

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Stewart, David and Gaetz, Ivan (2012) "Among the Angels? Exploring Collaborations of the American Theological Library Association: An Interview with David Stewart," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol4/iss2/6>

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## Among the Angels? Exploring Collaborations of the American Theological Library Association: An Interview with David Stewart

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### Abstract

David Stewart, past President of the American Theological Library Association, reflects on various collaborative initiatives of ATLA.

Keywords: ATLA, theological librarianship; ATS

*Collaborative Librarianship* interviewed David Stewart, Director of Libraries, Bethel University, Saint Paul, MN, and a member of CL's Advisory Board, on the nature, challenges and opportunities for collaboration in a subject-focused, special academic library organization.

David has three graduate degrees in religion and theology, as well as a Master of Library and Information degree from the University of Western Ontario. He has worked in four different library settings: Regent College in Vancouver, Princeton Theological Seminary, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, and (since January 2010) Bethel University, a private university with programs and libraries in five different locations. David has served on various committees within the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) was an ATLA board member for five years, including two as President.

**CL:** The American Theological Library Association (ATLA) has been a major focus in your professional life since becoming a librarian but many librarians outside the world of theology may not be familiar with ATLA. Could you provide a "Wikipedian" snapshot of this consortium?

**Stewart:** There are other organizations that are somewhat similar – The Association of Christian Librarians, the Association of Jewish Librarians, the Catholic Library Association, etc. – but

ATLA is the primary "guild" for people who work in (or are interested in working in) religious or theological librarianship. The most distinctive thing about ATLA is that it's a hybrid of a membership association and an indexing and database producer.

Examples of ATLA products include *ATLA Religion Database (ATLA RDB)*, *ATLASerials (ATLAS)*, and *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index (ATLA CPLI)*, which are subscribed to by thousands of institutions worldwide. *ATLA RDB* is the premier online index of citations covering journal articles, book reviews, and essay collections in all fields of religion. *ATLAS* is an online full-text collection of major religion and theology journals. *ATLA CPLI* provides indexing of periodicals, essay collections, church documents, papal documents and electronic resources expressly addressing the practice and intellectual tradition of Roman Catholicism.

ATLA is comprised mostly of the libraries and personnel who are associated with seminaries in the United States and Canada. At its core, ATLA serves as an association of libraries aligned through their parent institutions that are members of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the United States and Canada ([www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu)), although there is no administrative connection between these two organizations. The main relationship between ATS and ATLA centers on the accreditation standards



Stewart & Gaetz: Among the Angels?

delineated by ATS for the libraries that serve the schools and seminaries.

Currently, there are about 1000 institutional, individual, and affiliate members of ATLA. The reach of ATLA goes beyond North America, and in fact has a standing committee that focuses on and fosters partnerships and support for theological libraries in other parts of the world. At this point, international collaboration has been most successful in Europe and Southeast Asia.

ATLA was founded in 1947 and held its first meeting in Louisville, Kentucky that summer. Initially, ATLA was essentially (though not officially) Protestant – mainly because Catholic theological libraries had their own sub-group of the American Library Association. In the 1950s, Catholic libraries became interested in joining ATLA and were completely welcomed into the Association. Other non-Christian religious traditions are also now represented in the organization. ATLA is very interested in diversifying its membership.

Since its founding, and into the 1970s, ALTA was completely a volunteer organization, but with growth in membership and expansion of programs and to support various initiatives, a staff has gradually been built up to support its initiatives and programs.

Today, the central offices of ATLA are located in downtown Chicago. The organization maintains an annual budget of about \$6,000,000 to support the many facets of its operations. Currently, Brenda Bailey-Hainer is the Executive Director of ATLA. She also is a member of the Advisory Board of *Collaborative Librarianship*.

**CL:** You have been involved in the ATLA for a good number of years and have led the organization in various capacities. What have been some examples of its achievements in library collaboration and cooperation in recent years?

**Stewart:** One clear example has more to do with an initiative of one particular library than the organization as a whole. The Yale Divinity Library (of Yale Divinity School), a key member of ATLA since its founding, has developed over the years an arrangement with an organization

of theological libraries in Southeast Asia that collects theological literature from the region and makes this available to the Yale Divinity Library. In exchange, the Yale Divinity Library makes available to the partner libraries in Asia various resources from North America.

Another example is ATLA's listserv that invites requests from non-North American theological libraries seeking certain resources through ATLA. Invariably, ATLA libraries step forward to meet these requests.

A third example comes from the International Collaboration Committee of ATLA. This group has designated funds (limited, but still useful) that are used by ATLA members to assist in travel abroad for library support projects of one kind or another. A full account of the work of the Committee is available at the ATLA website: <https://www.atla.com/Members/divisions/committees/Pages/International-Collaboration-Committee.aspx>

**CL:** In your experience participating and leading ATLA, what are the qualities that help make this organization “work” as a collaborative enterprise?

**Stewart:** First, I make a disclaimer: usually I am suspicious about a discussion of “values” because it is based on assumptions more than realities, and with respect to meaningful collaboration, it is always better to deal with reality rather than simply lofty aspirations. However, in the realm of theological librarianship, values actually do matter and they make a difference. The tangibles include a broad-based commitment to serving the faith community or communities of each theological library. This means it is usually pretty straightforward to pull together the people and the resources to support worthwhile library initiatives.

For example, a few years ago, ATLA developed a course on theological librarianship to fill a void in options available to students in librarianship interested in pursuing a career with a theological focus or in providing professional development opportunity to librarians already in the field. The course took about three years to develop, but ATLA was uniquely positioned to



## Stewart &amp; Gaetz: Among the Angels?

design the course because of the strong commitment to the profession and to serving students and faculty of theology. The course, offered through the University of Illinois School of Library and Information Science, has proven to be very successful under the leadership of Dr. Carisse Berryhill, adjunct lecturer at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. For a good overview of the course, see:

<https://www.atla.com/Members/development/Pages/UIUC.aspx>

**CL:** As an association of "special libraries" of sorts, what are some of the unique challenges and opportunities concerning ATLA libraries working together?

**Stewart:** Challenges include an overall realignment in theological education that directly affects the libraries that support it. In effect, there may be too many seminaries for the need, and to see all libraries thrive given this decline is not realistic. Theological libraries, like their parent institutions, need to redefine their constituencies. Librarians need to find a way to engage this discussion, and to be active participants, rather than simply waiting for hopeful or favorable outcomes.

A related challenge pertains to the new trend in theological education toward online delivery formats. This raises the questions of the changing profile and a redistribution of the pool of students. One question surfaces as to the type of library resources that are needed to support online students. Another question is how well existing theological libraries are equipped to offer these new kinds of resources.

A third challenge concerns institutional support for theological libraries, not the least being financial support. There are other types of support as well, including participating in meaningful ways in the decision-making processes of the parent institution, engaging librarians more effectively in the teaching mission of seminaries, positioning the library in better ways in the promotional and development initiatives of the organization overall.

Finally – and this is a challenge as well as an opportunity – there is a need to recast collection

development. Not all theological libraries can or should build collections in the same way. Reconsidering this is a challenge, but it also raises the opportunity to rethink the relationship between a given library and the curricular objectives of the institution it serves. Specifically, most theological libraries are having to become more demand-driven, and thus shift from print materials to electronic as a medium that is more agile: wider access by number and geographically, more rapid acquisition, and more easily configured to a specific community and readership. As libraries become more adept in handling electronic resources, there opens up as well a vast array of open access materials.

Many small- to mid-sized libraries are – sometimes reluctantly – accommodating themselves to the fact that only a few larger libraries need to (or indeed can afford to) invest significant financial resources into continuing to amass special collections. Often efforts are much more wisely invested in developing smaller, locally-built collections, which shed light on what is unique about a particular school and/or its tradition.

**CL:** Perhaps not every effort in library collaboration actually works well or perhaps does not work at all. Are there examples like this from ATLA, and if so, why have difficulties emerged that do not make some projects successful?

**Stewart:** In general terms, difficulties in collaboration commonly stem from a lack of vision, and a lack of vision often stems from dire financial situations. This tends to cause librarians to think not in terms of new opportunities but rather of how to cut back services, reduce costs and go into survival mode. This leads to less thought about collaboration, expansion and new ways to serve constituencies. Unfortunately, this cycle in thinking seems to be a significant problem in a number of ATLA libraries.

More specifically, there are two examples to mention. The first pertains to sustainability. During the early years of the last decade, ATLA was able to offer grant funding to launch the Cooperative Digital Resources initiative (<https://www2.atla.com/digitalresources/>). The primary objective was to digitize materials important in theological research and to help



Stewart & Gaetz: Among the Angels?

smaller institutions get a start in offering digital resources. Some collections were created under this program but funding to sustain the initiative was not forthcoming. As a result, significant blocks of these materials were not integrated into individual collections. Because questions for sustainability may not be addressed, excellent collaborative programs sometimes fail.

Another example pertains to initiative and opportunism. ATLA distributes grants to support collaborative initiatives in various regions of the country. These grants provide support to sub-groups of ATLA for meetings and joint programs. Funding, albeit limited, is available, but there has not always been sufficient initiative from regional groups to exploit these opportunities. There may be plenty of reasons for regional groups not moving forward on joint initiatives—lack of staffing, institutional pressures, and so forth—but a lack of opportunism can be a major barrier to collaboration.

**CL:** As related to cooperation and partnerships, are there general principles that might apply in most or in all smaller library associations?

**Stewart:** Yes. Most importantly, opportunities need to be pitched to the many rather than the few. Often, smaller libraries (and the gap between libraries with huge resources and libraries with few resources in ATLA is vast) have a more intense awareness of what they cannot do because they are small. Smaller libraries can become entrenched in thinking like this so that in times of economic restraint, just when opportunism and creative thinking is needed most, it tends to wane. Inasmuch as smaller libraries are more vulnerable to this pattern of thought, collaborative ventures that reach smaller institutions and libraries have much greater potential in making a positive difference.

Another principle to guide smaller libraries in fostering collaboration is to understand the unique contribution each collection can make to a larger whole. No matter how small a library may be, it invariably has unique resources that could make a distinctive contribution to the broader learning community, and knowing about these resources and, if possible, making them available to a larger constituency benefits

all. A collaborative digital project that helps a smaller library bring more attention to its unique collections is very likely to attract eager and talented collaborators.

Principles governing consortial purchasing—both in owning and in licensing—have especially strong appeal and potential for smaller libraries. Especially where smaller libraries fall under the umbrella of large group purchases, the pay-offs can be impressive.

**CL:** More generally, what do you see as new opportunities in library collaborations within any type of library consortium?

**Stewart:** Moving from a theological library to university setting in the last couple years has sharpened my perceptions of other opportunities for collaboration beyond ATLA. Examples include negotiating in a consortium setting with ILS vendors, negotiating as a consortium for resources and services, such as with EBSCO, Serials Solutions, and CONTENTdm.

In short, the most obvious benefit of such collaborative ventures is the cost savings, but collaboration also factors significantly in library advocacy within the parent institution. Library partnerships with other libraries add value to the institution as a whole and enhance in numerous ways its educational mission by way of greater resources, wider access, broader participation in scholarly pursuits, more efficient services, and so forth. Libraries often serve as exemplars for other units of an institution in cooperation, collaboration and seeking a greater common good. Library deans and directors and librarians need to seize every opportunity to champion the achievements and benefits that these partnerships bring.

I believe ALTA still has untapped opportunities for greater collaborations, and working more closely with other similar organizations may help it make the most of these. Even with the new Executive Director only having been in place for 18 months or so, it's been interesting to get a sense of how ATLA might position itself for new partnerships and ventures.

