

# *Size Doesn't Matter*

*Advice for Small Theological Libraries*

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**S**mall theological libraries with limited staff and budgets have special challenges when it comes to preservation. It takes significant human resources to put recommended proactive measures in place to address this important concern, and it takes significant financial resources to implement technological solutions. Small libraries also often have inadequate facilities, which adds another challenge.

As the director of a small theological library, I often encounter professional literature and advice that does not seem easy to apply in my context. I know that I am not alone because many theological libraries are part of smaller institutions. Even when these institutions prioritize the allocation of resources to the library, they are generally not able to support the kinds of staff, structures, and practices that are commonplace at large university libraries.

Fortunately, there are simple, low-cost practices that can be implemented to assess and mitigate threats to the longevity of collections and to prepare for effective response to emergencies when they occur. Fundamental to developing and implementing these practices, especially for small libraries, is the principle of collaboration. This chapter describes two broad categories of practice (I call them “toolkits”), that focus on (1) assessing your situation and potential strategies for minimizing risk and (2) preparing for response to emergencies. These toolkits can empower staff in small theological libraries—when they collaborate with others—to develop an effective culture and program of preservation.

### *Collaboration is the Key*

Collaboration with other institutions and with other staff and offices on your own campus is essential for the success of any preservation program. It is especially important for smaller libraries, though the benefits of collaboration extend to libraries of all sizes. In fact, small, subject-specific libraries often bring special gifts to collaborative efforts, such as unique collections or staff with special subject matter expertise, which can benefit their larger partners. While collaboration itself requires time and relational energy, it pays off in gains to productivity and personal fulfillment, in my experience.

A good starting point for collaboration with other libraries is to engage with colleagues in a national, regional, or local professional association, developing networks for sharing information and working together. Pooling information with peers and discussing cases and solutions that have worked best expands everyone’s capacity to plan and act locally with good prospects for success.

Working collaboratively with other staff in your own institution can also pay dividends. In an institution where staffing and financial resources are limited, it is important to establish priorities since it is not possible to attend to every area of need at once. It may be very beneficial to set those priorities as a library team, both to build everyone’s awareness of preservation issues and to broaden the scope of thinking. In libraries that are served by only one or two staff members, the team could include, instead, peer librarians from other local institutions or staff from other departments in your own institution.

Collaboration with others, then, is the key to the success of preservation programming in libraries where resources are limited, but what more can be said about the actual work that needs to be done collaboratively? The rest of the chapter answers that question by describing two toolkits, or clusters of practices, which can help us maximize the longevity of our collections.

## *Assessment Toolkit*

The first cluster of recommended practices focuses on assessing your situation from a preservation perspective. Three types of assessment are foundational: relationship assessment, risk assessment, and opportunity assessment.

### *Relationship Assessment*

As Jeff Beck, Library Director at Wabash College, suggested to me in a personal communication, a relationship assessment identifies and characterizes various potential partners to whom one can turn when trying to carry out a complex effort like developing and maintaining a preservation program. A thorough relationship assessment should include relationships both external and internal to the institution and can be documented on a spreadsheet. Columns should include the entity to whom the library relates, the current strength of the relationship, the desired strength of the relationship, the differential between the current and desired strengths, notes about the relationship, and a plan for growth or maintenance (see Figure 4.1).

Relationship name	Current strength rating (1 to 5 where 5 is high)	Desired strength rating	Improvement need	Notes on contributions	Plan for growth or maintenance
Atla	5	5	0	Digitization collaboration, grant opportunities	Maintain memberships and stay alert to announcements
AMBS Maintenance & campus security department	5	5	0	Maintenance issues and security response	Maintain informal relationship, collaborate on response plans
Elkhart Fire Department	1	2	1	Disaster response	Reach out for another walk-thru & assessment
Elkhart Police Department	1	2	1	Security response	Reach out to have an officer do a security assessment
Mennonite Historical Library	5	5	0	Digitization collaboration, preservation expertise	Continue participation in advisory committee, maintain relationships with staff through transitions
PALNI	5	5	0	Digitization collaboration, preservation expertise	Stay active in groups, build relationship with Digital archive coordinator

**Figure 4.1:** Sample relationship assessment

It may be helpful to conduct this assessment annually to observe the development of the library’s relationships over time and to determine where energy needs to be focused in annual planning.

The relationship assessment carries over into risk and opportunity assessments. Relationships will be necessary to plan and carry out mitigation of risks. They will also be needed to capitalize on opportunities to plan and implement preventative measures. My own relationship assessment found that both internal and external relationships for my library are strong overall and provide multiple benefits, not only for preservation but also for other important activities.

### *Risk Assessment*

A risk assessment focuses on identifying the various potential threats to the longevity of library collections and the measures for minimizing those threats. It identifies the relative range and severity of risks as well as their likelihood of occurring. It also provides a beginning point for thinking about mitigation strategies and offers some sense of prioritization of time and resources based on the likelihood and severity of the risks (see Figure 4.2). For example, in my library, theft

received one of the lowest combined scores for likelihood and severity. This means that, although I may continue to make some efforts to deter theft, this is not my highest priority. In another library, theft may rank as a higher risk and thus require a more intensive response. New risks may emerge, old risks may disappear, and still others may change in terms of likelihood and severity. Assessing risks to the library’s collections should happen, ideally, on a cycle to ensure that responses remain appropriate.

Risk	Likelihood (1 to 5 where 5 is high)	Severity (1 to 5 where 5 is high)	Total score	Actions to be taken
Fire	1	5	6	dry system for fire suppression, disaster response kit and training
Natural decay (e.g. acid paper, failing bindings)	5	2	7	digitization plan
Other water damage	2	3	5	disaster response kit and training
Pests	2	2	4	patron conduct policy: food and drink
Storm	2	3	5	disaster response kit and training
Theft	2	1	3	security gates and tags
Usage damage	5	2	7	digitization plan

Figure 4.2: Sample risk assessment

### *Opportunity Assessment*

The third tool in the assessment toolkit, the opportunity assessment, seeks to identify proactively creative possibilities for extending the longevity of collections and content. An opportunity assessment can be conducted as a planned initiative, but it may happen more often “on the fly” as unique opportunities arise. In my library, for example, we have addressed a variety of preservation needs in recent years through collaborative digitization projects. Each project has involved a unique combination of partners and resources (with some overlap). Case studies of how digitization has been used in two other libraries

as a tactic for preserving and extending the accessibility of valuable content are provided in Chapters 7 and 8 of this volume.

An opportunity assessment may be conducted for an entire collection or for discrete subcollections within the library. Each subcollection assessed may require a different constellation of potential partners, funders, and technologies based on its research value and uniqueness or the special interests to which it may be related. Thinking about collections in smaller chunks makes it feasible to develop appropriate approaches that are tailored to each situation. While it may be overwhelming to think about preservation strategies as a whole, thinking about them in terms of discrete and unique opportunities can be energizing and productive (see Figure 4.3).

Collection name	Mennonite periodicals		
Collection Definition	<i>Gospel Herald &amp; The Mennonite</i>		
		<b>Strength Rating (1-5 scale where 5 is high)</b>	
<b>Notes</b>			
<b>Partners</b>	MHL, MC USA	5	
<b>Funders</b>	Schowalter Foundation	5	
<b>Research needs</b>	High- frequent inquiries	5	
<b>Uniqueness</b>	Medium - multiple libraries hold, but some volumes/issues are unique	3	
<b>Resources available</b>	Collaborative time, Internet Archive, examples of others (e.g. Brethren)	5	
<b>Other considerations</b>		n/a	
<b>Total Score</b>		23	0.92

Figure 4.3: Sample opportunity assessment

## Emergency Toolkit

### Emergency Response Plan

It is important to have a readily accessible emergency response plan that is updated regularly. In my library, the emergency response plan is included in the online library manual so that all library staff, including student assistants, can access it easily. Our plan is combined with other emergency preparedness procedures because preservation-related disasters are often linked to other types of emergencies.

An emergency response plan should include the following elements:

1. Emergency contacts. Consider your relationships and who might assist in an emergency.
2. Procedures for responding to various types of emergencies (e.g., tornado/severe weather, fire, roof leak). Consider your risk assessment and how to prioritize responses.
3. Procedures for dealing with wet books (a common result of many types of disasters), such as the following:
  - a. Wrap very wet books individually in waxed paper or aluminum foil, pack them snugly in a box (flat), and put the box in a freezer as soon as possible. Send the frozen books to a vendor for freeze-drying.
  - b. Lay out slightly damp books on a table with pages fanned and standing on end if possible. Use fans to keep air moving around them and to lower humidity. Fan pages frequently as they dry.
  - c. Glossy pages (coated stock) will stick together. There may be very little that can be done.
4. Maintain contact information for local book restoration companies and other relevant vendors.
5. Maintain a brief bibliography on preservation. Have books and articles available to staff in an accessible location and provide links to instructional videos (many are available on YouTube).
6. Follow a schedule for review of procedures, for supply inventory, and for training.

### *Emergency Response Supplies*

It is important to maintain a stock of emergency response supplies and to make sure everyone on staff knows where they are located. Consult peers to see what supplies they maintain. Meghan Ryan of the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois suggests the following list (Ryan, 2017):

- Waterproof gloves
- Disposable aprons

- Goggles
- Dust masks
- First aid kit
- Rubber boots
- Polyethylene sheets (plastic sheeting to cover shelves)
- Garbage bags/plastic bags
- Paper towels (for interleaving books)
- Buckets
- Sponges
- Flashlights/batteries
- Scissors
- Mops/buckets
- Vacuums
- Dehumidifiers
- Hand-cranked radio/cell phone charger
- Storage containers
- Clipboards
- Pencils/markers/pens
- Fans

Make sure that these supplies are inventoried and refreshed at least annually. If some items are kept elsewhere in the building because they are in regular use (e.g., mops/buckets), note during your annual review whether their default location has changed. If your budget allows, you might consider duplicating these shared items so that they are always stored with your other library emergency supplies.

### *Training*

Conducting a training session annually for all library staff on emergencies and disasters helps to ensure that everyone working in the library can respond capably in these situations. In my library and in many other small theological libraries, student workers staff the building by themselves during evenings and weekends. This means that they also need to be prepared to respond to emergencies. If emergencies and disasters are stressful for librarians, they are even more difficult for part-time student workers. Be sure that student assistants have contact information for a regular library staff member who can be reached for advice and assistance.



It is helpful to provide an open, friendly environment for the training session, perhaps beginning with some social time with food or snacks available. In a theological library with a particular religious identity, it may also be beneficial to open the meeting with a devotional practice (e.g., a prayer or religious reading). The agenda for the meeting should include a high-level review of the emergency response plan and reminders about where to find supplies and whom to call for help in various situations. The meeting could also include role-playing one of the more likely and potentially impactful scenarios uncovered in a recent risk assessment.

## *Conclusion*

Effective preservation of collections is entirely possible for small theological libraries with limited staff and resources. Although the toolkits described here may need to be altered to fit a particular context, they provide a sense of the patterns by which theological librarians in small libraries can assess their situations and build protection and preservation procedures in an environment of collaborative relationships.

## *References*

- Ryan, Meghan. 2017. "Supplies and Tools for Library Disaster Response." Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois. <https://www.carli.illinois.edu/products-services/collections-management/supplies-tools>.

