

Discoverability of Unique Resources: Unitarian Universalist Church Newsletters at the Harvard Divinity School

By Michael Bradford

BACKGROUND

Harvard University was founded in 1636 to train new congregational clergy for churches in the newly established commonwealth, but it was not until 1816 that the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) was founded as America's first non-denominational school of divinity. Unofficially, HDS was aligned with American Unitarianism, though it still maintained those old ties to Congregationalism.

Today, the Andover-Harvard Theological Library (AHTL) at the Harvard Divinity School is the national repository and library of record for the Unitarian Universalist (UU) tradition. The library collections include books, hymnals, periodicals, curricula, pamphlets, sermons, personal papers, audio-recordings, movies, church records, photographs, postcards, digital, and many other types of materials.



Figure 1: Drawers of microfilm reels of Unitarian Universalist church newsletters, not discoverable in the online catalog until 2008.

In the late 1960s, Dr. Maria Grossmann, the then-librarian, put out a call to Unitarian Universalist churches across the United States to collect their church newsletters and preserve them via microfilm (Figure 1). Issues began flooding in around 1969, and some churches even provided their historical backfiles.

The newsletters were filmed by the microreproduction department within Harvard's Widener Library and were either returned to their respective churches or discarded. This was an ongoing process that ended in 2012 when Widener ceased microfilm production.

The receipt and descriptions of these newsletters were never managed in Harvard's card or online catalogs. In 2004, a database was created for use by library staff, but the material within was not discoverable. Patrons did not know of the existence of the hundreds of church newsletters unless they visited the microfilm room on the 2nd floor of the library and browsed the rows of microfilm cabinets.

In December 2008, the off-line database was converted into brief provisional records and imported into Harvard's

online catalog, HOLLIS. The record dump included 662 provisional records for serial titles. Additionally, another 20,000 monographic pamphlet titles were added, while 737 authority records for churches that were not able to be added to the local authority file, instead this information was exported into an Excel spreadsheet. This information was helpful in processing the newsletters, in that it included some historical information about those churches.

GETTING TRAINING

In June 2005 I joined the staff of AHTL as its Serials and Electronic Resources Librarian. The library had not had a full-time serials cataloger in nearly two decades, and one of the first things I was tasked with was to upgrade all the provisional serials records via copy or original cataloging.

In 2007, I expressed interest in NACO training and traveled to Chicago, where I and a small group of catalogers were housed at a Catholic retreat center for a week. Our training was led by ATLA's Judy Knop, and we became the newest cohort in the ATLA NACO Funnel Project.

Initially, I contributed originally cataloged serial records through the Harvard CONSER office. In 2010, ATLA began the CONSER Funnel Project with training of a small group of ATLA catalogers at ALA Midwinter in Boston. We received training by LC's Les Hawkins and the late Valerie Bross from UCLA. The ATLA CONSER Funnel Project became the second ever CONSER Funnel and, to-date, the only subject-specific CONSER Funnel. Because of the number of bibliographic records I contributed, not just the UU newsletter records, I quickly became independent in CONSER cataloging.

PHASE ONE—CATALOGING THE BACKLOG (2009-2017)

As a key resource in the study of the life of these local churches and of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, to have these newsletters fully described and available in the online catalog became a priority for the library. So, beginning in 2009, I undertook the task of not only providing bibliographic descriptions of the serials in the collection, but also performing the authority work needed to establish or update names of individual churches by tracing the name changes of those churches back to their origins, some of which went back as far as the Pilgrims in Plymouth.



Figure 2: My second home—the microfilm machine connected to a computer that allowed me to save digital scans, rather than reams of printouts.

Each microfilm reel was painstakingly consulted. The library is fortunate enough to have a microfilm reader that is attachable to a PC (Figure 2), where I can make scans of images to a variety of digital file types (.jpeg, .tiff or .pdf) instead of printing reams of paper for consultation. I spent countless hours making digital surrogates of pages noting title, church name, numbering, and variations in title not considered title changes.

I determined at the outset that because of the size of the project and that I was working strictly from what was microfilmed on a reel (not necessarily what was truly published), detailed holdings

LDR	ny 22 3n 4500
001	016959487
005	20111114102512.0
007	hdlbfa012babp
008	0812101p 8 3001uueng0000000
035	__ a (uuapm)MHAAB73939UP
035	__ a (uuapp)MHAAB73939UP
843	__ a Microfilm. b Cambridge, Mass. : c Harvard University Library Microreproduction Dept., d 1974-2000. e 2 microfilm reels ; 35 mm. f In Filmed with later title.
852	8_ b DIV c MFLM h Unit. i 85
908	__ a c b 20111114
910	__ a mb b oc c un
966	_0 a Reel 1: Jan. 1973-Apr. 1985; Reel 2: May 1985-Sept. 1994
995	__ b 1p ⁸ 8 ⁸ 3001uueng0000000

Figure 3: A holdings record in the Alma ILS, showing level 3 summary holdings in an 866 Textual Holdings Statement (called a local 966 field in Alma).

Andover-Harvard Theological Library Mflm. Unit. 85 HOURS & INFO

[Hide Details](#)

ReproductionMicrofilm. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Library Microreproduction Dept., 1974-2000. 2 microfilm reels ; 35 mm. Filmed with later title.

note Dept., 1974-2000. 2 microfilm reels ; 35 mm. Filmed with later title.

Holdings Reel 1: Jan. 1973-Apr. 1985; Reel 2: May 1985-Sept. 1994

Contact the library for access information.

Figure 4: That same information displayed in the public catalog.

information was not going to be possible. Therefore, I decided to provide summary (level 3) holdings information only (Figure 3 and 4). I would indicate the first and last chronological designation on a reel and note the gaps, when I could.

When cataloging a serial run, especially with a church newsletter, I noticed some patterns. One of those patterns dealt with new ministers. When a new minister was named to the church, they often made their mark by changing something with the newsletter. The title, layout, and publication frequency can all change with a new minister.

One of the most interesting examples of ministerial input on a title occurred with a church in Lexington, Kentucky in the early 1970s. A contest was held over a period of eight months with church members voting on what the preferred name for the newsletter should be. Each new issue would appear with a

245	1	0	Fellowship Church Universalist Unitarian : #b [newsletter].
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 2 (Jan. 20, 1972) called: #a Shipmates
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 3 (Feb. 2, 1972) called: #a Star-ter
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 4 (Feb. 9, 1972) called: #a Sprinting press
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 5 (Feb. 16, 1972) called: #a Bluegrass blade
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 6 (Feb. 22, 1972) called: #a Fellowship funnies
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 7 (Mar. 1, 1972) called: #a Alpha
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 8 (Mar. 8, 1972) called: #a Newsletter
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 9 (Mar. 15, 1972) called: #a Thinker
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 10 (Mar. 22, 1972) called: #a Unicycle
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 11 (Mar. 29, 1972) called: #a Stone-roller
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 12 (Apr. 5, 1972) called: #a Unicorn
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 13 (Apr. 12, 1972) called: #a Trumpeter
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 14 (Apr. 19, 1972) called: #a Uni-verse
246	1		#i Issues for: Vol. 1, no. 15 (Apr. 26, 1972) and v. 1, no. 18-21 (May 17-June 6, 1972) called: #a Olympus
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 16-17 (May 4-11, 1972) called: #a Puzzler
246	1		#i Issues for: Vol. 1, no. 22-25 (June 14-July 5, 1972) and v. 1, no. 30-31 (Aug. 9-16, 1972) called: #a Newsletter
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 26 (July 12, 1972) called: #a Fish-triars
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 27 (July 19, 1972) called: #a I leaven sent
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 28 (July 26, 1972) called: #a Unisun
246	1		#i Issue for: Vol. 1, no. 29 (Aug. 2, 1972) called: #a Whatchamacallit
260			Lexington, Ky. : #b Fellowship Church
310			Weekly
336			text #b bt #2 rdacontent
337			unmediated #b n #2 rdamedia
338			volume #b nc #2 rdacarrier
362	1		Began with v. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 20, 1972); ceased with v. 1, no. 31 (Aug. 16, 1972).
500			Several issues over the first year have different titles because the church was seeking interest in a name for the newsletter, even asking for voting preference on at least two occasions.

Figure 5: Variant titles of the Fellowship Church Unitarian Universalist (Lexington, Ky.) newsletter in 1972 before a name was finally settled on: Shipmates. (Ironically, this was the first variation suggested in January, before it officially changed in August!)

new title and voting would commence. All of these new titles are considered titles of short duration, and thankfully did not require new descriptions, but just notations as variations of the title (Figure 5).

Because of the size of the Harvard collection, it was determined in the early days of an online catalog environment, that instead of having bibliographic records for every format of a title, all formats (print, microfilm reproduction, online, and a reprint) would be “attached” to the print format record. The other format information would be noted in the holdings record in the 007 and 843 fields. (This approach has been abandoned for new cataloging beginning earlier this year, and there are projects underway to break apart print and electronic holdings, but microform holdings, for the time being, will remain on the print record.)

Because of this cataloging policy, a print bibliographic record was required for the HOLLIS catalog, even if the only version held was on microfilm. The nature of the collection was as such that only microfilm reels existed for the large backlog. When microfilm was produced, the print issues were not retained. I needed to create not only a bibliographic record to represent the microfilm version that Harvard produced, but also had to create the record for the print format to bring into the HOLLIS catalog.

Through sophisticated automated processes by the library’s systems department, holdings records were checked for format and a batch process would attach Harvard’s holdings symbol to the appropriate format



Figure 6: Unfilmed newsletters from the UU Church of Columbia, Missouri. From the early 1990s. Many print newsletters date even earlier.

collected and put into file cabinets until they are filmed and they are only filmed if there are enough to fill a microfilm reel. If a title stopped arriving, the church ceased, or some other thing happened that affected the receipt of newsletters, the print issues remained unfiled. This constitutes a large backlog of printed material (Figure 6).

In 2012, Widener Library's microreproduction department ceased creating microfilm. It was decided to eliminate the print backlog by microfilming it with a third-party vendor. This will make way for the Special Collections Department to make a new call out for church newsletters and receive them in a variety of formats, not just print. They are also studying the feasibility of ingesting digital newsletters, PDFs, websites, e-mail newsletters, and ways to archive those to make them available for researchers, while at the same time committing to the privacy of individuals and the copyright restrictions of the churches.

I now process the print backlog newsletters for microfilming by editing or creating new records based on the work I had previously performed on the microfilm backlog. I then bundle the print issues to be sent to the vendor for filming. We have a test batch of titles ready to go and I will be tweaking my workflows after we receive it back from the vendor. In 2014, I did a quick and dirty inventory of how many pages of paper needed to be filmed, and it was estimated that about 140,000 pages were unfiled.

In the time between 2009-2017, a lot changed within the libraries at Harvard. In 2012, the libraries underwent a reorganization of library services. I was moved, administratively, under the auspices of the Harvard Library's Information and Technical Services (ITS) Department in its Serials Cataloging Unit.

record in WorldCat. Therefore, if a print version was not held, but a microfilm version was, the batch processing would attach the MARC code to the microfilm record, not the print record.

The cataloging into HOLLIS of the initial ingest of newsletters from 662 different churches was completed on May 1, 2017. These 662 provisional records exploded to 1,425 titles, taking into account title changes and changes to church names. I, therefore, created some 2,850 unique bibliographic records over the span of this project, for the multiple formats. I did not work on this project full-time, but it was still a time-consuming effort.

By doing both the authority work behind the cataloging, as well as describing the newsletters to the fullest extent possible, this project took quite a while to complete.

PHASE TWO—THE PRINT BACKLOG & GOING FORWARD (2018-)

Because the print newsletters are not managed in the ILS, it is unknown the extent of what has not yet been microfilmed. For nearly fifty years the issues have been

collected and put into file cabinets until they are filmed and they are only filmed if there are enough to fill a microfilm reel. If a title stopped arriving, the church ceased, or some other thing happened that affected the receipt of newsletters, the print issues remained unfiled. This constitutes a large backlog of printed material (Figure 6).

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I no longer work for the Harvard Divinity School, but for the Harvard Library. While my day-to-day work did not change much, I spend more and more time cataloging non-religion material.

In 2017, I moved permanently out of the Divinity School, into the ITS offices in Cambridge's Central Square area. I now only spend one day a week at AHTL doing cataloging maintenance and working on the next phase of the newsletter project.

SIGNIFICANCE

You get a sense of a church by looking at its newsletters through the years. From robust membership to lean times, building construction, auxiliary group activities, its work with the community, and how the community reacts to events of historical significance, the newsletters tell the story of the church.

It is a very interesting and important research resource. One that I am glad I am a part of. I hope to see how the project transforms itself in its next phases and how the changing formats of newsletter production, as well as archiving methods, will change what and how I do my work as a metadata professional.

I wonder how many other ATLA member libraries have large collections of church newsletters that are currently not discoverable. This is ripe material that can be shared. Unique resources are the sexy get in cataloging discussions. Cataloging is no longer about modifying existing copy until it's perfect; it's about creating bibliographic descriptions for material nobody else has!

Do you have such unique serial material? I bet the ATLA CONSER Funnel Project would be a good way for you to get involved in making it available. As the CONSER Funnel Coordinator, I can help you out with that!!