

Continuing the Conversation

Reflecting on Our Pandemic Experiences

*Megan E. Welsh, Interdisciplinary Arts and Humanities Librarian,
University of Colorado Boulder*

Ian Burke, Evaluation Consultant, Burke Research Consulting

Kimmetha Herndon, Dean of the University Library, Samford University

*Timothy Lincoln, Director of the Mary B. and Robert J. Wright Learning
and Information Center, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

ABSTRACT Grounded in past conversations sponsored by the Atla Professional Development Committee and research focusing on how theological library staff, deans, and directors coped with the pandemic, the facilitators guided participants in sharing their experiences of the past two years. Conversation with both virtual and in-person conference attendees emphasized sharing successes and changes in planning, policy, services, and culture, and ended with a discussion about what attendees are currently working on and what they are hopeful for. At the end of the session, virtual and in-person attendees listened to a brief recap of each setting's discussions and were invited to consider contributing to an upcoming edited volume to be published by Atla Open Press focusing on the impact of the pandemic on theological libraries.

INTRODUCTION

This conversation group session allowed conference attendees, both in-person and virtual, an opportunity to revisit their experiences of the pandemic within a supportive community where they could gather ideas and identify similarities and differences across settings. Survey and interview research presented at the beginning of the session helped to orient attendees to the topics of discussion. The majority of the session focused on conversations between participants.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

In 2020, Megan E. Welsh, Ian Burke, and James Estes (2021) conducted a research study wondering:

1. How has the pandemic affected theological libraries as institutions?
2. How has the pandemic affected individuals who work at theological libraries?

Findings presented during this conversation group were drawn from the 58 deans and directors of theological libraries who completed an initial survey in spring 2020, and the nine deans and directors whom we interviewed in fall 2020.

We presented three themes that emerged from this study: the process of addressing pandemic risks through mitigation practices, reactions to changes in library workplaces brought on by the pandemic, and issues related to communicating library value (particularly with regard to communication needs emerging from the changes mentioned above). Additionally, we shared several excerpts from interviews related to these themes so that attendees could better understand the relationship between the themes and the primary interview data.

Presenting interview excerpts also emphasized that the collected interviews were rich data that nevertheless only told a small portion of the story of how librarians coped with the pandemic. We encouraged participants to consider areas of further research, such as case studies and narrative accounts, and analyzing emergent networks and communities that developed as a result of the pandemic. Concluding the session, we invited participants to consider submitting chapter proposals for an upcoming edited book on the impact of the pandemic on theological libraries to be published by Atla Open Press.

CONVERSATION IN SMALL GROUPS

After a brief overview of research findings, conference attendees were divided into two groups: virtual attendees and those who attended the conference in-person.

We posed six questions to participants and, as facilitators, committed to asking both sets of attendees the last question as the conversation group came to a close, regardless of whether all previous questions had been addressed. These questions were:

1. What struck you about the research findings? Do these align with your experiences? Do they resonate with you?
2. What are the top two things you've learned from the pandemic?
3. How have you worked to improve your library culture? What are strategies you've used to build relationships?
4. How has hybrid or online learning pushed us to improve our teaching practices or services? What hybrid or online learning practices have been successful for you?
5. How has the pandemic magnified or focused priorities, new programs, and things that need to happen?
6. What are you working towards now?

Question 1:

"What struck you about the research findings? Do these align with your experiences? Do they resonate with you?"

Although in-person attendees did not discuss the research findings, virtual attendees reported being struck by the theme of communicating the value of the library when library access was limited to the virtual realm. These attendees also discussed the importance of hearing from librarians who completed the survey who were not deans and directors as their experiences may have been very different from the administrative perspective.

Question 2:

"What are the top two things you've learned from the pandemic?"

In-person attendees reported learning that educating disciplinary faculty became even more important during the pandemic. They incorporated themselves into the faculty retreat and educated these patrons about reserves and interlibrary loan requests. In some cases, boundary-setting became necessary, including setting a deadline by which title requests for course reserves needed to be submitted. They also learned that, although vendors were initially generous with materials, including offering free trials, the cost of e-resources quickly increased and these initially free resources functioned as a teaser for purchases that could not be sustained.

Virtual attendees reported learning that the impact of the pandemic was felt more by front line employees and staff rather than faculty or administrators within some libraries and institutions, thereby

demonstrating an inequitable workplace environment, which has implications on morale and retention. The pandemic also offered a lens through which library staff could view the institutional, cultural, and financial situation of their institutions as the response to the pandemic emphasized certain priorities over others. These attendees also reported learning that the pandemic was a “great time to build a building.” Closures and less foot traffic meant that renovations could take place and go more smoothly without interrupting patron activity. Both virtual and in-person attendees commented on checking in on students and colleagues. One attendee discussed a campaign where library and campus administrative staff called each student to learn more about their unique situations and needs. Others discussed checking in with colleagues, including using technology such as Microsoft Teams to check in with their peers.

Question 3:

“How have you worked to improve your library culture? What are strategies you’ve used to build relationships?”

While in-person attendees focused more on the broader institutional culture, virtual attendees reported that they created informal channels for communication, utilizing Microsoft Teams and Slack in order to communicate with one another. Additionally, they created new workflows and had discussions in support of departmental work. Simultaneously, virtual attendees acknowledged the challenge of communicating work, discussions, and decisions across the entire library. They reported experiencing some silos and shared that it is important to be intentional about scheduling and engaging in face-to-face conversations when provided that opportunity.

Question 4:

“How has hybrid or online learning pushed us to improve our teaching practices or services? What hybrid or online learning practices have been successful for you?”

In-person attendees discussed student needs and the extent to which libraries could meet student needs at the beginning and throughout the pandemic. The pandemic made the digital divide more evident where, even if students had devices critical for distance learning, they did not always have reliable internet. This significant disruption could not be mitigated by libraries whose physical locations were closed. However, some attendees’ libraries loaned laptops to students

and one person said: “It was nice to be the connection [for students to technology].” This personal and individualized approach to library service can be extremely beneficial for students overwhelmed with the nuances of coping with the pandemic and their schoolwork.

Question 5:

“How has the pandemic magnified or focused priorities, new programs, and things that need to happen?”

In-person attendees reported an increase in e-resource usage by patrons, yet also a need to communicate the complexity of these resources. The pandemic provided an opportunity for patrons to become more familiar with digital materials, whereas in pre-pandemic times they preferred print materials; yet this familiarity means that they are now demanding more e-resources without an understanding of the increasing costs and complicated licensing terms of these resources. Patrons see that they can purchase their own e-resources without understanding that libraries spend much more money on these same resources through library vendors. These changing expectations of having ready access to e-books means that patrons are surprised and frustrated when these are not immediately available.

Building off the theme of addressing patrons’ technological needs, in-person attendees indicated that the pandemic has magnified the necessity of understanding patrons’ unique needs in general. One attendee said: “Even if we can’t help each student, we began to understand their circumstances.”

Question 6:

“What are you working towards now?”

We hoped that the final question would inspire hope for the future. Indeed, participants shared what they were looking forward to as they described where their efforts are currently concentrated. Virtual attendees answered the question “What are you working towards now?” by describing a need to focus on morale, healing, and building community across the campus and within their own libraries and encouraging patron usage of library space back to pre-COVID levels, especially returning to a sense of pre-COVID socializing and community.

In-person attendees described specific strategies for reducing barriers to library access. These included trying to implement single sign-on authentication and continuing to leverage technologies originating in the pandemic such as live streaming, digitization, and video

display of special collections materials. This group also discussed trying to bring patrons back to the physical library space after they had become so familiar with the virtual services afforded by their libraries. Attendees shared hope for outside-of-the-box thinking, which included programming such as escape rooms and services that support the whole learner such as satellite food pantries. Although a generation of students learned of the library as virtual space during their pandemic experience, attendees believed that more students entering the library space after many pandemic restrictions have been lifted will associate the library with its physical form as well as its virtual services.

CONCLUSION

The unifying theme of our discussion, across both in-person and virtual modalities and across all questions, was “needs.” Participants explored patrons’ needs while also questioning what library and staff needs are as we look to the future. While we are looking forward to building community and once again hosting more and more patrons in our physical spaces, we wonder what the future of theological librarianship will look like.

Notes from our conversations may be viewed by visiting <https://bit.ly/Atla2022Conversation>.

REFERENCES

- Welsh, Megan E., Ian Burke, and James Estes. “Uncertainty and Resilience: Experiences at Theological Libraries During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Theological Librarianship* 14, no. 1 (2021): 1-21.