The Next Generation: Mentoring, Recruitment and Library Education

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Good morning! Praise God for this wonderful day! I am greatly honored to speak to the audience of the Association of Christian Librarians. I also want to acknowledge the members of the Massachusetts Black Librarians Network who have come to support me. This presentation is so appropriate because I strive towards a commitment to Christian principles in my personal life, and my work life. In fact, my sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc, a private non-profit organization committed to academic excellence and community service, is based on Christian principles. We set aside time for spiritual readings in our business meetings, and during service weekends, my sorority combines visits to a local church for a Sunday service. It is a wonderful way to share our Christian values with each other and our community. It is not just the motions that we go through that I appreciate, but the respect and support for each other.

Furthermore, I am committed to the issues of morals, honesty and social justice that speak to many of us in the library profession. I have always tried to blend my Christian values with my daily work in a private non-denominational academic institution. I use personal prayer when times are good and bad. I like to chat with my God. A couple of years ago, I joined a colleague for Morning Prayer during the lent season. It was such a satisfying way to begin my day with my colleague, and it provided both of us with a positive and healthy manner to share our love for God and to find out what was going on with each other in our jobs. Thus, we became more in tuned with each other for the betterment of both of our units. This worked so well that I invited her to do the same for a second year. African American librarians use prayer before meals at our own conferences. And I must say how much I enjoy how some American Indian librarians begin both committee meetings and conference programs with the Spiritual passage that sets the tone of a place, puts people at peace and urge the participants to focus on the work at hand. I ask you to do the same now. So God, here we go… My role today is to address the Next Generation: Mentoring, Recruitment and Library Education. The next generation is arriving in graduate programs in library and information studies now. Library school programs must begin to think differently about how to meet students where they are; we have to adapt our recruitment strategies, both to get students into our programs and to get them into good jobs. We are still using the old ways, website and printed materials but we must use different communication tools to reach the next generation. So here is our challenge: COMMUNICATION.

A colleague passed along a story: a Communications professor asked an undergraduate class, “How many of you use email to communicate?” The answer was one out of 30. The student uses email to communicate with her grandmother. OUCH! This could be me! Yes, email has become one of the oldest modes of social networking. The other students used Skype, Instant Messaging, and text messages. Library education has dramatically changed with other uses of technology in courses. There is a growing
curriculum that focuses on preparing the new librarian with technological innovations to streamline or enhance work in libraries. This is very noticeable in reviewing any listing of courses in a Library school curriculum. One of our Simmons faculty members holds office hours in Second Life, a virtual communication mode. It allowed the instructor to meet with students using avatars who represent them in a virtual spatial discussion. It is a way for each person to see each other as they talk. So far it is working well as both instructor and student grow accustomed to it. The Library School alumni association at Simmons has established a Face book site for members to connect with others interested in current topics in the profession. A new alumni group began a wiki called Library Bling. The wiki allows new librarians to provide information about looking for a job, such as setting up resumes, interviews and other ways to put your best foot forward when looking for jobs. Thus the “bling.” Librarians who have contributed are located throughout the United States and can help others know about preparation for their respective areas. So…to meet this challenge, we need to adapt, but we also must stay with the time-honored way to recruit and prepare librarians. The most effective way to insure our librarian future is still you and I – the personal touch with a librarian. A growing portion of students entering our profession are looking for a position that pays a satisfactory salary, allows for balance with their family lives, and allows for their spiritual beliefs or ethics to be supported in the workplace. The Christian librarian, you may be a perfect person for these LIS graduates to use as a resource to know about opportunities. At Simmons, for example, our program has been noted as an outstanding “generalist” program. But we also offer a Theological Librarianship course through our joint library schools collaboration. This course attracts a number of students who have been, or who are practicing ministers, pastors, priests, or anyone who just wants to explore the religious literature or support their faith based interests. Although there are limited seats for our students, the seats are always filled. This course combined with a series of core courses and selected academic librarianship courses could prepare someone to work in a Christian library. So, personal interaction with Christian librarians and other staff inside the library can play a big part in helping a student to think about the field of library and information science. Other connections with librarians on campus, outside the library, can also play a part. For example, The Christian librarian can become the advisor to an undergraduate student club. I served as advisor to an undergraduate chapter of my sorority. Another faculty member served as the advisor to the campus Republican club. Christian Librarians can become advisors to the campus Christian fellowship. In this way, the club can participate in various community projects and conversations; one or more students might consider our profession because many of them are interested in blending their faith and community service within their work lives.

Here is the point I want you to remember. Christian librarians can serve as mentors. I define mentoring as the behavior to help the mentee, or protégé, to maneuver successfully through his or her career. I have been working with the mentoring concept, and facilitating a formal program for about ten years at Simmons. It began as a brainchild of the Library School Alumni Association, and I have maintained the program. The American Library Association developed a phrase, “Each One, Reach One” about twenty years ago, and I embrace this phrase as I promote the Simmons mentoring program. It is due to this idea that I believe that the mentor can make a big impact on the mentee, and to provide the support and guidance that sometimes an employer cannot. The mentor can serve as the sounding board for ideas that a mentee may not feel comfortable discussing with someone in the workplace. Some of the questions can be queries about how a person shares or exhibits his or her faith in public with colleagues and students. As a side note, I just finished reading a book called, “How Strong Women Pray” by Bonnie St. John. A 2007 imprint. It touches on how women practice praying in their full lives including the point I just mentioned. The
Simmons GSLIS mentoring program consists of a set of alumni mentors with a minimum of 3 years of experience, and who prepare a statement as to what they can offer a mentee. The compilation is made available to students. Although, I match students with mentors whom I personally know, other students peruse the statements and make decisions on whom to contact based on library type and the personal statement. It is the personal statement that can guide students towards a mentor who holds a strong personal bent towards social justice, community service or personal Christian faith. Another component of the mentoring program is offering a luncheon meeting. This past spring, the School and the Alumni Association held its third mentoring luncheon for students. Our program was called “Building a Mentoring Relationship.” It included a speaker to discuss the facets of a mentoring relationship along with various issues to be discussed between the mentoring pair, how long a relationship can continue, how to move on from a relationship, and how to begin the cycle again. This was followed by two pairs of mentors and their mentees who discussed how their mentoring relationships worked. This gave the audience a better idea of what they can expect from a mentoring relationship. The Association of Christian Librarians and individual Christian librarians can offer mentoring opportunities. For example, in our School, efforts have been made for student groups to volunteer at a local urban grammar school in rebuilding their library from raising money for books, helping with cataloging books, designing bulletin board exhibits, to reading to classes. The Library School Alumni Association organized a book project for prisoners, and one of the student groups has done the same. These are just some examples in which students have been exposed to community service projects at Simmons. But the mentoring can also help students as they leave our programs in search of job opportunities. Several programs host virtual lists of their graduates as a way for employers to meet prospective candidates. It is a way to get a sense of candidates’ backgrounds and values. Students all have different interests but all have a strong a sense of what they want to focus on in their careers. Many graduates are eager to work somewhere where they can make moral and ethical choices. They are interested in working with different types of community agencies, including libraries in social justice, community health and community development.

Christian librarian mentors can provide valuable feedback for job ideas. In addition to having strong ideas about what they want to do in their careers, new LIS graduates have begun to think about a number of issues that fit into the hallmarks of being good citizens including, making reasonable personal sacrifices for the greater good; becoming well informed about local and national laws and understanding how events in the United States impact the rest of the world. If any of these traits relate to you as a Christian librarian, then it should be easy for you to find the same elements in others who want to join our profession. While students are in school, they write and publish papers, maintain websites, blogs, and wikis, learn about the vast technological innovations, and attend virtual and physical lectures on a wide range of professional issues. They become engaged in current topics including the use of filters, the USA Patriot Act, and funding sources. Students’ interests mirror those of working librarians, including librarians working in Christian libraries or organizations. They want to bring these pursuits and interests with them into the profession. Christian libraries may be the perfect place to accommodate these pursuits and interests.

Let me tell you about the students coming into program now. They may present a special mentoring challenge. The average age of entering students at Simmons this past semester was under 30, a major drop compared to past years when the average age was 35 or 36. Students of the new millennium are coming to the field, and we must be ready to adapt and welcome them. These students are younger and enter graduate programs with either no experience or very little experience. Some “helicopter parents” come with applicants to the library information sessions and sometimes even to an applicant’s interview. Some students

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seek pre-professional positions to gain practical experience to complement their coursework. Many programs encourage students to take internships or volunteer positions, as well as pre-professional positions. These positions provide graduate students with a real life experience about what happens in a library. Again, the Christian librarian can help guide young prospective candidates into a position and career that accommodates their interests and faith. In summary, the recruitment, education and mentoring of future students must be a collaboration between library educators and library practitioners. Library school programs are diligently working to attract the best and brightest to the field.

We Christian librarians can offer the right kind of moral, ethical positions that new graduates are looking for. We Christian librarians can offer positions that support and balance personal commitments. We Christian librarians can be recruiters to target the talent needed for the profession and Christian libraries. We can partner with library schools to serve as mentors at our respective alma mater, or local graduate programs, or our respective academic library arena. In this way, we can also provide the guidance and encouragement for future Christian librarians. I am confident that we as Christian librarians are well positioned to recruit and mentor future librarians. If given the opportunity, job hunters will follow. You and I can offer much — a place for balance in work and home, an environment in which ethics, morals, social justice, and shared Christian beliefs can flourish. As mentors, You and I have a mission! Thank you.

Here is the point I want you to remember, Christian librarians can serve as mentors.