

# Reviews of Two Atla Open Access Books on Theological Library Management

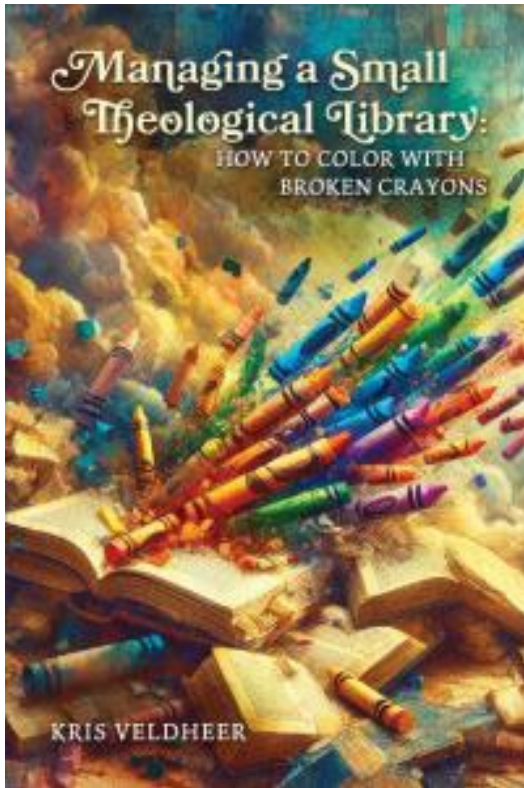
By Cindy Derrenbacher

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- Veldheer, Kris. *Managing a Small Theological Library: How to Color with Broken Crayons*. Atla Open Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-949800-42-5
- Sweeney, Stephen, ed. *Management in Theological Libraries*. Atla Open Press, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-949800-45-6

Given that I am involved in developing a three-year strategic plan for the theological library I currently manage, I was pleased to be asked to review two open access books for ANZTLA, both published by the American Theological Library Association (Atla) related to theological library management. This is a timely subject when thinking broadly, strategically, and missionally about the services and resources of the small theological library and how best to steward them in this present age.

I should mention at the outset that I know one of the authors – Kris Veldheer – having first met her when she was working at the Graduate Theological Union Library (Berkeley, CA) some years back. I have always



been impressed by Veldheer, her motivation and drive. It has been exciting to witness her professional development over the years especially as expressed through the pages of her book. Through this work, she gives back to the profession as colleague, mentor, and friend.

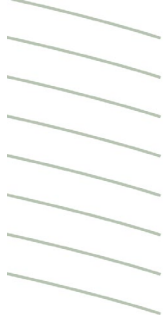
I suppose that an explanation for the intriguing title is in order. Veldheer explains:

The allusion to broken crayons in the title is from a chat among a few directors of Atla's Small Libraries Interest Group. While discussing library size and resources, the directors longed for what they described as "the big box of 64 crayons to color with" that these directors perceived so many college and university library directors have access to. Call it resource envy, but this group of directors found it hard to make do with a much smaller box of crayons. As someone quipped, they usually had eight broken crayons to color within a small library. (p. vi)

While I would agree that small theological libraries normally have more limited resources with which to work, having worked in larger university library contexts as well, I know that many of these libraries have also undergone dramatic cuts to staff, services, and resources, just on a different scale serving larger student populations. I am also aware that some theological libraries in the developing world have even fewer resources (both staff and materials) than the average small theological library that the author addresses. There are, for example, efforts by ANZTLA members to support these fledgling theological libraries in the Pacific Islands.

What impresses one at first reading is how thorough Veldheer has been. She truly has succeeded in covering the scope of managing a small theological library well, thinking through the many facets of such a specialized management endeavour in an accessible way. She is both thoughtful and detailed in her delivery. She has achieved a conversational tone (see p. vii).

The book covers ten core topics: strategic planning, staffing, collection development and acquisitions, budget management, service orientation, managing a library solo, professional development, managing up



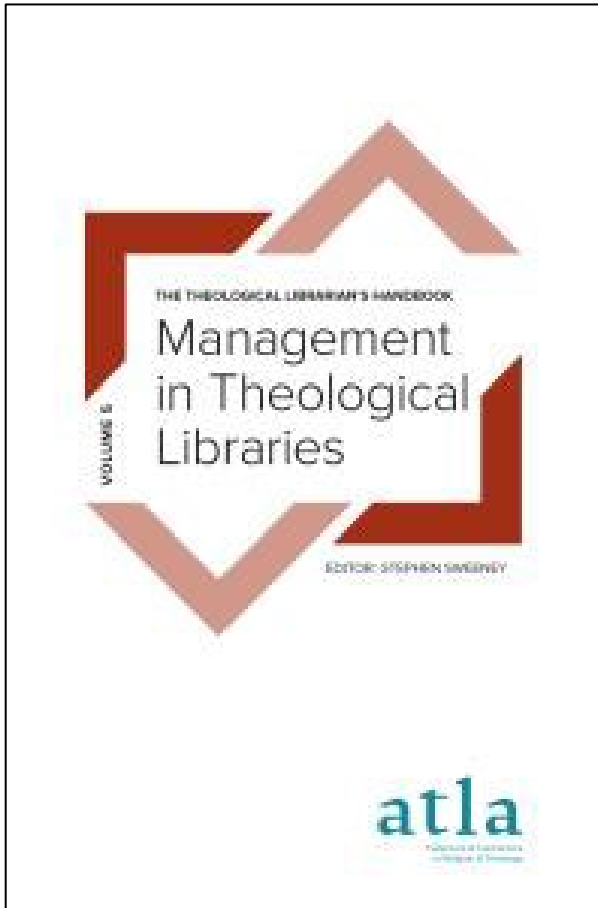
(i.e., developing a productive working relationship with one’s supervisor), accreditation preparation, and succession planning. There is an underlying emphasis on time management and setting priorities. She also incorporates case studies for reader reflection and helpfully includes a summary of key points at the conclusion of each chapter, especially if one is time-poor or wants to quickly read up on a particular chapter section. Additionally, the Appendix includes select resources for further reading and a number of accessible links—a time saver, for sure!

My sense if one were to follow Veldheer’s management lead and tips, is that, over time, one would have the skillset to be a very effective library manager, even if one was dealt a smaller box of crayons or even broken crayons. I personally found it helpful to have her insider insight, checking my own practices against her broad thinking and seasoned advice on the subject of library management, reminding myself of new and creative ways to adapt and innovate as a library manager of a small theological library in a changing library environment.

A couple of critiques: While the Table of Contents showcases lively chapter titles, it is not always clear what the content of each chapter is about until one begins reading it; an index would have been helpful in this regard. I do, however, appreciate the fact that Veldheer deliberately chose to make her book freely available through Atla Open Press. I was given a print review copy for which I am grateful (the luddite and “pencil underliner” that I am), but I should mention, from a librarian’s point-of-view, the binding is useless and pages began falling out almost immediately. As one might anticipate, some of the wording and examples are North American-centric, but these do not detract from Veldheer’s main points. The chapter on accreditation, for example, likely does not mirror most library professionals’ experiences in the southern hemisphere, but of course, there is much to be learned through such a detailed assessment process and, regionally, we would improve the library services and resources we have on offer if we were to go through such a process every ten years (having served as an Atla accreditor for the Association of Theological Schools in the past). Finally, while Veldheer references GenAI in passing (see p. 24), I would have liked her to forecast how GenAI might impact the small theological library moving forward and how a librarian might respond.

In sum, I would heartily recommend *Managing a Small Theological Library: How to Color with Broken Crayons* and look forward to ANZTLA colleague, Katrina Dal Lago’s facilitation of an ANZTLA membership discussion on this title on Zoom later this month.

The second book I am simultaneously reviewing also relates to the topic of theological library management – Stephen Sweeny’s (ed.) *Management in Theological Libraries*. It is the fifth volume in The Theological



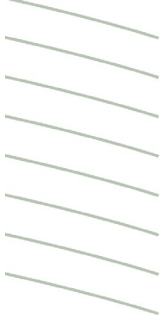
Librarian's Handbook Series, published in 2025 by Atla Open Press. I should mention that I have known at least one of the contributors through my association with Atla over the years, and I found the brief professional listing of the contributors at the back end the book informative.

In the first chapter of this volume, there was an attempt to distinguish between leadership, management, and administration using associated theory and applying it to the library context. Perhaps because so many Atla and ANZTLA practitioners operate in small to medium-sized theological library contexts, the nuanced descriptions of leadership, management, and administration seemed unnecessarily differentiated, especially as these roles often overlap. In terms of leadership theory, Sweeney references "transformation and servant leadership" (p. 3) nicely laying the groundwork for Chapter Two, "Library Management as Pastoral Care." Here, author David W. Kiger argues that our work of managing a theological library "has the potential to be a transformative exercise rather than a transactional process" (p. 9). Kiger highlights

the importance of demonstrating pastoral care through "compassion in the face of change" (p. 12). In another section, he discusses the importance of placing value on each human being (both library staff and patrons) for the purpose of human flourishing.

Chapter Three, "Change Management in Theological Libraries," describes how to bring about change in one's organization using a "change management" approach. Author Timothy D. Lincoln maintains that what "distinguishes change management approaches from other approaches to management is that change management asserts the value of large-scale change..." (p. 19). He writes that this is "in contrast to some management approaches that argue that sustained improved performance comes incrementally from building on existing strengths" (p. 19). While the first three chapters of the book fall under the heading "Principles," in my opinion, they do not interact with the full range of management theories.

The next three chapters are collected under the heading "Processes." Leslie A. Engelson's chapter, "One Library's Workflow and Processes for Record Management," provides a great example of a written data



management plan, one which I have asked my own staff to review and develop a version tailored for our library.

Chapter Five, entitled “Using Qualitative Data to Manage and Improve Theological Libraries,” is also authored by Timothy D. Lincoln. Given the trend to be over-reliant on quantitative data that drives the direction of our libraries, the emphasis on gathering qualitative data is a helpful corrective.

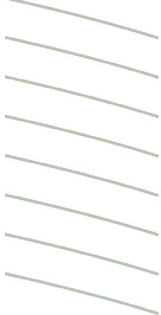
The final chapter of this section, “Counting Our Blessings,” by Tamara A. Conley, details the process for inventorying the Cardinal Stafford Library, St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, Denver, Colorado. The chapter provides insight into one library’s inventory practices and given that my own library has never been fully inventoried, it gave one of my colleagues enough information to develop a local approach for a three-year inventory project. We both agreed that the advice to beware of scope creep (“...when work that was not included in the original plan is added” [p. 51]) was justified.

The final grouping of chapters are gathered under the heading of “Personnel” and highlight staffing issues some of which may have emerged during or post-Covid. Chapter seven, written by Victoria Tsonos, “Balancing Efficiency and Service: Managing a 4-Day Work Week Model in a Small Theological Library,” describes the benefits and challenges of library coverage when staff work a more compressed week. Balancing employee well-being while maintaining library services certainly keeps management on its toes!

Chapter Eight, by Vincent Williams, entitled “Managing Graduate Student Workers in Theological Libraries,” is a good reminder that our procedural manuals and library policies should be written down and current. The chapter also speaks to the importance of motivating and engaging our students with projects for which they can take ownership and which ultimately make for a more formative workplace experience.

The final, co-written chapter by Drew Baker and Thomas E. Phillips, “Considering the HR Implications for a Work-at-Home Workforce,” details the library management of a remote workforce, an intriguing scenario, which may not mirror the experience of most theological library operations. While the chapter is US-centric and must be read so, the authors share some helpful advice, including only allowing volunteers “to do only those tasks paid personnel never perform” (p. 83) and “[e]mployees should never be encouraged ‘to use their own computer’, internet account, or software license to complete work for an employer” (p. 85).

I conclude with some critical reflections: Because this is an edited work, there were multiple voices speaking into the volume; the end result was somewhat uneven. There was a Contents page, and each chapter was well-referenced and some included source links which are helpful to practitioners for current ease of access. I might have imagined that this volume would have interacted more with generative AI and



management. If one was looking for specific guides on how to document workflow and processes for record management or a library inventory project, for example, the corresponding chapters would be particularly useful. If one were looking for management advice or ideas on other topics, one might find the overall coverage thin. I found this publication wanting from the perspective that there was no preface or introduction to tie the various themes and chapters on management together or by some logic. There was no index to indicate subject coverage. There was simply a brief blurb on the back cover which provided some input into the structure of the content. Alternatively, a concluding chapter or epilogue summarizing the contents of the book might have brought this volume to a more satisfying closure.