

Expertise and Service: A Call to Action

by Rebecca Butler

Abstract

Although theological librarianship is found most often at seminaries or graduate level theology programs, there are also librarians working with theology on an undergraduate level. In many cases, these librarians are responsible for additional subject areas and may or may not have any theological expertise or training. While the two groups do the same types of work, they are doing so in different ways. To explore these commonalities and differences, a study was conducted among undergraduate theology liaisons, and those results were compared with the literature and data regarding graduate level theological librarianship. One hundred ten undergraduate librarians responded to a survey regarding theological liaison activities, and the results indicate both the need for more research and the need for further emphasis on undergraduate subject-area liaison duties in theology and adjacent areas.

Introduction

There is a vast body of extant literature on undergraduate subject-area and liaison librarianship. There is also a body of literature on theological librarianship. However, the literature on theological librarianship is usually concerned with graduate level education (usually seminaries). This is understandable since the notions of service orientation and working within a theological framework — identified by Beth Bidlack, current president of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA), as characteristic of theological librarianship¹ — fit naturally within a seminary or graduate theological school setting. Furthermore, seminary and graduate school libraries often seek out librarians with theological subject expertise (usually demonstrated by the possession of a graduate degree in a theological subject in addition to a library school degree) to serve as theological librarians within these settings.

The discussion of theological librarianship has almost entirely ignored the role of the theological librarian in the undergraduate setting. This raises the question of the nature of theological librarianship at this level. To what extent is being a theological librarian serving a primarily undergraduate population similar to being a theological librarian in a seminary or graduate institution? How is it different? How do theological librarians at undergraduate institutions perceive their role in comparison with the way theological librarians in seminaries perceive their role? What are the particular challenges faced by theological librarians in the undergraduate setting and how do those challenges compare to those faced by their seminary counterparts? Finally, what might theological librarians at the graduate level, especially through the agency of ATLA, do to assist their college and university colleagues to fulfil their roles as theological librarians? These are the kinds of questions the present study wants to investigate.

In the first part of this article, I will discuss the nature of liaison librarianship at the undergraduate level as that role has been portrayed in the literature. The second part of the article presents a discussion of the nature of theological librarianship as portrayed in the literature, much of which has been produced by members of ATLA. The goal of these discussions is to begin to answer some of the questions from the previous paragraph. The second part of the article presents the results of a survey of librarians at undergraduate institutions with some degree of theology/religious studies responsibility.

¹ Beth Bidlack, "Some Observations on Theological Librarianship in Seminary and University Contexts," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 60 (2006): 38–48.

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Subject-Area Liaisonship

Undergraduate theological librarianship is best understood within the larger context of undergraduate subject-area librarianship. However, the definition of subject-area liaisonship has become so complex that few (if any) librarians can fulfil every aspect of the definition.

The American Library Association defines a subject specialist (liaison) as

A library staff member with superior knowledge of a subject or discipline, with responsibilities for the selection and evaluation of the library's materials in the subject area and sometimes with the added responsibilities of information service in the subject area and the bibliographic organization of materials.²

While this definition has held for a number of years, the vast array of literature on subject-area librarianship has complicated matters. Based on this literature, John East created this ideal subject librarian "composite":

A young, outgoing professional who is comfortable hanging out in campus cafes and student halls of residence and able to communicate easily with undergraduate students. At the same time, he or she will be a subject expert, with advanced knowledge of the literature of one or more disciplines and able to work closely with academic staff and postgraduate students. On top of this, our liaison librarian will be extremely proficient with technology and an expert with various software packages used for teaching and researching.³

East goes on to argue, "We cannot go on pretending that liaison librarians can provide such an impossibly wide range of services."⁴ The recent recession and economic downturn has on occasion forced librarians to assume more roles and a greater diversity of roles in the library.⁵ It is this struggle to define roles and responsibilities of the liaison librarian that permeates much of the current literature.

Despite the increase in the variety of roles and the burden of additional responsibilities, subject knowledge and expertise remain the most valued aspects of subject-area liaison work. A United Kingdom study determined that this specific aptitude is one of the most "highly prized attributes [of librarians]" within the academic community despite a lack of recognition and awareness regarding the services offered by a liaison.⁶ Subject-specific knowledge is considered as an advantage possessed by subject-area liaisons in academic libraries, as "it ensures that a person who is knowledgeable in a subject handles most of the library operations relating to that subject."⁷ This high level of competence is of critical importance to the library and to the liaison areas because high proficiency leads to greater acceptance of the librarian within the academic context.

And yet, very few liaison librarians at the undergraduate level have liaison responsibilities strictly limited to those subject areas in which they have particular expertise. "Whilst it has traditionally been seen as an advantage to employ subject librarians with first or second degrees in relevant subjects, most subject librarians will always have a wider subject remit than just the subject in which they have a qualification."⁸ Furthermore, according to Rodwell, subject-specific expertise is not as valuable as a mixture of subject knowledge and broader knowledge that allows for better mediation

² *The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1983), 220.

³ John W. East, "The Future Role of the Academic Liaison Librarian: A Literature Review," Reprint, submitted October 7, 2007, <http://eprints.rclis.org/10561/> (referenced in Alice Crawford, *New Directions for Academic Liaison Librarians* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Alice Crawford, *New Directions for Academic Liaison Librarians* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012), 124.

⁶ Louise Cooke et al., "Evaluating the Impact of Academic Liaison Librarians on Their User Community: A Review and Case Study," *New Review of Academic Librarianship* 17, no. 5 (2011): 5–30.

⁷ D.O. Fadiran, "Subject Specialization in Academic Libraries," *International Library Review* 14 (1982): 41.

⁸ Stephen Pinfield, "The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries," *The Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 33, no. 1 (2001): 33.

between the librarian, the resources, and the patrons.⁹ Pinfield views as more important than subject knowledge the skills of flexibility and the ability to learn quickly.¹⁰ Universities are becoming more cross disciplinary, and because of this subject-area expertise becomes secondary to general information literacy skills.¹¹ Librarians faced with this view of liaison librarianship must find ways to fill the potential gap between their personal aptitudes and the subjects for which they liaise. While membership in non-library professional organizations can be of some benefit,¹² librarians need a larger support system of training and resources.¹³

It becomes clear that the “sometimes added responsibilities” in the ALA definition of subject-area liaisonship have instead become full expectations. Along with information literacy instruction, collection development, reference responsibilities, and bibliographic work, all with respect to multiple subject areas, subject-area librarians are expected to be Jacks/Jills of all trades and work to fully integrate the library within the academic enterprise. The greatest asset of the subject-specific librarian is the perceived expertise s/he offers. This high level of expertise, either in librarianship in general or in subject-specific areas, is valued by faculty. However, this expertise is often overshadowed or negated by the large variety of responsibilities and subject areas attended to by subject-area liaisons.

Theological Librarianship

According to the literature, the theological librarian must be theologically trained, professionally engaged, and academically published in order to retain authority within the academic environment. Rashelle Karp and Andrew Keck, in their 1996 “Profile of the Profession,” defined the theological librarian as a person who performs ministry and provides “linkages among theology, church, scholarship, education, diverse constituencies, and both scholarly and popular literature.”¹⁴ James Dunkly, former president of ATLA, also identified major values for theological librarianship as respect and accountability that are drawn from the traditions of scholarship and theology.¹⁵ Thus, a working definition of a theological librarian is one who ministers to students and faculty in the university or seminary context in a way that consciously links theology with scholarship and scholarship with ministry. Again, the concepts of expertise and service remain central.

In order to be taken seriously among academic peers, the theological librarian must learn to speak the language of theology and must become a member of the community of scholars,¹⁶ but establishing one’s authority within the field of theological librarianship itself is not enough. Peterson’s Project 2000 study concludes that theological librarians, at a minimum, should have graduate degrees in both library science and divinity.¹⁷ While the experience of completing a Master of Divinity program or having pastoral experience provide an additional level of authority to the theological librarian,¹⁸ “One needs ideally to be educated not simply to the level of ministerial ability but to the level of instructional

⁹ John Rodwell, “Dinosaur or Dynamo? The Future for the Subject Specialist Reference Librarian,” *New Library World* 102, no. 1/2 (2001): 48–52.

¹⁰ Pinfield, “The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries,” 38.

¹¹ Michael Cotta-Schonberg, “The Changing Role of the Subject Specialist,” *Liber Quarterly* 17, no. 3/4 (2007).

¹² Miranda Henry Bennett, “The Benefits of Non-Library Professional Organization Membership for Liaison Librarians,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 1 (January 2011): 46–54.

¹³ Jo Henry, “Academic Library Liaison Programs: Four Case Studies,” *Library Review* 61, no. 7 (September 2012): 485–49.

¹⁴ Rashelle S. Karp and Andrew J. Keck, “Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession,” *College and Research Libraries* 57 (January 1996): 35.

¹⁵ James Dunkly, “Some Values in Theological Librarianship, 46th Annual Conference, Dallas, TX, 1992,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 34.

¹⁶ Helen B. Uhrich, “The Community of Learning: Presidential Address, 11th Annual Conference, Fort Worth, TX, 1957,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 141.

¹⁷ Stephen L. Peterson, “Theological Libraries for the Twenty-First Century: Project 2000 Final Report,” *Theological Education* 20, no. 3 (January 1, 1984): 60.

¹⁸ Paul Schrodt, “Theological Librarianship and Theological Education,” in *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years* (Evanston, IL: American Theological Library Association, 1996), 147.

capacity in the ministerial and theological sciences.”¹⁹ “Librarians must be proactive contributors and partners in our schools of theology, communicating and demonstrating our importance in ways that are evident to faculty and administration.”²⁰ The theological librarian’s expertise must be incorporated into the whole educational enterprise and experience.²¹

Theological librarians in seminary/graduate school libraries are focused on specialized collections and on students conducting specific theological work in the religious context of the seminary or denominational group. This environment lends itself to greater emphasis on subject-area expertise. And yet, theological librarianship is rarely the end-goal when one sets out on a library career.²² Project 2000 found that 50 percent of the librarians serving as theological librarians are trained exclusively on an MLS track with 36 percent being trained in both MLS and theological education tracks.²³ Furthermore, “[t]here are few library schools which offer specialization in theological librarianship. Where theological bibliography and librarianship are taught, it is not in the same graduate departments as other theological and religion disciplines.”²⁴ But these statistics were focused strictly on seminary/graduate level librarians. It is important to note, undergraduate theology subject-area librarians work with much less specialized collections than their seminary counterparts and have fewer opportunities to be focused on theology alone.

Greater value is placed on the ability of the theological librarian to perform a ministerial, even pastoral, role appropriate to the character of librarianship in an institution whose primary functions include the training of clergy and other ministry professionals. Thus, theological librarians have a sense of vocation or calling that is not usually found among undergraduate liaison librarians. Characteristics of theological librarians often identified have included being faithful stewards, having a notion of theological librarianship as ministry, pastoral counseling, and partnering in ministry with church offices and the whole people of God.²⁵ The “Profile of a Profession” survey revealed that 67.8 percent of respondents believed their librarianship was a vocational calling,²⁶ and for those respondents, “Librarianship represented the vehicle through which they could pursue a higher calling.”²⁷ Thus, the roles of a theological librarian include that of an educator with additional responsibilities, including communication within a “theologically informed context,”²⁸ and functioning as “theological educators and teachers in the broad sense.”²⁹

This notion of librarianship as a form of ministry can also provide the librarian with unique perspective, and one who has been ordained may have an even deeper understanding of preparing students for the work of ministry.³⁰ Keck and

¹⁹ Ibid., 144.

²⁰ John Weaver, “The Library Workshop: Theology, Pedagogy, and Promotion. Part One, Raising the Standard: Library Workshops and the Requirements for ATS Accreditation,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 61 (2007): 22.

²¹ James Dunkly, “Theological Libraries and Theological Librarians in Theological Education,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 45 (1991): 231.

²² Andrew J Keck, “Information or Divine Access: Theological Librarianship Within the Context of Ministry,” in *The American Theological Library Association: Essays in Celebration of the First Fifty Years* (Evanston, IL: American Theological Library Association, 1996), 177.

²³ Peterson, “Theological Libraries for the Twenty-First Century: Project 2000 Final Report,” 60.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Anne Richardson Womack, “Introduction to Part One,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 3–6; Dunkly, “Theological Libraries and Theological Librarians in Theological Education.”

²⁶ Karp and Keck, “Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession,” 40.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Schrodt, “Theological Librarianship and Theological Education,” 137.

²⁹ Peterson, “Theological Libraries for the Twenty-First Century: Project 2000 Final Report,” 242.

³⁰ Myka Kennedy Stephens, “The Ordained Theological Librarian: A Cost Benefit Analysis,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 61 (2007): 142–52.

Karp found that 34.6 percent of the librarians in their study were ordained.³¹ Stephens also found that many theological libraries have at least one staff member with clergy status although that service may or may not be recognized as a form of ministry by denominational or congregational governing bodies.³² She also concluded, “Their pastoral experiences and connection with the church help them better understand how to meet the needs of students preparing for ministry.”³³ Whether ordained or not, theological librarians often minister to the students and institutions they serve and this ministry, for some, has become a calling or a realization of following a greater purpose.

According to Raymond Morris, a former president of the American Theological Library Association, “[t]heological librarianship is at its best a ministry.”³⁴ In addition to having a theological degree, librarians must continue to grow theologically (both in education and in spiritual development) in order to be able to maintain a high level of service to the library and the university.³⁵ As part of this ministerial function of theological librarianship, theological librarians should see a duty and/or responsibility to assist their undergraduate liaison colleagues by making it easier for them to acquire the subject expertise necessary to carry out their roles successfully.

Expertise and service are the constant concepts that link both subject-area librarianship and theological librarianship. Expertise for both of these librarian types is defined in terms of educational background, but also in terms of willingness to “bridge the gap” between subject knowledge and formal library education. Where the areas differ, however, is in the understanding of service. For the subject-area librarian, service is most closely tied to the university. Service is defined in terms of outreach to the greater campus, interaction with students, and being an interface between the library and the patrons. For the theology librarian, service can take on larger meanings. The largest difference lies within the concept of “calling,” which brings vocation and service to God and the church into the equation. However, the differences between these two distinct areas of librarianship are not as clear when it comes to the undergraduate theology librarian. Who are the librarians bridging this gap between the undergraduate subject librarianship and theological librarianship? Do expertise and service hold the same value for these librarians, and to what extent do they view their service roles in terms similar to those emerging from these discussions of theological librarianship? These questions are the driving force behind this study of undergraduate theological librarianship.

Methodology

This study was conducted to supply data on this understudied population. In particular, there was an attempt to determine how many librarians are serving as theology liaisons in undergraduate institutions and the way in which they came to these positions. Additionally, the survey sought to determine the types of degrees held and how these librarians came to have subject responsibilities for theology in non-seminary and undergraduate settings.

After receiving approval to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board of Valparaiso University,³⁶ the survey was distributed through listservs in an attempt to garner wide participation. Listservs were chosen based on the primary audience of librarians served, thus targeting both theological librarians and a more general academic library audience. The following listservs were identified for survey distribution: American Library Association-College Libraries Section

³¹ Karp and Keck, “Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession,” 36.

³² Myka Kennedy Stephens, “Called to Be a Librarian: Theological Librarianship and Ordained Ministry,” *ATLA Summary of Proceedings* 60 (2006): 273–75.

³³ Stephens, “The Ordained Theological Librarian: A Cost Benefit Analysis,” 146.

³⁴ Raymond P. Morris, “Theological Librarianship as a Ministry, 8th Annual Conference, New York, 1953,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 8.

³⁵ David Faupel, “Developing Professionally on the Job, 27th Annual Conference, Bethlehem, PA,” in *A Broadening Conversation: Classic Readings in Theological Librarianship* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 25–28.

³⁶ “Office of Sponsored and Undergraduate Research - Valparaiso University,” <http://www.valpo.edu/osur/facultyresources/irb.php>.

(Collib), American Library Association-Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL), and the American Theological Library Association (ATLANTIS).

The survey included ten multiple choice questions³⁷ with options for open-ended follow-up. The first three questions were demographic in nature and were used to determine the Carnegie class,³⁸ Type (public or private), and Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) population of the schools represented. Additional questions focused on the size of library staffs with emphasis on Theology liaisons and subjects for which respondents had liaison responsibility. Ordination status, the path taken to employment in the position, and organizational membership were also surveyed. A total of 110 responses were received in the 60 days the survey was open (April 14-June 13, 2014). Open-ended responses or “other” responses were analyzed for additional data and to discern trends and/or patterns. While this response rate was not exhaustive or all-inclusive of the field, there were enough responses to point out some interesting trends and areas of concern or further research.

Survey Data

Of the 110 respondents, 50 percent work at 4-year colleges/universities, 34 percent work at MA/PhD granting colleges or universities, 10 percent work at research universities, and less than 2 percent are employed by community colleges. Notable inclusions in the “other” category are two Bible colleges and a comprehensive library that serves multiple universities. FTE for the institutions surveyed are evenly distributed with 36 percent being Small (FTE 1000-2,999), 24 percent being Medium (FTE 3000-9,999), 24 percent being Large (FTE of at least 10,000), and 18 percent Very Small (FTE below 1000). In the area of theology, most (82 percent) libraries employ only one liaison. Ten percent of the libraries represented hire no liaison for theology (rather they have “religious studies,” other similarly religious-themed liaisons, or theology falls under the umbrella of philosophy) and 13 percent employ two theology liaisons. Only two of the represented libraries hire more than three liaisons in the area of theology.

The majority (77 percent) of universities served by these librarians are private, and 50 percent of these private institutions have a current religious affiliation. The denominations represented by those 42 schools are listed in Table 1. The other 68 schools represented had no religious affiliation, whether they were private or public universities.

Table 1

Religious Affiliation (n=42)	No.	% of Response
Catholic	7	17%
Non-Denominational/Loosely Religious	4	10%
Baptist	3	7%
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)	3	7%
United Methodist	3	7%
Churches of Christ	2	5%
Presbyterian	2	5%
Assemblies of God	1	2%
Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (Restoration Movement)	1	2%
Christian Reformed Church	1	2%

³⁷ All collected data from the surveys, as well as a list of questions asked, can be accessed at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/ccls_fac_pub/19/.

³⁸ Please see “Carnegie Classifications” at <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/> for complete definitions of Carnegie classifications and how they have been used to classify academic institutions.

Religious Affiliation (n=42)	No.	% of Response
Converge (formerly the Baptist General Conference)	1	2%
Free Methodist	1	2%
Independent Lutheran	1	2%
Nazarene	1	2%
Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada	1	2%
Not Listed	10	24%

Most of the respondents are responsible for more than one subject area in addition to theology, as only 12.7 percent of the respondents have theology as their only liaison area. Of the 96 respondents responsible for more than one subject area, 54 responded with a list of those subjects they represent. Almost nine percent of these additional subjects are theology-adjacent, such as biblical counseling, Bible, spirituality, religious studies, Christian formation, mission and ministry, and religion. Among those non-theology adjacent subjects, philosophy was the most common one, with other subjects such as women and gender studies, communication, history, psychology, education, languages, sociology, and English having higher representation as well. Less frequently occurring subjects were anthropology, classics, political science, and social work. A variety of other subjects such as biology, criminology, kinesiology, dance, and broadcasting were also represented in the responses. Table 2 details the non-theology adjacent subjects with the most representation.

Table 2

Non Theology/Theology Adjacent Subjects	N= 165	% of non-Theology adjacent
Philosophy	28	17.0%
Women and Gender Studies (Women, Gender Studies, Women and Gender, Women's Leadership)	9	5.5%
Communication	7	4.2%
History	7	4.2%
Psychology	7	4.2%
Education	6	3.6%
Foreign languages (Classical Languages, Modern Languages, Spanish, Italian)	6	3.6%
Sociology	6	3.6%
English	5	3.0%

Of the librarians who responded, 103 hold an MLIS or MLS degree; for 35 percent of them, this is their only advanced degree. Of those with additional advanced degrees, 30 percent hold Master of Divinity or Master of Arts in Theology degrees. Other theology-related degrees held include Master of Arts degrees in biblical studies, Christian ministry, divinity, Near Eastern languages and Hebrew, religion and society, religion-early Christianity, religious studies, and theological studies. Six of these identified themselves as ordained Ministers, Priests, Rabbis, or other clergy. Non-theology-related MA degrees reported are American history, education, English, history, human service studies, and philosophy. Three percent of those with additional advanced degrees hold PhDs in theology, while four hold PhDs in other subjects. Other degrees or certifications reported include certificates of additional studies, graduate diplomas, and a variety of other degree programs unrelated to theology, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Degree/Certification	Other Degrees Held/Subject Area	Number Held
PhD	Musicology	1
ABD	Religious Studies	1
CAS	Archives and Records Management	1
CAS	Library and Information Science	1
Graduate Diploma	Religious Studies	1
M.Ed.		1
MALA		1
MALS	Ceramics	1
MBA		1
MS	Instructional Design	1
MTS		2
Th.M.		1

The path to theological liaisonship for the librarians surveyed varied, but a slight majority (51 percent) was assigned their position based on interest or expertise. Only 8 percent applied specifically to be the liaison for the area of theology, and 32 percent were assigned the position based on the needs of the department regardless of interest or expertise. Of the nine respondents who replied as “other,” two were liaisons for all departments and two others had the duties as part of a larger job description. One respondent stated, “I assigned myself to philosophy as the chair of the liaisons program. It was a combination of my interests, my background, and the lack of anyone else being interested.” Another noted that the assignment was “also based on willingness to gain some expertise.” Overall, 49 percent of undergraduate theology liaisons who responded were assigned their role having no particular expertise or interest in theology.

Organization membership by respondents varied. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents indicated membership in at least one organization. Of these, 59 percent are members of the American Library Association, 38 percent are members of the American Theological Library Association, and 23 percent are members of the Association of Christian Librarians. Very few are members of scholarly organizations related to theology among the spectrum of organizations represented (see Table 4).

Table 4

Membership in Organizations:	= 98	% of respondents
American Library Association (ALA)	58	59%
American Theological Library Association	37	38%
Association of Christian Librarians	23	23%
Association of College and Research Libraries (a division of ALA)	12	12%
Society of Biblical Literature	6	6%
Catholic Library Association	3	3%
Music Library Association	2	2%
Academic Library Association of Ohio	1	1%
American Academy of Religion	1	1%
American Musicological Society	1	1%

Membership in Organizations:	= 98	% of respondents
American Philosophical Association	1	1%
ARLIS/NA	1	1%
Association of Educational and Communication Technology	1	1%
Association of Jewish Libraries	1	1%
Association of Librarians and Archivists at Baptist Institutions	1	1%
Canadian Society for Studies in Religion	1	1%
Christian College Librarians, Inc.	1	1%
College-Universities Librarians (CULS)	1	1%
Kansas Library Association	1	1%
Mountain-Plains Library Association	1	1%
National Church Library Association	1	1%
North American Patristics Society	1	1%
North American Serials Interest Group	1	1%
North Dakota Library Association (NDLA)	1	1%
Oklahoma Library Association	1	1%
Pennsylvania Library Association	1	1%
Society for American Music	1	1%
Society for Pentecostal Studies	1	1%
Society of American Archivists	1	1%
Special Libraries Association (SLA)	1	1%
SUNYLA	1	1%

Discussion and Conclusions

This study revealed a diversity of answers to the original question of who is doing theological librarianship and where said work is being done. The survey suggests that private, four-year colleges and universities do the most hiring of theology liaisons, and that most of those private institutions (62 percent) have a religious affiliation. In this regard, the findings of this survey parallel those findings of Keck that the most graduate schools hiring theological librarians have religious affiliations.³⁹ Regardless of institution size, most libraries employ only one liaison in the area of theology. Research universities, community colleges, and public institutions are less likely to have a librarian devoted to the area of theology, and in many cases theology will fall under a larger umbrella such as philosophy or religious studies at these types of institutions. Schools aligned with a religious tradition are more likely to hire a theology librarian, as a particular tradition is being taught and thus tradition-specific collection development and classroom support are more necessary.

The biggest issue highlighted by the survey was not where theological liaisonship is taking place, but rather *how* it is being done. Librarians often have a wider area of subject responsibility than their area of specialty.⁴⁰ This is borne out in the data. The strange, and at times seemingly haphazard, grouping of theology with other subjects belies a system of subject assignment based on need rather than expertise. Combinations such as theology with Spanish, Italian, and broadcasting, or with English, film studies, and biology might appear somewhat arbitrary. The more common pairing of

³⁹ Karp and Keck, "Theological Librarianship: Toward a Profile of a Profession," 36.

⁴⁰ Pinfield, "The Changing Role of Subject Librarians in Academic Libraries," 33.

theology with philosophy does seem more natural. However, the second largest pairing was theology with gender and/or women's studies, which is not an obvious pairing. While there is great value in an interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum, the range of responsibilities arising from these pairings (see Table 2 for more pairings) can inhibit the librarian from developing needed subject expertise.

In the literature, expertise is touted again and again as one of the most critical components of quality subject librarianship. But if, as Atterbury and Finnell found,⁴¹ library schools are not preparing students for subject-specific liaison duties, it is not surprising that many liaisons feel that they lack professional credibility.⁴² In the microcosm of undergraduate theological liaisonship, librarians are responsible for so many subjects with such variety that full proficiency is all but impossible, not just in the area of theology but in all areas for which the librarians are responsible. Although librarians are trained to be “Jacks/Jills of all trades,” expanded subject-area remit and large areas of responsibility place a heavy burden of professional development responsibility upon the libraries and the librarians. This is not to say that theological librarians in these settings are not good at their jobs, but the wide array of subjects represented does not make expertise easily attainable.

While this study did not specifically seek to determine librarian's perceptions of themselves as “theological librarians,” the question does remain. Thirty-eight percent of respondents identified as members of ATLA, but that leaves at least 62 percent who may or may not perceive themselves as theological librarians. Further, those librarians who serve theology as part of an assortment of liaison duties may feel more closely aligned with one or more of their other areas of responsibility and may not identify as theological librarians at all. Librarians specifically trained in the area of theology or who specifically applied for or requested to be the theology liaison might be more likely to consider themselves theological librarians, but the survey did not address that question. This distinction may grow even muddier for librarians serving on campuses where theology falls under a larger umbrella such as philosophy or religious studies. Further research would be required to answer the question of the degree to which liaison librarians in an undergraduate setting with subject responsibility for theology think of themselves as “theological librarians.”

Suggestions

If librarians doing theological liaisonship on the undergraduate level are largely untrained in the area of theology and are responsible for such a wide array of subjects, what then is the role of an organization such as ATLA which is devoted to supporting theological librarianship? What can be done to better support theological liaisons without specific theological expertise? The situation of theological librarians at undergraduate institutions as described above perhaps presents ATLA with an opportunity to expand its influence to an underserved population of librarians. ATLA already has a college and university interest group⁴³ and currently offers a graduate level course in theological librarianship in partnership with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.⁴⁴ In addition, ATLA could also create a track of workshops at the annual conference geared towards this type of liaisonship, specifically targeting those librarians who want to learn more about the area they are serving. These sessions could include:

- Theological librarianship basics
 - 18-30
 - What is ATLA and what does it do?
 - What is theological librarianship?
 - Best practices for theological librarianship
- Collection development for new theological librarians

⁴¹ Ramirose Ilene Atterbury and Joshua Finnell, “What Do LIS Students in the United States Know about Liaison Duties?” *New Library World* 110, no. 7/8 (2009): 325–40.

⁴² Rodwell, “Dinosaur or Dynamo? The Future for the Subject Specialist Reference Librarian,” 3.

⁴³ “College and University Interest Group,” <https://www.atla.com/Members/divisions/interest/Pages/College-and-University.aspx>.

⁴⁴ “Theological Librarianship Course at University of Illinois,” <https://www.atla.com/Members/development/Pages/UIUC.aspx>.

- Best practices
- Recommended texts, authors, publishers
- Navigating the wealth of materials
- Selection criteria for theology

This could increase membership in ATLA, increase attendance at the conference, and help expand the qualifications and expertise of those liaisons working with theology on an undergraduate level.

At some institutions, the development and presentation of a “Liaison toolkit” has increased the success of liaison librarians.⁴⁵ The “Library Liaison Toolkit” developed at SUNY New Paltz was intended to increase expertise, and it was found that partnership efforts with classroom instructors increased and there was a deeper interest in collection development.⁴⁶ One potential opportunity for ATLA would be to develop a Theology Liaison toolkit that could be downloaded from the ATLA website and used by liaison librarians. It could be specifically geared toward those librarians without theological expertise, but would likely be of use to any librarian serving in the liaison role. This downloadable tool kit could include:

- Essential collection development tools
- A list of important reference works
- Links to guides, book lists, tutorials, and other valuable online resources
- A list of potential mentors and contact information
- Information about the theological librarian course offered through the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Links to basic information in
 - Biblical studies
 - Church history
 - Denominational websites
 - Common definitions/theological jargon
 - Biblical and liturgical terms
 - Types of theologies, their definitions, and major scholars

It is critical to understand that the obligation does not lie only with organizations such as ATLA. The libraries and librarians themselves bear responsibility in ensuring that those doing liaison work are adequately prepared to do so. Because so few LIS/LS programs are specifically educating librarians in liaison-specific areas, and many of these programs are informal or brief in nature, new librarians are rarely fully equipped for subject-specific liaison duties.⁴⁷ Thus it has been asserted that “all libraries should have a training manual covering the areas of acquiring subject knowledge, collection development, evaluation, and accreditation assistance.”⁴⁸ Further tools for assisting new liaisons have included seeking opportunities for mentorship,⁴⁹ initiating formal study in a subject area,⁵⁰ increasing collaboration with subject-

⁴⁵ Stephan Macaluso and Barbara Whitney Pegtruzzelli, “The Library Liaison Toolkit: Learning to Bridge the Communication Gap,” *The Reference Librarian* 43, no. 89–90 (October 12, 2008): 163–77.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Atterbury and Finnell, “What Do LIS Students in the United States Know about Liaison Duties?”

⁴⁸ Henry, “Academic Library Liaison Programs: Four Case Studies,” 492.

⁴⁹ Henry, “Academic Library Liaison Programs: Four Case Studies.”

⁵⁰ Rodwell, “Dinosaur or Dynamo? The Future for the Subject Specialist Reference Librarian.”

area faculty,⁵¹ joining non-library professional organizations,⁵² and further developing personal initiative.⁵³ Since the literature emphasizes expertise as a hallmark of quality subject liaisonship, it is imperative that librarians augment their experience whenever possible so that they can best serve the departments for which they are responsible.

More research is needed to determine the degree to which theological subject librarianship is being done at the undergraduate level; an updated survey of the profession as a whole (including both undergraduate and graduate program librarians) would be helpful. It would be interesting to see whether the profession has changed demographically, but also how opinions may have changed regarding vocation, ordination, and other similar issues. Additionally, a larger, more concentrated study regarding undergraduate liaisons is needed for undergraduate subject liaisons as a whole and theology librarians specifically. In particular, studies focusing on the perceived education needs of subject-area liaisons would help highlight places where organizations such as ATLA could do more outreach and training. Understanding the various roles of undergraduate liaison librarians, their levels of education and training, and the interdisciplinary challenges of a wide subject remit are all potential areas for future research. There is a considerable lack of data regarding liaison librarianship in general, and one or more studies on various niches such as theology could contribute to the greater conversation.

Although more research is warranted, there are a few key conclusions that can be drawn from the results of this survey and the related literature. Theological librarianship, though a niche, has been confirmed as an important subset of the subject-liaison paradigm, specifically in colleges and universities with religious affiliations. While this particular niche is more common at graduate level institutions, the survey confirmed that there are librarians doing dedicated theological work at undergraduate schools. Some of these librarians are dedicated to theology and theology-adjacent subjects; others are responsible for theology liaison duties within a much larger range of responsibility. These librarians, many of whom are also responsible for multiple/non-theology-adjacent subjects, need the support of an organization such as ATLA. This is especially important due to the emphasis placed on expertise within subject-specific liaisonship. With combined emphasis on service through deep connection with students and acquired expertise in theology, theology liaisons can become successful theological librarians regardless of the context of their librarianship.

⁵¹ Janice M. Jaguszewski and Karen Williams, *New Roles for New Times: Transforming Liaison Roles in Research Libraries* (Association of Research Libraries, August 2013), <http://www.arl.org/nrnt>.

⁵² Bennett, "The Benefits of Non-Library Professional Organization Membership for Liaison Librarians."

⁵³ John Meier, "Solutions for the New Subject Specialist Librarian," *Endnotes: The Journal of the New Members Round Table* 1, no. 1 (May 2010): 1–10.