

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

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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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