Top Concerns of Technical Services Staff

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ABSTRACT   The Tuesday evening preconference conversation group hosted by the Technical Services Interest Group provided an opportunity for technical services staff (and other library workers interested in the concerns of technical services staff) to talk about their top concerns. This year, the discussion focused on intentional succession planning (and whether such planning is wanted and/or needed) and some of the ethical problems encountered in cataloging.

About twenty-five individuals (including several who were not part of a technical services staff but whose input is always valued by those present) met for the conference's traditional Tuesday evening Technical Services conversation group, facilitated by Richard Lammert. The group's discussion focused on "Top Concerns of Technical Services Staff."

The first topic that the facilitator chose to discuss was intentional succession planning, or "Who are the next technical service librarians?" It is evident to anyone who has attended the annual conferences that many of the faces remain the same. The good news is that we have many valuable technical services staff who contribute to the operation of ATLA libraries. The bad news is that those people will not be around forever. Thus, the natural question is, "How does a library plan for succession?"

This topic elicited a spirited discussion. It was not the purpose to arrive at any consensus or final action plan, but rather to consider the possibilities (and necessity) of replacing retiring catalogers. No one knows exactly what cataloging will look like in the future. Will automation, artificial intelligence, and machine creation of records make traditional cataloging unnecessary? Are library schools providing the necessary training for future catalogers? From those who have

recently been in library school, the answer is "yes" when viewed from the perspective of working with metadata in general, but "no" when viewed from the perspective of working with cataloging codes and the MARC records. What skills do catalogers bring to the job that will be applicable to any future cataloging position, no matter what it looks like? There was a consensus in the group about the importance of the cataloger in the theological library, but there was also an uncertainty about how much that perception is shared by those who hire library staff. In the end, a tentative conclusion was that libraries need to be able to spot potential future catalogers and mentor them so that they develop the skills and traits needed for theological cataloging.

A second topic that the group considered was the ethical problems in cataloging: How do one's biases affect cataloging? This, like the previous question, is multifaceted. Although the problems of subject cataloging were mentioned, the group did not discuss this in detail. It was noted that everything catalogers do has some bias in it. For example, the classification of the books of the Bible impose an order on them which is not natural to Judaism. The Library of Congress provides an alternative classification for the Tanakh, not applied at the Library of Congress, at BM450–BM478.8. This provides an order for the books quite natural for Jews (starting with Genesis and ending with Second Chronicles) but unnatural for non-Jews. However, most libraries cannot afford to buy multiple copies of their biblical works and place one in each of the two classifications, so that everyone finds the books in his or her own "natural" order. Thus, one must ultimately be aware of choices and decisions and be ready to explain them to others.