

Library Leadership in the Long Lockdown and Beyond

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The Gardner A. Sage Library of New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) is located in New Brunswick, New Jersey, fifteen miles from New York City. New Brunswick falls roughly at the center of the Northeast Corridor Line that runs from Boston, MA to Washington, D.C. The Northeast Corridor is the longest and (usually) busiest rail corridor in North America. This densely populated, regional hub is where Sage librarians and patrons experienced the COVID-19 library lockdowns.

Out of caution, Sage Library was required to close to the public on Thursday, March 12, 2020, then closed entirely on Saturday, March 14, 2020. Stipulations by New Jersey government officials required no more than one member of the Library staff to be in the building at a time. Even as staff were able to return to their offices by staggering work days in the summer of 2020, the recommendations of the New Jersey Library Association and policies of the state government

for adequate ventilation in schools and libraries kept Sage closed to patrons until fall semester 2021.

Due to furlough, layoff, graduation, or eventually “the Great Resignation,” only three out of eleven pre-pandemic library staff remained to reopen the Library: a Digital Services Librarian, a part-time Library Assistant, and me, the Director of the Gardner A. Sage Library and Assistant Professor of Theological Bibliography and Research at NBTS. This chapter details multiple types of change phenomena through which I led the Library community: the frightful start to the lockdown; changing routines for self-care in work-from-home/hybrid contexts; changes in topics and modes of professional communication; changes in technology used for chapel, then library instruction; changes in personnel, recruitment, and development; and changes in the Library’s physical space to reopen with mandated vaccinations, masking, and social distancing. I also discuss what came after, or beyond the lockdown and phased re-openings. Ultimately, Sage Library’s story is about striving to maintain library services for our local Seminary community despite restrictions in the long shadows of New York City’s and Philadelphia’s COVID-19 struggles.

Leading Change from the Frightful Start

Before the closure itself, the NBTS community did a lot of soul-searching. Faculty, administrators, and staff all engaged in a psychological and literal bargaining process as contingency plans were rapidly developed for many aspects of Seminary life. What I look back on as the watershed moment in academic life was the emergency faculty meeting at which faculty offered their fears, anxieties, tears, and hopes. Dean Beth Tanner emphasized what a small faculty (11) we were. If even one faculty member (e.g. the church historian or theologian) were to be taken ill for the remainder of the semester, the Seminary would be challenged to complete the spring semester successfully.

It was considered safest to engage in meetings and classes remotely, so the motion was made and vote taken to transition all faculty affairs, meetings, and classes to online platforms. At the time, I was co-teaching the research course required for all Doctor of Ministry (DMin) students, “Social Science Research Methods.”

Fortunately, this class was already designed for online delivery except for an in-person intensive week, which finished its in-person work one day before the pandemic closure. But most faculty experienced substantial challenges as we set out to transform all face-to-face elements in course designs into virtual substitutes.

Deciding to teach online was a simpler task than deciding what to do with the rest of Seminary operations. Sage Library was a popular hub of learning and community on the bustling College Avenue campuses of New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Rutgers University. Much more than for-credit course instruction happened here. As the Library Director, I served on the Administrative Council and reported to President Micah McCreary. In this role, I witnessed first-hand what Seminary departments were most concerned about, and how they were willing or hesitant to collaborate. On Monday, March 9, 2020, the Administrative Council met. First of all, everyone was deeply concerned about our students' welfare. Anticipated furloughs, job losses, and budget shortfalls prompted the Administrative Council to support a program for student financial assistance for basic expenses.

We were concerned about everyone's safety and well-being, but there was a broad spectrum of ideas about how far that should go. Even though the faculty were encouraged to work from home indefinitely, there were NBTS students whose personal technology needs were expected to require immediate workarounds facilitated by Seminary staff. One librarian had an immuno-compromised relative at home, and I had a one-year-old child. Amid reports from the *New York Times* and other news sources, the Administrative Council held an emergency meeting on Thursday, March 12. I made a motion to the Administrative Council to "hit the pause button and close Sage Library for one week" as troubling news about the COVID-19 coronavirus percolated in our devices and hearts. The proposal fell flat. My fellow administrators were not yet convinced that COVID-19 should be a matter of such great concern. Although I was adamant about closing the Library entirely, other Seminary departments considered it safe to be present on campus. The Dean's office expected that the registrar would need to generate transcripts on site despite safety concerns. The IT office was prepared to relocate the public access computer terminals from Sage Library to the classroom building, placing one in each classroom to facilitate what was a new expression for all of us – "social distancing." The business office was concerned about sustaining operations, some of which were paper-based

workflows. Advancement was disturbed by the pandemic news, of course, how could we maintain and build donor relationships if we could not meet with them? With a capital campaign underway and Sage Library's 150th anniversary on the horizon in 2025, I was worried, too. Although I did not believe that my colleagues in other departments should be required to risk their health to facilitate computer access for Library patrons, I was relieved that the administration would not force Library staff with health vulnerabilities to do it. I recall feeling uncomfortably stuck between following my conscience and closing the Library out of concern for everyone's safety, and my fiduciary commitment to remain shoulder-to-shoulder with Seminary operations for the success of the Seminary as a whole.

Information was pouring in; decisions were being made in rapid succession around the world. The decision to close our New York campus located at St. John's University in Queens was made for us. New York was hit harder and faster than New Jersey, and by the time I had time to call the Circulation Desk at the University Library at St. Johns on Friday, March 13, 2020, about their status or contingency plans, they had already closed indefinitely (as they indicated in a prompt, helpful email). My cell phone was abuzz with text messages and emails from Sage Library staff about the latest COVID-19 news and evidence in favor of closing the Library, each more worrisome than the last. The New Jersey Library Association recommended precautions, then closure.

Although as of March 13 Library staff were still going to work as usual, we were then up late at night texting each other, sharing anxieties for the future of our work. I found myself texting back and forth with President McCreary at midnight and emailing the Academic Dean in the wee hours. Fortunately, the weekend of March 14-15 our President made the decision to close the Seminary building for a period of weeks, while we waited to see how things progressed with COVID-19. It was encouraging that NBTS worked quickly and together to close, even before our neighbor Rutgers University closed, and before Governor Murphy called for the forced closures of private schools and libraries across New Jersey.

People take different amounts of time to process unprecedented and potentially traumatic information and events. I had initially asked for a one-week pause to address the COVID-19 crisis, but I was then granted a few weeks. Little did I know the closure of Sage Library would last over two years, until June 2022, with mandatory masking

until April 2023, making it one of the longest-lasting lockdowns and longest-lasting masking policies of Atla member libraries.

Routines of Self-Care to Reimagine Work-Life

One of the most visible and immediate impacts of the pandemic closure of Sage Library was the effect, not only on how common tasks were performed but on how life itself was lived. In the seminary context, a library director and faculty member can be very influential. Although I was in a state of disorientation like everyone else, I tried to model both vulnerability and confidence. I spoke in Library staff meetings about confusion, stress, anxiety, and even being mad at God. I shared in faculty meetings and chapel services about how much I missed receiving communion. At Administrative Council meetings, I lamented my decline in physical fitness given gym closures. I shared my fears and anxieties and asked others to share theirs if they wished. Yet, I also offered confidence, quiet assurance that more will be revealed and that the world may not end tomorrow. I asked folks how they were adapting and made commitments to new routines that helped reorient my life to the work-from-home reality, then I shared with others how I was doing emotionally and what I was doing personally, physically, and socially.

I felt antsy. I had been going to the gym with some devotion for a couple of years, and was in the best shape of my adult life. Then all of a sudden, I had nowhere to direct my energy and strength. I could actually feel the extra stress building, but I could find no reduction in the stress hormone cortisol, which was usually reduced through exercise. I worried about atrophy. In addition to the body, there was the mind to consider. My psychological condition was tied together with my family's. My partner's parents live in Manhattan, which was a COVID-19 epicenter in the early days of the pandemic in the United States. My in-laws both contracted COVID-19 during the initial spike in cases early in 2020. My father-in-law worked at Lenox Hill Hospital where there was an emergency morgue annex of freezer trucks. My mother-in-law lost her sense of smell and taste for more than a year. My partner's stress about her parents and my own stress about my aging parents who lived several states away was profound. The early days of the pandemic were gloomy and isolating.

With the COVID-19 lockdown, my train commute was interrupted, to say the least. I had enjoyed a short walk from my home to Rahway Station, a 20-minute train ride to New Brunswick Station, and a short walk through the beautiful, historic quad of Queens College that grew to become Rutgers University. I really enjoyed my commute. There were stretches of exercise, and sometimes sunshine. The ride itself had usually been a pleasure, too. The train line, New Jersey Transit's stretch of the Northeast Corridor, ran through many of the most densely populated areas of New Jersey, which itself is the most densely populated state. So there is a kaleidoscope of cultural diversity among the residents, many of whom are immigrants. Newark Liberty International Airport is one express stop away from my home station, and the cultural diversity extends to the many international visitors coming and going to the Newark airport.

Meeting and learning in unexpected ways from the folks I encountered by chance during commutes were highlights of my life in the Northeast. There was something about the wonder of who I might meet that excited me for the commute. The Rutgers librarian responsible for religious studies caught the same train, too. I benefited from both his advice and camaraderie regularly. That is until I did not. We exchanged Christmas cards, but otherwise did not engage socially for two years while our libraries maintained cautious COVID-19 protocols. The loss of my train commute definitely affected my social life. At first, the very notion of social distancing seemed impossible to enforce in our American context that privileges individualism and free will, but looking back, the degree of social distancing was devastating.

So what self-care can one engage in or encourage library staff to consider when the gyms and parks are all closed? I would try to maintain upper body strength by improvising free weights. The pandemic struck not long after our grocery's winter soup sales, so my family happened to be very well stocked with soup (also convenient in prolonging my first venture out for groceries). I would fill a utility bucket with soup cans, then do repetitions, alternating exercises. I only had one bucket (and I was not about to leave the house to find another), so I had to switch arms. It took longer than my usual work-out and it was frustrating, but when I shared this absurdity in staff and faculty meetings, everybody got a good chuckle out of it. Eventually the soup ran out and I left the house.

For cardiovascular exercise, I would jog or walk the streets of Rahway, NJ for one and a half to two hours, from 8-10 a.m. every day

when my one-year-old, Maeve, was taking her morning nap. During those walks, I would make and take calls about Library business, research support, student advising, etc. For weekly one-on-one supervisory meetings, I often walked to a nearby war memorial park that was far enough from city streets that traffic noise was less disruptive. In that location, I kicked gravel about in a fidgety sort of way, the way I might have twirled a pen in a normal office setting. Of course, only I knew about the gravel in such conversations. The pandemic shrouded so many elements of communication, from facial expressions and hand gestures to overall body language. In the war memorial park, I reflected on the lives and sacrifices of the many military and emergency personnel who lost all. As many states, including New Jersey and New York, declared states of emergency, I was especially grateful to the many types of first responders who were staffing the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we librarians were not emergency personnel in the clinical fight against COVID-19, we were leaders in the creative provision of library and information resources under potentially dangerous circumstances. Although most librarians are not uniformed personnel in any sense, I made a point of dressing for work on weekdays, wearing a coat and tie in my improvised attic study whether I would be on camera or not. At times, there was little I could think of that I did not miss about pre-pandemic life. The aspects I could control, I did. Dressing for the workday also helped me to recognize when I was not at work, and more fully embrace a new approach to work-life balance.

To ritually mark time at the end of the work week, I started making pancakes from scratch every Friday night. It became big fun for Maeve. We were not going out anywhere, and I was not coming home from anywhere. I would walk downstairs from the attic study and remove my tie, then proceed further downstairs to don my apron and make pancakes. That meant it was Friday. We had made it through another week of life in the midst of a pandemic. This tradition subsided when my daughter Esme was born in 2022, but Maeve still asks for pancakes, associating them with Fridays, and so do I. They were our weekly celebration kicking off the weekend. We eventually started video-conferencing with our neighbors during pancake Fridays, and at holidays I would invite the Library staff to join in our online Pancake Friday parties. By Christmas 2022, we were back having guests at home. What remains from the pandemic is that the Friday menu is always pancakes now!

Changes in Professional Communications: Discussing Groceries and Vaccines

Every day I would check the website of New Jersey's principal state-wide news source, the *Star-Ledger*, for which cities and counties had the least COVID cases and lowest rates of transmission. Transmission spread from airports, ports, and generally from the northeast first. Even when stay-at-home orders were in place by our governor and mayor, and trains were operating on skeleton schedules and scarce staff, long-haul truckers from around North America were passing through New Jersey's famously full-service-only filling stations. I remember vividly wondering how the virus was spreading if everyone were really hunkered down. The fact is, they were not. When I finally ventured out for a grocery run, not-so-major roads had moderate levels of traffic.¹ In April I would drive an hour south to Bordentown, NJ for groceries. But by May the virus had spread south quickly along the Northeast Corridor. In May and June, I traveled an hour west to a more rural grocery in Flemington, NJ. I kept in touch with Library staff about vaccines and their availability via text messaging. NBTS and New Jersey in general leaned liberal and favored vaccination. The entire Library staff wanted to be vaccinated, and we were as promptly as we could. We considered vaccination a matter of life and death. I skipped a faculty meeting when an appointment opened up for a vaccine, and encouraged colleagues to do the same. Eventually, all of the faculty were fully vaccinated and boosted.

While many of our colleagues' personal and family lives existed in varying degrees of disorientation, we managed to stay connected. Library staff met weekly by phone or Zoom. The Faculty Council who met less frequently began meeting weekly, not simply for official faculty business and votes, but to multiply our joys and divide our sorrows. It seemed scarcely a week went by without someone from our Sage Library network testing positive for COVID-19. Within weeks our Seminary family lost our immediate past-president, a newly retired professor, and an esteemed alumna to COVID-19. I took joy in our infant Maeve as she grew during the pandemic, and celebrated the birth of our second daughter, Esme in January 2022. But by the end of 2022, my own dear mother, brother, and cousin had died.

Pioneering Zoom for Chapel, then for Library Instruction

After the administration closed the Seminary campus and Library, we set out to reinvent the Seminary experience using our key resources: people and platforms. The closure of the Seminary meant the closure of the Library and the Chapel. Before the pandemic closure, chapel services were held in person twice weekly, just before the start of in-person evening classes. How could we still be a Seminary community while closed? How could we do chapel? Where would we commune? Unfortunately, the Minister of the Chapel was simultaneously taking a new professorship elsewhere.

Sage Library staff had a tradition of gathering weekly to pray the Daily Office of Morning Prayer using the *Book of Common Prayer*, including readings from the Revised Common Lectionary. During Advent and Lent, Library staff prayed more frequently. Since most Library and Information Science graduate degree programs offer classes online and Sage Library staff consisted of recent graduates, I expected that the Library was actually best positioned to take a technological leadership role in the acute vacuum of Chapel leadership. Being a Library leader at the table with senior administrators, I was able to propose that Sage staff transition the print-based prayer services to video-conferencing, and invite the whole Seminary community to participate. Library staff were enthusiastic about this opportunity to serve our community in a new way.

Since the liturgical season of Lent was already underway, the first Lenten Morning Prayer Library staff led was on March 17. We led weekly Zoom gatherings of a dozen or more community members for two more weeks, then offered Morning Prayer every day during Holy Week. As the Library Director, I organized the services, assigning lectionary readings, canticles, and suffrages to all available Library and Archives staff. This week of chapel organizing replaced a week I had earmarked for research and writing, two activities that continue to get short-shrift to this day. However, the chapel services were well-received by those who participated. One of my thesis advisees reported that they were a great way to stay connected during the period of forced isolation.

Fortunately, a new Minister of the Chapel was recruited in the summer of 2020, and Library staff were able to return full focus to

Library work. The temporary services of Chapel leadership subsided, but the mode of delivery, use of presentation slides, and practices of turn-taking and virtual communion over Zoom that the Library staff pioneered for use during the lockdown are still the default practices for our Seminary chapel services that remain entirely online.

Prior to the pandemic, NBTS students commuted to campus for their evening seminary classes, often darting into the Library to print some course materials before class, then stopping by after class to photocopy some readings on reserve at the Circulation Desk. As a commuter school, Library traffic throughout the day was light. The peak times when a critical mass of NBTS students could be found in Sage Library was when faculty built it into their course designs. One of my great joys was when professors would invite librarians to provide in-person bibliographic instruction and bring their whole class to the Library. For my social science research methods students, I could physically show them where the bound theses were, and we could walk together to our neighbor, Alexander Library at Rutgers University, to use its Proquest Theses and Dissertations database (NBTS and Rutgers have reciprocal agreements for in-person access to databases).

The Old Testament professor would bring her class yearly. It was wonderful to teach and work with students in person, watch commentaries fly off shelves in the reference section, and see the computers full with students using Atla Religion Database's Scripture Search tool. The Pastoral Care and Counseling professor would reserve a conference room each semester for research instruction and topic vetting. During faculty retreats, I would curate displays of texts relevant to our discussions and debates. For example, to embrace post-colonialism in our curriculum, the faculty engaged the rare book exhibition "The Dutch in Two Worlds Revisited."² I admit that I had taken for granted all of the in-person joys of library leadership, for none of the physical elements of library life were possible once the pandemic struck.

Fortunately, Sage Library had a competent Public Services Librarian whom I mentored to take on more library instruction responsibilities. We worked in person prior to the pandemic on presentation slides for annotated bibliographies and literature reviews. So when the pandemic hit, the Public Services Librarian was able to focus on digital library services for Master's and certificate students, and I focused on research instruction for DMin students.

The Library Committee, composed entirely of teaching faculty, called for more opportunities for library instruction. The scheduled times had not been popular with students. With user-centered library practice close at heart, the Public Services Librarian scheduled them for different times of day and night and on weekends; later the Digital Services Librarian would also participate in library instruction. The sessions were better attended after the change in scheduling.

Changes in Personnel, Recruitment, and Development

The Administrative Council meeting for budget planning for fiscal year 2020-2021 occurred shortly after the lockdown. The stock market had crashed, and since NBTS benefited handsomely from the interest on its investments held in reserves and its endowment, the budget outlook was dire. Budget cuts were required of all departments. Student workers who previously staffed the in-person Circulation Desk were immediately furloughed. Unfortunately, the extent of the budget cuts also necessitated the loss of a staff position.

Sage Library was in a strong position in terms of staffing at the time. In addition to the Director, there was a full-time Public Services Librarian, a full-time Collection Services Librarian, a half-time Library Associate, a part-time Archivist, and enough student workers to staff the Library fifty-six hours per week. The Library staff was competent, specialized, collaborative, and diverse. In fact, all of my Library staff aligned with historically underrepresented identities in library services, a fact I was proud of especially as we serve a Seminary whose student body is primarily women of color. I was apprehensive that budgetary circumstances might force me to let go of a highly competent and effective person of color for no fault of their own. It was a fraught decision that I was loath to implement but I had to, and, prayerfully, I have found some peace around the matter. Leading a library is not simple or easy in the best of times. In the pandemic lockdown when the less savory realities of budget and personnel management compel us to affect the livelihood of a close colleague through a layoff, I felt it very viscerally. I was more than a little depressed for several weeks. The decision focused on the efficacy of library services in the pandemic environment, and the person I let go primarily worked on cataloging print books, which was not tenable at the time.

The position of half-time Library Associate for serials and acquisitions was retained until they graduated with an MLIS in May 2020, then that position was eliminated in favor of a newly envisioned Digital Services Librarian position. NBTS had a strong tradition of Seminary-wide participation in the recruitment of new faculty and staff, but during the pandemic, everyone was extremely busy simply trying to subsist in their specialties. There was no Human Resources Director, so recruitment was always something extra to do for which ever department needed additional staff. I was busy myself, not only leading the Library and teaching but surviving at home and trying to be a good father to a one-year-old daughter.

I advertised the new Digital Services Librarian position on Atla's online job board, and shared the call for applications with regional groups, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Library Association (SEPTLA) and the New York Area Theological Library Association (NYATLA). The position was posted only briefly and there was little qualified interest. My decision to promote a half-time Library Associate into a full-time Digital Services Librarian was less a decision than a natural progression during a stressful time. We were struggling, and I was hesitant to bring on board new staff who I had only encountered online through a video conference interview. The half-time Library Associate became the Digital Services Librarian, and the Public Services Librarian was promoted to Assistant Director in light of additional duties with acquisitions and collection management.

Once on board as a professional librarian, I directed the Digital Services Librarian to digitize unique 19th- and 20th-century documents relevant to the history of NBTS. Digitization had long been a dream for NBTS in order to preserve and make available online some of our rarest and unique historic materials (e.g. the Superintendent's Minutes; letters of Horace Underwood, whose memorial is in Sage Library; Minutes of the Society of Inquiry). This journey towards digitization began in May 2019, when I invited the Director of Digital Initiatives from Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS), Gregory Murray, to meet with Sage Library staff to talk about the table-top scribe they used to digitize Princeton's most important documents.

The PTS Library administration offered to deploy their special scanning equipment to the Sage Library as early as spring 2021 if it could be done safely considering COVID-19. Library space we made available for digitization had not contained computers or scanners before, so I liaised with our IT department to acquire a new ethernet cable line for that space. A Memorandum of Agreement was necessary,

for which NBTS and PTS general counsels were consulted. I honestly did not expect the pilot project to be able to be implemented in 2021, but due to COVID-19's impact on what work library staff could do to be helpful to patrons, Library staff made rapid progress. Some of our most precious ephemera are now preserved in perpetuity at one of the most reliable and sustainable, open-access digital archives in the world – the Internet Archive. As new scans are uploaded, they will be published and accessible via the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/newbrunswickseminarylibrary>.³

In order to evaluate digital resources to meet the needs of online learning, I collaborated with Sage Library staff and the Library Committee of the Faculty. Together we proposed that NBTS join the Digital Theological Library (a rapidly growing community and online library of e-books and journals). The Faculty Council voted in favor and NBTS became a co-owner of this vast collection of theological resources.

Library staff began, continued, and completed many important projects in their own specialties, at their own pace. The Public Services Librarian created a virtual reference desk within the learning management system, enhanced the Library's website to support distance learning initiatives, repurposed Library spaces to support Library programming, and promoted user engagement.

Delegating leadership of reserves was a very practical decision. If I did not need to be part of the process, I should not be. So I delegated the entire process to the partnership of the new Digital Services Librarian, Assistant Director, and Public Services Librarian. Faculty and students used an online form for interlibrary loan (ILL) requests or emailed our general library email account as ILL services also cautiously resumed in solidarity with libraries in the New Jersey Library Association.

The Collection Services Librarian continued to catalog a backlog of print books of general interest and NBTS theses so they could be accessible to DMin students and other researchers via the catalog. The Archivist began two projects: identifying and organizing digitized photos of alumni who served in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) mission field to create an interactive digital display, and creating a digital archive of memos, releases, minutes, and other documents related to the Seminary's response to COVID-19. Some of the materials that we collected during the pandemic served as useful context for this chapter's development.

Sage Library had also been participating in accreditation efforts throughout the pandemic, including the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and Association of Theological Schools (ATS) self-studies on whose standing committees I served. To keep Library staff engaged with the Seminary as a whole, I appointed each to relevant task forces and committees. In anticipation of virtual reviews, the Academic Dean and I provided virtual tours of the Campus and Library; the tours were filmed, edited, and produced by Rev. Stephen Mann of NBTS. The MSCHE self-study process for the Library was thorough, and the virtual site visit was successful. The Library's participation in the self-study process for ATS was extensive, with me co-chairing the group responsible for reporting on the master's and doctoral programs, as well as Library services.

By late February 2022, the Omicron variant of the virus waned almost as quickly as it spiked, so the ATS visit was scheduled to occur in person. I came out of parental leave for a couple of days to participate in the site visit. Sometimes library leadership demands being present, visible, and ready to represent and answer any questions. Accreditation periods fall into that demanding category of work, yet leadership also requires balance. Encouraging work-life balance for my staff meant I also had to model self-care, so I returned to parental leave after the successful ATS site visit.

Sustaining the Academic Aspects of Library Leadership

In addition to administrative and managerial components, there are many academic aspects related to the role of Library Director in a graduate school of theology. My particular appointment includes faculty rank and status; I am on the tenure track and I am the lowest-ranking assistant professor. In the summer of 2020, I began to conduct research on financial management and reviewed Sage Library's financial documentation in order to write a chapter for *Administration in Theological Libraries*, the second title in a series of books on theological librarianship called the *Theological Librarian's Handbook* published by Atla. *Administration in Theological Libraries* focuses on matters relevant to new and experienced library directors. I researched this topic domain in general, and specifically at

NBTS, with an eye for highlighting standard ways to maintain fiduciary integrity.

Another academic aspect of my work includes collaborating with Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies Janice McLean-Farrell on human subjects research review and approval through a recently established Institutional Review Board (IRB), through which all thesis proposals are vetted. One of my responsibilities is reviewing every NBTS IRB application and completed thesis manuscript to prepare it for publication in Proquest's Electronic Theses and Dissertations database. Although my process for review has not changed since before the pandemic, our DMin student enrollment increased during the pandemic when we switched to completely online learning. Consequently, the number of theses to review continues to climb delightfully each year.

In the fall of 2020, I taught "Spirituality of the Twelve Steps" as part of the Science for Seminaries grant initiative. This journey began when the Ministry Studies department discussed curricular needs at its spring 2019 retreat; it was identified that a course on 12-step mutual support groups would enhance the department's offerings. The course was then selected for a teaching grant to deepen the scientific character of seminary learning at NBTS. "Spirituality of the Twelve Steps" went well and was particularly germane to the pandemic's impact on the social services work of the Church as the pandemic correlated with spikes in substance abuse and domestic violence. Later, I reworked the course and taught it again in Lent 2021 for my church (still online due to the pandemic). Fortunately, part of my faculty duties includes service to the church, which helped to justify the commitment of my time many evenings to teach the not-for-credit course for my church's adult education program. I would otherwise have been more fully present with our infant with whom I bonded immensely during the work-from-home marathon. I am now adapting and secularizing the Twelve Step course content for Library staff, some of whom are agnostic.

During the pandemic I also taught the graduate elective "Contemplation and Social Justice: Exploring Thomas Merton" (done by phone for the latter half of the class due to reports of Zoom fatigue by students and faculty alike) and co-taught the required doctoral course "Social Science Research Methods." My co-instructor and I found ourselves offering deadline extensions to the entire class repeatedly. Not all were able to complete the spring semester successfully due to COVID-19; the number of special cases for students due

to family emergencies (e.g., quarantines and hospitalizations) was extreme.

In my work with academic advisees, thesis students, and independent study students, I had to transform how I communicated with them. We transitioned from in-person meetings during office hours to Zoom meetings and impromptu phone meetings when they could find time. The DMin program takes three years at NBTS, and I have now experienced the thesis process, from start to finish entirely online since the DMin program moved to online only in 2020. In November 2021, I welcomed news of my reappointment as tenure-track Assistant Professor based on the third-year major review process; the Committee reported that I was eligible to apply for tenure at the next major review in 2024.

Networking to Survive: Leading in SEPTLA 2019-2023

As President of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Theological Library Association, the regional theological library association in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, I facilitated the collaborative efforts of our 18 member libraries by planning and leading monthly meetings of SEPTLA's Executive Committee. Summer 2020 stands out as a time of solidarity in SEPTLA. Although libraries in the metro Philadelphia area and New Jersey experienced longer closures with more stringent COVID-19 protocols than libraries in less urban areas, we still communicated actively. Our Webmaster, Myka Kennedy Stephens, championed a Google spreadsheet where a representative from each library kept its latest status up to date (e.g. closed until further notice; open to students from SEPTLA member institutions; facilitating interlibrary loan; masking required, etc.).

NBTS volunteered to host a special joint meeting of the NYATLA and SEPTLA in the spring of 2020. Invitations were sent, agendas were ready, and speakers were slated. Then COVID-19 hit. The spring meeting was canceled entirely while everyone was scrambling to pivot to virtual library services and survive. By the fall of 2020, Sage Library was ready to host the fall meeting, albeit online. It was a success, centering on COVID-19 protocols and practices. Despite distress from COVID-19, we were also attentive to the Black Lives Matter movement. The presidential statement I authored on the SEPTLA website

regarding COVID-19 and civil unrest in 2020 testified to the tension that permeated society at this time.

Presidents may serve two consecutive terms in SEPTLA. I served two, then served two more as Past President, so I continued to provide leadership as more member libraries reopened, and as Greg Murray of PTS began as President in 2021. We hosted conferences using first online, then hybrid, formats at Moravian Theological Seminary, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Cairn University.

Stuck working from home for months on end, I knew Library staff needed to stay connected to colleagues to grow and flourish, so I strongly encouraged Sage Library staff to take officer roles in SEPTLA during my presidency and beyond. Some of the positions in which Sage Library staff demonstrated leadership included the Chair of the Research Services Interest Group, Newsletter Editor (two positions), Continuing Education Committee Member (two positions), Secretary, and Treasurer.

Planning the Protracted Re-opening

Along with leaders across theological education, NBTS President McCreary was eager to develop a timeline for reopening. With so much uncertainty in international news about the spread of COVID-19, and multiple timelines for how quickly a vaccine might be rushed through research, development, and deployment, eagerness for a timetable materialized into plans for a phased reopening. Administrative Council members were asked to appoint a representative from their departments to serve on an ad-hoc Reopening Task Force. Since the Public Services Librarian's duties were most likely to be affected by reopening processes, I appointed her to serve on the Task Force. Together with five other Seminary staff, the Task Force listened to the community. I led online workshops about how to take advantage of the new resource-sharing environment that included the Digital Theological Library, the National Emergency Library (of the Internet Archive), and temporarily expanded access to JSTOR and Project Muse. Library staff met with students and faculty to discuss how best to provision library services, making use of online resources where possible, and ensuring health and safety for in-person operations.



Image 1: The library director's wife, Piper Ross Ferriter, suggested using photos of Sage Library's beauty to attract the community back to the library. We wanted the library to be used, but for people to be safe. So we adorned our statue of Hagar and Ishmael with medical face masks, and posted the photo on social media. It reminded folks of the majesty of Sage Library, and accentuated the protective spirit in which we required masking from June 2020 until April 2023.

The Academic Dean consulted students through a weekly Dean's hour when students could liaise with faculty and the registrar. The feedback from the community listening, fact-finding, and fact-facing informed the Task Force's proposal for a multi-phase approach, with guidelines for personnel in general, guidelines for building use, and Library-specific guidelines. Phase Zero's guidelines applied particularly to essential staff and covered:

- keeping building doors locked (we established a key card access-only policy)
- closing classrooms and common areas
- maintaining office door closures
- masking in common areas
- limiting in-person conversations
- frequent hand-washing
- admonition to stay home with any symptoms
- notice that areas were to be cleaned thrice weekly.

In June 2020, the Seminary moved to Phase One, which stipulated that limited faculty, non-essential staff, and “permanent renters” (e.g. the Archives of the RCA, located within Sage Library) could come into the office, allowing Library staff to resume processing requests for chapter and article scans, and processing the mountainous backlog of monograph and serials acquisitions that had amassed when the mail was not regularly checked during the lockdown. In Phase One, faculty could make an appointment to visit the Library to browse and perform research, but only one person made such an appointment.

New Jersey statewide limits on how many library staff could be present in the same space at the same time necessitated staggering work shifts. To imagine a typical week, consider the following examples. On Monday, the Library Associate for technical services cataloged the shelf of new acquisitions received from the Public Services Librarian the prior week. On Tuesday, the Library Director received a hand-written research query mailed to his home the day before, and passed it on to the Archivist to check the physical archives. The Archivist retrieved the item and scanned it for the researcher. On Wednesday, the Public Services Librarian processed rolling summer course reserves requests, leaving a list of monographs to be pulled and chapters scanned. On Thursday, the part-time Library Assistant retrieved, scanned, and disseminated the requested materials. On Friday, the Library Director would come in to check that all was well with the facility, and take Zoom calls that might have been possible from home, if there were not either a sleeping toddler or crying newborn present!

Any projects that relied on more than one member of the library staff depended on workflows that could be accomplished with staggered library staff shifts. Although the Public Services Librarian maintained regular office hours for reference initially, students and faculty often contacted her outside of those hours. Out of practicality, we forewent having reference hours at all, moving instead to do all reference by appointment, which sometimes happened on Saturdays. Then there were Sundays. As a faculty member, service to the church included participation in online Vestry (church committee) meetings, online Diocesan conventions, and online planning for an archival display and history book publication to celebrate Trinity Church of Cranford’s 150th anniversary in 2022.

Phase Two began in the summer of 2020 and centered on increased cleaning frequency of the classroom building. Phase Three further expanded cleaning to Saturdays, in anticipation of reopening on

Saturdays in the fall of 2021. Phase Three also saw the mask mandate shift to requiring a mask when in the presence of others. The other changes in Phase Three regarded building use. Building use was allowable up to 50% occupancy, but social distancing and masking were required. At this time only faculty and doctoral students who were in the thesis writing process could access Sage Library by swipe card. A library assistant vetted visitors without swipe cards. Events over 20 people were prohibited. Study rooms and conference rooms were closed, and only one person could be at a research table or computer bank. Common-use items had to be wiped clean after each use. To facilitate social distancing, half of the public access computer terminals were relocated to the basement where sneeze guards were installed. An additional screen was installed at the Circulation Desk to enable circulation staff to guide a patron through the Library website from across their desk. Library staff continued to work staggered shifts following prior guidance for 50% staff capacity until July 1, 2021, when all Library staff were expected to have been fully vaccinated.

Since we were still closed to the public in Phase Two, we needed to devote staff time to weeding. NBTS has a long and loving history of being attached to its books; weeding of any kind was politically fraught, but after developing buy-in with the faculty and Board of Trustees, I charged the Public Services Librarian with weeding the reference collection. Working together with Library staff, 100 boxes of books were weeded from the folio and reference sections of the Library and shipped to the global charity Better World Books. The weeding project made available two entire rooms for technical services processing and digitization and, most importantly, increased accessibility of materials relevant to social justice that were previously in closets instead of with the rest of the circulating collection.

Planning for Phase Three was done in tandem with both strategic planning and accreditation self-studies. Library staff worked together to develop the Sage Library Strategic Plan. We developed it intentionally while in person, but socially distanced; I wanted everyone to feel included. There were times during the MSCHE regional accreditation process I was forced to rush to complete documentation about strategic plans that were entirely mine, without consulting Library staff. I lamented the top-down precedent that created, and I did not wish to be overly prescriptive in workflows or worldview. To begin the strategic planning process, the Public Services Librarian, the Digital Services Librarian, and I gathered for a staff luncheon

retreat at a riverside park in view of Sage Library. We began with some levity: a walk around the park's small zoo. The discussion centered on mission and vision statements that were developed and included in the Sage Library Strategic Plan (SLSP) to be discussed at the next Library Committee meeting.

The Library Committee was not the most active of faculty committees during the pandemic but, when I needed them, they supported my leadership and shared valuable faculty perspectives. One of our accomplishments was defining the Committee and its scope in the Faculty Manual. Members served as helpful sounding boards for the ideas the Library staff and I brainstormed about the kinds of innovations, negotiations, and concessions the pandemic necessitated. In May 2021, the Library Committee was still debating questions such as, "What if someone made it into the building without wearing a mask? What will library staff do? Should there be any disclaimer posted such as: 'This historic building does not have ventilation. By entering you acknowledge that you accept any risk to your health?'" Whether and how NBTS would address vaccination status among the community was yet to be determined at that time.

Beyond Reopening: Falling into the First New Normal

By the fall of 2021, the Library Staff, Library Committee of the Faculty, Faculty Council, Administrative Council, and Board of Trustees approved plans and protocols for reopening to our student population. I was excited for a fall semester in Phase Three because it would be the first semester for all NBTS students to be welcome back in Sage Library. However, the expectant hope was short-lived. The Public Services Librarian who had worked with acumen to pivot reference services into the digital environment decided to leave Sage Library for a new position where she could continue to work remotely indefinitely. I had read about the "Great Resignation," but had not assumed it would hit Sage Library like an epidemic, or pandemic. But it did. Our Public Services Librarian resigned.

To prepare to reopen the building and expand services to in-person users, I led the effort to recruit new Library staff. There was an excellent, fastidious librarian at the Burke Library (part of Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University) who was ready for a new role. I hired her and she effectively replaced the Public Services

Librarian with a new pandemic-savvy title of Access Services and Reference Librarian. The title shift reflected the uncertainty about whether or not we could safely provide services to the public as well as discretion about whether it would be prudent to do so with finite Seminary resources. This librarian shared a variety of useful strategies and practices gleaned from her pandemic tenure. Such accomplishments included adjusting library assistants' shifts to shorter periods which increased attendance and facilitated substitutions, migrating content and developing new research tutorials, digitizing the treasury of SEPTLA, enhancing how-to documentation for routine library tasks, and extensively researching OpenAthens as a solution to our users' needs for multiple passwords for various library databases.

More than once during the pandemic, I personally identified with the character of Sisyphus who, according to Greek mythology, was doomed for eternity to roll a giant boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down each time it nearly reached the top. Almost as soon as the new Access Services and Reference Librarian was in place, the Digital Services Librarian resigned, also for a position where she could continue to work from home indefinitely. Due to budget constraints, I had to combine the one-third Seminary Archivist position with the full-time Technical Services Librarian position. I was concerned about the resulting workload of the combined position, but I structured the new role as necessary. Ultimately, the searches were successful. I welcomed two new professional librarians that fall: an Access Services & Reference Librarian and a Technical Services Librarian & Archivist.

Beyond Reopening: Closed Again!

Unfortunately, Sage Library was again temporarily closed in January 2022 in light of COVID-19 concerns related to the Omicron variant's transmissibility and prevalence. We reverted to Phase One for the month due to the Omicron variant, which had only recently emerged in December 2021. My wife was due to give birth to our second daughter on December 28, and I had organized parental leave to start upon delivery. But the baby did not come until January 1. So I was texting back and forth with library staff on New Year's Eve and emailing our IT director from the delivery room to post notices that Sage Library

would need to close due to Omicron. In hindsight, I should have had a more concrete start date for the planned leave. It was unnecessarily chaotic to continue to manage the library through a childbirth during a COVID-19 spike. Fortunately, my experience gained during the prior pandemic closure, along with the support of new and experienced staff, made the rapid transition back to entirely online library services effective for our campus community and for the alumni, whose in-person services had also resumed.

Beyond Reopening: Springing into the Second New Normal

Technical Services Librarian & Archivist Christina Geuther had brought to Sage Library the much-needed technical services insight she gained at Mundelein Seminary and Kansas State University. Geuther's experience with archives and digitization from Boston University School of Theology Library was also exciting expertise to have at Sage Library. She was away for a few months in 2022, but, fortunately, I was able to afford a temporary library employee in the meantime. As she was returning to work at Sage, the Access Services and Reference Librarian left for a new position in December 2022. Geuther then worked with a Library Technical Assistant to prepare the spring 2023 reserves. Our attention also turned to the recruitment of a replacement for the Access Services and Reference Librarian. A national search was conducted, candidates were identified, and we were in the process of second-round interviews when budget pressures led the President to institute a Seminary-wide hiring freeze until July 2023. Some silver lining in a short-staffed year was that the RCA recruited a new full-time archivist, Elizabeth Pallitto, who reopened the RCA Archives in February 2023. Having all lived through a pandemic that closed many archives entirely, Geuther, Pallitto, and I now collaborate to imagine enhancing archival access so that, pandemic or not, our cultural heritage is not only well preserved but broadly accessible for researchers and posterity.

It was a struggle to establish digital library services when the pandemic struck. But it was a greater struggle to resume library services in person without losing any of the energy and momentum of digital library services. These struggles were not entirely unique, and

I recall hearing many similar accounts from libraries that reopened sooner than we did. I learned about these trends first in SEPTLA's Executive Meetings, then in Atla's Directors' Meetings series, and finally saw hybrid strategies flourish while in-person myself, first at Lancaster Theological Seminary's hybrid SEPTLA meeting, and lastly at the hybrid Atla Annual in Baltimore in 2022.

Despite budget and personnel setbacks, I came out of the spring 2023 semester encouraged. Between our reopening to the public in June 2022 and summer 2023, our in-person Library traffic has increased tenfold. Literally hundreds of Rutgers undergraduates fill Sage Library for its beautiful, quiet study space, and strong wi-fi. Our circulation of print books has tripled and full-text downloads from Library databases doubled. Patrons are using Sage Library extensively, as it was intended as a purpose-built Library, and as a community hub, in-person and virtually.

Finally, one of the most rewarding experiences occurred in May 2023. We celebrated the graduation of the first student to complete the DMin degree program entirely online from the Caribbean island of Tobago. NBTS is succeeding in virtual learning and Sage Library is championing its relevant resources. The long lockdown was distressing and arduous, but it is over. It is over. To embrace a jubilee era, NBTS recently hosted its first biennial benefit gala. And if the outpouring of support and accolades from the Board of Trustees, faculty, alumni, church leaders, and current students is any indication, the Sage Library community has much to look forward to at our 150th anniversary celebration in 2025. Meanwhile, the journey continues to faithfully optimize services amid persistent change.

Notes

- 1 On Thanksgiving in 2020, I drove straight down Madison Avenue in a matter of minutes, hitting almost every green light; the City still looked quite the ghost town with its empty streets, shops, and restaurants.
- 2 Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands opened the original rare book exhibition “The Dutch in Two Worlds,” held at Sage Library to celebrate 200 years of peaceful diplomatic relations between the Netherlands and the United States.
- 3 As part of our agreement with Princeton, the NBTS materials will also be featured in the digital repository Theological Commons.