How to Build a Great Church Library

If you're passionate about books but your church owns only some dusty commentaries, you may want to consider starting a church library. Here's how.

by Sheila Wray Gregoire

ven if you begin with only a few titles, thinking through your purpose at the outset is a must, says Alison McCullough, board member of the Church Library Association of Ontario (CLAO) and volunteer in the library at Hebron Christian Reformed Church in Whitby, Ontario. "First and foremost," she believes, "this is a ministry."

Grace Snip, a former CLAO board member and librarian at First Christian Reformed Church in Orillia, Ontario, agrees.

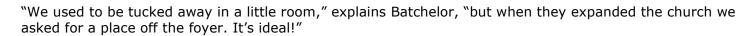
To Snip, "A library isn't about books – it's about getting the right resource into the right hands at the right time."

Ask for resources

Once you have established how the library will fit into the mission of your church, draft a proposal asking the leadership for both space and money.

In church libraries, as in real estate, location is almost everything. The library at Parksville Fellowship Baptist

Church on Vancouver Island, where Olive Batchelor volunteers, is a bustling place with 200 visitors every Sunday.



Weed ruthlessly

To create an enticing library, weed through your collection, urges Grace Snip. If your shelves are filled with dilapidated or outdated volumes, people won't browse.



This year Judy McIntosh, a board member of the Congregational Libraries Association of British Columbia (CLABC) and librarian at Richmond Presbyterian Church, had to weed out even good books in order to increase her library's appeal. Its shelves span both walls of a wide hallway, which doesn't provide room for display. She decided to free up one shelf per bay to highlight some books by turning the covers out. "We had to get rid of almost a quarter of our books," she explains. "But the spines don't tell enough of a story."

Know your congregation

Part of knowing what to throw out and what to purchase is knowing whom you're serving. To do that you must become familiar with the doctrines of your church. "The library has to support the teaching of the congregation," McIntosh explains. The first things she purged at her library were the *Left Behind* novels. "We're Reformed and they contradict Reformed teaching."

Grace Snip also advises librarians to keep track of what subjects are being covered in the sermons and small group teaching so that the library carries these topics.

Consider, too, the demographics of your congregation. If your church has



"A library isn't about books – it's about getting the right resource into the right hands at the right time," says Grace Snip of First Christian Reformed Church in Orillia, Ontario.

young families, DVDs can be a big draw.

If your church is mainly seniors, though, a garage sale of your children's materials may be in order. Similarly, if your church was once largely Caucasian but now is multicultural, the library needs to reflect that change.

And don't forget the men!

Olive Batchelor advises keeping good non-fiction books on hand because many men tend to read for information rather than for pleasure.

If you're unsure of your church's needs, Catherine Betts found surveying her congregation at Bakersview Mennonite Brethren Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia, to be helpful. A book lover herself, Betts expected to have the surveys returned with lists of authors people wanted. Instead, the survey came back strongly in favour of DVDs.

Think outside the box

Increasingly church libraries are focusing on multimedia. "You have to meet people's needs not only in terms of resources but also in terms of format," Grace Snip explains. Her library carries games and puzzles along with books, DVDs, music CDs and teaching CDs. And the youth group loves the quiz books she buys!

Donate Used Materials to the Christian Salvage Mission

If you're weeding out your library and you find things you no longer need, the Christian Salvage Mission wants them! They collect and sort used Christian resources and ship them to overseas missions where they're desperately needed.

They accept:

- Bibles
- Christian support books (concordances,
- Bible dictionaries, commentaries, etc.)
- Sunday school materials
- Daily Bread devotionals (or any devotional)
- Christian fiction
- Children's books
- DVDs and VHS
- French materials

They then ship English materials to India, Africa and the Caribbean, and French materials to Haiti.

For a more complete listing of what they accept and for information on drop-off locations around Canada, visit www.csmcanada.org. –SWG

Shop shrewdly

Before you spend a chunk of your first budget, McCullough advises librarians to check what's in the public library. Oshawa Public Library, for instance, carries many Christian bestsellers so there's not necessarily a need to invest their church budget in books that are already available. Judy McIntosh agrees. "Why duplicate in the church with our few budget dollars what is already available for free elsewhere?"

Once you've decided what materials to purchase, visit your local Christian bookstore. Many hold "librarian nights" once or twice a year with discounts on purchases so you can get the most value for your dollar.

Don't take shortcuts

When launching a library, it's natural to want to do things the easy way. But be careful! Use the Dewey decimal system, advise all the librarians, or chances are you'll have to reclassify everything years down the road when your collection grows larger.

Get wired - or not?

A computer system makes checkout easier, produces overdue notices automatically, creates waiting lists and helps to keep

track of your collection. Catherine Betts finds her computer system useful in the weeding process too. "I can take a good and hard look at books that have been sitting there for two years, and ask whether we can free up that space for something else."

But as helpful as a computer can be, the librarians agree that, if you only have a few hundred items, it's better to invest in quality resources. Once the collection reaches a few thousand, then it's time to automate.

Don't let them forget

Alison McCullough's library announces new books in the church bulletin. Judy McIntosh places displays in the

church hall. Recently, when the PGA (Presbyterian Golfers Association) met at her church, she created a display of books about golf and God. If your library is to serve the congregation, reminding them what the library has to offer is one of the most important aspects of fulfilling your ministry.

Plan to avoid pitfalls

One of the biggest traps a library can fall into, says Grace Snip, is being inconsistent. Whether it's the circulation policy, the late policy or even the library hours, if you don't take these seriously, people won't take the ministry of the library seriously.

A librarian must also be ready for conflict, warns McCullough. Invariably a congregation member will complain at some point about the doctrine or writing style of a book. Having a policy to deal with these complaints helps to resolve them with less stress.

Finally, all librarians should aim to work themselves out of a job. Judy McIntosh has been the librarian for 14 years and she is now grooming some volunteers to take over – not because she wants to quit but because, as she says, "If you want your ministry to outlast you, you must mentor others."

Where to Find Help

For newsletters, manuals, advice and conferences, you can join the Church Library Association of Ontario (www.churchlibraries.ca) or the Congregational Libraries Association of British Columbia (contact Linda Baxter, membership chair, at r lbaxter@telus.net).

Both associations charge \$15/year membership dues. Out-of-province churches are welcome to join. For library software, the experts seem to agree to recommend ResourceMate (www.resourcemate.com). It is used by more than 500 Canadian churches. Current cost is \$195, with a \$60 optional yearly fee for extras. n –SWG

Ask for help

In Canada, both Ontario and British Columbia have church library associations, which hold conferences, publish newsletters and sell manuals on setting up libraries. If you're not a resident of those provinces, you can still join to receive their materials. (See sidebar on this page.)

Grace Snip also suggests that new librarians ask other local churches for advice. Public librarians and school librarians know how to classify books and can often point you to suppliers for racks, pockets, cards and spine labels.

Celebrate

For Grace Snip, building a thriving library is a process she has had to measure in years. When she started, people tended to overlook the library when they needed help. "Now I have people coming to me and saying, 'There have been a number of deaths of people close to us and our daughter is asking questions. Do you have anything?" And then she does the dance of joy.

Sheila Wray Gregoire is the author of <u>How Big is Your Umbrella: Weathering the Storms of Life</u>. You can sign up for her free e-zine at <u>www.SheilaWrayGregoire.com</u>.





To Love, Honor, and Vacuum: When You Feel More Like a Maid Than a Wife and Mother

A must read for any woman who finds herself too busy, too tired and too frustrated to enjoy and cherish the most important blessings in her life mainly her husband, her children and her Lord.

How Big Is Your Umbrella?

In this down-to-earth, practical book, author Sheila Wray Gregoire takes readers on a journey through many

of her own hurts. From a broken engagement to the loss of a child, Sheila is well equipped to teach others about God's faithfulness in tough times.

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