

Preservation of Collections in Theological Libraries

Douglas L. Gragg, Editor. *Preservation of Collections in Theological Libraries*. The Theological Librarian's Handbook. Vol. 4. Chicago: Atla Open Press, 2024. 116pp. \$0. PDF. 9781949800371.

Preservation of Collections in Theological Libraries outlines best practices for preserving various record formats commonly located in theological libraries. The perspectives of 13 authors writing from four different countries (United States, Australia, Romania, and France) provide readers with helpful advice from a diverse and experienced group of librarians and archivists. These seasoned professionals seek to provide not a comprehensive textbook but a “field guide for busy librarians . . . especially those who have had only limited access to information or training in this area” (i). The authors focus on physical libraries and archival materials. The editor recommends a separate volume covering digital preservation. The book's structure serves its purpose as a short guidebook.

Three main divisions of the work walk readers through the guide. Section one, “Principles and Practice,” consists of four chapters that provide general guidance on preservation actions. The guidance includes a discussion of proper environmental conditions and also dives into handling specific types of material, such as photographs. Section two, “Case Studies,” contains four chapters that convey real-world experience preserving theological library collections. The section addresses common preservation issues, such as mold outbreaks and format-specific challenges. Two chapters cover digitization projects.

The third and last section, “Additional Resources,” features a single chapter that offers an annotated list of easily accessible material for further study. Many of the recommended resources are freely available online and cover the various topics referenced throughout the book. This chapter is split into nine subsections. Each subsection features a specific preservation-related topic, such as sustainable preservation environments, emergency preparedness and planning, mold and pest management, and selecting materials for digital preservation. The list includes resources to provide reliable guidance to the intended audience of theological librarians, especially those with limited experience or resources.

This last section of the book points to one strength of the volume—the interconnectedness of its chapters. Common themes run throughout the text and are reinforced by the various authors' unique perspectives. Prominent themes include effectively pursuing preservation actions with limited staff and financial resources, understanding environmental factors as foundational, and seeking collaborative opportunities to advance preservation practices.

Preservation of Collections successfully addresses its intended audience. Chapter length averages eleven pages, and includes color photographs and illustrations. Such short chapters and visual aids introduce readers to essential information and practices. Specific methods and procedures, especially those addressed in the case studies, are replicable by readers. One example is the “adaptable guidelines” for care and handling of photographs, discussed in chapter 2 (11).

The work's emphasis on climate control as foundational to preserving library and archival material reflects best practices. Maintaining consistent temperature and relative humidity levels is appropriately acknowledged as a critical starting point for proper preservation. Chapter 3, “Keeping Your Cool: A Practical Guide to Climate Control,” is particularly strong in this area. The chapter

authors note, “Consistency in the environment is the most critical factor for material stability” (39). Readers new to navigating preservation issues are well-served by this emphasis.

Collaboration is the most crucial theme of the text. This topic holds significant practical implications for the book’s audience. Chapters 3–7 highlight this aspect of preservation. The authors stress the importance of collaborating with various stakeholders and fellow professionals. Chapter 3 focuses on collaboration between library staff and facilities staff members of the parent institution. Library staff are encouraged to communicate the library’s needs concerning HVAC systems, fire suppression, and security. Advocating within the parent institution for the unique requirements of a library is critical to achieving preservation goals.

Working with fellow library, archive, and conservation professionals is also addressed. Chapter 7 examines an international partnership to preserve digitized content between a smaller institution (Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives) and a larger repository (Harvard Divinity School Library). The author skillfully notes the benefits of collaboration to the intended audience: “Even small organizations with limited resources can achieve this success through collaboration” (86).

Regional collaboration is also addressed. Chapter 5, “Responding to a Mold Outbreak at the Catholic University of Toulouse,” notes the importance of regional conservation plans that promote efficient use of resources across institutions (55). Regional collaborative efforts are effective because they can focus on preservation challenges and opportunities unique to a particular geographical area. The specialized practices resulting from regional communities are excellent resources for the less experienced. The target audience will benefit from embracing and implementing the type of collaboration suggested in this book.

While the volume generally serves its purpose and addresses the intended readership, certain weaknesses exist. Too many authors shared their perspectives as librarians and archivists at well-resourced institutions. Five of the thirteen authors serve at Harvard University. Archivists at institutions with limited resources have difficulty relating to Harvard’s dedicated preservation centers and cold storage options. Additional real-world examples from library staff working with fewer resources would better serve the target readership.

A more effective “field guide” would arrange chapters differently. Chapter 1 begins with a helpful overview of preservation issues. However, the following chapter immediately delves into a technical study of preserving photograph collections. The book’s flow would improve by placing chapter 4, which covers the broad topic of preservation assessment and preparation, and chapter 3, which focuses on climate control, before chapter 2. Section one would then exhibit a narrowing of focus from general to specific preservation practice. Readers new to the field could then more easily follow this guide.

The most concerning oversight of the volume is not clearly communicating the distinction between artifactual and intellectual value when advocating digitalization as a preservation option. Artifactual (or intrinsic) value is the significance of a record due to its physical properties rather than, or in addition to, its intellectual content or value. The authors of chapter 2 note that the dye used in the creation of chromogenic images makes this material “a high priority for digitizing as a form of preservation” (21). Additionally, chapter 7 advocates for digitization “as a way to preserve...valuable historical resources” (86). While digitization can further preservation efforts by limiting the handling of original records, it does not preserve the artifactual or intrinsic value of originals. Indeed, the record’s information, or intellectual content, can be preserved via digitization. However, because the book’s intended audience is those who have limited training and experience with preservation, the

authors should clarify the distinction between these two types of value. Such clarification can prevent the inadvertent disposal of valuable original material when digital surrogates are “preserved.”

Overall, *Preservation of Collections in Theological Libraries* aims to provide pertinent information to those requiring an essential and succinct preservation field guide. The many references to additional resources remedy any omissions of noncritical information in the chapters. Library and archival science professors can use this text to introduce students to preservation issues. Experienced librarians and archivists can also train less experienced staff members in the basics of preservation. I recommend this text not only for those working in theological libraries but also for any librarians and archivists seeking a quick reference guide to preservation issues, challenges, and solutions.

Jonathan Lawler
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary