
Starting A Church/Synagogue Library: A Checklist

Janet L. Flowers

There are more church and synagogue libraries in the United States than all academic, public, and special libraries combined.¹ Therefore, librarians in all types of positions may be asked to serve or to guide a volunteer in church librarianship.

Where does one begin? What advice does one give? Although I have been a church librarian for a long time, I only recently realized how naive I was when I accepted this task. As President of the North Carolina Chapter of the Church and Synagogue Library Association in 1986-1987, I talked with beginning church librarians who were getting libraries started and seasoned librarians who were re-establishing or revitalizing them.

These individuals often spoke of the need for crash courses in beginning church librarianship. I have written this article to help meet that need.

Resources Available to Help

Even an experienced librarian may feel overwhelmed by the complexities of managing any small library. Remain calm and make use of the following resources. These can be life-savers for the professional or non-professional volunteer in the church/synagogue library.

Join the Church and Synagogue Library Association

The Church and Synagogue Library Association is a national organization which has just celebrated its twentieth anniversary. It supplies timely and helpful information about how to make church and synagogue libraries more effective. CSLA publishes a bi-monthly newsletter, full of helpful tips and book reviews.² In addition, CSLA sponsors an annual conference with workshops, book exhibits, and visits to outstanding libraries in the area. The conference is an excellent opportunity to talk with others involved in the same mission.³

Janet L. Flowers is Head of Acquisitions, Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Become Active in the North Carolina Chapter of CSLA

In 1984, several North Carolina members of CSLA formed a local chapter. Since that time, the rapidly growing organization has presented six excellent workshops, including such noteworthy speakers as Doris Betts and Jane Belk Moncure. NC-CSLA also publishes a newsletter for its members.⁴ Participation in the chapter is a good way to get help from others facing the same challenges.⁵

Obtain Guides to Providing Library Services

Today there are many more resources available to the neophyte than when I started. One of the major publishers of these useful publications is, of course, CSLA. There are twenty-two guides available from this organization dealing with topics ranging from classification to publicity to standards.⁶ In addition, there are a number of substantial monographs which deal with the full range of responsibilities.⁷

Use the Following Checklist for Decision-Making

The church librarian must attend to many details when starting or revitalizing a library. This checklist highlights the major decisions to make and points to resources with useful information for making and carrying out the decisions.

1. *Write a Goals Statement for the Library*

One goal will be to help church/synagogue members understand their faith and grow spiritually. The library can also help the church/synagogue improve its programs in areas such as mission, education, stewardship, religious education, and evangelism. It can provide resources which give background on theology, doctrines, denominational history, and teaching methodologies.

Each congregation is unique and your goals should reflect your local situation. What are you hoping to accomplish? Who are you planning to serve? Is the library for the parents of the children who come to the day care center in your educational wing? In what ways will you be serv-

ing? Careful consideration of these areas will help you determine what your goals are. Write them down!

2. *Recruit a Library Committee*

This group will have much work to do at the beginning and as the library grows. Careful selection of the members is necessary. You will need to look for volunteers with clerical, artistic, and organizational skills. These skills will be needed for processing the materials, for preparing bulletin boards, and for getting the work done. Of course, you will want volunteers who are enthusiastic and dedicated, whatever their skills!⁸

3. *Select a Location for the Library*

Try to locate the library where there is a natural traffic flow so that church/synagogue members cannot miss it. The library will also need an adjacent work area for the processing of materials for the collection. If these features are not possible, at least try to obtain a well-lighted room which looks inviting.

4. *Prepare a Budget and Seek Financial Support*

The budget for a church or synagogue library is usually very limited. You must be very careful, especially as you begin a collection, to include the invisible items which might not be quite as obvious to the budget committee. In addition to books, the library will need supplies (e.g., catalog cards, book labels, promotional aids) and furniture (e.g., card catalog, shelving). Be certain to include these in your budget request.⁹

5. *Develop Selection Policies*

Selection policies indicate questions such as who can make selection decisions, who must approve purchases, and how to handle recommendations not accepted.

Think carefully about the users you will be serving. What are their interests, needs, and educational levels? What other resources are available to supply the needs identified? (One particularly thorny issue is the collection of fiction. Should your library compete with the local public library and if so, to what extent?) The policies should state the types of material collected and the criteria for the choice as well as the types of material *not* collected and why not. In addition, you should attempt to formulate an ideal composition of the collection, i.e., what per cent will be devotional material or biography.¹⁰

6. *Develop Ways to Identify Materials to Collect*

There are many ways to find out about current religious titles appropriate for the collection.

- Read your denominational publications for references to appropriate materials.
- Write to religious publishers and request that

they put you on their mailing lists.

- Ask for recommendations from the church/synagogue staff.
- Visit other church/synagogue libraries in your area and see what they have on their shelves.
- Use a standard booklist to begin a core collection.
- Browse in bookstores looking for titles which seem appropriate.
- Attend NC-CSLA workshops and browse through the displays from local religious bookstores.

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7. *Establish a Purchase Process*

After identifying the titles you wish to purchase, prepare a method by which you will keep track of your purchases. To find useful sources, ask local librarians where they purchase materials for their collections. Many bookstores, in addition to giving a discount, will allow church/synagogue libraries to set up an account. You should make careful written arrangements with all of your sources including bookstores, publishers, and wholesalers.

8. *Decide What the Service Policies Will Be*

Decide what hours the library will be open and if there will be staff present. You will also need to decide about circulation policies including the borrowing period, renewal option, and whether to charge fines, and, if so, how much.

9. *Choose a Classification System*

As the classification needs of your library will depend directly upon the nature and size of your collection, this is a decision which should not be taken lightly. In general, however, for a collection of this type, simplicity and adherence to an established system (e.g., Dewey Decimal) is advisable. Whatever you choose, continue to use it as a standard when assigning classifications.¹¹

10. *Determine the Subject Headings You Will Use*

Determine how extensive the subject headings should be, based upon your users' needs. It is, of course, important to maintain a subject headings list to ensure uniformity.¹²

11. *Prepare a "Processing Manual"*

Prepare a manual which gives detailed instructions regarding the physical processing of

the materials. This includes matters such as establishing ownership, typing the catalog cards, preparing the book card and pocket, shelving books, and filing cards. It should be a step by step guide which a volunteer can easily follow.

12. *Develop a Gifts Policy*

Donated books can be a rich source for building the collection quickly. There are, however, pitfalls which you should avoid. One is the acceptance of conditions from the donor along with the material. A second is offending the donor by your decision to discard rather than add the gift. A third is annoying the donor who wishes to receive an evaluation for tax purposes.

You can manage these pitfalls through the following practices. Always rely upon your selection policy when evaluating potential gifts. Know what you want for the collection; refuse to add inappropriate titles. Be certain that the donor and you have a clear understanding regarding the disposition of the materials. It is important to determine the donor's wishes regarding his gift. It is also important to state the library's position. You should make it clear that you are unable to evaluate the material because of the tax laws. On the other hand, you should suggest an appraiser if the gift is substantial.

To show appreciation, acknowledge the receipt of the gift promptly. In addition, keep careful records of all donations, whether materials or money. Honor the donor by using a book plate, maintaining a donor list, announcing the gift in the newsletter, or displaying gifts. In time, you can help your congregation understand the library's needs and the ways in which they can contribute to its success.

13. *Publicize What the Library Has to Offer*

Your work has only begun when the library is established. Then comes the exciting opportunity to see your investment grow. There are many ways the use of the library can be nurtured. These include story hours, book reviews, visits to classes, tours, bibliographies, and attractive bulletin boards. There are many publications available which make publicity easier.

Conclusion

One can easily see from the above list that there are many decisions which must be made to set up the church/synagogue library. On the other hand, many aids—bibliographic information, guidebooks, and human resources—are available to assist those willing to accept the challenge. This checklist highlights the major decisions to make. The references point to some resources helpful in making and implementing those decisions.

References

1. For a history of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant libraries and religious library associations in the United States, see *Church and Synagogue Libraries* edited by John F. Harvey (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980).
2. The address for the Church and Synagogue Library Association is POB 19357, Portland, Oregon 97219. Contact that office for information regarding membership and publications.
3. Several members of the North Carolina chapter attended the twentieth annual conference, "Congregational Libraries: Keystone of Ministry" in June 1987. They reported that it was well organized, educational, and inspirational.
4. Some of the workshop topics thus far are storytelling, book selection, archives, and cataloging of books and audio-visual materials. The fall 1987 workshop will emphasize the beginning steps in establishing a church/synagogue library, including policy statements and financial planning.
5. The 1987-88 treasurer for NC-CSLA is Helen Peacock. Her address is POB 1023, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. Contact her for membership information.
6. The guides, which range in size from eight to sixty-four pages, currently cost between two and five dollars. They are well worth purchasing because they contain concise information understandable to volunteers not trained as librarians.
7. Two more substantial monographs which are useful to beginning church/synagogue librarians are *How to Organize Your Church Library and Resource Center* by Mary L. Hammack (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985) and *The Church Librarian's Handbook* by Betty McMichael (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984.)
8. For a helpful guide to recruiting and using volunteers, see *How to Mobilize Church Volunteers* by Marlene Wilson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983).
9. The CSLA guide, *The ABC's of Financing the Church and Synagogue Library: Acquiring Funds, Budgeting, Cash Accounting* by Claudia Hannaford, covers the basics in a clear manner. (Bryn Mawr: Church and Synagogue Library Association, 1985).
10. To find out how to decide what materials to collect and where to find them, consult *Selecting Library Materials* by Arthur W. Swarthout (Bryn Mawr: Church and Synagogue Library Association, 1986).
11. *The Church Librarian's Handbook* (cited earlier) describes the considerations in choosing a classification scheme. It also contains an appendix which lists numbers selected from the 18th edition of the Dewey Decimal System.
12. *The Church Librarian's Handbook* addresses the issue of subject headings. Ms. McMichael also includes a list of subject headings which she has found useful.

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