

Transforming your

CHURCH LIBRARY

from a

MUSEUM INTO A MINISTRY

subtitled: "The Art of Moving the Books!"

Church libraries come in two flavors - Active and Abandoned.

Phil Myers, PhD

*How you make decisions in 6 crucial areas
will determine the effectiveness of your church library ministry.*

A functioning church library in a smaller church is one which helps the body of Christ become more effective in carrying out its ministry by encouraging personal spiritual growth. Simple libraries with only two-hundred books that circulate regularly are far more valuable in fulfilling this mission than large collections which are neatly cataloged and shelved in locked rooms accessible only by appointment. Church libraries come in two flavors - beehives and dust collectors

There are six qualities which characterize the active ones:

- 1.) committed librarians
- 2.) ongoing publicity
- 3.) easy access to the materials
- 4.) carefully chosen acquisitions
- 5.) some system of organization, and
- 6.) a retrieval procedure.

In a good book ministry the success begins with the first of these six items - the librarians. As each of the others is added, the ministry doubles its impact.

1 - COMMITTED LIBRARIANS

"The starting point, the place to launch your library -- is with a key person, not with procedures, policies, or budgets. Every successful library requires a key person" who must be discovered.

a. Qualifications: Look for five qualities in your head librarian:

- 1) a solid Christian testimony
- 2) perhaps the gift of exhortation or at least the ability to develop in others a thirst to read
- 3) biblical discernment
- 4) a feeling that God could use you to serve in this capacity, and of course
- 5) a cooperative spirit.

Did you notice that "library experience" was not one of the qualities mentioned?

Traits such as these are in demand throughout the church, but each of these will prove to be an enormous help to librarians in carrying out their work.

b. Responsibilities: The primary tasks of the librarian fall into two broad categories. Although the ability to 1) organize the ministry for efficient operation comes quickly to mind, the more important work for the church librarian is that of being able to 2) take the initiative to promote reading.

I believe that the adroitness of keeping a finger on the pulse of the needs of the people is far more valuable than the ability to computerize book titles, shelve books, and collect library fines. Those jobs are also valuable but may be delegated to assistants who do that chore best. The head librarian, however, must feel a deep appreciation for books, CDs, DVDs, and be convinced that others in the church can also be blessed by them.

Small churches may still be able to use the card catalog system, but libraries serving the larger church will need to step into the emerging world of library technology, just don't get so caught up in the tedium of library science that you forget to move the books! Yes, you can start with 50 books from the pastor emeritus' personal library and 15 from your own home. Talk it up and you'll easily cull another 20 from your Sunday School classmates.

Force yourself to get rid of [*i.e. give away or sell*] some books every year.

c. Appointment: I encourage the church to recognize the librarian at the annual installation of church officers. Each one in the church who directs a facet of the ministry needs the corporate prayers of the congregation. By affirming the importance of the library as a vital tool in equipping the saints, the church magnifies its determination to raise up a godly generation of biblically literate believers.

A one-year appointment is typical. Standard procedures to reappoint or select a successor annually or biannually should be developed.

2 - ONGOING PUBLICITY

In my estimation the head librarian must **first be the mover of books** and secondarily the keeper of the shelves. If your church already has a faithful librarian whose strengths lie in the craft of cataloging, it may simply be necessary to appoint and anoint a second person with the title of Promotional Chairman. This is the one who will make readers out of your church people.

It would be this person's privilege to give the library ministry a higher public profile through publicity. It has been said that God leads people to make decisions according to the volume of information they receive. "The more you tell, the more you'll sell." Let people know what you have to offer. Take the books to the people!

a. Set up two "browsing tables" on the first Sunday of each month. *One in the Sunday School hallway for people who come to Sunday School, and one for those who come in the other door.* Each display should focus on 1 or 2 topics and showcase a number of books, CDs, and DVDs. Be sure to let people check them out right there at the table! These displays could be in the church foyer, on the lawn, in various department hallways, or even at the rear of the sanctuary if that would be appropriate.

b. Bulletin boards can advertise new acquisitions by displaying book jackets.

c. Posters in heavily trafficked areas should be changed at least quarterly, if not, you'll drift closer to the "museum" mode. The formula for poster making is "the fewer words the better." A poster contest in the younger departments is a great boost, especially if you'll distribute blank poster boards to the kids right there on the spot. Perhaps you'd like to hold the contest during National Library Week in April of each year.

d. Monthly visits to each department bring exciting results and they escalate the utilization of your cache of knowledge.

e. *Groups with special interests* need to know what resources you have available to them. Recently, I took both our Youth Pastor's wife as well as our Sunday school superintendent down to our library to show them the sections which targeted teens and teachers. By the by, I'm not the librarian at my present church.

You might try scheduling a visit to a church board meeting to make a brief commercial about four or five books that would be of interest to the leadership of the church. Adult classes may not know about various tape series that you have on finances, or child rearing, or apologetics, or marriage. The minister of visitation may love to read a collection of stories about great soul winners.

I have seen well-funded large church libraries ignore this foundational block of constant publicity. They may even have a high-volume Christian Bookstore on campus, but they have virtually disregarded urging non-library-goers to come to the library. Attracting new readers is off their radar screen. They only cater to those who already were avid readers without luring in the non-readers.

On the other hand, I attended a church which had a section of the wall outside the library with pictures of 60 missionaries whose biographies could be checked out. At the beginning and end of every school year kids were escorted to this hallway. September = the challenge to read! April = trophies for those who finished the list for their grade. Huge trophy for any kids who read all 60 before going into 7th grade. Certificate for finishing at least one biography.

Constantly be on the lookout for groups within the church which could benefit from some of the little known resources you have tucked away. Try taking a fresh look at your books with an eye toward matching some of them to unexpected readers. That massive exhaustive concordance could be used by a fourth grade girls' class which is studying love, discipleship, or the Ten Commandments.

A map or an atlas might be useful to a ladies' Bible class which is studying the book of Judges. Specific CDs and DVDs could be suggested for men's or teen's retreats. You might even have to conduct workshops to help older teachers utilize YouTube and projectors in their classes.

An auxiliary ministry here in the 21st century might be to conduct a class on using the internet, using free resources like E-Sword or many of the available Bible study software packages. The pastoral staff might profit greatly from bringing in a knowledgeable friend in this area.

f. In some churches it may be appropriate to *give a short book review* during the announcement time during Sunday evening worship service or Sunday school opening exercises and certainly at monthly teachers' meetings.

g. If you have a knack for saying a lot with a few words, try getting *a library column* [1 1/2 inches] in your church bulletin once a month or once a quarter. Spotlight new acquisitions, or those with a relevance to a current church or national issue, or select a book to review based on its possible impact on the church's spiritual life.

The more information you disseminate, the wider your circle of distribution will grow. "In Christian bookstores, perhaps as high as 80% of the sales of books is made through the recommendation of others."

3 - EASY ACCESS TO THE MATERIALS

Successful libraries are seldom in the basement. Try every way you can to obtain a space in a high traffic area even if your basic modus operandi has to become a table in the hallway. Remember, your library's mission is circulation, not accumulation, or labial-ization.

a. Make it as easy as possible to check books out and easier still, to return them. Put a "bushel-book-drop-basket" in the foyer for returns!

b. Open the library on the customer's schedule, not on the proprietor's schedule. Appoint a "floor walker" during library hours to help visitors.

c. Encourage visitation teams and pastors to take books and CDs to shut-ins and hospital patients, then return later to pick up these materials.

d. Although an unlocked library has its drawbacks, and missing books are a grief to any librarian, I am willing to risk such losses especially if the library cannot be manned adequately. After all, it is the people's library, **not yours!**

4 - CAREFULLY CHOSEN ACQUISITIONS:

a. Policies - Developing a book selection policy requires a functioning library committee and this may be the most important purpose of the committee. It might only meet once or twice a year for the smaller library.

The librarian will serve as the Acquisition Committee chairman. Until a committee is formed, the "librarian pusher" probably functions as this ad hoc committee's chair. Recommendations for new acquisitions will always go through this group. The acquisitions policy must take into account such matters as church doctrine, relevance of new materials, size and scope of the present holdings, quality and copyright dates of new books and of course, cost. Eventually, the Acquisition Committee will function under the board of the church directly.

It will be helpful to state what resources the library will not accept: items such as encyclopedias, certain biographies, textbooks, etc. Be willing to dump unacceptable donations (discreetly).

I strongly encourage each committee to post its policies in writing on the library wall, even if it is just one page long and has ten items. Arthur Saul has a sample policy on page 49 of [121 Ways Toward a More Effective Church Library](#).

The committee should develop an annual or semi-annual "Wish List." This will be formed primarily from recommendations by the committee itself. Some librarians feel an acquisitions Suggestion Box may provide too much pressure in a small library, but in a large church it may be quite helpful to keep you aware of the needs of the congregation. The number of books you'll be able to obtain will obviously be determined by the size of the budget allotted.

b. Budgets - For a starting point in a small library request enough funds from the church board to add three books per month to the library ministry. At current paperback book prices this might require \$50+ per month. For books which you expect will have a high volume readership let me suggest that you seriously consider hardback versions which may run 50% to 75% higher per book.

Gently used books are available online at exceptionally low prices. After all, once a book has been checked out one time, it is a "used" book.

Where there is no budget, volunteer supporters can be recruited to buy one book per year or donate \$3 per month. In addition, you might use the 4 weeks in National Library Month (*April*) to take up an offering each week for selected titles. Some churches have conducted an "adopt-a-book" drive. Members donate the price of a book from a list of titles posted on the library door. The list includes the price of each book. Also try a "Help-Our-Library-Grow-Month" campaign to solicit books. You may also contact the largest church in your city which has a functioning library to help you out with suggestions or even duplicate copies.

If you can't move the books you already have, don't expect any church to approve even a meager budget. Learn how to move the books! Be sure to track how many books were checked out each year.

5 - SOME SYSTEM OF ORGANIZATION

a. Filing Systems: booklovers come in at least two flavors - those who love to see long rows of shelves with labels neatly affixed to their spines, and those who savor the thought of devouring a volume by the light of a crackling fire all the while thinking of passing this treasure on to another booklover. Both are needed in your church. The second of these should be in charge of publicity, the first should oversee the shelving, cataloging, and retrieval systems.

Small book closets can function with a home-style cataloging system [*yes, even in the 21st century*] which has 20 or 30 categories with a couple dozen books in each group. Beyond this smaller collection, however, your library probably needs a little more finesse. The Dewey decimal system may just be the easiest way to go if you grow beyond 500 books.

Whatever your plan, it must be simple enough so that the next librarian (*who might not have the technical skills*) won't get discouraged and drown in the paperwork, just in case your present librarian gets a company transfer to Bolivia. Each of the books at the end of this article has ideas for simplified procedures on card files, due date slips, and check-out procedures.

Let me make only one direct suggestion about music and your library.
DON'T.

With the possible exception of children's music.

b. Room Organization: While church library rooms may not get the volume of use that a community library does, there are at least seven things to keep in mind when getting started:

- 1.) Label every subject or section of books clearly so that it can be read from ten feet away. CAPITALIZED LETTERS are harder to read than lower case. No fancy or colored lettering, please.
- 2.) Obtain good lighting.
- 3.) Provide at least one comfortable reading chair.
- 4.) Post checkout policies conspicuously. Phrases, not sentences.
- 5.) Use book ends.
- 6.) Supply proper sized shelving especially for odd-sized resources.
- 7.) Carpeting, pictures, and silk plants can add a nice decorative touch.

6 - A RETRIEVAL SYSTEM

The cardinal rule for retrieval is to label every book clearly on some designated page inside. The church name should appear on the front cover and/or spine. *Stamped on the edges on the top of the book itself?*

Second in importance is the convenience with which materials can be returned. A box near the entrance of the church is as simple and effective a book return system as any size library needs. There should also be a designated book return spot inside the library.

Although I'm persuaded that it is better to have books checked out that never come back than to have books that are never used, the library committee is responsible to establish procedures for retrieving and reshelving books, mailing out overdue notices, and collecting fines.

My [*casual, unscientific*] observation has been that a reading church tends to be a growing church. If the cobwebs on the tomes of your church's book tomb annoy you, perhaps the Lord can use you to resurrect the vision that someone had in the past.

If you have read this entire article and your church has no library at all, it just may be that God is nudging you to get involved in such a work. The ministry of putting literature into the hands of believers is an exciting one. I trust that the Lord will raise up a small band of workers in many churches who can be used to bless others with a thirst to read.

100% of all library fines buy new books!

TWO APPENDICES BELOW

**A. CHECKLIST FOR RESURRECTING
(or creating)
A LIBRARY MINISTRY**

1. Librarian
 - a. develop list of responsibilities p.#1,2
 - b. determine how appointment should be made
 - c. draft procedures for selecting library committee members
2. Publicity
 - a. choose 3 primary ways to promote your library p. #2
 - b. develop a calendar of library awareness projects
3. Accessibility
 - find a room, closet, or hallway *[your church may not even need a lock]*
4. Acquisition policies
 - a. form an ad hoc committee to select or accumulate books
 - b. develop an acquisitions policy and post it p. #3,4
 - c. begin to construct a budget
5. Organization
 - a. choose a filing system p. #4
 - b. organize your shelf space (or reorganize)
 - c. post check-out procedures
6. Retrieval
 - a. buy labels or a rubber stamp with the church's name and "CHURCH LIBRARY"
 - b. establish book return locations p. #5
 - c. determine reshelving procedures

**B. 7 SECTIONS & 35 CATEGORIES
(for smaller church libraries)**

- I. ANTHROPOLOGY - Man**
- a. Biographies
 - b. Children / Child Rearing
 - c. Counseling / Psychology
 - d. Culture
 - e. Family living
 - f. Health
 - g. Marriage
 - h. Men
 - i. Money
 - j. Sex
 - k. Teens
 - l. Women
 - M. maybe even church cookbooks

II. BIBLIOLOGY -The Bible

- a. Apologetics
- b. Bible Study Tools
- c. Bible Translations
- d. OT Commentaries
- e. NT Commentaries
- f. Memorization helps

III. ECCLESIOLOGY - The Church

- a. Church Leadership
- b. Church Growth
- c. Church Organization
- d. Preaching
- e. Teaching

IV. ESCHATOLOGY - Future Things**V. SOTERIOLOGY - Salvation**

- a. Apologetics (*see Bibliology*)
- b. Cults & World Religions
- c. Evangelism
- d. Missions
- e. Salvation

VI. SPIRITUAL LIFE

- a. Prayer
- b. Spiritual Life & Christian Living
- c. Christian novels

VII. THEOLOGY PROPER - The Study of God

- a. God the Father
- b. God the Son
- c. God the Holy Spirit

“C’mon, you can make a list better than this!”