

Theological Libraries in Prison

Prison Theological Libraries: New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

by Jeff Griffin

Our main campus involvement in the prison library includes: (1) collecting and evaluation of donations, (2) cataloging of items, (3) providing additional resources at a professor's request, and (4) purchasing additional items for new course offerings or courses not taught for several semesters.

Resources provided focus primarily on print resources. If professors request audio-visual aids, these are made available. Because of a lack of Internet access, computers provide only word processing and Bible software capability.

Challenges to establishing a prison library can be substantial if for no other reason than that few librarians have launched a brand new library operation. That said, libraries within prisons are nothing new. For many decades, prisons have provided legal libraries along with leisure and listening libraries as part of self-improvement and educational programs. The importance of libraries in the US prison system is observed in the inclusion of library services among two of the eleven "Inmate Rights and Responsibilities" as found in the Federal Bureau of Prisons *Inmate Information Handbook*:

Rights: 8. You have the right to participate in the use of law library reference materials to assist you in resolving legal problems. You also have the right to receive help when it is available through a legal assistance program. 9. You have the right to a wide range of reading materials for educational purposes and for your own enjoyment. These materials may include magazines and newspapers sent from the community, with certain restrictions.

Responsibilities: 8. It is your responsibility to use these resources in keeping with the procedures and schedule prescribed and to respect the rights of other inmates to use the materials and assistance. 9. It is your responsibility to seek and utilize such materials for your personal benefit without depriving others of their equal rights to the use of this materials.¹

Initially, librarians launching a new prison library might believe that finding and training inmate staff would be the most significant challenge of all. Staffing a prison library, however, often is accomplished with minimal effort. Inmates covet any indoor and air-conditioned work responsibilities in comparison to most other prison labor assignments. Introduction of a theological library is a natural addition to what is already an established prisoner service. Inmates with significant law library expertise are readily found. Such expertise is easily adaptable to the needs and requirements of a theological library.

Collection development for a prison-based theological library is a unique challenge. Inmates often enter incarceration with profound emotional and mental health struggles. Including a variety of books in the collection, covering such topics as anger management, fear, bitterness, manhood/womanhood, and overcoming addictions, is essential to a theological student's overall character building and development of Christian maturity.

Due to the diverse faith backgrounds of the students, which are often more varied than a traditional seminary student body, a more inclusive collection policy is often required than that of a typical denominationally-based seminary library. The collection will require a breadth of theological interest that covers Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions. Other non-Christian religious traditions will also require some representation, including Judaism and Islam. Generally speaking, however, a theological collection serves first and foremost to support the academic needs of course offerings.

¹ Federal Bureau of Prisons, *Inmate Information Handbook* (Safford, AZ: Federal Correctional Institution: 2015): 60, https://www.bop.gov/locations/institutions/saf/SAF_aohandbook.pdf.

Jeff Griffin is Dean of Libraries at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana.