

## *From the Ground Up: Starting a Theological Library from Scratch*

by Gerald L. Truman

**ABSTRACT:** There is no “How To” manual for starting an academic library. This essay describes one experience in the effort to take a room of books and make the journey to an accredited resource center for a theological graduate school. The collaborative expertise of colleagues, the wisdom and direction garnered from professional meetings, and the wary wiles of technological information resources serves to chronicle this rocky and rewarding road to accomplishment

Browsing through Yahoo’s *Ask Me A Question* usually doesn’t get my attention. But the question “What is the difference between stupidity and courage?” provoked me. I don’t know why I gave it any attention. It was a philosophical dilemma and I knew there was no “good and easy” answer. But I was compelled and smitten—compulsively I had to offer an “answer.” Like Moses drawn to the burning bush, I took off my sensible shoes and bared my calloused soles to the hot responses piled up online.

Compulsions of this sort seem to plague my life. Some of my friends were compelled to flee the Viet Nam draft, while I felt committed and curious. To my school mates, education was a matter of “just enough to get by,” but I always needed to know more. Colleagues saw military chaplaincy as “leaving the ministry,” but I was intrigued and pursued an assignment. For some reason I am somehow drawn by these contrary impulses.

After military retirement I took on the pastorate of a small rural church, content in what I thought would be a satisfying assignment for my “fading” years. Then one evening the telephone rang. The caller’s question excited me: “Garry, we’re starting a new seminary (to be known as Urshan Graduate School of Theology). Would you help us?” My exact reply was not quite “You bet’-cha!” but it was close. As this conversation progressed, the proposal became more personal and the proposition more detailed. “We really need someone to take on and develop an academic library.” And I said, “Oh!” And he said, “Would you tackle that?” And . . . well, by now you *know* what I said.

Ignorance can be a vice if we resign to its grip. Or, we can wrestle with the mechanism, manipulate its lever, and unlock the potential. Ignorance is also an awesome confession: “I just didn’t know!” So the famous line I love to cite is, “If only I had known then what I know now.” A more measured and deliberate response to my caller might have been more appropriate. However, coasting on the bliss of my unknowing, and in my mid-fifties, I eagerly enrolled in library school.

During the summer of 2001, between my first and second year at Indiana University in Indianapolis (yes, my alma mater is IUPUI—Indiana University and Purdue University at Indianapolis—which is pronounced “*oo-we-pu-ee*,” by the way), I had to move to St. Louis and assume the library director’s role. Picture this, if you can: It is my first working day in an academic library, I am the *director*, and I do not *hold a library degree*. (Yes, there is something very wrong with that picture.)

On arrival in St. Louis, I took inventory of my new “directorship”—which amounted to a room of 10,000 books and a software program to manage circulation. There were store rooms with dozens of boxes of other books, but there were no computers, no databases, no journals, and no subscriptions; the shelving was inadequate; and there was one part-time worker with an accounting degree. But we were excited all the same. (Oh, did I mention at that

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point there was no library budget. The school as a whole had a budget, but the library was an unknown, or an oversight, or just left out! I suppose we'll never know but, as it turns out, it was not important. We were obligating funds without a clear picture of how they would be funded or paid.)

The best part of that semester was an academic requirement from IUPUI that I enroll for an internship, in my case at Eden Seminary, located in the Webster Groves area of St. Louis, under the supervision of the patient public services director named Ellen Eliceri. Her gentle requirements in every area of an academic library became guiding principles for future actions at Urshan. Two things we did immediately. One was to update the program being used to circulate materials. There were no MARC records, no OPAC, and no student access to the catalog. That had to change. Second, we needed shelving. Two seminaries in St. Louis were remodeling and upgrading facilities. Their library renovations and moves afforded us deselected material for the hauling and great savings on shelving and furnishings. It was as if we had decided to start our library on the heels of the growth of neighbor schools like Covenant and Eden seminaries. In this we were richly blessed.

Both of these schools were members of the St. Louis Theological Library consortium. Whether out of Providence or simply need, I was brought under the influence of wise mentors like Ron Crown, Jim Pakala, and Andrew Sopko. These stalwarts of the library world facilitated many of our physical needs, offered insights on the foibles of integrated library systems, promoted the glories of ATLA, and provided a kind counterpoint to my lack of knowledge. Telephone calls, e-mails, and drop-in meetings helped bridge the chasm of my unknowing to reveal a wide world of information to an eager, barefooted retiree who *just had to know*.

Oh, yes, the Yahoo question, "What is the difference between stupidity and courage?" Perhaps you can see why I was smitten. I could identify with the dilemma while not being completely sure if I was doing the "courageous" thing. The question seems more relevant to starting an academic library if you ask, "When do you quit? When are you finished?" Interestingly, that was the only question Chuck Willard asked when he made the first ATS visit to Urshan during our application for associate membership in 2004. The cautious reply offered was, "My understanding of a library is that it is never finished."

That first semester was a blur of traveling back and forth to Eden's library for the internship and setting up shelves, moving boxes, and relabeling materials until late in the evening. During my first Christmas break as a director, I crawled through the basements and dungeons of our campus (previously the house of studies for Jesuit scholastics in Florissant, Missouri, outside St. Louis) to install Internet cable for a computer lab and for the office workstations we so desperately needed. I had to lasso my pride in January when we were able to access the Internet from our lofty second floor setting in a women's dormitory building. Five thousand square feet, ten thousand books, and now the Internet; we were going to make it!

The library software in place used Dewey classification, contrary to the wishes of the faculty. We were faced with the double challenge of reclassifying the collection and finding a new integrated library program. Taking first things first, we sought to reclassify. In preparation, we arrayed the collection so that only the bottom shelves held the Dewey material. As material was relabeled it was placed on the upper shelves in alignment with the new Library of Congress (LOC) classification. Relabeling turned into a student party in the library with pizza and soda every night for a week. (We are still trying to correct some of those labels!)

The second semester as a director still had me finishing the MLS degree. This meant commuting to Indianapolis every Friday. Fortunately, my daughter and her family lived there so I had a place to crash and recover. The relief of graduating was my reward. The family insisted that I take the "walk." How does one describe the anticlimactic

experience of 14 lemon-hooded librarians getting to stand (not walk) in a field of 4,000 graduates in an arena of 15,000 to 20,000 well-wishers? With great aplomb and professionalism we stood and gave the crowd the loudest “ssshhhhh!” we could muster. Finally I was “the real thing,” a credentialed librarian.

My first ATLA conference was in 2002 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Just weeks after completing my MLS degree I was immersed in the real “university” of theological librarianship. I came home with new knowledge, new vision, and new friends. (Not to mention a furiously spinning head.) What a wealth of information and support!

In selecting and migrating to an adequate integrated library system, our main concern was the ability to import and export MARC records. I had taken only one cataloging course, and it had also been my weakest. This meant that I was poised to make a very uncomfortable decision. Once again I called on the wisdom of St. Louis theological librarians for advice on an intelligent transition. Our new program still did not offer an OPAC, but listed it as an upgrade to be included at a later date. Since we did not yet have much to offer our patrons, this was not as great a drawback as it might have been. Delaying that option was a good thing to do.

From the day we opened, we had a strong desire to subscribe to the *ATLA Religion Database*® (*RDB*). We only had about twenty students, but we were willing to pay top dollar for access. As soon as possible we subscribed for a year as a five-seat single site user. In using EBSCO to subscribe to a dozen print journals during our second year, we discovered EBSCOhost as a platform for *RDB*. Somehow a new world of databases, aggregators, and associations was introduced. The power of consortial agreements and group participation opened up the potential for discounted subscriptions and training opportunities. That dynamic alone stands out to me as a milestone in my growth and our library development. More and better services could be offered to my patrons when there was collaboration, cooperation, and communication. I left library school thinking the ultimate library mantra was “access,” but now I understood that “community” held an even higher value.

Consequently, we became a member of a Missouri educational consortium (MOREnet) for added online resources and designated technology assets. The more we expanded our “community,” the more serendipity we experienced. An unknown friend within ATLA, perceiving our lonely uphill plight, pushed to include us in a closed ATLA consortium for the religion database subscription. That membership reduced our costs for *ATLA Religion Database* with *ATLAS*® by a substantial savings, permitting us to subscribe to other resources as well. (Here is a public thank you to our anonymous ATLA friend.)

Perhaps our darkest hour was the last week of August in 2004. Just as both schools on campus were revving up, we opened our catalog to discover a massive crash in the integrated library system. Frantic grasping with every expert we could find could not restore over 20,000 MARC records. All the copy identification numbers remained with one or two access items from the record, but all the content was lost. We were able to operate only in a very lame and risky fashion and had no recourse but to buckle down and painfully rebuild records. This resulted in a loss of two years of growth in the collection. Looking back from where we are now, however, we can see benefits to the better records acquired from the rebuild, but the journey was still devastatingly dark.

Urshan offers only two degrees, the Master of Theological Studies (MTS), our two-year program, and the Master of Divinity (MDiv), our three-year degree. We needed to graduate a student with the highest degree we offer before we could apply to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for accreditation. In 2004 our one and only MDiv student graduated. Our application resulted in a visit from Chuck Willard, and we were granted associate member status the summer of 2004. Then we began the five-year journey to candidate status. We felt we were ready four

years out, so we applied early, welcoming our next ATS visitor, Father Jeremiah McCarthy, in the spring of 2008. That summer we were granted candidate status one year ahead of our five year window. Currently our self-study has been submitted and our ATS visit is scheduled for the end of March 2010. Our hope is that full accreditation will be bestowed in June 2010. We will have the decision from ATS about the time ATLA meets in Louisville, and perhaps by the time this essay appears, our accreditation will be a matter of history.

Currently our holdings number slightly over 50,000 volumes. We are still in our original second-floor facility, with 5,000 square feet of floor space. Shelves are tight, study space is at a premium, and finding adequate storage is an exercise in creativity. However, the rest of the building is empty, awaiting our imminent expansion. Renovating the first and third floors, installing an elevator, and sprucing up the basement will give us more than 15,000 square feet, with our own designated building on an impressive former monastic campus. We now work with two full-time people (one MLS-qualified) and four part-time (mostly student) helpers. Technology expansion will come with our new configuration and accreditation. These are exciting times.

So, the essential ingredients to starting an academic library simply stated are wise, wonderful, and generous professional friends, an expanding and diverse service “community,” and tons of ignorance. At least it seems to have worked for me. Hopefully, there will not be another telephone call or invitation to a new adventure. This time I truly intend to retire. It would have been “stupid” to quit before this. It will take courage to turn it over to someone “who just doesn’t know” what they are getting into.

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