The Future of the Small Theological Library

Abstract

Prompted by reflections from the ATS/ATLA event "The Future of Libraries in Theological Education: A Conversation with Chief Academic Officers, Information Technology Officers, and Library Directors," this essay explores the future of small theological libraries. Envisioning a bright future for small theological libraries first requires understanding the harsh realities of our context, both in theological education and as small libraries. Small theological libraries face many challenges, which require theological librarians to develop new habits for living into the future. These habits include staying attuned to the needs of the community, optimizing library resources, and acting boldly.

Introduction

"What is the future of theological librarianship?", or some variation on that theme, is one of the questions most frequently asked of candidates for theological library positions during the interview process. The expectation is that the best prospects have put a tremendous amount of thought into the future of our libraries and our profession, formulating some opinion and perhaps even a vision. Such was my experience when I attended the ATS/ATLA event entitled "The Future of Libraries in Theological Education: A Conversation with Chief Academic Officers, Information Technology Officers, and Library Directors," in June 2014. Just over one month into my new role as Seminary Librarian at Lancaster Theological Seminary, I attended this event with our President and Academic Dean. Despite my apprehensions, I was excited about engaging in a conversation with fellow librarians and others about the future. This was an opportunity to contribute my ideas to a conversation about our future, and I was hopeful that our collaboration would yield an inspiring and motivating vision.

The conversation was fruitful, particularly because it engaged librarians, information technologists, and chief academic officers jointly. This event offered us the opportunity to bring what we know from our own guilds into a common conversation. Some of the observations and ideas that bubbled up out of the conversation are already having an effect on ATLA's direction. Brenda Bailey-Hainer, Executive Director of ATLA, referred later to the June 2014 conversation in her address to the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association, mentioning how collaboration among theological libraries emerged as a key strategy for addressing growing concerns about the changing landscape of theological education.[1] While librarians have excelled in collaboration in years past, collaborating on union catalogs and digitization projects, for example, Bailey-Hainer encouraged her audience to explore more strategic partnerships among libraries and theological schools. ATLA continues to be a leader in this area by providing theological libraries with a networking structure for collaboration on projects such as reciprocal borrowing and e-book lending.

In some ways, however, my hope that we would develop an inspiring and motivating vision went unfulfilled. Due to time constraints, the conversation left many concerns unaddressed. One concern in particular has been a preoccupation for me over the past year and a half. In my notes from the event it is represented by a single bullet point under a heading marked "Additional Observations and Concerns": how to translate trends in libraries, information technology, and higher education in order to implement change in smaller institutions. My recollections of remarks and breakout conversations made a stronger impression on me than one bullet point can convey. At a point in my professional development when I was excited about the future, and full of ideas on everything I could do for my small library and the small theological school it serves, I was surprised to find that many of my counterparts did not share the same enthusiasm. What I

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[1] Brenda Bailey-Hainer, "Infinite Possibilities: The Future of Theological Librarianship," *The ANZTLA EJournal*, no. 13 (2014): 12.

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observed instead was a pervasive sense of skepticism, and questioning whether the small theological library is capable of adopting, adapting to, or developing trends. This skepticism manifested itself in the concern that we smaller theological libraries require outside assistance in translating trends into our environment, which could be expected to include financial assistance, resource sharing, and/or imaginative leadership from elsewhere.

Since that ATS/ATLA event, I have continued the work I was hired to do, gradually implementing the ambitious vision for Schaff Library that I shared during my interview presentation. I was, and still am, confident that small theological libraries have a bright future. It is a future in which we are true educational partners with our institutions, and assets essential to the lived mission and vision of theological education. I also acknowledge that our bright future will not come easily, and that it will require some radical thinking, imagination, and innovation. Small theological libraries have the tools and resources necessary to thrive in the changing landscape of theological education. To tap into this potential, we must first understand what it means to be a small theological library. When we have a firm grasp of our present realities, we can cultivate new habits that will help us achieve our future vision.

The Realities of the Small Theological Library

According to the recent survey report *In Good Faith: Collection Care, Preservation, and Access in Small Theological and Religious Studies Libraries*, a small theological library has fewer than five full-time equivalent staff members and a budget of less than $500,000.[2] Using collection size as a determining factor was considered problematic by the *In Good Faith* researchers and, as our collections become increasingly electronic, the size of a physical collection does not tell us as much about a library today as it has in the past. Surprisingly, FTE and head count enrollment statistics were not included in this survey. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, which some of our database vendors use to determine our subscription rates, factors size and setting into its classification, but only for two- and four-year undergraduate institutions.[3] Independent seminaries, like my own, are often not classified by size and setting. ATS does not classify theological schools by size, though a quick review of the 2014-15 enrollment data tables shows that an enrollment of 200 FTE may be an appropriate cut-off between small and mid-sized theological schools.[4] One caveat to using the enrollment data reported to ATS for the purposes of identifying a small theological library is that often FTE and head count do not adequately represent the size of community served by the library. The size of the total population served by the library is most important in determining whether it is small or not. Because this research has not been done, researchers are relying on theological libraries to self-identify as small.[5] For the purposes of this essay, I consider a theological library to be small if it has five or fewer full-time equivalent staff members, an annual budget of less than $500,000, an institutional enrollment of less than 200 FTE, and/or self-identifies as being small.

The future of small theological libraries is inextricably linked to the future of the institutions they serve. Our institutions are affected by what is going on with partner churches, denominations, and religious communities, and research shows that religion is in a moment of significant change.[6] In my experience, smaller institutions are rocked more by these seismic shifts than larger institutions. An enrollment drop of ten to fifteen students for a larger institution might raise some questions, but for a smaller institution it represents a dramatic loss of tuition revenue and poses a significant financial challenge. As smaller theological schools make radical decisions for their future survival,

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[2] Liz Bishoff and Tom Clareson, *In Good Faith: Collection Care, Preservation, and Access in Small Theological and Religious Studies Libraries Survey Report* (Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 2014), 4.

[3] "Size & Setting Classification Description," *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, 2015, http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/size_setting.php.

[4] *2014-2015 Annual Data Tables* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, 2015), 45–50, http://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables/2014-2015-annual-data-tables.pdf.

[5] Bishoff and Clareson, *In Good Faith: Collection Care, Preservation, and Access in Small Theological and Religious Studies Libraries Survey Report*, 4.

[6] Stephen Graham and Daniel Aleshire, "2015 State of the Industry Webinar," September 18, 2015, http://www.ats.edu/resources/publications-and-presentations/2015-state-of-the-industry-webinar.

such setbacks create tremors that are felt by all in the field of theological education, but most especially by similar theological schools asking whether the same thing could happen to them.[7]

When our institutions are struggling and concerned for the future, it is natural for that concern to affect the theological library. Survival has become a more pressing concern for the small theological library than exploring new and innovative trends in libraries and higher education. When our institutions face difficult financial decisions, our theological libraries encounter shrinking budgets and staff cutbacks. Sometimes this creates animosity between the theological library and the school administration, resulting in a rift that begins to separate the library from the rest of the campus. In most cases, cutbacks are not an attack on libraries but one of many ways in which administrators are trying to deal with the present realities. For theological librarians, this is an opportunity to become involved in the conversation, to seek understanding with our colleagues about what is going on, and to ask what we can do to help.

The rapidly changing landscape of religion and theological education is only one half of the vise that presses small theological libraries. The second half is the demand to keep up with the rapid pace of information and the struggle to remain relevant. The Association of College and Research Libraries and the New Media Consortium report annually on current trends in higher education and libraries.[8] Participants in the ATS/ATLA conversation were asked to read similar reports published in 2013 before coming to the meeting in June 2014. When we made note of the fact that small theological libraries need help translating trends to institute change in their context, we were referring to the trends that are reported by these organizations.

Trying to stay on trend and reviving our seminaries are interrelated challenges for the small theological library, often resulting in anxiety or pessimism. It is a common perception that trends are set exclusively by larger institutions, which have greater resources of time, money, and staff. Trends grow in popularity and acceptance to a point where prospective students begin to expect that the library will engage them in a certain way. When a smaller theological library fails to keep up with such trends, however, it affects their parent institution's ability to appeal to prospective students. When enrollment stagnates or drops, this affects revenue, which has a further negative impact on the small theological library's ability to keep up with trends. Mired in this downward spiral, the small theological library may begin to resent its size, seeing it as a limitation. We begin to think that it is our smallness that is preventing us from enacting positive change in our libraries.

In order for us to avoid this negative and unhelpful pattern, we must be able to recognize our assets, including the benefits of being small. We must shift our objective from trend following to trend setting. I do not believe that simply *translating* trends that may have been established in a different, larger setting to a small theological library context is the answer. This is not a viable long-term solution for small theological libraries. Today's trends will give way to tomorrow's trends, and thus the need both to *understand* and to *translate* trends for a specific setting is continuous. Merely translating trends is reactionary, and small theological libraries will forever be behind the wave of progress if we follow that trajectory. Instead, I believe we must start training ourselves to be more forward thinking, *mindful* of current trends *yet looking beyond them* at the same time.

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[7] Recent announcements by Andover-Newton Theological School, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia have generated a lot of conversation at my seminary, which is in the same denominational family as Andover-Newton and in the same region as the Lutheran seminaries. More information about these announcements can be found in the following news articles: G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Oldest US Graduate Seminary to Close Campus," *Religion News Service*, November 13, 2015, http://www.religionnews.com/2015/11/13/oldest-u-s-graduate-seminary-to-close-campus-denominations-secularization-andover-theological/; G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Two Lutheran Seminaries to Close and Reopen as New School," *Religion News Service*, January 15, 2016, http://www.religionnews.com/2016/01/15/two-lutheran-seminaries-close-reopen-new-school/.

[8] ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, "Top Trends in Academic Libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 6 (June 1, 2014): 294–302; ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, "Environmental Scan 2015" (Association of College and Research Libraries, March 2015), http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/publications/whitepapers/EnvironmentalScan15.pdf; L. Johnson et al., *NMC Horizon Report: 2015 Higher Education Edition* (Austin, TX: The New Media Consortium), accessed October 7, 2015, http://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2015-higher-education-edition/; L. Johnson et al., *NMC Horizon Report: 2015 Library Edition* (Austin, TX: The New Media Consortium), accessed October 7, 2015, http://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2015-library-edition/.

Habits for Living into the Future

One way that I am coping with the challenges of my reality in a small theological library is by cultivating new habits that lend themselves to forward, strategic thinking. Three of these habits are staying attuned to the unique needs of my community, utilizing my library's resources optimally, and acting boldly. I present these habits not as a prescription for how to be an effective theological librarian in a small theological library context, but as an invitation to dialogue.

First, I see the need for paying attention to what is unfolding in my community, and how the library can serve, as central to the success of my library. We exist to serve the information needs of our community, which includes students, faculty, staff, alumni/ae, visiting students and faculty, and clergy and laity from the region. Serving the needs of our users informs all the decisions I make, from collection development to programming. In order to meet the community's needs, I have to know what they are, and be able to assess how they change and develop. As information needs change, our services ought to adapt in response. If I am successful in developing sound mechanisms for evaluating and assessing information needs, I will be that much more likely to be able to anticipate information needs, and innovate solutions to match them as they arise.

There are several things I am doing to become acquainted with my users and to become attuned to their needs. I keep my office door to the library's foyer open so that folks know I am available to hear their questions, and to help with whatever information or technology problem they might have. While my predecessor kept that door closed, and let a plant grow over the threshold, students, faculty colleagues, and alumni/ae now regularly stop to say hello or to ask a brief question. I have also engaged my library's users by inviting them into conversations.[9] During the 2014-15 academic year we hosted some conversations using an adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry, and learned a lot about what people thought of the library, and how we might improve what we are doing. In May 2015 we hosted a "conversation through art" by inviting students, faculty, and staff to write and draw on our windows.

Second, I seek to optimize the use of my library's resources. In order to do this, I have to step away from the trap of thinking about all the things we *lack*, and change my thinking to recognize the resources we *have*. While frugality and cautious spending of limited funds is part of this habit, the larger construct of optimizing resources includes how we use our space and how the staff is deployed.

A more efficient use of our space and staff resources has made a positive impact on our library. In my first few months, I evaluated how space was being used in the library and arranged the furniture to maximize the spaces. We now have a lounge area for casual meetings and conversations, a Learning Commons instructional space, quiet study areas with tables and carrels, an exhibit gallery, and a periodicals reading area. We achieved this without purchasing any additional furniture, simply optimizing what we already had. I also evaluated our staff resources, assessing individual gifts and matching them to the tasks that needed to be done. From what I learned about my staff members, I was able to match each one with tasks they enjoy and are able to do well. I continue to do this as we have added new staff, so that we are cultivating a positive work environment where everyone's gifts are being utilized.

Third, I am learning to act boldly, a habit I have needed to cultivate deliberately. One of my goals is to anticipate our users' needs and meet them as they arise. I cannot achieve this goal by simply managing change; I must act boldly by *leading* change. In order to anticipate our users' needs and meet them we have to be able to merge what we know about our community and our resources with developing trends in libraries, technology, and higher education. Innovative solutions that come from this type of thinking will demand bold action.

I've taken bold action both in increments and in large steps. Our library's space is slowly evolving, having been opened up to conversation and to creative and artistic expression. We are exhibiting art created by our students, and creating a space where students can freely explore their creativity and artistic expression in support of a new seminary course on Christianity and the Arts. We have also become an active participant in the Open Source movement through migrating

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[9] Myka Kennedy Stephens, "Hosting Conversations in the Library: A User-Centered Approach to Change," *Summary of Proceedings: Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association 69* (2015): 226–31.

our ILS to Koha, migrating our digital archive to Omeka, and adopting SubjectsPlus for our library guides.[10] This was not without risks, and while it is financially cost-efficient for small theological libraries, troubleshooting can take additional time. Such initiatives have connected our library to a network of other libraries and institutions, which has been an unexpected benefit as I encounter issues and need advice.

Conclusion

Leading a small theological library into a bright future requires an acknowledgement and understanding of the present realities, and thinking beyond size as a limitation and toward size as an asset. Smaller institutions can often implement change more easily than larger institutions, and are just as likely to be places of creative innovation as better-endowed and better-staffed libraries. Small theological libraries will not succeed by denying change, and we will not progress sufficiently by only translating and following trends. We must change our habits. For me, this means staying attuned to my community's needs, utilizing my library's resources optimally, and acting boldly. I believe the library and seminary I serve are already seeing the benefits of these changes in thought and focus, and I am excited to see similar change and habits develop in other small theological libraries. Together we can attest to the bright future of small theological libraries.

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[10] This is the topic of my portion of the upcoming panel presentation "Open Source Software in Theological Libraries," with Richard Manly Adams, Jr. and Matthew Collins at the 2016 ATLA Annual Conference.