

# *Beginning the Theological Library*

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**T**HEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES, AS WELL AS THEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS WITHIN AN EXISTING library, all start somewhere. A library might begin with a small collection of books given by a professor or an alumnus, or possibly with a recognized need within your organization to begin a collection.

Perhaps this is the challenge before you—how to begin to put together the resources that will be useful for the learning context you are in and develop the type of collections that will inform and shape the religious/theological studies taught at your institution. On the other hand, perhaps you are beginning in a position in an established library and are entrusted with continuing the work and growing the collections further. Whichever circumstance you may find yourself in, my hope is that this chapter will provide ideas and practical help.

## *Context and Calling*

As institutions differ, so do their libraries. Spending the time to learn and understand the culture of your institution is critical. If you are working in a library within your religious/theological tradition, you may have some background already—but taking the time to get to know long-time faculty and reading resources on the tradition can be invaluable as you consider how to shape the collection. This orientation becomes even more important if your background differs from that of your institution.

Theological schools have a variety of reasons for existing—to train clergy and laity for the practical skills of ministry, to develop academicians and scholars, to train educators and missionaries, and to provide programs for spiritual nurture and development. Your institution may do one or more of these activities, each of which may require unique resources.

Your school may be a small stand-alone Bible institute or a larger religious/theological school, possibly situated within another academic institution. Some librarians may have strong theological backgrounds through advanced studies and others may be entering into an area of great interest but with a limited background. The first theological library that I worked in and developed was in a ministry organization with a small number of books that required some organization. We had few resources at hand—and I had neither a theological degree nor one in librarianship—so I had much to learn!

Academic culture at each institution may also differ. Accordingly, the role of the librarian may vary considerably from one type of institution to another. Expectations for who has oversight for collection development may be different as well. If we look at a range of institutions, it is rare that librarian roles and collections are conceived of in exactly the same way.

## *Collection Assessment*

When looking for a place to begin, a good first step is to assess the collection. Is it a well-defined collection built up over years—or, more often, a bit of a hodge-podge with some areas of strength and much-needed opportunities for growth?

Collection assessment has a number of components—the first consideration is determining whom your collection serves (your context). Is the focus primarily on the students and secondarily on the faculty (or the reverse)? Do you have additional community users such as local religious leaders? Do you have partnerships with other institutions in your faith tradition or in your geographic area?

Library director Jim Agee (2005) writes that “collection evaluations help librarians better realize what materials are in their collections, and how well they are meeting their collection development goals” and sees collection evaluation as one important measure of collection development. He adds: “A properly implemented evaluation may help focus concerns, uncover the character of the collection already in place, reveal gaps, measure the currency and historical depth of the collection, or reflect accuracy of vendor profiles—used for slip or approval plans—in meeting collection goals.”

Talk to your users. Recognize that this may mean that you need to spend time outside of the library to learn more of what is needed. Get input from classroom faculty about what is working or what is missing. Review their syllabi to see the recommended and required resources, and consider items that will supplement each course. What are the research or teaching interests of your faculty and administration? How current is the collection, and when has it been weeded?

Collection assessment is an ongoing concern for librarians—it is never “a one and done” activity. As collection development depends heavily upon the budget that a library has, most libraries have some form of assessment underway on an ongoing basis. This might include an overall review and then looking at specific areas of the collection for in-depth review each year. If the library has a primary focus in curricular support, certain course syllabi and discipline areas can be selected each year—books of scripture, history of the faith tradition, preaching and teaching, etc. Over a several-year period, the entire collection can undergo a review.

## *Curricular Support*

For library collections that are designed to support the curriculum, you should look first at the resources that the students are expected to have accessible. Depending upon the situation of your school and your students, students may not be able to afford individual purchas-

es of texts. If the latter, the library should attempt to own one or more copies of the needed titles. Print copies might be placed on reserve, or, if the school has the capacity for e-books, these might be considered for purchase as well. If the students and the library have reliable internet access, the librarian can work closely with faculty members to encourage adoption of texts that are open access, bringing down the cost for students and for the library budget.

As you review the syllabi, consider the listed assignments—will there be research papers or presentations? Shorter reports such as book reviews? Would it be helpful to have examples from various traditions? For instance, if a course is on preaching, the collection would be enhanced not only with the required texts but also with resources that show different styles/methods, possibly sample sermons and/or sermon illustrations. A course on the history of the church in a particular geographic area can be enhanced with biographies of church leaders or missionaries, histories of the religious organizations in the area, creedal and denominational histories, and critical works that analyze the period studied.

In many instances, this kind of expansive look may only lead the librarian to a few new selections in each area due to budget constraints. The work involved is still important as it can assist in setting priorities for purchases or gift selections in the future. Theological libraries are typically not built overnight—but an awareness of curricular needs can be of great assistance as you plan for both short and long-term growth.

## *Role of a Collection Development Policy*

Whether you are beginning the library or continuing the work, having a functional collection development policy can be a key resource for funding and gift decisions. Policies can vary greatly in length and scope—some policies are a page or two and state how the library will support the mission of the school through the collections. Other policies can be extensive and might list the key subject disciplines and the level to which these materials are collected. In a small library, a short policy could highlight the disciplinary areas you plan to collect (and perhaps, what you do not); the types of materials, such as print books, electronic books, journals, databases, and media types; and how you plan to handle gifts of resources to the library. Because me-

dia types can change rapidly, it is wise to update your plan as media changes (for instance, moving from VHS tapes to DVDs). If your library has space constraints, having a plan for weeding the collection to maintain currency is also good to include.

A thoughtful collection development policy can take some work at the outset, but it is invaluable for goal setting over time. If a donor wants to give your library a collection that doesn't fit your mission or space, you will have a written document that shows you have given consideration to what will be best for the school overall and be able to kindly refuse the gift. If your administration is raising funds for academics, having plans for what will improve your collection may be helpful. Finally, these policies are often requested if your school is being reviewed for an accreditation and can help accreditors direct administrators' attention to library needs. There are excellent resources on preparing different types of collection development policies and many schools have their policy on a library website—so you can get a sense of what might work best in your institution.

### *Joys and Challenges of Donated and Gift Materials*

Many schools rely upon donated print books and journals to grow their collection. Depending upon the original collector of the materials, this may be a boon for your library—or may be a time-consuming project to find the small number of materials that can be valuable. Gifts follow the interests of the giver, so having some knowledge of the giver is helpful in determining if the gift might be a match. If it is feasible, ask if you might see the items before they are packed up and delivered to your front door. Clarify within your organization that you are the one to make the decision on whether the gift is to be accepted (and having the collection development policy in place is a help here). This is not always possible, of course. Sometimes a donor will give their library linked with a donation to the school. If you think this might be possible, it is wise to work with the office that handles your financial donations.

There is not a single policy on the best ways to handle gift collections. Gift books can arrive in excellent condition or can be covered in dust and have mold issues. The librarian will need to review each title, decide if it is acceptable for the collection, catalog and process it. Gifts are time-consuming projects. Much depends upon the budget

you have and the amount of time you can allocate to processing collections. No gift is “free”—even if the books are.

## *Collaboration with Administration*

When we think of collection development, the first thing that springs to mind is not usually the role of administrators. And yet, they can play key roles in how collections are both developed and utilized. Much depends on the context and size of your institution.

Clearly, a librarian who works singly in a stand-alone theological school will have a significantly different experience than one who works as part of a team within a larger university setting. Yet both librarians will find their work enhanced through collaboration with colleagues.

Dr. Debbie Creamer writes on the importance of librarians learning how to be a translator or interpreter to their colleagues. Most academics train in the scholarship of their discipline and perhaps, to a lesser degree, in teaching. Very few have training or background in administrative skills—something that librarians often take for granted. We learn principles of organizing resources, working with budgets, and—in larger libraries—supervising others. We work with or write plans and policies and may be involved with accreditation. However, our academic colleagues will not know about these skills if we are quiet. Creamer suggests reporting in meetings about the administrative work you are doing, in addition to reports on the collections. If there is an opportunity to do so, serve on committees within your institution. These committees can serve as bridge-builders to allow others to get to know more about you and the library and allow you to advocate for what your library needs to be successful (Keck, Bidlack, and Creamer, 2019). The one caution is that your committee work must not continually take precedence over your work in developing the library.

Connections in administration can be very helpful as the institutional budget is planned or as funds are raised and grants are written. Think of this effort as developing advocates for your library. The more an administrator can speak knowledgeably about the library, the better. When others in your institution are aware of the work that you (and your colleagues) are accomplishing in the library and

are aware of the resources needed, you stand a better chance of receiving what is needed.

If your school has an individual whose work involves writing grants, take the time to get to know them and introduce them to your library. Sometimes a library purchase can be added to a grant in process. For instance, if a faculty member is writing a grant for a project, adding some funding for resources to support that project may be quite feasible. Perhaps a donor to your institution suggests an undesignated gift in memory of someone special. If administrators working with grants and donors are aware that you have a wish list, you might be pleasantly surprised to receive funding for some items. The key is to be prepared.

## *Collaboration with Teaching Faculty*

Exactly what does collaboration look like in the academic environment? Pham and Tanner (2014, 23) have defined collaboration between librarians and academic colleagues as “an educationally innovative process among academics, librarians and other relevant parties who are working together to share knowledge and expertise to support the enhancement of teaching, learning and research experiences for the university community.”

Context is important here as well. The role of the librarian in selection of materials for the library may be affected by differences between schools, cultural differences between countries, and even between departments. In their work reflecting upon three libraries in Hong Kong, Ferguson, Nesta, and Storey write:

The role of the librarian, for example, in collection development might vary considerably. While in large libraries in North America, collection development librarians might be responsible for selecting 90+ percent of what is bought, in a place like Hong Kong they might have to get a faculty member to approve every book. (Ferguson, Nesta and Storey 2007, 222)

It is important to realize that many, if not most, of your academic colleagues may have a limited understanding of what your library offers or how it is organized. This limitation may be predicated upon their experience at another institution. As new faculty are hired,

make the effort to get to know them. I see this annually as a new opportunity to share about our library collections and programs—to distinguish our library from ones they might have been affiliated with in the past. Think about ways to connect your collection and programs with their teaching and research interests.

While much of the literature on collaboration with faculty involves bibliographic instruction, there is still an important role in working with faculty to develop their advocacy for a strong library collection. Consider opportunities to bring faculty into the library for meetings, have small celebrations, and highlight new additions to your collection. Get to know the research and teaching interests of your colleagues by scheduling time with them over coffee or tea, and through this find ways to connect the library to what they are doing. The more that these colleagues know about the collections and what the library is attempting to do, the more helpful they can be in encouraging students to use the resources and making recommendations for good additions. Faculty members may also be aware of their colleagues at other institutions who may be retiring and seeking to contribute their personal library collections somewhere. Perhaps those collections might find a home in your library.

### *Collaboration with Library Networks and Associations*

One of the finest traits of librarians is the generosity they have in sharing ideas and resources with others, not only with those in their own institutions but with other librarians in the same geographic area, and even through international collaboration. I have personally benefited through my involvement with Atla and locally with the Southern California Theological Library Association (SCATLA). Each organization has enabled me to gain from the expertise of others while giving me opportunities to share my resources and expertise, too. When I was a new theological librarian beginning a library, several library directors in the area reached out to me and offered duplicate journals from their collection to assist my small start-up collection.

In a study of library directors and key librarians in Oman, participants expressed interest in collaborative relationships at both the institutional and individual level. The writers found “The three



most important advantages of collaboration were emphasized. They are: to enlarge and improve the library services, including increasing users' access to interlibrary information resources; to reduce costs by sharing manpower and resources; and to share experience through communication and enhance skills and knowledge of staff through collaborative training" (Al-Harrasi and Al-Aufi 2012, 240). Depending on both the location and collection type, librarians can also investigate collaborative collection development, where two or more libraries commit to purchasing certain unique titles that can be made available to all of the libraries in the collecting group.

However, not all parts of the world have ready access to regional networks of librarians. Julia Gross and Aminath Riyaz (2004) detail a collaboration between an academic library in Western Australia and one in the Republic of Maldives, brought together through a Link Institution project funded by the World Bank. Their project seeks to increase library resources and training in countries with limited numbers of trained librarians, improve access to collections, and help to set standards in place with collection development goals. If a library has at least some internet access, finding librarians who are willing to assist with questions no longer requires geographic proximity. For theological librarians, there are a variety of networks internationally, including Atla, ANZTLA (Australia and New Zealand), BETH (Europe), and ForATL (Forum of Asian Theological Librarianship). There are also other associations of academic and/or specialized librarians (outside of the religious/theological studies arena), so it is advantageous to see if your library might participate. Not only will you form new friendships, but you will find opportunities to learn from one another and to strengthen collections that can advance the work of your school.

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