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A Survey of Church Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a survey of congregational libraries, documents the current state of congregational libraries, and updates previous statistical studies. A survey was conducted to collect demographic statistics, information on collection size and composition, budgets and acquisitions methods, staffing characteristics, automation, and circulation.

Introduction & Historical Background

Church libraries have a long history, rooted in the monastic libraries of the Middle Ages where religious literature was retained for the benefit of the clergy. The strong connection between the church, clergy, and libraries was also present as explorers encountered the New World. For example, early libraries in the North American colonial period owed their origins to clergy. In fact, clergyman John Harvard donated his library of religious and utilitarian works to the school that now bears his name.

Also during this period, clergyman Thomas Bray was sent to the North American colonies on behalf of the Church of England. Bray observed that some churches had libraries for the use of the clergy, and in response he founded the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. The Society shipped books to ministers, which resulted in the establishment of several church-based, free-lending libraries.

During the 1800s the Sunday school movement introduced the principle of alternative, religious education, and church libraries were an outgrowth of this movement. In fact, according to the 1877 *Cyclopædia of Education* "… Sunday school libraries of the United States [had] become so numerous and important as to secure enumeration in the official census of the government…in 1870" (Kiddle & Schem, 798).

The libraries, however, were presented with a challenge. Originally, books were awarded to attendees for attendance, scholarship, or good behavior. Due to the costs associated with these practices, church officials conceived of the library as a solution; rather than award books, pupils would be rewarded the privilege of using the library (Briggs, 1961, p. 166). As time progressed, collections grew, materials intended for adults appeared, and the Sunday school library began to require formal oversight and organization. The appearance of adult materials and the need for formal organization

and oversight marked the point at which a Sunday school library ceased and a congregational library began.

Definitions and Scope

In order to further understand the study of congregational libraries, a formal definition is needed. This study utilizes a modified form of John Harvey's (1999) definition as posited in *Church and Synagogue Libraries*:

A church or synagogue library provides reading material and library service to members of a specific church or synagogue, usually in connection with their religious activities. A library is defined here as one or more rooms containing a collection of print and/or non-print material organized for use. In addition, the phrase "congregational library" refers to a church or synagogue library (p. vii).

Harvey (1999) also details the characteristics of such a library:

To become a library, the collection should (1) be organized in a logical order, (2) have appointed leadership, (3) provide circulation, processing and reference service, (4) contain at least 100 volumes, (5) be established in a dedicated room, (6) have a defined user group, (7) have an organizational plan and set of objectives, and preferably (8) be supported with an annual income (p. 681).

While many congregations may own a collection of books and other materials, these may not meet the aforementioned standards. Since the respondents of this survey were self-selecting it is difficult to determine how many of the libraries met the aforementioned criteria.

Literature Search

Locating literature on congregational libraries is quite challenging due to the proliferation of possible subject terms and the overlap with education and religion. For example, a search in *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* (LISTA) for the headings "CHURCH LIBRARIES" or "CATHEDRAL LIBRARIES" resulted in 76 items published since 1958. The term "SUNDAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES" was also searched, producing one item. From among these results, no surveys were located. Synagogue libraries did not fare better. A search using the terms "JEWISH LIBRARIES" or "RABBINICAL SEMINARY LIBRARIES" or "SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES" produced 45 results published since 1976. Again, no surveys were available. Attempting to cast a wider net, the term "RELIGIOUS LIBRARIES" was searched, resulting in 510 items. When combined with the search term "SURVEYS," two items appeared. One of these items, a survey of Catholic Library Association membership, was relevant.

Given the close relationship between libraries and education, the *ERIC* database was consulted. Here, the results were better. Using the search strategy "CHURCHES and

LIBRARIES" produced 123 items dating from 1953. When examining these results for surveys, four items were discovered; however, none of the items were specific to church libraries. The term "SUNDAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES" produced no results. Just as in the LISTA search, little material was available on Jewish libraries. Indeed, a search on the recommended terms "JUDAISM" and "LIBRARIES" produced no results. The broader term "RELIGIOUS LIBRARIES" was searched and 76 items produced. From among these, only one was a survey but it was focused on academic libraries.

Given the obscurity of the topic, the gray literature was consulted. A search of *Dissertation & Theses A&I* was conducted. The phrase "CHURCH LIBRARIES" was utilized and 214 items located. Upon closer examination, six relevant titles were discovered; only two could be deemed surveys. This was complemented by results from a search of "SUNDAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES," which produced 140 results. From among these, only four could be deemed wholly relevant. A search for "SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES" produced one item devoted to the topic.

Finally, WorldCat was consulted using the subject headings "CHURCH LIBRARIES" and "SURVEYS." This yielded 22 items; however, none of the items were relevant to the goals of this survey. Various combinations of searches were tried using "SURVEYS" with "SUNDAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES," "RELIGIOUS LIBRARIES," and "SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES." All of the results were disappointing.

By far, the most pertinent book was John Harvey's 1999 publication *Popular Religious Libraries in North America: A Statistical Examination*. Harvey consulted the *American Library Directory*, mailing lists, surveys from congregational library associations, and devised his own 44-question survey tool. Harvey's work is the definitive volume of statistical data; however, the data is considerably outdated.

These searches demonstrate the paucity of literature on congregational libraries, especially when current statistical data is sought. This article hopes to correct this situation.

Methodology and Purpose

This article updates previous surveys and documents the current state of congregational libraries. The survey aimed to collect demographic statistics, information on collection size and composition, budgets and acquisitions methods, staffing characteristics, automation, and circulation. The survey was created using Qualtrics. Distribution of the survey occurred in June-July 2015 and involved contacting church and synagogue library associations via e-mail, web sites, and social media, and requesting participation. Respondents were self-selecting.

Results

Demographics

Beginning with the location of the libraries, responses were received from 30 states. Libraries in Texas constituted the largest group of respondents, with 12 libraries. Table 1 indicates the location of the libraries.

Table 1: *Libraries by Location*	Total Responses
Texas	12
North Carolina	8
Tennessee	6
Washington	6
California	5
Virginia	5
South Carolina	5
Illinois	4
Maryland	4
Wisconsin	4
Florida	3
Louisiana	3
Oregon	3
Pennsylvania	2
Ohio	2
Minnesota	2
Alabama	2
Oklahoma	2
South Dakota	1
Alaska	1
Wyoming	1
Georgia	1
Michigan	1
New York	1
Indiana	1
Missouri	1
Colorado	1
Kentucky	1
New Mexico	1
Maine	1
Total	**90**

The survey asked about denominations with which the libraries were associated. When taken together, the largest group of respondents (44%) was Baptist. Perhaps this preponderance was due to this denomination's overall size; Baptists are the second largest denomination in the United States when all forms of Baptist are combined (Hartford, n. d.). Interestingly, Catholic churches, which represent the largest denomination in the United States, were only represented by two responses. Table 2 represents the breakdown of denominations.

Table 2: *Libraries by Denomination*	
Baptist	46%
Jewish	4%
Lutheran	9%
Methodist	12%
Presbyterian	13%
Other	15%

n=68

Possible reasons for the disparity in the aforementioned categories and answers may relate to the respondents' self-selection. Also, since respondents were recruited via congregational library associations, the size and denomination of the library association may also have had some effect.

Finally, the size of the congregation was explored. Forty libraries (45%) were located in congregations with 600 or more members. Smaller congregations were less likely to have a library; only one library reported having 100 or fewer congregants. From these results it is possible to conclude that larger congregations were more likely to have libraries. The reasons for this are unclear, but could have something to do with financial support. Table 3 records congregational size in relation to library presence.

Table 3: *Congregation Size*	
1–100	4%
100–200	16%
200–400	16%
400–600	19%
600+	45%

n=88

Administration and Finance

To determine the nature of the libraries' operations, question 12 asked about staff. The staff of the libraries was well-qualified to work in the libraries. Professional library experience was reported by 49 respondents (71%). Formal library education was reported by 58 respondents (84%) (Table 4).

Table 4: *Staff Experience Levels*	
Professional library experience	71%
Library education	84%

n=107

Library staff had some policies to guide their operations with most libraries having more than one policy, as indicated by the 216 responses to this question. Donation polices were in place in 82% of the libraries, while circulation policies were present in 79% of operations. Other policies included those addressing collection development, discards, and challenged materials. Table 5 demonstrates the preponderance of policies by type.

Table 5: *Policies*	
Circulation	79%
Donations	82%
Discards	54%
Collection development	71%
Challenged materials	31%

n=216

A surprising number of the respondents (64%) indicated attending a congregational library conference in the last three years. For those not attending a conference, budget was a hindrance, as were distance and the lack of staff to cover library operations should someone attend a conference.

Attending a library conference was likely affiliated with belonging to a congregational library association. Membership in an association was reported by 62% of respondents. Membership in the Church & Synagogue Library Association or a regional affiliate was most prevalent. Table 6 lists memberships in associations.

Table 6: *Membership in an Association*	
Church & Synagogue Library Association	16
Church Librarians Network	5
Evangelical Church Library Fellowship	3
Tarrant County Baptist Association	3
Tennessee Baptist Association	3
Virginia Church Librarian Association	3
Association of Jewish Libraries	2
Congregational Library Association of Greater Washington, DC	2
PNACL Pacific Northwest Association of Church Libraries	2
WELS Church Librarians' Organization	2
Baptist General Convention of Texas	1
Buxmont Libraries	1
Caldwell County Baptist Church Librarians	1
North Carolina Church Library Association	1
Church Library Association of SBC	1
Total	46

Most libraries were fortunate to have a budget, with 84% responding accordingly. The budgets ranged in size from $100 to $32,000, with an average budget of $3,487. Table 7 demonstrates the distribution of budgets.

Table 7: *Reported Budgets*	
$100–$1,000	51%
$1,000–$5,000	30%
$5,000–$10,000	12%
$10,000+	7%

<div align="center">n=92</div>

Table 8 indicates the presence of a budget by congregation size. From this data, it is clear that larger congregations were more likely to have a budget.

Table 8: *Presence of Budget by Congregation Size*		
Congregation size	**Budget (Yes)**	**Budget (No)**
1–100	3	1
100–200	10	4
200–400	12	2
400–600	13	2
600 or more	34	6

n=87

Collections and Organization

The size of the libraries' collections varied widely. From among respondents, the smallest library reported owning a total of 208 items, while the largest library held 112,750 items. The majority of libraries (30%) owned between 1,000 and 2,000 items, while the average collection size was 6,511 items. Table 9 indicates the percentage of libraries within a range of sizes.

Table 9: *Collection Size*	
Item Count	**Percent of Respondents**
0–1,000	10%
1,000–2,000	30%
3,000–4,000	28%
5,000–6,000	8%
7,000–9,000	12%
10,000+	12%

n=92

Print books comprised the most widely held format. The smallest library reported owning 200 titles. In contrast, the largest collection contained 112,000 books. Video collections were next in popularity followed by audio materials and electronic books. The smallest video collection numbered four and the largest collection held 5,000 items. The smallest audio collection contained three items, while the largest collection amounted to 3,172 pieces. Clearly, there is a great deal of variance in the size of congregational libraries. Budgets, as well as congregational size, may be causes for the variance.

The ownership of electronic books was most interesting because, as far as this author can ascertain, there has never been an attempt to assess ownership of this format among congregational libraries. Among the responses, only eight libraries indicated ownership of e-books. The smallest library held six e-books, while the largest library had 2,500 electronic books. The reasons for this variance are unclear but might have something to do with budget size or lack of technological expertise.

Also contained in congregational collections were materials specifically related to congregational history and materials to support curricular activities. In order to determine the scope of collections, respondents were asked to indicate if materials were limited to only those supporting denominational perspectives. The majority of the 69 respondents (70%) replied that such limitations did not exist.

Given the wide-ranging scope of the collections, challenges to materials seemed a likely possibility. When queried regarding this possibility, the 69 respondents were nearly evenly divided, with 52% indicating no challenges had occurred and 48% reporting challenges. When asked to provide examples of challenges, inappropriate language, adult content, and conflicts with doctrinal beliefs were the most common reasons. Responses to challenges ranged from reviewing materials and subsequently keeping or removing the material, reminding the congregation of the purpose of the library, and making notes regarding the objectionable material.

For collection development purposes, respondents were asked to rank the types of resources commonly used to locate reviews and make purchasing decisions. Web sites were highly utilized. Publishers' catalogs, patron recommendations, and religious magazines were nearly equal in their popularity. See Table 10 for complete rankings.

Table 10: *Popular Reviewing Resources by Rank*					
Answer			**Rank**		
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Publishers' catalogs	19	15	20	19	16
Religious magazines	16	23	20	27	4
Web sites	33	24	18	12	2
Patron's recommendations	21	26	25	13	6
Non-religious publications	4	2	6	16	59

n=92

When asked to specify the names of resources used, Amazon.com was the predominant web site; other web sites included denominational publishing houses' catalogs. By far, the most heavily used resource was that of a commercial distributor of ecumenical materials.

Donations were another method by which materials were obtained. From among 69 respondents, 20% indicated use of this collection development method while 30% relied upon purchases. The majority of congregational libraries (49%) relied upon both purchases and donations.

When queried regarding how collections were organized, 83% of 69 respondents indicated use of the Dewey Decimal System. The Library of Congress classification system was used by 4%. Other systems, such as Weine and Elazar, were employed by 12% of respondents. Additional organization methods included by media type, alphabetical by title, and bookstore style. Table 11 demonstrates the various methods by which collections were organized.

Table 11: *Use of Classification Schema*	
Dewey Decimal	83%
Library of Congress	4%
Weine or Elazar	12%
Other	1%

n=69

Respondents were also asked to indicate the preferred tool for assigning subject headings. Sears Subject Headings garnered 46% of the responses, while the Library of Congress was used by 29%. The remaining respondents indicated use of other classification schemes, including homegrown systems, some based upon a schema recommended by the Church & Synagogue Library Association, and combinations of other schema. See Table 12 for a complete breakdown.

Table 12: *Subject Heading Use*	
Sears Subject Headings	46%
Library of Congress Subject Headings	29%
Other	25%

n=104

Library Access and Use

The ability to locate materials based on organization was aided by automation in most cases. Table 13 indicates 72% of respondents reported using an online catalog. Card catalogs were present in 9% of the congregations. The remainder of respondents used locally devised systems, such as a spreadsheet, for accessing the collection.

Table 13: *Access Method*	
Online catalog	72%
Card catalog	9%
Other	19%

n=69

Among the 67 libraries responding to the question about what online system was utilized in the library, the most popular was Concourse. Table 14 records the use of automated systems by frequency of program use.

Table 14: *Automation Systems*	
System	**Responses**
Concourse	15
Resourcemate	11
Atriuum	6
OPALS	6
Librarything	5
PC Card Catalog	5
Surpass	4
Library Concept	3
LibraryWorld	2
Companion	1
CROSS (Library 1.7)	1
A program developed locally	1
Lexwin	1
Library Systems	1
Library World	1
Master Library System	1
Microsoft Excel	1
PowerChurch Plus	1
Primasoft	1
Total	67

Collection access and use is central to effective operation but is irrelevant if collections are not physically available. Hours of operation and methods for identifying items in collections impact library accessibility and utilization. Due to their location, libraries often have unique operational hours and patterns. Table 15 shows the responses to the question asking when the libraries were open.

Table 15: *Library Hours*	
All hours the building is open	67%
Only on days of worship	33%

n=93

Promoting the library can influence use of the collections. This study wished to determine the use of electronic means to reach library users. Thirty-seven libraries (54%) of the 88 respondents utilized web pages, while 20% used Facebook. However, 26% did not use electronic means to communicate with users.

Hours, organization, promotion, and access methods all contribute to the use of collections. When queried regarding circulation, the majority of libraries circulated 11 or more items per week, as revealed in Table 16.

Table 16: *Weekly Circulation*	
Items per week	
1–5	37%
6–10	21%
11 or more	42%

n=92

Conclusion

Church libraries are an often overlooked type of library and statistics related to church libraries are typically unavailable. This survey corrects that situation by providing a snapshot of several factors related to church libraries. However, the survey could be improved upon in order to produce more detailed data and allow for drawing in-depth conclusions. For example, a factor which could be examined in greater detail relates to the composition of the library staff. While this survey does provide a baseline regarding the qualifications of library staff, further exploration is needed to determine staff size and gender breakdown. A look at the number of years of library experience among staff could also be included.

Membership in the various library associations could be examined, considering questions about the length of membership, reasons for belonging to an association, and the level of participation in the association. In a similar vein, members could be queried regarding what services provided by an association are most valuable. Finally, a future study could ask participants what changes, if any, are recommended to continue to make an association viable and valuable.

This study establishes the use of web sites and social media by libraries to reach constituents; however, a study regarding how these tools are used could be undertaken. Similarly, exploring the exact nature of challenges to collections could prove interesting.

This study confirms that congregational libraries face many of the same challenges experienced in other libraries, namely budget challenges, challenges to materials, and low circulation. Nevertheless, the libraries persist in the face of growing competition for users' attention. They provide access to unique collections and serve special populations. The future of these libraries will depend on their ability to continue meeting these dual criteria. ☦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHURCH LIBRARY SURVEY

Collections

1. Total number of:
   a) Print books
   b) Electronic books
   c) DVD/Video
   d) CDs/Cassettes
   e) Other

2. How is the collection organized?
   a) Dewey Decimal
   b) Library of Congress
   Other (please specify)

3. What does the library use for subject headings?
   a) Sears Subject Headings
   b) Library of Congress Subject Headings
   c) Other (please specify)

4. Check if the library has:
   a) An online catalog
   b) A card catalog
   c) Other

Materials

5. How are materials for the library obtained?
   a) Donation
   b) Purchase
   c) Both

   Please list the resources most often used to identify purchases.

7. Does the library collect materials related to the congregation's history?
   a) Yes
   b) No

8. Does the library have curriculum materials for Sunday School or other instructional programs?
   a) Yes
   b) No

9. Is developing the collection limited to materials supporting the congregation's beliefs?
   a) Yes
   b) No

10. Have any materials been challenged as inappropriate to a congregational library?
    a) Yes
    b) No

11. If yes, please explain.

Staffing

12. Have staff attended a religious library conference in the last 3 years?
    a) Yes
    b) No

13. If no, please explain.

14. Does the library belong to a religious library organization?
    a) Yes
    b) No

15. Please specify to which church library association the library belongs.

16. When is the library open?
    a) All hours the church is open
    b) Only on days of worship

17. Does any member of the staff have:
    a) Professional library experience
    b) Library education

Automation

18. Does the library use library-related software to manage the library's services?
    a) Yes
    b) No

19. Please specify the name of the software program.

20. Does your library have
    a) A web page
    b) Facebook page
    c) Twitter account
    d) Pinterest page
    e) Other

Other
21. Does the library have a budget?
    a) Yes
    b) No

22. If yes, what is the library's budget per year?
    $_____

23. On average, how many items circulate per week?
    a) 1-5
    b) 6–10
    c) 10–15
    d) 15–20
    e) 20 or more

24. Please indicate if the library has any of the following written policies:
    a) Circulation
    b) Donations
    c) Discards
    d) Developing the collection
    e) Challenged materials
    f) None of the above
    g) Other, please explain

About your congregation
    1. State
    2. Denomination
    3. Size of congregation