

Guidelines for an Effective Church Library Ministry

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In my ministry for over half a century I have done and still do a considerable amount of traveling. Whenever I visit churches, Christian colleges, and seminaries anywhere in the world, I make sure to visit their libraries. When I do, more often than not, I am appalled at what I see in their collection, which often consists of books, DVDs, and other resources, the existence of which in those libraries is hard to justify. It is clear they are included without any discernable guiding principle, unless it be that “anything goes,” which is very unwise.

“What?!” I can hear some saying now. “Don’t you believe that God’s people should ‘know what’s out there’ so they can answer all questions in an effective witness for the Lord Jesus Christ?” Others may say, “Are you saying you’re for censorship?” This last accusation is a not well thought through canard that I’ll respond to shortly.

Of course I want all believers in and followers of Christ Jesus our Lord to be equipped for the most effective witness, which he has commissioned us to do. (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Peter 3:15) Nevertheless, the questions posed in the preceding paragraph commit the logical fallacy called the complex question. It is often called a trick question. On the surface a complex question appears to only require a simple yes or no answer, but on closer examination that is not so; it hides one or more assumptions, and often a priori unasked questions, and has the effect of confirming the implied answer to the unasked questions, which is why it is included as a logical fallacy in the field of logic.

The first of these questions above is not so simple. Of course we want all believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ to be fully informed about what people in the world believe and are saying. It is essential to have this knowledge in order to witness and evangelize most effectively. But the above question is making unwarranted assumptions, one of which is that anyone picking a book off the shelf of the church library can tell whether what is in it is true or false. Many people do not have that ability to make that distinction, and usually there is no one with them to whom they can turn for help.¹

In the church library, the patrons of which are mostly children, youth, and adults who have had little or no education in the theological frame of reference that is most helpful in discerning what resources are trustworthy and which are not, are thereby limited and many unable to do so. Many people today, though I hope not too many in the church, believe that if something is in print and published it must be true. Wrong! A dangerous error that could have tragic eternal consequences!

The resources selected for the shelves of the church library should be obtained according to what in library science is called a collection development policy. This is a document that identifies

¹ The focus of this brief essay is on the church library. Yet, the basic principles are essentially the same for a Christian college and seminary library. Regarding college and seminary students, they have the guidance of professors in making their selection, often with syllabi for their courses. They regularly meet with their professors who can advise them and answer their questions. Further, if their college or seminary is holding to historic Christian theology, they are being educated in their courses how to discern truth from error.

the basic guidelines and procedures that will be used to procure the library's holdings. When I was asked to begin a Ministry Resource Center, a special collection that was to become, and is, a permanent part of The Hekman Library,² the main library serving Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the first task I was given was to produce a collection development policy.

When my wife, Carol, and I were asked to be coordinators of the church library for the Immanuel Lutheran Church in Loveland, Colorado, we used the collection development policy that I produced for The Hekman Library as the base for such a policy for the church library.³ In essence, the policy states that all resources placed in the library must be consistent with the Bible and with historic Christian, especially Lutheran, theology. That policy guides not only the purchase of such resources but the screening of donated resources which typically trickle into the church throughout the year and come in a deluge during spring and fall housecleaning by members and friends.

Why Be So Careful?

1. In the first place, contrary to the unwarranted assumption in the question raised above, many if not most church members today, unlike their parents and grandparents, are not as well-informed Biblically and theologically as they should be. Thus, they are ill-equipped to discern fact from fiction, wheat from chaff, truth from falsehood. It is very confusing for them to hear a sermon in the sanctuary, and then go into the library for more information and select a book on the same subject, only to have that book teach a position contrary to that of the pastor they just heard.
2. Such contrary resources undermine the teaching of the pastor, the Bible, and the denomination or Christian theological tradition espoused by the church. They also foster disunity and discord in the church.
3. People who do not have the information to discern what is right and what is wrong on a given subject need guidance to help them become well-informed. The busy pastor, church staff, elders, and other leaders in the church cannot always be in the library helping people select good books and other resources that are consistent with the Bible and the historic and trustworthy theology espoused for hundreds and even thousands of years by their church. But the collection development policy can help them. It produces a library collection that is trustworthy, facilitates the Biblical, theological, and spiritual development pleasing to the Lord, and is consistent with the teaching of the church.
4. Of course it is necessary for Christians to not only know what atheists, agnostics, and adherents of non-Christian religions believe and teach but how to best respond to that teaching in an effective witness for Christ. The church library should have such information to help them, but it should be accurate and provide the contrasting truth of the Bible and historic Christian theology to enable them to fully and correctly understand

² The Hekman Library at that time was the largest library in the city of Grand Rapids with over 13,000,000 volumes.

³ The church's collection development policy is posted on the church library Web page of Immanuel Lutheran Church's Web site at <http://church.immanuelloveland.org/resources/library>.

and most effectively proclaim that truth. Thus, I answer the censorship accusation this way: "No, I'm not the church censor. I'm not saying people shouldn't read a particular book or watch a DVD about which they've heard. All I'm saying is that they may not be able to find a certain book in our church library, and here are the reasons why."

Therefore, I urge churches and in particular those members charged with the responsibility to begin and/or maintain a church library to produce such a church library collection development policy. They are most welcome to use the one on Immanuel Lutheran Church's library Web site as a base for establishing their own.