
Origins of ANZTLA : some recollections

Robert Withycombe

Former Warden of St Mark's Library

I have been asked as a former Warden of St Mark's Library and Institute of Theology—between 1976 and 1986—to recall and record the circumstances of ANZTLA's formation.

Never professionally trained as a librarian I have, nevertheless, since the days I worked (in lunch hours and after classes) as a voluntary assistant to our school's librarian, learned to depend on good libraries, and therefore on good librarianship, for all my tertiary studies and research whether in universities or in theological colleges at home and abroad.

Once I got the measure of the problems facing any attempts to renew and restore professional management of the St Mark's Library collections in Canberra in 1976-7, and after drafting (with the help of staff at the National Library of Australia) our first Collection Development Policy document in 1978-9, it became obvious to me how amateur the management of theological libraries could become and, in seeking remedy, how isolated we were from other comparable theological libraries or collections in Australia and New Zealand.

We at St Mark's were then receiving the Newsletter of the American Theological Library Association, the product of a vast and intimidatingly complex theological library network. It served, however, to reinforce our determination to find others to begin something similar in Australasia. ('Australasia' because I had worked for four years amongst universities and theological colleges in New Zealand and so I knew their strength and was convinced they too had to become part of any new antipodean association.)

This had been the experience of other managers of theological libraries in Australia and they had been seeking a remedy (some local network between theological libraries and their custodians) through the Australian and New Zealand

Association of Theological Schools and the ANZ Society for Theological Studies (whose membership was broader than theological faculty staff members).

The importance of their theological libraries, however, did not seem to be recognised by all theological educators in allocating conference time to enable those responsible for theological libraries to meet as a component of their conferences.

Those who could see the value of this: Hans Arns of St Patrick's Manly, Kim Robinson from Moore College, Ed Perrin from the freshly reconstituted United Theological College collections, and (later) Trevor Zweck of Löhe Library, Luther Seminary; all had tried hard but had uncovered difficulties.

Time and space was too short at such conferences to fit in any major library consultation. Not all library managers were regarded by other theological educators as fully colleagues as 'staff' members of theological colleges or 'schools'. Their role in theological colleges seemed marginal. Nor (we were reminded) were all of these library managers entitled by their level of training professionally to be called 'librarians'.

There were also problems arising from our wish to include in our network custodians of theological libraries working in institutions that were not members of ANZATS, viz. in university and state libraries. Some committee members of ANZATS appeared to be jealous for control—regarding libraries (and their staff) as necessary but *subordinate* components of theological education or ministerial formation programmes.

Librarians (we were told) did not understand the problems of funding. This was very ironical indeed, as most theological library custodians grappled with an imposed poverty of resources daily, and

amidst a very rich legacy of imposed expectations!

Besides the varied levels of training available to library managers, we faced other diversities:

- For classification systems, some used Library of Congress; others the Dewey system (or like Moore College the alleged 'Vatican variants' of it). Others, like St Mark's and Ormond College, were using the Pettee system, kept alive by the Union Theological Seminary in the USA.
- New subject fields were evolving as the theology discipline grew and its components interrelated. Theological librarians needed to consult to confer of standard subject headings for these new subject intersections and developments. This meant modifying older categories and creating new ones. We had faced the last particularly in classifying within the Pettee system the rapidly growing volume of new material on Australian and New Zealand social and religious history.

We experienced stalemate in negotiating for greater recognition and time allocation with the ANZATS conference planners. It seemed that St Mark's was in a good position to take an initiative here—since its warden was also effectively its chief librarian! So we convened (with willing cooperation and encouragement from several senior theological librarians) an initial gathering of librarians and other library staff members from theological libraries and special theological/religious studies collections. That gathering was held at La Trobe University, Melbourne, in 1978.

A further consultation was held in Brisbane in close association with ANZATS/ANZSTS conference in 1983. We found wide agreement that we needed to foster high professional standards amongst our theological libraries and cognate collections; that together we should seek to persuade our institutional managers and/or funding authorities to foster or underwrite new library development; and that we should regularly consult and encourage

each other in riding new developments in library management and technology and in addressing common problems.

So another library consultation was held prior to and during the ANZATS/ANZSTS conference at the Baptist Theological College of NSW on 27-28th August, 1984. It attracted several librarians from outside ANZATS member institutions. Proposals were mooted to form a separate association of theological librarians. Trevor Zweck was to put four proposals to effect this to the ANZATS annual meeting. Discussions were inconclusive at first. We pressed on.

On 27th August 1985 (in Adelaide) at a special consultation proposals were put to constitute a new association: the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Libraries (ANZATL). Notice the use of 'libraries' and not 'librarians', since not all who had pioneered and managed our burgeoning theological collections could professionally be labelled as 'librarians'. We had to be inclusive while also active in promoting professional library management standards. That new association's inaugural conference was held—independent of any ANZATS/ANZSTS conference—in Canberra on 25th August 1986. It was well attended and appreciated—a very encouraging outcome!

By that stage I had already been given my 'marching orders' to leave St Mark's and to cease to be its warden. That for me was a very great sorrow. Yet our dear St Mark's Library, with its meagre and vulnerable resources of money and space, was now in professionally trained hands and had already begun—through being the first theological library to link to the Australian Bibliographic Network—to appropriate the benefits of the new generation of library technology.

Furthermore, ANZTLA was 'off and away' at last! Others must be asked to record its fine progress thereafter. With the hope that this fills some of the gaps in ANZTLA's corporate memory,

(Dr) Robert S M Withycombe