The Seminary Library and the Continuing Education of the Minister

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The seminary library has a responsibility to graduates after they leave the campus. This obligation exists for as long as the graduate is actively engaged in the ministry, and regardless of the demand (or lack of it) from graduates. The responsibility may not be recognized by the present generation of ministers, and may not be expressed until an appetite for extension service has been whetted by the library itself. Why should a library thus create or enlarge a market for its services—especially today when many libraries are girding for those pressures soon to come with doubled (or more!) seminary enrollments? Four reasons may be noted to support this contention:

1. Proper stewardship demands an extension service. The vast expenditure of money and effort in the creation of great theological libraries, as described elsewhere in this issue, will lead to a circumscribed use of these literary treasures unless there is also developed a policy for widening the usefulness of theological collections. Even with burgeoning student enrollments on the campus, the library cannot achieve its full potential of service without a program of off-campus service. Stewardship of resources provided by the church requires that the library continue to serve ministers. From the standpoint of the best use of the investment involved in a theological library, therefore, an extension program is desirable.

2. There is also the service motive. If the theological library has the capacity to serve an expanding church in its wide outreach, does this library not have an obligation to stretch its resources to make them available as broadly as possible? If it is the mission of the seminary graduate to serve others, it would appear to be incumbent

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upon the campus library likewise to be the servant of all—as far as its means will allow.

3. Another motive that has both selfish and unselfish facets is the increase of loyalty and willingness to support theological education. Seminaries frequently solicit financial gifts from or through their graduates. A program of continuing library service extended to alumni frequently stirs them to renewal of interest in the alma mater and financial contributions to express this interest. Provision of library service for ministers residing in the seminary's constituency—including non-alumni—builds good will on the part of these ministers toward the seminary. This motive alone does not compel the development of an extension program, perhaps, but in company with others it has a place.

4. The basic reason for an extension program by a theological library is that the library may meet specific needs in the continuing theological education of ministers. What are these needs?

The first is the need to study. With the multiple pressures upon him the minister may succumb to the temptation to believe that the intensive study of any subject is a luxury that he cannot afford, and that he must content himself with browsing or skimming. With this viewpoint he may become a Reader's Digest sort of student, devoting at most a few minutes to a subject. Halford Luccock wryly remarks that many a man has taken Paul's statement, "This one thing I do," and has made it read, "These forty things I dabble in." The minister who is in earnest about his proficiency needs to study, wrestling with a subject until he has achieved some degree of mastery of its content.

A second need of the minister is system: that is, he needs a program of study. If it is imperative that he dig intensively to gain some comprehension of a given subject, it is likewise essential that he spread extensively across the whole range of theological knowledge. He must choose with care and imagination those subjects upon which he intends to concentrate, covering the major disciplines of theology in a sequence determined by his orientation as a minister, and planned particularly with reference to his long range development as a minister. His objective is twofold: both to acquire knowledge that will be useful, and to nourish resources for contemplative, creative thought. Like every educational pursuit, this projection of personal learning needs does not just "happen": it is created through imagination and insight. It ranges both more deeply and more broadly than
his sermon preparation for next Sunday—or even his sermons for the next month! He is concerned to study not only what already interests him but also the literature of subjects that have never yet excited his interest. He obviously cannot pursue every subject to its limits; therefore he must choose those which are vital as his "majors" and content himself with "minors" in those topics which are peripheral to his ministry. The minister needs to study according to a plan which he has formulated with care in order to achieve clearly defined objectives.

A third need of the minister is consistency in his study. He must resolve to stay with his systematic study throughout his active life, working toward both immediate and also long range goals. An impression that has been commonly noted in appraisals of the pastoral ministry in our day is that the minister largely molds his routines according to the pressures exerted upon him, giving himself to those activities where the demands are heaviest. Unquestionably he should plan his study program in view of commitments to preach and to teach, rather than expecting to carry on his study in a vacuum as a work of pure scholarship for its own sake. One of the first components of a minister’s life to succumb when many things compete for his time is his long range study program. Persons or committees when neglected by the minister may clamor for his attention, but the unopened books on his shelf and the unexplored recesses of his mind have no such vocal means by which to compete for his time. Telephones often interrupt study hours and disrupt a train of thought which cannot be recovered. Thoughtless visitors break into time reserved for study, and intrude casual or meaningless chatter. Persistent pursuit of his study program requires him to capture time by self-discipline and by educating others to understand his objectives. Many congregations are ready to adopt the same attitude toward his study time that the minister himself shows: if he is in earnest, his people will support his efforts; if he shows that he values study time lightly, they will so regard it. Unconsciously he may allow his thirst for study to be dissipated until he scarcely knows that he has no longer any program worthy of the name.

H. R. Niebuhr in The Purpose Of The Church And Its Ministry asserts bluntly: “A theological education which does not lead young men and women to embark on a continuous, ever-incomplete but ever-sustained effort to study and to understand the meaning of their work and of the situations in which they labor is neither theological
nor education." The pastor's study program should be conceived deliberately to meet his objectives as a minister, then pursued resolutely despite the temptations to drop it because of the difficulties encountered.

The theological library through its extension program offers the most satisfactory answer to the needs in the continuing education of ministers. With some notable exceptions, parish ministers are likely to engage in sustained, systematic study only if some major obstacles are cleared away. Briefly noted, these problems are: (1) uncertainty as to "best books"; (2) availability of these books; (3) the discouragements that harass disciplined study plans; and (4) the intellectual impoverishment occasioned by the paucity of colleagues who are prepared for or interested in theological dialogue on a deep level. Through its extension program the seminary library may meet directly problems one and two, and the librarian may be a decisive factor in regard to the third. At least a partial answer to problem four may be provided by the seminary library and faculty jointly.

The parish minister is far more likely to continue his study if he feels confident that he is reading the most valuable works on a given subject. Remote from the campus library where once he could seek bibliographic guidance, he now hesitates to read in areas where his knowledge is limited. His study languishes. Yet he may have available to him by mail the counsel of a host of bibliographic experts via the theological library.

The seminary library may also meet a need of ministers by making the books available by mail. With the ever-increasing cost of books, the minister often regards the purchase of books as beyond his means, no matter how desirable they may be. If he can obtain books from a library, he will have at his disposal a more comprehensive selection than he could ever hope to buy for his own shelves. Incidentally, the very fact that these books are on loan from a library, and have a terminal date by which they must be returned, furnishes added incentive for their use immediately upon receipt—and this motivation is demonstrably at work inciting borrowers to read books that would remain unopened if they stood on their personal library shelves!

A third service which the library may render in meeting ministers' study needs is to evince a sympathetic concern for their study programs. The knowledge that someone cares, expressing a personal interest in the progress of his efforts to broaden his education, is sometimes sufficient spur to keep a discouraged minister on the track.
The library staff may demonstrate this kind of interest even at a distance and encourage the minister to pursue his quest for learning. A fourth provision which the seminary may offer to support the minister in his study program is an occasional opportunity to engage in resident study in company with other scholars. This involvement in a learning group may furnish stimulus for study that will carry over through years of parish ministry, both sharpening the focus as to the point and range of a minister’s study program, and adding fresh incentive to his study because he will have occasions when the fruits of his scholarship will be shared with others engaged in like pursuits while serving as parish ministers. This kind of in-service residential study is obviously not the solitary domain of the seminary library, but the impetus for such a provision may well be given by the library.

The four areas of service which have been noted are not merely theoretical delineations of an ideal program: they are actual. American theological libraries are presently serving in these ways, encouraging and enabling ministers to continue their education.

Without doubt the most widely offered service is bibliographical counsel. Librarians offer guidance in book selection by correspondence, at alumni meetings, in alumni and seminary publications of a variety of types, as well as in personal conferences. Where the librarian’s subject knowledge or experience is limited, he may rely on the counsel of his faculty colleagues to supply the needed suggestions. Failing this counsel, he may seek help from one of the up-to-date lists of theological books.

Theological books are now widely available by mail loan in the United States. A sizable and steadily increasing number of theological libraries in the United States now offer the loan of books by mail. In a few cases the extension library is a separate collection circulating by mail only, but the usual practice is to lend from the same book collections that serve campus borrowers. Notable among the separate circulating mail collections are Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina; Kessler Circulating Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee; and Auburn Lending Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York, the latter serving Presbyterian ministers in New York State. Service arrangements differ: some libraries serve only their schools’ alumni; some serve only within a limited geographical area. Others serve without restriction, mailing books to ministers within the continental United States. At least three major theological libraries (none of which is seminary-connected) lend books by mail without
charge, to ministers throughout the United States. They are the Congregational Library, 14 Beacon St., Boston 8, Massachusetts; General Theological Library, 53 Mt. Vernon St., Boston 8, Massachusetts; and Zion Research Library, 120 Seaver St., Brookline 46, Massachusetts. All three issue quarterly book lists, available on request. At least forty libraries connected with seminaries lend books regularly to ministers via mail (this number is in addition to those libraries which lend on interlibrary loan only). When one considers that many theological library collections have been developed largely within the last thirty years, the number of libraries now offering extension service is impressive. Furthermore, the total number of theological libraries in this country is not large: The American Association of Theological Schools has at this writing eighty-two accredited members and forty-three associate members (often one major factor preventing their full accreditation is library inadequacy). In view of the number of theological libraries in the nation, the proportion of those rendering extension service by mail is high.

There is also the factor of increased demand for library service to seminary students in residence. The enrollment of theological seminaries in the United States has risen from 12,448 in 1940 to 21,771 in 1958–59. The rise in student population has resulted in heavier demands for books on the campus. Classroom demands frequently require curtailment of mail loans in some subject fields at specified periods during the academic year.

An important function of the librarian of a theological seminary is aiding and abetting the student in his quest for learning. As undergraduate theological students on a seminary campus, many men have come to feel that the librarian is one of their most dependable partners in the persistent pursuit of knowledge. Their rapport with the librarian continues after their graduation, and they maintain touch with him or her through correspondence and occasional personal visits. The knowledge that the librarian has a continuing interest in the minister's study—his subjects of inquiry and the status of his current project—is often an important factor in the latter's resolution to stay with his educational effort in spite of obstacles. A brief letter from a seminary librarian has been known to spark a pastor to resume a study program laid aside because of pressures of time. This quality of concern may be expressed by any or all members of a theological faculty, it is true; but the seminary librarian is often in a favorable position to indicate this sympathy and add tangible evidence of his
sincerity through regular book service by mail. This personalized “service” cannot be made a part of a formal structure or program, but it is an influential factor in many ministers’ study life.

A major concern is that theological library extension service be designed and operated in such fashion that it undergird serious study efforts—so far as practicable—rather than merely scatter books by mail without regard for their place in a systematic pursuit of a subject interest. Circulation by mail is not an end in itself for theological educators; the loan of books that contribute directly to educational goals is regarded as a more worthy objective. That is, the library seeks to stimulate ministers to develop and maintain a systematic study program, relying largely on the extension service to supplement personal libraries.

In view of this objective, the library at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, has developed a Directed Study Program for ministers. Members of the seminary faculty produce on request from the library brief guides to the literature of specific subjects, recommending from ten to fifteen books, noting their particular contributions to the subject, and suggesting an order in which they may be read with greatest profit. The library in turn obtains multiple copies of the recommended books, and lends them on a regular schedule to nonresident ministers. The calendar of shipments is kept flexible, so that the needs of the extension borrower may be taken into account. Whenever a loan renewal is necessary, the borrower asks for it, and the library delays shipment of the next recommended book. The number of extra copies of recommended books and the length of the loan period determine the number of pastors to be accommodated concurrently and the frequency with which new groups may be enrolled. For example, if three copies of each title are bought, and the loan period is three weeks, three persons may be enrolled for a given subject each four weeks (allowing a few days’ grace for delays in return of books).

The participant in the Directed Study Program works for those values and educational goals which he wishes to achieve. He submits no written papers or reviews of his reading, and receives no credit toward an academic degree. It will be observed that the Directed Study Program provides three major services that correspond to pastors’ needs: guidance in book selection, availability of books by mail, and continuous interest in the minister’s study. Response to the Directed Study Program through eleven years (1950–60) has shown
that ministers are interested in directed study. At this writing the thirty-two courses of study have been taken a total of 1,479 times in eleven years.

A further development of the Directed Study Program is the enlistment of local study groups in various centers distant from the campus, where pastors of an area gather periodically for study and discussion of their reading. Through the seminary library extension service books are provided to supplement study material available to the participants. The seminary faculty’s guidance is sought by the ministers after the size, constituents, and primary aims of their group have been determined. Bibliographical counsel and occasional personal appearances with these groups are the faculty’s contribution to these study groups. The personnel involved in such groups changes as pastoral changes occur, and regrouping becomes necessary from time to time. The initiative in planning and carrying through these study group arrangements (while they may be stimulated from the library) is the responsibility of the local pastors.

Some seminaries invite small groups of ministers into the campus community during the academic term for sustained resident study, centered largely in the library. This program differs from graduate study leading to the Th.M. or equivalent degrees and from provisions whereby nearby ministers come in for classroom courses at the seminary. It is also qualitatively different from most of the programs offered by thirty-five or more seminaries in summer sessions. Among the seminaries which have brought in ministers for resident study during the academic year are Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, Berkeley, California; Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut; and Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia. Two specialized institutions separate from seminaries use library facilities as significant elements of their programs: the College of Preachers, Washington Cathedral, Washington, D.C.; and the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The former emphasizes the preaching function and the latter the pastoral responsibility, but neither preaching nor pastoral work is narrowly conceived in their programs.

Soon after World War II, the United States Council on Foreign Relations set up fellowships at strategic centers for American foreign correspondents, “to help them to increase their competence to report and interpret events abroad...to give men who have been preoccupied with meeting deadlines an opportunity to broaden their
perspective by means of a coordinated program of reading, study and informal discussion.”

Seminary resident programs offer pastors—men who have been “preoccupied with meeting deadlines”—a similar opportunity for reading, study, and informal discussion. Their study programs have been set up with the guidance of subject experts in their fields of special interest. From time to time the group gathers for interchange on subjects of mutual concern, and occasional informal conversations with members of the seminary faculty. Thus the pastor has opportunity both for independent study and for group conferences where he may reflect upon his ministry, test the validity of his ideas, and probe for deeper understanding of issues.

The seminary library is the locale in which this dialogue occurs and often a catalyst. The pastors in residence work individually in library carrels, and gather in library seminar rooms for their group discussions which often involve books drawn from the stacks. Daily conferences are arranged between the group of ministers and members of the seminary faculty for the joint exploration of subjects. Definite plans for orderly reading are projected by the ministers toward the end of their residence, as an outgrowth of the supplement to the education gained on campus.

In this type of residential study in the library and group learning, participants value most the opportunity for reflection on the aims of the ministry and a fresh evaluation of their life and work in view of these purposes. This analysis and redirection proceed from the discussions which go on almost constantly among the participants, as they share with one another the fruits of study and personal experience. Where the pastors have been merged with seminarians in one community, both they and the seminary students have profited from interchanges on ministerial concerns. Frequently the minister returns to his home with renewed determination to take time for study as a matter of top priority. His period of uninterrupted study has given him a fresh appreciation of the place that systematic study has in his own life. He expresses amazement that he can accomplish so much in a few days when there are no telephone calls or other interruptions of his study. He returns to his home with new zeal for his calling and resolution to carry on a long-range study program. He has come to see with fresh clarity how vital is an arrangement for systematic in-take of ideas, and periodic re-evaluation of his priorities.
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if he is to remain vigorous in his thinking and dynamic in his communication of the gospel.

Through this rhythm by which a minister returns to the seminary campus and library for periodic residence, then moves back to his pastoral responsibilities, the total life of the church is invigorated. As the pastor's study life is kept robust, the effects are seen in his preaching, teaching, pastoral, and administrative roles.

The extension service from seminary libraries is at present generally confined to bibliographic counsel and book loans by mail. At this writing a fully developed Directed Study Program for ministers is available from only three centers (Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, Berkeley, California; Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago; and Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia), and a year-around program of residential study by pastors is found only at Union Seminary in Richmond. Widespread interest in a broader provision of library extension services is evident. Both seminary librarians and administrators show a readiness to consider ways and means by which their libraries may be used by a larger constituency.

The development of extension service calls for imaginative cooperation among the theological libraries of the country. There are opportunities for a systematic division of responsibility within geographical areas of the nation, so that certain institutions assume as their specific assignment the continuing education of the ministers of their areas without regard for their denominational or earlier seminary ties. In such an arrangement the libraries would offer mail loans, directed study courses, and opportunities for on-campus and off-campus study groups to gather for concentrated work.

The rapid enlargement of Directed Study Programs awaits a cooperative plan for the production of study guides. Whereas one seminary faculty could be expected to produce perhaps ten or twelve guides in a year, a cooperative attempt may yield a hundred guides from many different faculties in the same period. A library could then select from among available guides those which that library would choose to offer its patrons. With the wealth of bibliographic guidance available from a sizable group of experts across the nation, the Directed Study Programs would take on important dimensions both of extent and of depth, as thousands of ministers began to study choice books under the guidance of highly qualified tutors.

The spacing of seminaries across the United States and Canada
makes possible a widespread program of resident study, if cooperative efforts are undertaken to enable ministers to study for periods of one to three weeks in a seminary library. Coordinated plans for such a project await active support from associations of seminaries and/or libraries.

With electronic communication media entering a new era, the possibilities for library extension in conjunction with other means of communication are dazzling. The uses of radio and television in education are being widely studied, and theological educators will watch alertly to capitalize on those media which hold promise for their field.

The library of a seminary may properly serve an archival function as the repository of the treasured works of past generations and the custodian of the literary heritage from earlier days. Yet the library has also the mission of dispersing to a broad community of learners the useful guides to an understanding of our contemporary culture and the church’s ministry in and to that culture. If the library were to conceive its function merely in terms of archival depository, and omit its place as a faithful communicator of the Christian faith, that library’s self-view would be severely truncated. Happily, most libraries see themselves as institutions created to serve—as many as possible, as widely spread as necessary, for as long as required.

References