

Starting Off Well

Advice for New Theological Librarians

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ABSTRACT Three veteran theological librarians representing different types of library settings share from their experiences on ways to begin with your best foot forward. We discuss the importance of mentor librarians and libraries, involvement in Atla and other regional and national organizations, training opportunities to consider, collection development, the role of accreditation, and more! The session was followed by an opportunity for Q&A.

OUR BACKGROUNDS

Liz Leahy (Azusa Pacific University)

In the years before I began in my present role, I started a special library in the areas of theology and law for a Christian ministry called Prison Fellowship. I served next as a speechwriter at the US Department of Education for the Office of Library Programs, where I wrote speeches and legislative testimony related to all aspects of librarianship. I then moved to the Library of Congress, where I served as a senior research analyst and worked with new technologies in database management and developed and edited technical publications. I also traveled to most library and computing trade shows across the US, representing the Library of Congress at their booth.

I began my work at Azusa Pacific University nearly 30 years ago and of course, have seen many changes during my time here. I was hired to begin the theological library after the seminary had begun — with many notations from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Over these years, we moved from a single library to three libraries on the main campus and two regional campus theologi-

cal libraries, and my roles have varied over the years as well. The Stamps Theological Library serves the seminary and undergraduate programs of religion and bible as well as courses campus-wide that integrate faith and learning. The seminary teaches in English, Spanish, and Korean, and our collections reflect this. We also have theological special collections and archives.

One of the things I love about librarianship is the amount of variety we can have in our careers. I hope that this session encourages you. Whether you are currently serving in a theological library role — or hope to be in the near future, what you are doing now will likely be able to be used in this role.

Carisse Berryhill (Abilene Christian University)

I began my work at Abilene Christian University nearly 20 years ago and in these years have additionally served as the Associate Dean of Digital Initiatives, Special Collections and University Archives, as well as serving as Special Collections Librarian and Special Services Librarian, where I also served as the liaison to the English department and to the Friends of the ACU Library. I have taught the Atla-sponsored course on Theological Librarianship for the University of Illinois for 18 years. Prior to these appointments I served as the Associate Librarian at the Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, and as Professor of English at Lubbock Christian University, Lubbock, Texas. My PhD is in English from Florida State University.

Susan Ebertz (Wartburg Theological Seminary)

I'm Susan Ebertz and the Director for the Library at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, USA. I've been there for 26 years and will be retiring at the end of June. I was hired for a one-year temporary position. I did not have a library degree when I started but had an MDiv and was working on an MBA. Wartburg Seminary must have liked what I did because they then hired me as the Assistant Director and then later, I became the Director for the Library. I earned my library degree after becoming the Director. I attended my first Atla conference in 1999. I was so lonely at the conference and didn't come back the next year.

GETTING YOUR BEARINGS IN A THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY: CARISSE BERRYHILL

My heuristic:

- Contexts — history and associations, doctrine/dogmas, etc.
- Materials — what makes up your library collection?
- Services — who are your patrons? What needs should you be supporting?

Issues to consider as you move into your position in a theological library:

- If you are new to a theological library and this is a new universe of discourse, look into auditing or enrolling in a course which will help to fill gaps you might have.
- What are the governance structures for your institution? Advisory structures? Denominational connections? Talk to colleagues both inside the library and in the departments affiliated with your library.
- What reporting duties do you have — and to whom? (Internal— perhaps to a dean or provost and external, such as accrediting agencies.)
- What does advancement look like in your institution? Who sets goals and evaluates your work?
- What do scholarship, teaching, service and collegiality look like for you, and what expectations should you meet?
- Who are the library's user groups?
- What policies are already in place?

MENTORS: SUSAN EBERTZ

At any point in our career, there will hopefully be new responsibilities and challenges that come our way. We could try to do it on our own to figure out what to do. It would make more sense to seek out someone who knows more and can help you see any pitfalls or better ways of doing something and to support you in making it through the new responsibilities. Why waste your time and effort doing it alone when you could have a guide and encourager with you?

Six months after I started working at Wartburg Seminary, we had our Association of Theological Schools accreditation visit. The then-

director had me meet with the ATS visitor. The director was also the director at a nearby library and delegated that task to me. The ATS visitor was the chair of the visit, Charles Willard. Many of you know him. During the visit we had several conversations, not only about the library but also about where I saw myself going. After the visit he graciously answered questions that I had. He became one of my mentors.

When I first became a library director, I often sought out the advice of a good friend at a nearby library. She was an excellent librarian who I admired. Many of my decisions were based on what she did at her library. Our policies began to strangely resemble the policies at her library. My friend taught me the importance of making the library student-focused and not about the books.

The flip side of having a mentor is to mentor someone. Mentoring should begin the first day on the job. Some places call it *succession planning*: helping someone to take over your job. And in the case of theological libraries, it may not be our job per se, but a similar job in another institution. We need more theological librarians and one way to do that is if we start mentoring someone.

I remember someone who worked in the library while their spouse was a student. When the student received their first church position, the former library worker was able to find a library position. Since that time the former library worker has worked in a library with each move that the alum made. There was also a student worker who discovered that their passion was libraries. They went on to library school and became an academic librarian.

Sometimes the relationships are formal. For example, some library organizations offer mentoring programs, providing a mentor for anyone interested. I met someone who was in a mentoring relationship with a friend. The mentor suggested that the person contact me to answer questions that I could answer. You don't need to be in a formal mentoring relationship to still provide help.

Internships, whether paid or unpaid, should definitely be seen as a mentoring relationship. It is not just about teaching skills but also forming a librarian.

Informal mentoring happens when we seek help from others who we know to be good at something. It also happens when we have a posture of being willing to help others. When we are known as someone who knows something and who is also willing to share and help, we will be sought out as mentors.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES: CARISSE BERRYHILL

Start with library networks and cooperatives at a local, regional, and national level. Look into associations of religious librarians: organizations such as Atla, Association of Christian Librarians (ACL), Catholic Library Association and the Association of Jewish Libraries can provide a wonderful network as well as to alert you to trends and publishing within your faith tradition. These groups may meet regionally or at annual conferences and increasingly offer virtual training or discussion groups during the year.

Consider attending conferences that focus on research in your discipline(s) such as the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature (AAR/SBL), which host regional, national and international gatherings. If you are affiliated with a denomination, there may be gatherings related to research being conducted by scholars in your field.

Look into other types of opportunities which may be available to strengthen your skills. These might include grant writing, cataloging, student services programming, or technology. Some of these programs might be offered online or through a network you may already be connected with but don't forget to look into offerings by other academic or large public libraries or museums in your area.

NETWORKING: SUSAN EBERTZ

From a purely selfish standpoint, networking can be seen as a way to meet people who can help you. There are basically two types of networking: within your institution and outside of your institution.

Within your institution, it is important to build relationships with everyone. We sometimes don't think about staff at our institutions but only think of administration and faculty. Seeing all people by acknowledging their gifts and their worth creates an environment that is conducive for lifting everyone up. I know that when I worked at another institution, I would periodically bring donuts to the maintenance crew. This really helped my relationships with them. They knew I cared about them and did not see them as a means to serving me. I think for those of us which a religious background, the understanding of seeing all as being made in the image of God is important.

Networking with those in the administration and faculty are important in building those relationships which may more directly affect our work. There is another session in this year's Atla Annual dealing with those relationships. You may want to avail yourself of that session.

Networking outside of your institution is also helpful. In my comments earlier, I talked about mentoring and seeking mentors. Building relationships within your profession not only helps you to know who can help you or be your mentor, but as you build those relationships, they get to know you and your gifts and learn how you can help them. It's a two-way street. In the opening plenary for the Atla Annual this year, we heard about community organizing. This can best happen when we have built relationships with others. In a recent post in the Directors list-serv for Atla, there was a request for advice. The response was tremendous from others who have had a similar experience. These professional relationships become very important.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT: LIZ LEAHY

All libraries generally begin somewhere. You might be starting in a well-developed library. or you might be beginning from scratch — but the same methods can apply in either circumstance.

1. Get to know the organization you are working in. Does it have a particular religious tradition/denominational perspective? If this is not your tradition, find out who you can talk to in order to give you more background.
2. Who are your users? Students, faculty, external users?
3. What is the library's main task? Is it to support curriculum? Support research — perhaps by faculty and other scholars? Serve as a denominational archive?
4. How is your budget determined and what is your spending time period/fiscal year? Does your library use a jobber – say Baker & Taylor? Do you have ongoing commitments/standing orders with any publishers?

All of these questions factor into how you set up your collection development priorities and these are often different in each library. And much of this becomes incorporated into the collection development policy for your library. Check to see if your library has an existing policy and if so, how frequently it is updated. Does it include

information such as collecting levels? Types of materials collected? How gift books are accepted (or not) and how weeding takes place? If your library does not have a policy – there are many good examples available online or check with other libraries in your network to help you to develop one that best fits your institution. My focus here is on collecting books but the same questions hold true for determining the best serial and database titles as well.

My campus has a strong focus on the curriculum followed by faculty research needs. So, I receive the syllabi for all classes each semester and review the assignments, the required and the recommended titles. If a course is a research course, say on the history of Christianity, and has one or more research papers assigned, I think about the average class size and whether or not a class of students could each find enough materials to prepare a research paper — so I'm not only looking at what the faculty member has suggested, but also considering how students might go about fulfilling the course requirements in research and writing.

I look at the book reviews and articles in the more popular journals that our faculty are reading. When there are book awards, such as the *Christianity Today* books of the year. I try to order all of them as they will have received attention broadly across our campus. I look at the journals that have denominational ties to our seminary as well as resources such as New Testament Abstracts, to be aware of what is currently being published. I look at and mark up trade catalogs as well.

With database access, it seems fewer annotated bibliographies are published but when you can locate them, they can be an excellent resource. Several that discuss the backgrounds and merits of various commentaries and dictionaries are listed below, but one I especially like is our former Atla colleague David Stewart's *The Literature of Theology: A Guide for Students and Pastors*. If your library can access (or subscribe to) the *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, it is a helpful source for recommended titles on an array of topics in religion and philosophy. Resources such as WorldCAT can give information related to newly cataloged works as well as how many libraries are acquiring the title. I do look at other theological libraries in my region to see if books that are on my larger wish list might have been purchased and available nearby ; one of the difficult aspects of collection development is that most of our libraries do not have the budget to purchase everything we would like and we have to make choices!

A newer challenge for many of our libraries is the ratio of print to ebooks we purchase and how to determine the best use of our funds. You may have space challenges which have encouraged the purchase of more e-books – or perhaps students who study at a distance. The COVID-19 pandemic initiated a major change in our libraries as we needed to make more research materials available online during campus closures.

ACCREDITATION: LIZ LEAHY

Most, if not all, of our libraries are connected with educational organizations that are accredited. It is important to get to know the standards for accreditation that will impact your school — and often there are more than one. For instance, my university has an overall accreditation through our regional accreditor (WSCUC) and individual schools and departments may have discipline-focused accreditation as well, such as ATS.

Look at the accreditation materials to see if there are standards for libraries, but also look at standards related to student learning, research support, distance education — as libraries often fit into more than one section of these reports.

The standards can give you something to aim for and help you to be aware of reports and documents you should have in place — such as a collection development policy or survey/assessment data.

If the agencies that accredit your school don't say much about libraries (and our regional one says virtually nothing), consider also looking at the standards for other disciplines if you are in a university setting. For instance, the standards for social work and for art, are both quite specific with library expectations and are helpful in thinking about the types of questions an accrediting team might ask.

I believe that most accrediting standards are easily located online but if you have some problems with access, most schools have an individual or office tasked as the “Accreditation Liaison Office” and these individuals can help you to locate what you are seeking. I once told a previous provost that I liked accreditation visits (which is something most administrators dread) and he remarked that it was always because the libraries fared well in the reviews on two levels: we knew what was expected of us and also generally received funding we lacked the rest of the time to fix problems that were obvious to us and our accreditors. Get to know the documents that help to hold your campus accountable — they can be very helpful as you set goals and priorities for your library!

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- ATS Commission on Accrediting. *2020 Standards of Accreditation*. Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. <https://www.ats.edu/files/galleries/standards-of-accreditation.pdf>
- Bauer, David R. 2003. *An Annotated Guide to Biblical Resources for Ministry*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Berryhill, Carisse, ed. 2022. *Collection Development in Theological Libraries*. The Theological Librarian's Handbook series. Chicago: Atla Open Press. <https://doi.org/10.31046/atlaopenpress.89>
- Danker, Frederick W. 1993. *Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study*. Revised and Expanded. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Stewart, David R. 2003. *The Literature of Theology: A Guide for Students and Pastors*. Revised and Updated. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.