

# *Introduction*

KATHARINA PENNER

*The 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 services<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

