

## Majority Staffed By Volunteers

# A new read on church libraries

Today's collections include books, videos, music and more for families

Shirley Jinkins, McClatchy Newspapers

**FORT WORTH, Texas** — Allison Fitzgerald is a teacher by profession, but she always wanted to be a librarian.

Now that Fitzgerald is a stay-at-home mom of two, she has found a way to combine her passion for books with her membership at University Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, volunteering in the church's 11,000-volume library.

People like Fitzgerald are part of a growing nationwide library ministry that has changed since the days of a few donated volumes stacked on dusty shelves in fellowship halls.

"We have a great Baptist history section, a large theology section in case our seminary students want to do research here," Fitzgerald said.

She is planning extra activities next month to bring new members into the library and let them know what's available.

## Passionate volunteers

Fitzgerald is one of 1,200 members of the National Church Library Association, which includes individuals, churches, church resource centers and schools from more than a dozen Christian denominations. Roughly half of the association's members are churches with fewer than 500 members, but others have more than 10,000 members.

"The majority of church libraries are managed by dedicated volunteers who are passionate about library ministry," said Sue Benish, executive director of the association, in an e-mail.

University Baptist Church's Butler Memorial Library began in 1958 with 376 volumes. Books include fiction, biography, reference books, travel, adventure, Bible and lesson helps, devotionals, history, mission study, philosophy, preaching and thousands of children's books.

Wedgwood Baptist Church's 10,000-volume library has recently been enlarged and remodeled, with a new children's section decorated with a sea-creature theme.

"We have a lot of readers in the church, and Wedgwood's public library is one of the busiest, too," said Anne McEowen, one of eight volunteer librarians at the church.

The adult collection includes the usual inspirational and devotional texts, but also an extensive historical collection of newspaper clips, e-mails, cards, letters, Web pages, posters, video and audio clips relating to the church tragedy of Sept. 15, 1999, when a gunman burst into the Fort Worth sanctuary and opened fire.

## **Special Purpose**

Aside from congregational history, church libraries offer services that congregations can't get from a public library or a Christian bookstore, Benish said.

"The books and media found in a church library have been very carefully selected," she said. "They are influenced by much more than trends and bestseller lists."

First Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth has a library committee that makes selections for the Dr. Robert F. Jones Library, which fills a couple of rooms. A church expansion project will increase its size.

Bettye Kinard has served on the committee for a decade or more, and she and other volunteers strive to get a good balance between fiction, nonfiction, children's books and periodicals.

A church's focus and outreach is reflected in its library.

"If a church is very community minded, their library is usually community focused as well," Benish said. "Author events, book groups, visiting readers, story times, even satellite libraries in senior centers are some of the ways church libraries are reaching out to their communities."

## **Creating a library**

Most libraries begin with a pastor or church member who is an avid reader and who envisions a church library as a new ministry. The key to success, Benish said, is to integrate the library with other programs and ministries of the church to keep it from becoming just a room with books.

"We have a fairly active circulation, with new people coming in all the time and discovering our wares," Kinard said.

Modern church libraries offer DVDs and videos with biblical or inspirational themes, Christian music CDs and all-important sections for children and youth.

"Most libraries find that a bright and colorful children's collection, which includes videos and music, draws families into the library," Benish said. "Often it's the children who bring their parents in the door of the library, introducing them to the wealth of resources inside."

## Selecting books

The usual church-library selection process looks at the author's qualifications, the accuracy and relevance of information, the way the information is presented, character and plot development (in fiction) and the credibility of the publisher.

Personalization is important, too. Each collection reflects the mission and theological view of its church.

"One of the skills we teach librarians is how to develop their library collection so that the materials not only meet quality standards but also support the beliefs and work of their church," said Susan Benish of the National Church Library Association.

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