

Faith in volumes

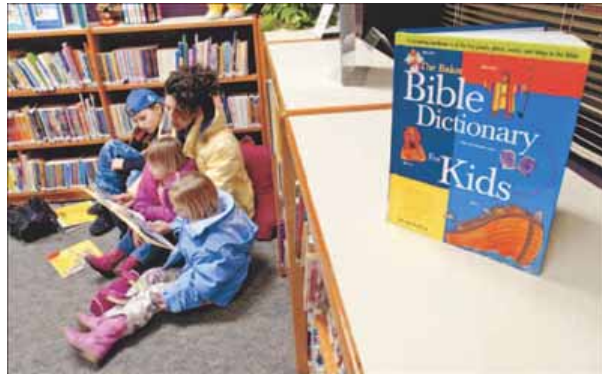
Church libraries offer stockpile of religious learning

Carol McGraw, *The Gazette*

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colorado — When Christopher Morton was working on his doctoral thesis, he spent a lot of time in the library.

What's so unusual about that?

Well, it wasn't a university library. It wasn't even a public library. It was the library at First Presbyterian Church, a place where its 5,000 members can find the perfect item among the 13,586 books, videos, magazines and other materials.



Angie Martin and her children — Luke, from left, Nicole and Hannah — sometimes visit the library at First Presbyterian Church on Sundays and Wednesday evenings. The kids listened as their mom read to them before a Wednesday service.

"I even found three books on the Christian theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg for my thesis topic," says Morton, who got his doctorate in theology. "But it's not all dreadfully serious. The collection is broad. And there's lots of books for even my 2-year-old. We check out 10 at a time."

Not every church library is as impressive as the one at First Presbyterian, but a lot of churches are beefing up their libraries. Whether it's the simple wall of 500 books at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church or the expansive offerings at First Presbyterian, libraries are becoming a vital part of a church's educational services.

There's even an organization, the National Church Library Association, that helps its 1,200 members set up and manage libraries, and provides them with a quarterly magazine that includes reviews of books and other materials.

Church libraries sprang up to offer items that public libraries and bookstores generally don't: denominational Bible commentaries, books on theological issues, church histories, religious biographies and devotionals, says Suzann Alstrin, volunteer librarian at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church and president of the Pikes Peak Chapter of the National Church Library Association.

Alstrin notes that her church's collection is heavy on Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod publications because the items are almost impossible to get in public libraries.

Don't confuse the church library with a church bookstore. Typically, church bookstores operate as a fundraising arm, with an emphasis on Christian best-sellers. Church libraries, on the other hand, want to preserve church history and are usually more wellrounded and carefully chosen, says Sue Benish, president of the Minnesota-based NCLA.

The information explosion has made such libraries more relevant than ever. "There is so much out there on the Internet and in bookstores that people want help with finding credible information that has been scrutinized using criteria on how to best support the ministry of a particular church," Benish says.

Although you probably won't find any bodice rippers, Western shoot'em-ups or murder mysteries, the offerings at church libraries are not all heavy-duty reading either. You can find mainstream series such as the Mitford books by Jan Karon, books for teens and children, popular pastoral books by Christian authors such as Rick Warren and C.S. Lewis, videos, self-help books, inspirational biographies, and even classics including "Oliver Twist" and "Moby Dick."

But not just any book will make the cut at a church library. Some churches have committees that choose the materials. Others rely on their minister or librarian to make selections or check out recommendations from staff and donations from congregants.

At Salem, the Rev. James Seiltz and Alstrin review books to see whether they follow church doctrine and moral principles.

"We tell donors to take care in what books they donate, but sometimes we will include books and commentaries that we don't agree with," Seiltz says.

At Holy Apostles Church, which has about 2,400 families, the Rev. Paul Wicker and volunteer librarian Elaine Tourville choose books to fit their library's mission of being "a safe place where you can read safe books."

"The idea is these books help us walk with our faith," Wicker says. "It's not limiting. There is a treasury of wisdom to choose from."

They shy away from videos that are rated R or PG-13. The only R-rated movie in the Holy Apostles catalog is "End of the Spear," and they OK'd this violent video about missionaries because "It's an awesome story of faith," Tourville says.

Holy Apostles, which stocks about 5,000 books, also draws from the library at the Diocese of Colorado

Springs at 228 N. Cascade Ave., which has more than 9,000 catechetical books and videos.

Church librarians see themselves as a ministry team, says Janet Wilcox, a retired school and public librarian who serves as First Presbyterian's head librarian. They are almost like pastoral counselors, aiding people in finding just the right resources that will answer their questions, whether about marriage, grief recovery or spiritual challenges.

Sara Hillman, who was visiting the Salem library for the first time recently, sees it as a resource to deepen her knowledge of her faith.

"I found all sorts of books written by our Wisconsin synod that I'd never find at the public library," she says. "I'll go back to our library a lot. It's nice to have it, especially if something pops up in a sermon that I want to know more about."

The 276-member Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church has no room for a large library. To solve the space problem, a congregation member handcrafted a wall of bookcases. It's self-service — members fill out their own library cards, and return to a collection box.

In contrast, bigger churches may devote hundreds or even thousands of square feet to their libraries. At Holy Apostles, study tables, chairs and sofas welcome visitors to the 500-square-foot library, and there are plans to open a coffee shop soon.

First Presbyterian has such a well-used library that when the church did renovations, the size of the library was considerably increased, says Wilcox.

A lot of what a church library offers depends on funding, and many churches have a hard time finding extra money to finance libraries. Some depend solely on gifts, says Benish, while others such as First Presbyterian have endowments.

Some church librarians say their offerings encourage people — especially kids — to read more. Tourville's 8-year-old granddaughter Elise Tourville says, "I like it because it has books on how people are supposed to act. And my school library doesn't have a lot of stories about Jesus."

Call First to Check

Interested in checking out the offerings at local church libraries? Call before you go.

Most of the bigger libraries, including the ones at Holy Apostles and First Presbyterian, are open to the public.

But smaller ones, such as Salem Evangelical Lutheran, limit checkouts to their members because they don't have the staff to support public use.

Group Meeting

The Pikes Peak Chapter of the National Church Library Association will meet 9 a.m. April 12 at Holy Family Catholic Church, 331 Main St. in Security. The group will discuss children's books; guest speaker is author Bambi Venetucci.

All church librarians or those hoping to start a church library are invited. Membership packets will be available. For information call 594-4248.

For more information contact

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