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Theological Librarianship

Is It Ministry?

Gregory A. Smith

January 2002
Ernest Liddle explains that employment at a Christian institution offers opportunities for ministry that would be impossible in a non-Christian setting.

Molly Lyons discusses ways the staff of a seminary library can minister to its community of users.

Robert Krupp argues that librarians at evangelical institutions should carry out bibliographic instruction so as to portray “writing as a vehicle for Christian ministry.”

James Dunkly describes theological librarians as partners in the ministry of theological education.

Andrew Keck’s essay, based on a survey of ATLA members, portrays theological librarianship as a ministry on five grounds:

Keck’s survey results

- its connection to theological education
- its relational character
- its occupation with religious materials
- its vocational nature
- its relation to church ministry
its connection to theological education

P1 Theological educators are ministers.
P2 Theological librarians are theological educators.

C Theological librarians are ministers.
its connection to theological education

“the [theological] library is an equal partner with classroom and field and shares mutually in the task of forwarding the institution toward its goals.”

its connection to theological education

“education does not . . . take place in the classroom alone. The library provides an essential context where the work of education, begun in the classroom, is completed.”

Pastoral work is relational.

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<th>Its relational character</th>
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Pastoral work is ministry.

Theological librarianship is relational.

Theological librarianship is ministry.
“All of this is to say, as I see it, that our jobs are carried on in the context of life, in the context of living things, primarily with persons, not inanimate objects. We are dealing with people in a very vital way.
We are dealing with growth in understanding, with the shaping of points of view, with developing and living philosophies, with the stuff which shall shape the promptings of conscience and ethical and moral perception.
We are dealing with situations which will fortify the will, which will shape character, and which will ultimately participate in the destiny of men.”

its occupation with religious materials

Theologian Roger Nicole made this comment to an assembly of Christian librarians: “As custodians of the records of the work of the Holy Spirit we have a task which has spiritual dimensions.”

What he meant was that Christian tradition--interaction with Scripture and the Holy Spirit--is passed down through history in documents that are preserved in libraries (pp. 112-14).
67.8% of theological librarians who responded to Keck’s survey reported that “theological librarianship (rather than other types of librarianship)” was “a vocational calling” for them (p. 178).
According to Keck, one respondent stated, “I entered theological librarianship on my way to ministry and after 10 years I realized I was already there . . .” (p. 178).
“Why did a nice guy like you leave the ministry?” my family asked when I became a theological librarian [. . .]
I wish to share with you my philosophy--no, better, my theology--of librarianship and the role of the library in theological education.
Far from having left the ministry, I conceive of my work and that of my staff as a ministry as well as an aid in multiple future ministries.”

While theological librarianship is intrinsically service-oriented and religious, its practitioners will probably never be regarded as ministers in the same way as pastors, missionaries, or even Christian educators.
“When theological librarians perceive themselves as being in ministry, there is a theological and spiritual focus to their work that adds to their satisfaction and contentment in that they are engaged in both the ministry of their institution and the ministry of service possible through theological librarianship” (Keck, p. 181).