but also an opportunity to foster processes of restoration and personal growth.

Edwin Jara, a student at the institution, is a clear example of this. Coming from a region affected by violence and with a history of forced displacement, he arrived at FUSBC with limited communication and digital skills. “I had never before had access to such a wide range of bibliographic resources,”¹³ he explains. This access, coupled with the support he received, has allowed him not only to advance in his theological studies but also to reinterpret his personal history through the lens of faith and principles of justice, reconciliation, and forgiveness. “Like Joseph, I have come to see how all the harm done to us, God used it for good”¹⁴ (personal communication, March 21, 2025).

Edwin’s experience illustrates how the library, by facilitating equitable access to knowledge, can catalyze ethical and vocational transformation. His relationship with the library, along with the literature and courses he has taken, has helped him process forgiveness and reconciliation, and prepare for pastoral ministry. He now sees the library as a space for holistic growth and suggests more literature be promoted to help heal those who have suffered displacement, just as he did.

In this context, ethics cannot be reduced to mere obedience to external norms; instead, there must be a transformation of character. As Polo (2007) aptly states, “Virtue is what makes a person master of themselves; vice, on the other hand, deprives them of freedom. Thus, the alternative does not reside only in the choice of the act, but affects the very being of the person”¹⁵ (155).

It is essential to remember that the ethics of Christ are based on love for God and neighbor, and this is only possible when a person’s life is led by the Holy Spirit. As Polo (2007) affirms, “God must be

loved above all things... love is superior to any other act of piety”¹⁶ (159).

It is this love that does not violate the rights of others in pursuit of personal gain. It is a genuine love that seeks to give each person the best of oneself: respect, honor, and recognition. This is the perfect love of Christ described by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13—the kind of love that recognizes the importance and value of what others have written, and expresses biblical ethics in all relationships.

Final Proposals for a Library Committed to Social Well-Being

The FUSBC library is an extension of the academic institution and bears the responsibility of forming agents of change. It is part of the broader process of preparing men and women called to serve God, the church, and society. Therefore, it must assume an ethical and social responsibility that meets the demands of today’s challenges.

The library must eliminate access barriers by ensuring resources are available to remote students, displaced individuals, and those in rural areas, through digital libraries, community alliances, and mobile strategies.

It should also form a biblical ethical framework, promoting a culture of integrity in the use of information through pedagogy and example, integrating love and justice as the foundation of every library action.

Listening to and giving visibility to people’s stories is equally important. Life testimonies must be recognized as part of the institutional heritage. To humanize library services is to accompany, guide, and give value to each person’s story.

Comprehensive support is also necessary, creating environments that foster academic, emotional, and spiritual growth, and encouraging restorative relationships and spaces for meaningful interaction.

Overall, the library should focus on forming agents of transformation. It plays an active role in the institutional mission, and its efforts should be aimed at preparing men and women to bring hope to their communities, with critical thinking, compassion, and ethical coherence.

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Notes

- 1 Spanish original: “La violencia ha sido una vía utilizada históricamente por la sociedad para resolver sus diferencias entre sí y que esta puede ser de tipo social, político, económico, familiar, entre otras.” (González Arano and Molinares Guerrero 2010, 353)
- 2 All translations from Spanish are by the author.
- 3 Spanish original: “Según Bucana, entre 1841 y 1900 se produjeron fuertes oleadas de violencia generalizada en el territorio colombiano debido a la inconformidad de la población con el gobierno de turno. Durante ese periodo, la iglesia enfrentó desafíos significativos que pusieron a prueba su resiliencia y el compromiso con su misión.” (Bucana 1995, 133)
- 4 Spanish original: “Un problema no sólo de falta de ingresos sino también de progreso humano e intelectual.” (Meneses 2008, 50)
- 5 Spanish original: “las personas en situación de desplazamiento necesitarían un acompañamiento para recuperarse.” (Hays 2018, 22)
- 6 Spanish original: “Llegué después de haber intentado entrar a otras universidades. En ese momento, estaba muy mal en redacción, puesto que la educación que recibí no fue la mejor. Considero que la biblioteca ha sido clave para mi formación, porque en las páginas de los libros está plasmado el conocimiento de muchas personas.” (Peña 2025)
- 7 Spanish original: “Un servicio de biblioteca para quienes sufren un menoscabo en su dignidad es un imperativo de justicia que nos debe sensibilizar e impulsar, a generar y consolidar políticas de inclusión social.” (Meneses 2008, 48)
- 8 Spanish original: “Crear espacios que garanticen tranquilidad y satisfacción humana mediante la lectura y promover el desarrollo pleno de los individuos.” (Meneses 2008, 48)
- 9 Spanish original: “Dentro de todas las cosas que el Seminario me enseñó, me enseñó a leer bien, no sólo libros, el contexto, las personas y a escribir bien.” (Espitia Díaz, 2025)
- 10 Spanish original: “por sus condiciones sociales, económicas y culturales, por un lado, físicas, sensoriales, intelectuales o psicológicas, por el otro, pueden sufrir vejaciones contra sus derechos humanos.” (Meneses 2008, 51)

- 11 Spanish original: “La corrupción es la utilización indebida que un individuo hace del poder que le da un cargo o posición social para obtener beneficios personales o para terceros.” (Acosta 2018, 12)
- 12 Spanish original: “uno no puede quedar mal con los amigos... Las relaciones familiares y las amistades hay que conservarlas por encima de todo.” (Acosta 2018, 19)
- 13 Spanish original: “Nunca antes había tenido acceso a una oferta bibliográfica tan amplia” (Jara, 2025)
- 14 Spanish original: “Como José, he entendido cómo todo el mal que nos hicieron, Dios lo usó para bien.” (Jara, 2025)
- 15 Spanish original: “Es la virtud lo que hace al hombre dueño de sí; en cambio, los vicios privan de libertad. Así pues, la alternativa no reside solo en la elección del acto, sino que afecta al ser mismo del hombre.” (Polo 2007, 155)
- 16 Spanish original: “A Dios hay que amarlo por encima de todas las cosas.” (Polo 2007, 159)

Library as a Bridge between the Past and the Present

Genealogy as a Library Service

KATARZYNA MARIA GOŁEMBICKA AND ANNA KATARZYNA KRYZA

The practice of preserving the memory of one's ancestors through genealogy dates back to ancient times when societies were divided into clans or tribes, and documenting membership in a particular group was essential to justifying the rights granted to an individual (Synowiec 2003). For this reason, the Old Testament contains extensive genealogical sections, indicating direct kinship with patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was not so much a historical function but a religious one—demonstrating the continuity of the covenant with God and the associated blessings, thus illustrating a person's participation in the history of salvation. Although the New Testament clearly presents that ethnic origin is not necessary for salvation, as “there is neither Jew nor Gentile” (Galatians 3:28), and that all people are—through Christ—descendants of Abraham and heirs to the promises made to him (Galatians 3:29), the Gospels of Luke and Matthew continue the Jewish tradition

by presenting the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38) (cf. Rosik 2007).

The same applies to conducting genealogical research today. On the one hand, it is about preserving memory; on the other hand, it should not be limited to searching for and adding names and dates, but rather be an attempt to understand the ancestors and the times in which they lived. In this approach to personifying research, theological libraries should play a significant role. Due to their religious nature, they better understand the danger of uprooting individuals and depriving them of identification with the community. Most important, they know the necessity of seeing oneself as part of a larger whole—a divine plan, like a link in the entire chain of generations. By organizing various workshops or genealogical events, these libraries become places of local community integration, encouraging the cultivation of intergenerational bonds and traditions.

Theological libraries have another advantage over similar institutions due to their connection to church archives, as part of their structure or close enough that cooperation between these two institutions seems natural. Additionally, local publications concerning small parishes and towns are often issued in limited print runs, rendering them difficult to access; nevertheless, libraries systematically seek to collect such materials relevant to their regions and dioceses.

Genealogical Services in Theological Libraries: Current Status

A survey was conducted in 2025 among forty Polish theological libraries affiliated with the Federation of Polish Church Libraries “Fides” regarding the provision of genealogical services. These are libraries of various types, including academic (found at universities and higher education institutions), seminary, monastic, and parish libraries. Exactly half declared themselves as seminary libraries, with the next largest group being academic libraries (35%), the least represented were monastic libraries (10%) and parish libraries (2.5%), while others did not fit into any of these categories. More than half (60%) reported conducting research, including searches for information about ancestors/parishes, etc. Only 18.8% of respondents

reported not having encountered such requests in the past year. The interest of readers is illustrated in Figure 1.

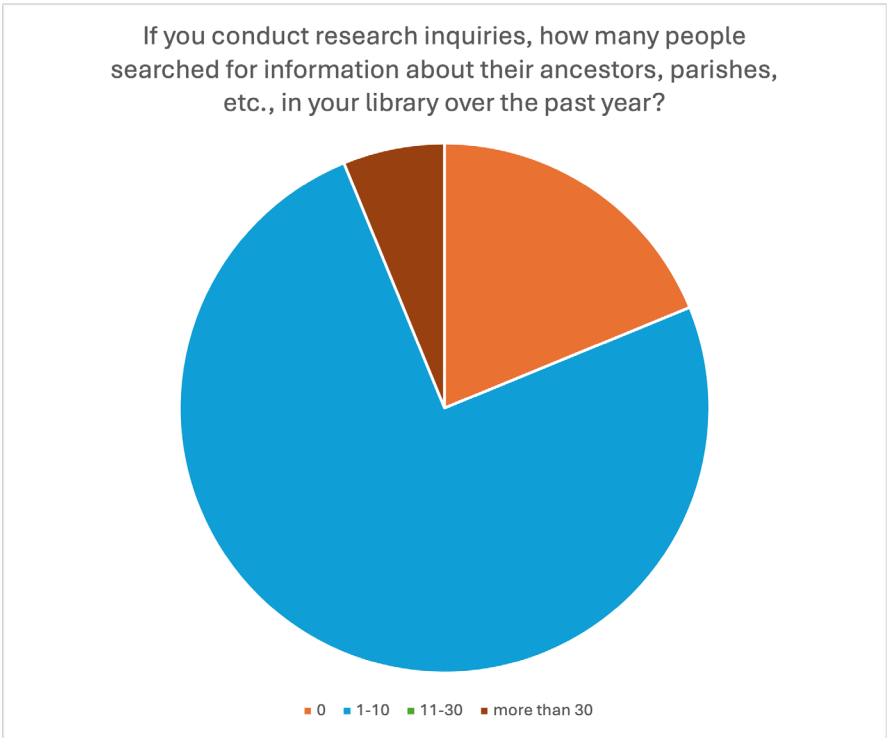


Fig. 1. Interest in genealogical inquiries.

The vast majority of theological libraries (90%) do not organize any genealogy or local history events, arguing this is due to the lack of interest among readers (61.1%), lack of staff for organizing (38.9%), lack of experience (30.6%), lack of funds (25%), or other factors—this is illustrated in Figure 2.

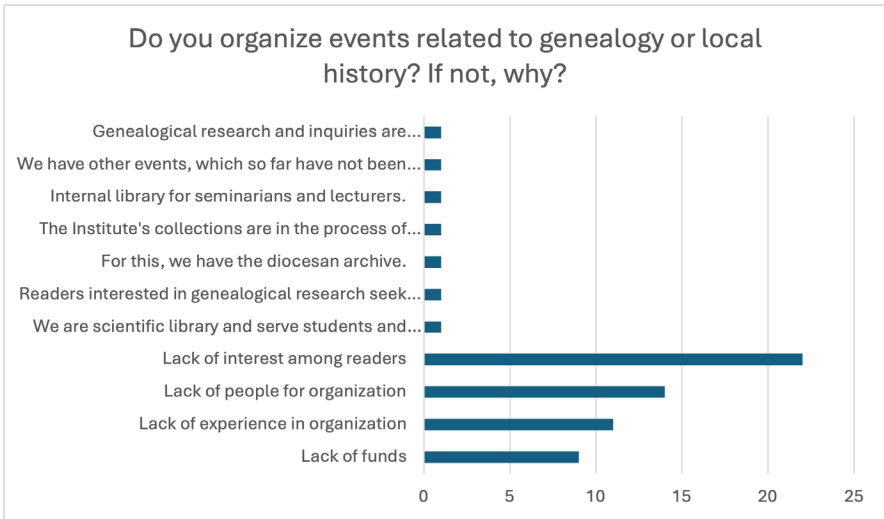


Fig. 2. Reasons for not organizing genealogical events.

Libraries that confirmed organizing such events (10%) were asked to indicate the types of events they organize. Figure 3 shows the types of events they held.

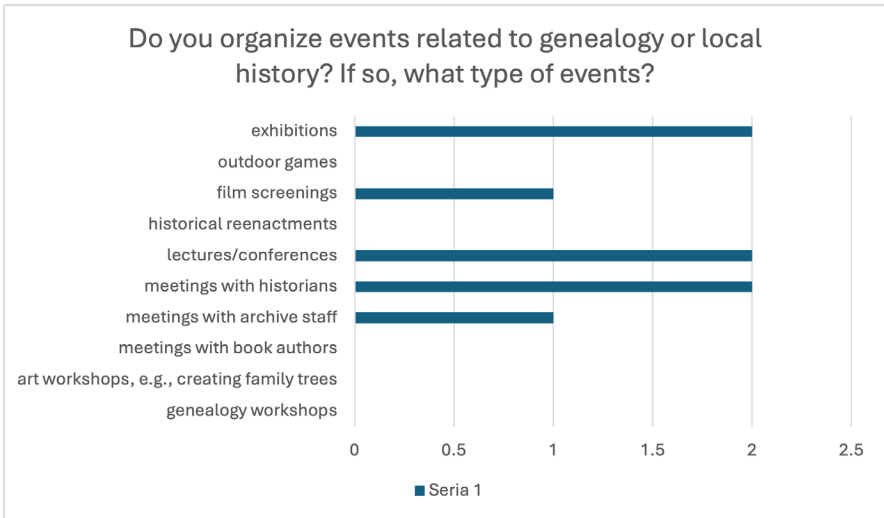


Fig. 3. Types of genealogical events in libraries.

All events were organized with the institution's own resources and drew considerable interest, with half of the respondents

reporting that more than fifty people attended. The attendance of readers is illustrated in Figure 4.

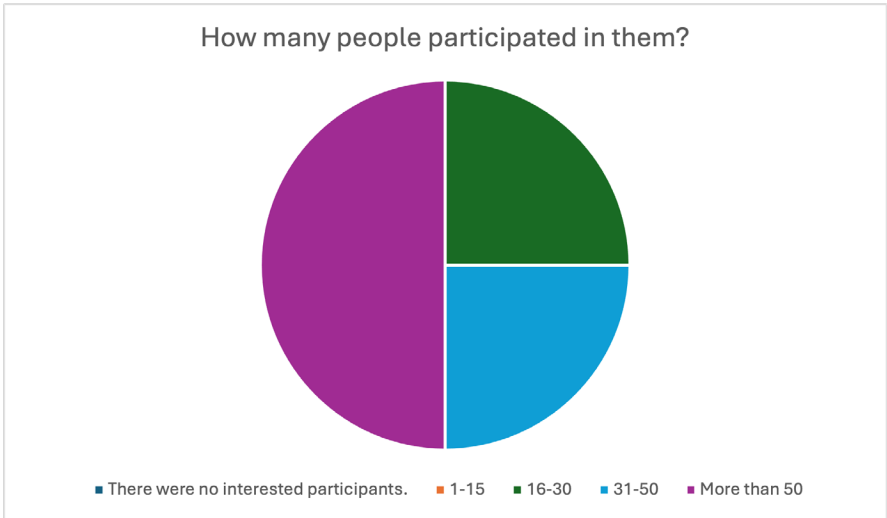


Fig. 4. Number of attending participants at events.

Based on the survey, it follows that most libraries do not organize any genealogical events, mainly due to the belief that there is a lack of interest among readers; however, the experiences of others clearly indicate that attendance is high. Could this be based on a false assumption? Especially considering the decline in readership (and vocations, particularly affecting seminary and monastic libraries), this opens up new opportunities to attract more people to our institutions.

Genealogical Services in Theological Libraries: Perspectives

The role of libraries in society is changing. Libraries are no longer just places providing access to literature and source materials but true cultural centers playing an increasingly important role in integrating local communities, combating digital exclusion, and promoting regional education. Theological libraries are also facing the unique challenge of adapting to the expectations of their current users. It is no longer enough to provide religious literature; it is necessary to

create spaces for organizing lectures, debates, seminars, and workshops that will enable interfaith dialogue, spread theological knowledge, and engage and integrate the local community.

Actions undertaken by public libraries, particularly in the context of genealogical services, can serve as an inspiration and an example for theological libraries in adapting to the contemporary needs of the community. One effective (and low-effort) action is to create a listing of sources for genealogists on the library's website, as seen in the Brooklyn Public Library Association (Brooklyn Public Library n.d.). Another simple yet effective option is to establish cooperation with the US-based genealogy organization FamilySearch (n.d.) and become an affiliated library. This necessitates only the provision of Internet-connected computers, enabling users to access high-quality digital scans of vital records from diverse regions that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, cooperation with local genealogical societies, archives, museums, and cultural institutions can contribute to organizing various workshops, events, exhibitions, and meetings promoting the history and heritage of the local community. As a result, even beginners can embark on their genealogical journey and explore the history of their family.

It is essential to remain open to collaboration and to engage with local creators and institutions. A good example might be contacting a local photographer and offering to organize retro-style photo sessions for readers in the library space. Interested participants, dressed in vintage clothes, will have the opportunity to embody their grandparents or great-grandparents and, for a lower price than at a traditional studio, receive black-and-white photos. If combined with a lecture from an archivist on caring for old photographs and documents, a historian's talk about 1920s fashion, and scrapbooking workshops for children and youth to create their own albums, an event would be created that appeals to people with diverse interests, attracting a broad audience to the institution.

Additionally, initiatives like meetings with seniors, during which they share memories of their lives or the history and appearance of the town, are excellent opportunities not only to show the youth the past but also to build intergenerational bonds. These are even more appealing to young people or students when linked to journalism workshops or the creation of board games or mobile apps (especially location-based). Thus following the motto, "Popularization is as important as scientific research," as stated by Wrocław-based

scholar Professor Jerzy Łanowski (Jasińska 2017, 14), knowledge is shared in an engaging and accessible way with others.

Few libraries organize film screenings, due to equipment limitations and associated costs. The most expensive option involves virtual reality (VR), which enables immersive historical experiences and appeals to a broad audience beyond genealogy or history enthusiasts. While many educational VR films are free to access, the necessary equipment remains costly and typically serves only one user at a time. A more affordable solution is a traditional screening using a projector and screen, provided appropriate film licenses are secured and the library can offer a space that does not disrupt regular activities. Libraries should creatively leverage available resources. Older devices, such as slide projectors or record players, can support nostalgic or intergenerational programming, like screenings of vintage animated films or music evenings featuring vinyl records.

It is essential not to abandon organizing such events due to concerns about costs. There are many ways to raise funds for these initiatives. Options include organizing a book sale or selling books to secondhand bookstores. Another option is to apply for grants and funding, such as those from government institutions or other foundations that support education and social activities. It is also worth noting that many companies involved in multimedia equipment sales or organizing workshops for library staff and readers offer help in obtaining such funding for project implementation. In the Polish market, institutions such as the Institute of National Remembrance also have funds. They are open to cooperation with libraries, supporting them in organizing various cultural and educational events. It is worth seeking various opportunities that can help develop activities for local communities without generating high costs.

Modern Technology in the Service of Genealogy

The computerization of libraries, particularly the shift of data to online platforms, has rendered non-collaborative institutions largely uncompetitive and invisible to readers. Today's cooperation is possible thanks to metadata, which exists mainly in electronic form. The most obvious form of this involves the exchange of bibliographic data (Nahotko 2019).

Union Catalogs

The amount of information available on the Internet can be both an advantage and an overwhelming task when looking for something very specific, like a book published in a small edition or grey literature¹. Union catalogs can also be of great value for users researching their roots for genealogical purposes. Especially theological catalogs, which gather publications—often scarce ones—about parishes, cemeteries, and generally speaking, local history, should be a first choice in this kind of research.

NUKAT (Polish National Union Catalog)

For Polish readers, the best catalog to start research is NUKAT (n.d.), which contains descriptions of documents held by many Polish libraries as well as those from around the world. It was launched in 2002 as an initiative of several academic libraries and the National Library of Poland, today connecting more than 170 libraries in a shared task of simplifying access to information. NUKAT holds descriptions of books, journals, sound recordings, printed music, movies, maps, iconographic documents, ephemera, and early imprints.

Fides Catalog

The Central Catalog of the Federation of Church Libraries “Fides” was created on June 14, 2014. Currently, Fides (n.d.) contains bibliographic records from nineteen university libraries and higher seminaries, four diocesan libraries, and eleven religious congregations. The catalog contains information on the collections of forty-one libraries. It contains over 820,000 bibliographic records and encompasses more than three million books and periodicals.

Digital Libraries

Unlike many commercial services, digital libraries often offer free access. Furthermore, for church libraries, this kind of free and widespread provision of collections via the Internet fulfills their mission of evangelization (Witczak 2009). The availability of digital

libraries significantly enhances the efficiency and scope of genealogical research. Digital libraries collect materials, including local newspapers and records, that reflect everyday social life. A notable example is POLONA, the most extensive Polish digital library. Materials available on its platform include, among many others, digitized books, magazines, graphics, maps, music, leaflets, and manuscripts (Biblioteka Narodowa n.d.). It provides access to the cultural treasures gathered in the collections of the National Library of Poland and institutions with which it collaborates. Genealogy-oriented users can find many valuable source materials, such as archived issues of the Polish local press, or address and telephone books.

Pushing in the Right Direction

A key part of a librarian's work is to provide access to information and guide readers to the sources they need. It is not about presenting them with a ready solution, but rather about explaining strategies for finding the necessary information themselves. This approach is equally important when dealing with users researching their roots.

Numerous websites dedicated to creating family trees offer access to various databases of vital records, censuses, immigration documents (including passenger and crew lists), and military records. The most popular options include Ancestry, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch, which also offer a range of additional tools to facilitate family history research.

Several smaller projects contain indexes of vital records and search engines covering specific countries, provinces, or social groups. In the case of Poland, the most extensive database is Geneteka, which includes data from birth, marriage, and death records, often with links to scanned documents collected in the associated Skanoteka. Digitized vital records can also be found in GenBaza and the most comprehensive service, Szukaj w Archiwach. The latter also contains other documents, lists, cadastral maps, and photographs stored in state archives, as well as instructional videos to facilitate use of the platform.

Conclusion

Despite significant progress in the field of genealogy, challenges remain that make researching one's ancestry difficult. Language barriers, limited access to certain archives, difficulties in interpreting old documents, simply not knowing where to look for information, or lacking historical context are just a few of the obstacles genealogy researchers face. This is where libraries play an invaluable role—not only by providing access to a variety of sources and research assistance, but also by serving as meeting places for knowledge exchange through workshops and events that promote awareness of the past.

For theological libraries, these activities align not only with their educational mandate but primarily with their inherent missionary role within the broader framework of religious institutions. Ultimately, genealogical passion is not just about “collecting” ancestors; by creating a space for sharing knowledge and experiences, it can become a way to preserve memory and tradition. It is also a way to integrate the local community and include groups who are at risk of exclusion (such as seniors).

Libraries should collaborate with local genealogical associations and experts in the field to provide readers with the most up-to-date and reliable knowledge. As a result, genealogy becomes accessible and appealing to everyone interested in discovering their family history and exploring the secrets of the past. Ultimately, every newly “discovered” ancestor is not just a name in a record, but a glimpse into the life of a real person whose story holds value beyond bare facts. After all, “Tickets to the afterlife are paid by our collective memory” (Szymborska 2015, 36).

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Notes

- 1 A term describing publications that meet one of the conditions: they are difficult to access, not intended for commercial book trade, or not included in the national bibliographic register.

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