
Churches and Libraries 2002

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- **Social fabric of suburbia**

Church life is one of the great 'unseens' of the Australian/New Zealand social fabric. In country towns you can drive past the church on a Sunday morning and count the cars. In suburbia you can live next door and not even notice. Most people suspect that churches are losing members and losing influence on the hearts and minds of the community. And if the religious life is still important to some, it belongs to the private part of life. It certainly attracts little attention from the media – except in the case of scandal and abuse of power.
- **Perceived struggle for resources**

Church life in turn is reflected in theological colleges and seminaries. Again there is a perception that colleges and seminaries are struggling and declining, losing their established positions as leaders of knowledge and judgment within our communities.
- **National Church Life Survey**

Libraries and colleges are mutually dependent. So in the great endeavour of acquiring and storing wisdom, theological libraries too are feeling threatened, and struggle to gain the resources they require.
- **Positives and negatives of church life**

Australian churches have been well served over the past decade by the National Church Life Survey. NCLS was initiated by Anglican and Uniting Church groups and now works cooperatively and constructively with almost all denominational groups. NCLS has developed comprehensive instruments to measure what is going on within churches and in the attitudes and actions of church members. They then analyse and interpret this information to produce excellent sociological commentaries, which in turn provide well researched church resources. The NCLS methodology has now been shared with NZ and USA groups.
- **Four vital areas**
- **Connections**
- **Possible directions for theological libraries**

The picture that NCLS produces is not a simple, bleak picture of church decline. Rather they identify many different trends within church life, positive and negative.

In one of their recent publications *Connections for Life: Core Qualities to Foster in Your Church* (Openbook 2002), they identify 4 vital areas of church life and 12 core qualities which mark healthy growing churches. These are:

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1. **Faith and Worship**
 - a. An active and growing faith
 - b. Vital and nurturing worship
2. **Our Life Together**
 - a. Growth in belonging and involvement
 - b. An active concern for those on the fringe of church life
 - c. Care for young people
3. **Community Connections**
 - a. A focus beyond ourselves
 - b. Serving the wider community
 - c. Discussing faith and inviting others to church
 - d. Integrating newcomers
4. **Vision and Purpose**
 - a. A clear, owned vision for the future
 - b. Openness to new possibilities
 - c. Empowering and inspiring leadership.

Are there similar indicators of healthy theological colleges? I do not know of any research. But based on my observations of trends in the books that are being published, and the books that are being sought I would suggest the following. As theological librarians you may be able to confirm or modify these indicators.

1. **Connections to God.** Our society recognizes and promotes a quest for spirituality within and beyond Christianity. Theology is not just an abstract system of thought, but a faith that is lived. All areas of theology must face issues of spirituality – Biblical studies, theological studies, pastoral studies as well as the more specific area of spiritual formation.

2. **Connections to One Another.** Healthy theology is involved in dialogue across denominational and traditional lines. Colleges with a strong confessional basis are considering what they can learn from and what they can contribute to other traditions. Interdenominational colleges and the university based schools deliberately grapple together with questions of meaning in our postmodern context.
3. **Connections to Society.** Theology is no longer isolated from other disciplines, and there is a growing interface between theology and other areas of knowledge such as science, ecology, sociology, education, ethics.

Some possible directions then for theological libraries:

1. A focus beyond themselves, and an openness to readers who may come from other traditions, from among the spiritual searchers, from other disciplines.
2. A sense of not only undergirding a single institution, but of sharing their body of knowledge and wisdom with others, and a belief that their holdings are a valuable contribution to the wider church and wider society.

I believe that ANZTLA expresses this spirit of a combined contribution to church and society rather admirably, and a healthy body of librarians is itself a sign of healthy theological life and healthy church life.

(adapted from a presentation to the ANZTLA Conference, July 2002)

***The librarian of today, and it will be true still
more of the librarians of tomorrow, are not
fiery dragons interposed between the people
and the books. ... Many still think that a great
reader, or a writer of books, will make an
excellent librarian. This is pure fallacy.***

Sir William Osler, 1917