

# *Reference Sources for Small Seminaries*

## *Prospects and Challenges*

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**A**CQUIRING REFERENCE SOURCES IS OFTEN A CHALLENGING TASK for small libraries due to lack of established procedures involved in acquisition. This essay attempts to answer questions related to the development of reference sources in small seminary libraries. Small libraries can be defined as theological libraries that have five or fewer full time equivalent staff and/or serve institutions with an enrollment of less than 200 FTE (Stephens 2016, 29). The scholarly productivity of academia depends on the availability of balanced reference sources accessible through their libraries.

How can I improve my library's reference collections? How might I acquire more reference resources for the library with a minimum investment? Will the current library resources suffice to support the programmes my institution offers, now and in the future? These are some of the daunting questions the librarians and administrators of small theological institutions are likely to ask.

The library supports the academic pursuits of the faculty members and students by providing a carefully curated collection of resources. Absence of quality learning resources would make a library simply a storeroom with books. Academic libraries exist to achieve the mission and vision of the institutions they serve. Libraries have a mandate to contribute to the growth and development of teaching and learning activities of the faculty members, students, and alumni/ae. Stephens (2016, 31) aptly reiterates that seminary libraries exist to cater to the information needs of their patrons, particularly the groups mentioned above, by understanding who they are and what they need. Therefore, when acquiring learning resources, an academic library must carefully endeavor to fill any gaps in the reference collection and avoid adding irrelevant, redundant resources. The collective and collaborative efforts of the faculty members, administrators, and the librarians can help identify relevant sources and thus help improve reference services offered by libraries.

Developing library resources in general requires systematic planning and the execution of clear policies. The collection development policy of a library plays a major role in developing its holdings. It is the responsibility of the librarians to develop and adopt a collection development policy, in consultation with the faculty members, for their libraries. The collection development policy of a library reflects the institution's mission and vision. Thus, the library collection development policy plays a major role in providing practical guidelines for the library staff, enabling them to add learning resources systematically and weed out resources that do not meet the needs of the users. The acquisition of a good reference collection is an important task of the librarians to address the information needs of library patrons. Librarians' knowledge of current trends in the theological disciplines and familiarity with the acquisition process help them strengthen their library's resources. As Hattendorf (1989, 228) rightly notes, the development of a reference collection is an art when it is done well.

## *The Importance of the Reference Collection in a Seminary Library*

As Kansfield (1980, 83) observes, the mission of theological libraries is to preserve, transmit, and advance theological knowledge. Undoubtedly, seminary libraries have contributed immensely to the growth, spiritual formation, and ministerial training of pastors, evangelists, and ministers. The collections of historical and current theological works available in seminary libraries are of great importance for theological education.

Reference collections provide background and historical information for further research in any discipline. The reference collections in a seminary library include commentaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, dictionaries, atlases, and other multi-volume works which cover biblical, theological, and historical topics. Exorbitant prices, limited finances for acquisition, and non-availability of reference works are some of the challenges librarians need to overcome while adding reference works. Small seminaries in the majority world often find it especially challenging to add to their core collections of reference works. Meeting such challenges requires clarity, careful planning, and support from administration and faculty members. Clearly defining the intended use of reference collections in libraries will help librarians proactively develop them (Colson 2007, 174) and make it easier to solicit support from faculty and administrators.

Theological libraries have an important role in supporting the academic programmes offered by seminaries. Irrespective of the size of the seminary or level of education offered by it, the library exists and grows with the institution. Hence, the institutional growth plan should include library development. A seminary library is as important a place of learning as the chapel and classroom, due in no small part to the reference collections held in the library that offer historical and background research information. Although it is an undeniable fact that theological libraries significantly contribute to the spiritual formation of students and faculty, there is a general tendency, prevalent among seminary leaders, to make library development a lower priority compared to building offices and classrooms. It is important for the seminary's administration to include librarians, especially while planning and developing the library. The library should get its allocation of funds from institutional operational bud-

gets. Any compromise on funding allocation for library acquisitions would lead to scarcity of learning resources for students and create a pedagogical vacuum (Lincoln 2004, 7).

## *Overcoming Challenges to Reference Collection Development*

Small seminaries in the majority world often face challenges in meeting their operational costs and their obligations to hold a huge number of donated books regardless of relevance or usefulness. Lack of budget provisions for acquisitions for the reference collection, absence of a collection development policy, and inadequately trained librarians are some of the problems faced by small seminary libraries in the majority world.

Theological libraries and librarians face the herculean task of developing a seminary library collection able to provide resources for the growth and development of scholarly productivity among faculty members and students. No library can afford to procure all resources needed by its users. One of the major reasons seminary administrators and librarians seek to develop their library resources is to meet the requirements set by the accreditation agencies.

Library resources are added not just to fulfill the standards of accreditation bodies but also to meet the needs of newly introduced academic degree programs and courses. According to Dr. Ranganathan's fifth law of library science, the library is a growing organism. It grows in terms of resources added to the library to meet the information needs of an increasing and diverse number of users. It is agreed that most academic libraries were shaped by the research needs of their faculties (Nichols and Rumsey 2001, 19).

There are challenges in developing library reference resources. As we know, majority-world theological seminary libraries face more financial challenges compared to their counterparts in North America and elsewhere. Due to the scarcity of funds, seminaries often operate in maintenance mode, which results in allocating less funding or no funding for the library's acquisitions budget. Lack of support from faculty members can be another disadvantage for librarians seeking to acquire reference works, since faculty members' suggestions are critical in identifying resources for each field of study. Collaboration

with faculty members is thus very important. Theological library staff play an important role in achieving the collection development goals of the library, so any lack of awareness, technical skills, and cooperation among the library staff would derail such development.

### *Reference Works in Print versus Electronic Format*

Libraries must navigate the challenge of providing necessary reference works while also handling the changing information needs of patrons and their access to the available resources. Library administrators should decide whether to acquire reference works in print and/or in electronic format. Based on his survey, Lincoln (2013, 42) observes that most of the instructors and students from Atla-affiliated libraries prefer reference works and bible commentaries in electronic format. Providing reference works in electronic format is convenient for users who can access them from anywhere. They are easy to search to locate relevant information, and they do not cause any storage problems. On the other hand, print reference sources may be less expensive compared to those in electronic format. However, library users often need to spend considerably more time to search and locate information from print reference works. Adequate internet connections, desktop computers, and network facilities should be developed to provide electronic reference works for libraries.

Librarians, in consultation with the faculty members, must carefully plan what type of reference resources should be provided in print and/or online/digital format. Decisions must be made while keeping in mind current users' needs and academic programmes' requirements.

### *Low-cost Electronic Resources*

Ease of search and retrieval of content and remote access are reasons for an increased demand for access to electronic resources by academicians. Subscribing to online electronic resources can be a challenge for libraries with limited finances. The following are some low-cost options for providing access to online theological resources.

The Global Digital Theological Library (GDTL) has an online library that offers subscriptions to majority-world libraries for a small fee calculated according to FTE. The GDTL provides access to e-books, journal articles, and other open access repositories. The Christian Library Consortium (CLC) of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL) occasionally offers special or discounted e-book packages from various publishers. While considering e-book packages, libraries need to choose whether a single-user or unlimited-user license would be more feasible financially. Through its CLC arrangement, SAIACS was able to add e-book titles to its collection in 2010. It was undoubtedly a step forward for the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) library to subscribe to JSTOR, Bloomsbury Collections, and the GDTL to enhance the availability of learning resources. Atla's special pricing policy for majority-world libraries has enabled SAIACS to subscribe to the Atla Religion Database with Serials.

### *Open Access Resources*

Librarians can prepare and regularly update a list of freely available open access electronic resources, which can complement print collections available in the library. This helps libraries to support the growing information needs of faculty members and students. Faculty members and students can be encouraged to become individual members of the Internet Archive, an online library that allows its members to access thousands of digitized books through a controlled digital lending (CDL) programme. The Open Access Digital Theological Library (OADTL) curates electronic resources available in the field of religion, theology, philosophy, and other related disciplines from various open access online repositories and other digital libraries. Content available in the OADTL can be of great value to the library patrons without any financial impact on the library budget. Regular user education and awareness training programmes offered by libraries will help improve access to the open access content (Selan and Sornam 2017, 98).

## *Donations*

The Theological Book Network (TBN), Langham Literature Trust, and many other organizations support majority-world libraries by facilitating redistribution of donated books. Another way to strengthen library collections is to contact retired or retiring professors whose personal library collections will be advantageous in filling gaps in the library's collection. These personal library donations carry on the legacy of professors and missional leaders. At the same time, libraries should not become a dumping place for unwanted donations of non-academic materials. To avoid space problems, libraries should accept only a limited number of books of fiction, biographies, and devotional literature. The collection development policy must explicitly specify how to handle donations and include guidelines in accepting and acknowledging donations received from individuals.

## *Interlibrary Loan and Regional Collaborative Initiatives*

Local and regional library networks can be of great help in improving access to resources for patrons. Libraries do not need to invest in rarely used resources that can be either borrowed or consulted through library networks. Librarians can engage in dialogue with other colleagues in the region to form mutually beneficial networks for sharing resources and services. Libraries can mutually agree to avoid redundancy in their collections and focus on developing core collections of reference works. Regionally published literature offers background information for study of culture and ministry of a particular context. Therefore libraries must make efforts to acquire indigenous publications such as souvenirs, newsletters, and journals to preserve and strengthen the reference sources published locally which are otherwise not available from other libraries.

## *Suggestions*

Developing reference collections in small seminaries requires support from administrators, faculty members, and librarians. Regular evaluation of learning resources available online and in print will help librarians assess the relevance and usefulness of such collections. Theological librarians need to be proactive in collaborating with faculty members and research scholars to identify their current research needs and familiarize themselves with trends in research and publishing. Librarians should also explore the possibilities of becoming members of local, regional, national, and international theological librarians' forums for mutual benefit. Librarians also need to keep themselves abreast of developments in the LIS profession.

The following are a few suggestions for growing and improving resources, particularly reference sources, available in small seminaries:

1. In consultation with faculty members and the library committee, formulate a collection development policy which reflects the mission and vision of the institution.
2. Evaluate the present reference collection in light of plans to introduce changes in the curriculum.
3. Assess whether the existing collection needs any weeding to keep the collection more relevant and useful.
4. Collaborate and partner with faculty members to identify gaps in the subject areas of library reference collections and add reference collections based on the input received from them (Sellan 2021, 9). Such collaboration with faculty members is one of the keys for effective collection development (Cooper et al. 2017).
5. Seek partnerships with parent institutions and other theological colleges for collection development and resource sharing in order to reduce the financial burden on the individual libraries (Reekie 2010, 207).
6. Ascertain the faculty members' perception of the adequacy of small libraries' collections and instill in them an awareness



of the importance and usefulness of their input in improving the library collections (Bidlack 2007, 59).

7. Focus more on current curricular and research needs rather than planning for future needs.
8. Consult with colleagues in other libraries to learn from their experiences.

## Conclusion

The quality of theological education depends on the quality of learning resources available in seminary libraries. Library collections add value to the programs offered by seminaries. Hence, developing a reference collection in a seminary library is an important task that requires careful evaluation, systematic planning, reasonable funding, emphasis on acquisition of regional publications, and collaboration with faculty members and other networks. A well curated reference collection focuses on academic needs of faculty members and students and plays an important role in the library's service to theological education.

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