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# Physical Collections and the 21st-century Theological Library

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**ABSTRACT** Collection management in libraries has changed over the past generation in libraries and will undoubtedly continue to do so. In a world of e-books, physical space pressure, consortial reciprocal borrowing, blossoming journal prices, shrinking monograph budgets, and declining print circulation, what is the role of the physical collection in a religious studies or theological library? In this panel discussion, three librarians from various types of religious libraries explore this question through their respective institutional contexts.

*Presentation slides are available at: [static.sched.com/hosted\\_files/atlaannual2020/2c/ATLA%20Collections%20Panel%202020.pptx](https://static.sched.com/hosted_files/atlaannual2020/2c/ATLA%20Collections%20Panel%202020.pptx).*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Two decades ago, it was not unusual to hear people outside the library profession (and even some inside the profession) predicting the demise of print materials. According to these individuals, by this time in the 21st century (that is, 2020), “everything would be digital.” Some even thought that libraries as a whole would be obsolete. However, data has shown that, while physical collection usage has declined, our patrons still visit the library and continue to check out physical materials, albeit at a lower rate than a generation ago.

This session will highlight the print material collecting strategies and practices of three widely different institutions: St. Michael's Abbey, Moravian College and Theological Seminary, and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), represented by Derek J. Rieckens, Elizabeth Young Miller, and Karl Stutzman, respectively. After introducing their libraries, each panelist will respond to three questions in light of our session objectives.

## **INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND**

### *St. Michael's Abbey*

Unlike most Atla member institutions, St. Michael's Abbey is not a degree-granting institution. It is a canonry of the Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, i.e., the Praemonstratensians, i.e., the Norbertines. The Norbertines are a Catholic religious order that follows the Rule of St. Augustine, as opposed to the, perhaps more familiar, Rule of St. Benedict. Norbertines, like other Augustinian orders, lead a way of life that straddles the line between the more contemplative life of monks and the more active life of diocesan clergy: they live in community and pray together throughout the day, but they also perform many forms of ministry, such as administering parishes, hospital and prison chaplaincies, writing, and leading retreats. St. Michael's Abbey is currently home to 81 Norbertine canons, including nearly fifty priests and over thirty seminarians.

The library at the abbey exists chiefly to serve the internal needs of the Norbertine community, but its collections have grown in quantity and quality in ways that have led the canons to make their resources available to outside researchers. The abbey possesses roughly 70,000 volumes, but only about 16,000 of those are cataloged. Chief collecting areas include biblical studies, lives of the saints, dogmatic theology (with special attention to Augustine and Aquinas), church history, monasticism, philosophy, liturgy, and literature for leisure reading. The library houses a few special collections revolving around church history and sacred music. The formal library program is in an early stage of development. The community was just introduced to its first-ever OPAC at the beginning of the year; before that, there was no catalog of any kind. The library has an FTE of exactly one, and that position is currently open.

### *Moravian College and Theological Seminary*

As the information literacy and seminary liaison librarian, I work with both undergraduate and seminary students. Moravian is comprised of an undergraduate college, a theological seminary, and a graduate school, with one library serving all degree programs and populations. The total student FTE is 2,149 (Janet Ohles, pers. comm., May 28, 2020), with approximately 63 part-time seminary students and 14 full-time seminary students. Of these seminary students, the

majority are commuters, with about a handful of online students and a similar number of residential students. The average age of seminarians is 43 (Randy D'Angelo, pers. comm., April 6, 2020), and for many students, a degree from the seminary represents a second or even third career. Certainly, these demographics impact collection decisions, which I will discuss a bit later in the presentation.

Currently, the library has eight FTEs. However, we are down two positions and it is unclear, given the current situation, what will happen with these positions in the future.

The library has over 370,000 items. The seminary's collection, classed primarily in the Bs, focuses on Moravian history, polity, and doctrine at a comprehensive level. The following areas are collected at a study level: biblical studies, chaplaincy, church history, clinical counseling, pastoral materials, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation.

The collection aims to support the seminary's curriculum. Moravian Theological Seminary currently offers four degree options, with an additional one in the works. These degree programs include the following:

- Master of Divinity (MDiv)
- Master of Arts in Chaplaincy (MACH)
- Master of Arts in Theological Studies (MATS)
- Master of Arts in Clinical Counseling (MACC)

The seminary also offers three certificate programs in biblical studies, formative spirituality, and spiritual direction.

#### *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary is a small, freestanding seminary in Elkhart, Indiana with about 100 students. We offer both MA and MDiv programs, with both distance and campus options. About half of our student body takes classes from a distance. Many of our campus students are international. Though some of our students are a more "traditional" age, our students span a range of age groups. AMBS Library has a print collection of around 100,000 volumes and an expansive e-book and e-journal collection. We have two librarians.

**QUESTION 1: HOW DO YOU BALANCE COLLECTING BOTH ELECTRONIC AND PRINT RESOURCES, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN?**

*St. Michael's Abbey*

At St. Michael's Abbey, print still is the default and will remain so for the foreseeable future. There are many reasons for this:

- The library does not support a degree program, so there is not much urgency about having access to the very latest scholarship
- A focus on internal community needs and special collections for visitors. It is a sort of combination personal library and special research collection. Internal needs revolve around personal prayer, homily preparation, ongoing personal study, and leisure reading, all of which have been adequately served by print. The special collections consist of archival papers and rare books, which are inherently physical.
- Long-established habits of use. Never having had curated e-resources, the community doesn't seem to feel their absence.
- The formal library program is in a very early stage of development. With an FTE of one, no professional staff prior to 2016, no automation systems prior to 2017, and tens of thousands of uncataloged volumes, the top priority has been to direct limited resources into wrangling the existing print collection. Accordingly, curating electronic content has not even shown up on the radar.
- The Norbertine way of life.
  - In this quasi-monastic setting, there is more of an inclination toward slow, deep reading, which tends to favor print.
  - They also intentionally limit access to electronic devices. Desktop computers are available only in a dedicated computer room. Seminarians do not have personal electronic devices. This may be done both because of the moral dangers available online and because extensive absorption in the online world can detract from community life.

All these reasons conspire to sustain a preference for print resources.

### *Moravian College and Theological Seminary*

Balancing electronic and print resources has been a challenge since I began working in libraries, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated the situation. In the humanities, such as theology, print remains the preferred format; this is certainly true for many seminary students who prefer print books. This preference may be due to their age and their comfort level with various forms of technology. Also, with a large commuter population, students typically come to the library to check out materials and, before COVID-19, had a lot of flexibility to do this, given the library's extensive evening and weekend hours. However, the preference for print is greater among students in the MATS and MDiv programs. The MACC program tends to attract a younger demographic who prefer electronic articles from the field of psychology.

With that being said, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Lehigh Valley has been a hotspot for the virus, and we just recently moved from the red phase—basically shelter in place—to the yellow phase. As a result, our print collection has been mostly unavailable to patrons. Neither can we get print books for students via interlibrary loan, nor is reciprocal borrowing available through several consortia. However, there is a working document among other libraries in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Theological Library Association (SEPTLA), of which we are a part, noting what services they are providing. As the physical buildings themselves reopen, I would imagine this will be especially useful.

Certainly, there is a wish for print resources amidst social distancing. At Moravian, we began offering curbside pickup several days a week starting last week. We are using our general reference email to handle requests.

My colleagues and I have also been promoting e-books, online databases, free trials, and open access resources. Colleagues and I created the following research guide to share available resources with students: [moravian.libguides.com/onlineresources](http://moravian.libguides.com/onlineresources). I would like to provide an example of how I used this research guide to assist a student. First, for some context—in February, I offered an information literacy session for the class Religion in the American Context and shared with students how to find both print and electronic resources for their required research paper. Using this research guide designed specifically to address resources available during COVID-19, I was able to assist one student in finding a chap-

ter in an e-book that she could use for this assignment. However, with limited to no access to our print resources, the professor decided to give students the option of writing a paper or taking a final exam.

To assist patrons during this lockdown period, I have worked with faculty to order e-books with unlimited access. A student actually reached out to me in May, asking if I could create a LibGuide highlighting these e-book titles for a summer course, which I was happy to do. E-books are serving as a work-around of sorts. However, as you may know, not everything is available as an e-book, nor can we sometimes afford these titles.

### *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*

At AMBS, print has been our default format for monograph acquisitions. Since COVID-19 hit, our default format for monographs has been electronic. Why print as a default? Some users state a preference for it. I would say our users prefer print if they are on campus and our distance users prefer electronic. But there is crossover, too, so it is not a simple matter of user preferences. Really, what drives print purchasing are two factors: some monographs we need can't be purchased in electronic format, and the licensing of e-books prevents full resource sharing. I also do not see e-books fitting our preservation priorities. In our current COVID-19 situation, we're purchasing e-books as a default through June 30. We're also licensing e-books that we already have in print—we purchased all the books available from our reserve list and we took Proquest up on a Print-to-E offer. One of the primary uses for print during COVID-19 has been liberal scanning, especially from reference and reserves, for persons who are working remotely. We created a COVID-19 library guide that indicates our resources and special services in this strange time.

## **QUESTION 2: DO YOU HAVE ANY REGIONAL OR CONSORTIAL AGREEMENTS WHICH IMPACT YOUR COLLECTING OF PHYSICAL MATERIALS?**

### *St. Michael's Abbey*

The abbey neither belongs to a consortium nor participates in ILL, so these have not been components of the acquisition strategy. To speak of acquisitions more generally, the abbey has acquired its hold-

ings in a generally ad hoc, serendipitous, just-in-case manner. The collection has not so much grown as metastasized, mostly through purchases from secondhand dealers and donations large and small.

The backlog has gotten quite out of hand. The purchase of a large special collection in 2012 was the 15,000-volume straw that broke the camel's back, forcing the abbey to face the backlog—or rather to hire a librarian to do so. Dealing with what they already have has taken priority over all else, including entering any sort of cooperative arrangement with other libraries. In short, they are not yet prepared for any cooperative collection management arrangement, because they don't yet have a good handle on what they have, much less what they might be able to offer to other libraries or what they might need from other libraries through ILL or a consortium.

#### *Moravian College and Theological Seminary*

Moravian does participate in several reciprocal borrowing agreements that have a small impact on collecting of physical materials. These reciprocal borrowing agreements include, on the local level, the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC), on the regional level, SEPTLA, and, on the national level, the Atla Reciprocal Borrowing Program. When I am processing book donations, I look to see which LVAIC and SEPTLA libraries own a title. The holdings of LVAIC and SEPTLA institutions play more of a role when it comes to weeding decisions, which I will discuss later.

Interlibrary loan plays a greater role when it comes to collection development. Clearly, there are lots of wonderful print books, and our library, while it has a solid book budget, cannot afford to purchase them all. If a title is outside of our price range—for example, over \$100—and does not directly support the seminary's curriculum, we rely on interlibrary loan. The MATS students working on theses probably utilize interlibrary loan the most for print resources.

When it comes to owning a complete run of a series that other LVAIC or SEPTLA libraries may have, cost and/or the fit with the collection are considered. Again, if the book aligns with the curriculum, it will be purchased. If not, we will rely on interlibrary loan or direct reciprocal borrowing for missing volumes in a series.

Similar to the Abbey, Moravian does not have a demand-driven platform set up. With that being said, nearly every title that a faculty member suggests is purchased. Those titles over \$100 are shared with the dean of the seminary for his approval.

*Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*

In 2016, AMBS Library revised its collection development policy and adopted what we call a “resource access policy.” Our resource access policy identifies four priorities: efficient discovery, expedited delivery, targeted acquisitions, and preservation priorities. At one point, print ownership covered all of those priorities: you needed to own it in print to discover, deliver, and preserve. New library technology allows us to frame print ownership as one mode of access and inter-library loan, partnerships, and electronic materials as equally valid forms of access. In our priorities for acquisition and preservation, we prominently state our partnership with the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI) and Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen College, a close partner for collecting Anabaptist-Mennonite resources. This affects our decisions on purchasing “research”-level materials, our subscriptions to print serials, our weeding practices, and our acceptance of donations. We see ourselves both benefiting from and contributing to our partnerships, so collecting in print is important to facilitate that. In terms of our purchase process, many of our e-books are selected from demand-driven plans through Proquest and, to a lesser extent, EBSCO. Our print books and some of our e-books are selected based on faculty requests—we buy anything faculty members request for teaching and materials they request for research purposes that are not already in PALNI. PALNI has a shared catalog and hold request system that makes it easy to discover and deliver materials from PALNI libraries, fitting into our priorities for efficient discovery and expedited delivery.

**QUESTION 3: HOW HAVE YOU GONE ABOUT EVALUATING YOUR COLLECTION AND SELECTING MATERIALS TO WITHDRAW?**

*St. Michael's Abbey*

At the abbey, a weeding project is actively underway. What’s actually in the library has already been combed through, but what remains to be weeded is a large shipping container of mostly donations—an estimated 20,000 volumes or so. Between two and three thousand books have already been deselected and sent off to Better World Books. Thousands more will doubtless follow, and the clock is ticking. The abbey is relocating—lock, stock, and barrel—during the final quarter of the year; COVID-19 hasn’t slowed that down. It would be ideal to



have the backlog of books in storage completely weeded in time for the move, but the pace is limited by the availability of expert labor (isn't it always?). The actual deselection decisions are being carried out entirely by one priest—and he has other jobs too.

I wrote a collection development policy that includes a supplemental policy on weeding. As I prepared the policy, I had to confront the fact that many of the data-driven deselection criteria commonly used in libraries, such as circulation statistics, have no place at the abbey. Lack of automation means there is no historic data. Instead, more general criteria take center stage, such as collecting scope, currency, and physical condition.

The weeding criteria generally run thus:

- First of all, items in designated special collections and items classified as “rare books” are generally exempt from weeding.
- Beyond that, items in the general collection are subject to review for deselection if any of the following criteria are met:
  - Out of the library’s collecting scope.
  - Available at other libraries nearby, including public and academic libraries.
  - Outdated, inaccurate, or misleading information.
  - Superseded edition.
  - Physically damaged or deteriorated so as to make repair cost-prohibitive.
  - Duplicate copies: with the exception of titles currently used as formation textbooks, the library normally retains a maximum of two copies of a given edition of a work.

### *Moravian College and Theological Seminary*

Yes, I have started the slow process of weeding because some areas of the B call number range are very tight. A systematic weeding project, however, has not occurred for a very long time.

Developing weeding criteria was a collaborative effort. I began in the summer of 2018 by drawing upon criteria shared at two Atla conference presentations; they include Leslie Engelson’s (2018) presentation “Managing a Large-Scale Weeding Project: When We All Pull Together,” and the panel presentation offered by Amy Limpitlaw, Michelle Spomer, and Suzanne Estelle-Holmer (2018), entitled “The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Art of Decluttering and

Organizing Library Collections.” Once I pulled these criteria together and added some of my own, I sought input from a well-read semi-retired faculty member who expressed interest in working with me on a weeding project. The weeding criteria we used are as follows:

- 1) Condition (dusty?)
- 2) # of check-outs (3+?)
- 3) Last date of circulation (within the last 5 years?)
- 4) Duplicate?
- 5) Publication date (within the last 20 years? — do not examine things published within the last 5 years)
- 6) Superseded edition?
- 7) Balance — Are there other, more recent books on this topic?
- 8) Foreign language? (most seminary students today can only read things in English)
- 9) Does this title support the curriculum?
- 10) How many libraries worldwide own this title? More than 100?  
Less than 25?
- 11) How many SEPTLA libraries own?
- 12) How many LVAIC institutions own?
- 13) How many benchmark institutions own?

Titles slated for deselection had colored slips placed in them. Mine were pink, and the faculty member, Steve’s, were blue. Others were then invited to either come to the library and view the titles, making comments on the slips, or add comments to a shared Google sheet. I solicited input from not only the seminary faculty but also from the following undergraduate departments: philosophy, global religions, psychology, history, political science, modern languages, and sociology/anthropology. As a result of this project, there may have been 50 titles removed from the stacks.

### *Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary*

At AMBS, weeding is done, in part, through our understanding of preservation priorities. We tend to favor preserving materials where feasible. When materials are in poor condition, we decide whether to repair, replace, or withdraw based on recent circulation and state holdings. Recently, we undertook a significant shifting project and

a reclass of our biographies. Before shifting and reclassing books, we decided first to withdraw some of them. When we did that, we based our decision on the most recent circulation (last 10 years). When we held last copies in the state that we wanted to withdraw, we sent them to Indiana University at Bloomington as part of the Academic Libraries of Indiana Last Copy Program if they were in stable condition.

## CONCLUSION

Print collections remain alive and well in a variety of types of theological libraries. The questions raised in the question-and-answer period demonstrated that issues related to print collecting are current for theological librarians, even as collaboration and electronic access are important trends in collection development. For a variety of reasons, the panelists predict that the end of print collecting in theological libraries is not happening anytime soon, even with temporary dramatic changes of course due to COVID-19. Theological librarians still need to be competent managers of print collections in the 21st century.

## WORKS CITED

- Engelson, Leslie. 2018. "Managing a Large-Scale Weeding Project." *Atla Summary of Proceedings* 72: 276–85.
- Limpitlaw, Amy, Michelle Spomer, and Suzanne Estelle-Holmer. 2018. "‘The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up’: The Art of Decluttering and Organizing Library Collections." *Atla Summary of Proceedings* 72: 131–40.