

Management in Theological Libraries

Stephen Sweeney, Editor. *Management in Theological Libraries*. The Theological Librarian's Handbook. Vol. 5. Chicago: Atla Open Press, 2025. 93pp. \$0. PDF. 9781949800432.

Management in Theological Libraries, Volume 5 in the *Theological Librarian's Handbook* series, is a collaborative effort published by Atla Open Press. Edited by Stephen Sweeney, the volume brings together insights from multiple practitioners to explore leadership, administration, workflows, data management, and personnel challenges in faith-based academic libraries. Comprising nine chapters across three thematic sections—"Principles," "Processes," and "Personnel"—the book engages both the practical and pastoral dimensions of library management.

This volume is clearly crafted for theological librarians, library directors, and information professionals working in or with religious studies collections. Graduate students in library and information science with an interest in theological librarianship would also find it beneficial, as would administrators from accrediting bodies or theological schools seeking to understand the inner workings of library management in a theological setting. Given that the book is a collaborative effort including authors from various contexts, it should find a wide audience.

In reading through the book, four strengths come to mind. First, the contextual specificity appeals to theological librarians, but the wide applicability is useful in any type of library. While the book centers on theological libraries, many principles—especially those around leadership, change management, and metadata workflows—are applicable to libraries in most all academic settings. The chapters do not merely transplant general library management theories; they reinterpret them in some chapters through the distinctive lens of theological education, grounding management in service, care, and mission. Second, there is the integration of pastoral and professional perspectives. David W. Kiger's chapter, "Library Management as Pastoral Care," exemplifies the book's strength in reimagining library leadership as a humanizing, spiritually informed practice. Drawing on thinkers such as Henri Nouwen, Kiger's chapter frames managerial work not only as task-oriented but also as deeply relational and transformative—a perspective rare in mainstream LIS literature. Third, there is a balance of conceptual and practical guidance. Chapters like Leslie Engelson's on record management workflows and Timothy Lincoln's on qualitative assessment offer concrete, replicable models and tools. Engelson, for instance, lays out an intricate system for handling metadata using tools like MarcEdit and ChatGPT, complete with naming conventions and lifecycle planning—a real asset to catalogers and technical services librarians. As a side note, Engelson's chapter is terrific for those steeped in cataloging terminology and processes, but may be too technical for library generalists. Fourth, the book has well-curated bibliographies and references. Each chapter concludes with relevant and current citations, including foundational texts in leadership theory (Northouse, Drucker, Kotter) as well as recent publications tailored to library change management, cataloging tools, and digital transformation.

Along with these strengths, there are also a few weaknesses and limitations in this book, beginning with uneven chapter depth. Some chapters are richly developed and supported by data and literature, while others remain anecdotal or cursory. For instance, while Chapter 1 on leadership is robust, some chapters in the "Personnel" section feel more observational than analytical. Next is a lack of critical engagement with diversity or justice issues.

Despite the emphasis on pastoral care and human dignity, the volume does not deeply engage with pressing issues of racial equity, inclusion, or the impact of structural inequalities on theological library work. This omission may reflect the field's broader struggles with diversity, but it limits the book's reach in social justice-informed academic environments such as theological education. The book also has limited international and interreligious representation. The contributors and examples are overwhelmingly situated in North American, largely Christian theological settings. Broader perspectives—such as those from Islamic or Jewish theological libraries, or global majority voices—are notably absent, which narrows the volume's potential impact in ecumenical or interfaith contexts.

The editors' aim, stated both implicitly and explicitly across the volume, is to equip theological library professionals with a resource that merges management theory with the particular needs and values of theological education. Despite the weaknesses noted above, they achieve this aim admirably. By organizing the book into coherent thematic categories—principles, processes, and personnel—the volume allows readers to dip into specific issues or follow a more holistic arc of professional development. Most chapters succeed in making management practices accessible and relevant to theological librarians who often wear multiple hats, especially in small institutions.

For the most part, the writing throughout the volume is accessible and jargon-free, making it suitable for practitioners regardless of whether they hold a library science degree. The inclusion of practical examples (especially in the workflow, personnel, and change management chapters) reflects an editorial commitment to clarity and usability. That said, the tone does vary somewhat across contributors—some writing with pastoral warmth and others with technical precision. This variety is not necessarily a flaw, but it does make the volume feel more like a collection of essays than a cohesive handbook.

Formatting is reader-friendly: chapters are broken into sections with clear subheadings, and many include bullet-pointed lists, process charts, or practical appendices (e.g., Engelson's Appendix 4A on cataloging tools). The Creative Commons license and open-access availability further enhance its accessibility.

Throughout the book, most chapters advocate a clear perspective—namely, that management in theological libraries should be approached not only as a technical skill but also as a theological and pastoral vocation. While this is a strong and compelling stance, the book does not consistently present countervailing views or critiques (e.g., secular management philosophies, or resistance to managerialism in academic libraries). For those looking for a pluralistic debate, this book may feel more normative than discursive.

Given its focused scope, practical utility, and relevance to theological education, this book is highly recommended for purchase by:

- Academic theological libraries
- Seminaries and divinity schools
- Institutions with LIS programs with an interest in religious librarianship
- Professional development collections for library consortia or associations such as Atla

Its open-access availability makes it readily usable for course readings, staff workshops, or self-directed professional development. For institutions looking to align their library operations with both mission and managerial best practices, this volume offers a timely, thoughtful guide.

Overall, *Management in Theological Libraries* is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature on theological librarianship. It thoughtfully combines theory and practice, offering a compelling model of how libraries can be led with purpose, compassion, and competence. While there is room for broader representation and critical engagement with diversity and justice, the volume succeeds in its core mission: to help theological libraries thrive through skillful, mission-centered management.

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