

## Managing a Small Theological Library: How to Color with Broken Crayons

Kris Veldheer. *Managing a Small Theological Library: How to Color with Broken Crayons*. Atla Open Press, 2024. 153pp. \$0. PDF. 9781949800401.

*Managing a Small Theological Library* is a thorough book by an experienced library manager. It is nearly exhaustive in covering the topic of operating a small theological library. The author intends to create a how-to manual for directors of such libraries. Because it is comprehensive, it achieves the author's goal and would be a great help to anyone's freshman attempt at operating a small library, theological or otherwise. Alternately, for library directors with years of experience, the book is reassuring. It achieves its goals by first filling a gap in the literature on library management. Second, it fills a gap in training. Most librarians are educated for frontline positions, not managerial positions. This book is a viable substitute for coursework on library management.

This might seem counterintuitive, but managing a small library is often more difficult than managing a large one. It is analogous to the endgame in chess. At the beginning of the game, there are many opportunities because many pieces are in the game, similar to a large library with many staff. Failures are usually not devastating. At the end of the game, only a few pieces are left to work with, so options are limited—this is the world of the small theological library. Your staff may be equivalent to a knight and a bishop instead of a rook and a queen. Failure can take years to recover from in this endgame analogy of the small library. In such a situation, the next move has to be well-thought-out.

It is appropriate, then, to have an endgame plan in a small academic library. Veldheer notes that while having a strategic plan is good, not all small theological libraries are that well prepared. The strategic plan of some libraries is likely to be part of the seminary's strategic plan, but that is no excuse for not having plans specifically for the library.

Her case study for strategic planning offers a perfect description of what many theological libraries, whether big or small, face: shrinking enrollment, tighter budgets, the growth of online classes, and the shift toward digital resources. Because a whole other book could be written about strategic planning in small libraries, this book's example of a strategic plan is very basic.

The endgame analogy is most appropriate when Veldheer discusses "why every position is important" (19–21). When operating with a small staff, without a cushion of extra staff, losing just one person can be crippling. However, a small staff can be too traditional in a rapidly changing world. Perhaps the most prescient phrase in chapter 2 is this: "Looking ahead, the library workforce will inevitably be influenced by technological and financial factors, particularly for small libraries" (24).

In hindsight, technology began to be a factor 20 years ago but did not significantly result in a reduction in size or importance. Getting staff to adapt to that influence is, as Veldheer says in what reads like an understatement, "very difficult" (25). One group of paraprofessionals she managed were dedicated and loyal but not flexible. Many library managers have had the same experience. Veldheer was fortunate to have a solution. Although not overtly discussed, there is a hint that, in some cases, it is simply better for all involved if the library manager moves on to a new position. As Veldheer says, all managers have a personal management style. Sometimes, it is not a good match for existing staff. What is not mentioned in the book is terminating staff for poor performance or budgetary cuts. Any advice on the subject would have been welcome.

In her discussion about the library's collection, Veldheer writes, "While you may disagree, I think a library should first be driven by the curriculum" (37). When I first read this, I could not imagine someone disagreeing, but then I remembered an example in which far too many books about Batman were purchased in an academic library where I worked. The temptation to buy material that supports personal interests is not always the best collection development policy.

One of Veldheer's soundest bits of advice is for managers to keep their own spreadsheets of expenditures in their collection development budgets. In a large library, tracking their own expenditures is not possible, but it is in a small library. Expenditure reports from the business office may lag one or two months behind current expenditures, and uncertainty about the bottom line might make managers, who are the purchasers, indecisive near the end of the budget year. Maintaining their own spreadsheets eliminates that problem. It also eliminates the problem of quickly spending down a budget line that has too much money in it at the end of the year. The resulting purchases—what I call "gold-plated encyclopedias"—are rarely a good buy.

Veldheer's chapter on "budget bogs" should be shared with every novice library director. Everything of budget importance is covered. Veldheer's honesty is reassuring, especially when she writes, "Every year when I enter a new budget cycle, I struggle with the old category headings that harken back to an earlier library" (54). In a world that is changing so quickly, changing the names of budget lines does not necessarily help.

Her advice on learning the language of accounting is on target. Learning the language of accounting may be one reason she likes doing budgets, but she is absolutely right about using the budget process to find areas for savings as well as those that need additional funds. I will never forget looking at the bindery line for the past year and remembering we had stopped binding periodicals. I had some extra money to put someplace important, but I might not have caught it had I not studied my budget.

Advice on flat budgets and budget reductions is covered fairly well. Almost all options are considered, except for reductions in full-time staff. Such reductions have happened in some seminaries and probably will happen in others. When cuts in standing orders and lightly used databases are already done, there may be no other choice but to reduce full-time staff.

Although she does not call it that, the "paywall" is a barrier, like the service desks Veldheer believes are disappearing. To paraphrase, the information producers are becoming more interested in disseminating their message than the money. The lawsuit the Hachette Book Group won against the Internet Archive is not mentioned as a possible exception to the removal of barriers. It would be interesting to know how Veldheer interprets that event.

Everyone in the profession should take notice of Veldheer's view that "a transformation in the traditional roles of academic libraries and librarians" is taking place (69). She gives a short list of examples, but there could be many more. She also mentions that this transformation will require staff to develop new skills, but I could not help recalling her early narrative about the hardworking but inflexible paraprofessionals. Retooling is not easy.

The chapter titled "Managing Up" is another must-read for the beginning library director. It is essentially about building relationships within the organization. A library director's most challenging relationship may be with the dean, and the author has good advice on various avenues for establishing good communication with the dean. Still, the most important relationship is with the students. To quote Veldheer, "Because students are your primary users, anything you can do to foster a relationship with them is important" (116). I love this statement because I think some academics still often see students as Chaucer did—at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

While still placing the dean in first place, the author reminds us of the necessity of the maintenance staff. As she points out, working on that relationship is important because teaching in a room with a leaky roof is not possible. It is also good to know that most care deeply about a leaking roof but not so much about a full trash can.

Like many chapters in this book, the chapter on accreditation is required reading for the novice theological library director. The labyrinthine process of accreditation status is both fascinating and a little frightening for beginners. For those who have wondered why there are no specifics that apply to libraries in accreditation, Veldheer says there never have been. The vagueness of the language in the standards is most challenging.

The author's advocacy for succession planning should give every library director a reason to pause. Those who care about their seminary will want to think about what might happen when they leave. Training a potential successor takes time, and as this book demonstrates, there are many topics of importance. In fact, this book would be a good starting point for training a successor.

This fine introduction to managing a small theological library is an inspiring read. For beginning directors of small libraries, this book should be an essential. If given the opportunity, all should give Veldheer hearty thanks for freely sharing her wisdom.

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