

Religious libraries growing

Patricia Farrell Aidem, *Los Angeles Daily News*

LOS ANGELES, California — Its genesis was the minivan load of used books from a desert monastery, yet within a year, the new library at St. Bernardine of Siena Catholic Church in West Hills is filled with some 4,000 volumes.

The collection in the Stanley S. Zack Library at the Jewish Community Center in Long Beach includes Jewish literature, history, children's books and a 42-volume Talmud.

Churches, temples and mosques are striving in recent years to establish their own libraries to feed a growing thirst from members who want to explore their faiths.

Sue Benish of the Minnesota-based National Church Library Association, which has 21 chapters nationwide, said her group has noted the growth of religious libraries.

"We certainly are having growth in membership," Benish said. "We can attribute that to several different things. There's just a lost feeling going on in the world and people are turning to their churches for directions.

"I think that's where the library comes in; it provides resources that help people discern what their faith is saying, what their particular denomination is saying."

Libraries at worship centers primarily offer volumes about their particular faith, their history and practices and their guides to daily living.

Laura Hogan is the chairwoman of an active library committee at St. Bernardine's in the western San Fernando Valley. She recalled buying books for her daughter, now 10, to teach the child about her faith, but realized other parents were doing the same and perhaps a system to share books would enrich the parish and help save money.

She said her daughter's original books have been donated to the year-and-a-half old library, tucked in a corner of the church building.

"It was a labor of love by a lot of people," she said. "I remember I filled up my minivan with used books from St. Andrew's \ out in Valyermo."

Since then enough money, books, videos and books on tape have been donated to fill the main library and adjoining children's reading area.

The goal was to appeal to a broad base. There's a shelf filled with different versions of the Bible, there are histories and writings from various Catholic orders and there are books to help parishioners draw on their faith in tackling family problems from marital woes to helping children understand death.

"The focus was to have a place where people in the parish could come and develop their faith," Hogan said. "We try to make this a place where you can have access to resources you can't get in a public library."

Books and other resources are carefully reviewed by the library committee before hitting the shelves, Hogan said. That, Benish said, is common practice.

"The materials in a Christian library are carefully selected," Benish said. "They're not necessarily best sellers or trendy things. There's been a lot more thought put into what's in that library. People can take comfort knowing those things are appropriate for their faith. There's a certain confidence level."

Religious libraries certainly aren't new. The Church of Christ, Scientist, opened its first reading room in 1888. Today there are about two dozen in the greater Los Angeles area, including four in Long Beach, six in South Bay cities and eight in the San Fernando Valley area.

The rooms are open to the public to study and to borrow or purchase the Bible as well as Christian Science literature.

The Jewish Center library in Long Beach is run much like a public library branch but based on an honor system. Patrons check out books for free, keep them for two weeks, then leave them in a drop-off slot. The collection includes a special section devoted to the Holocaust and its victims. Children's resources include the Young Reader's Encyclopedia of Jewish History and Junior Jewish Encyclopedia, along with Jewish tales, children's stories and pictures books about Jewish holidays and customs.

Some libraries, including St. Bernardine's, have small sections of books exploring other faiths.

At Encino's Valley Beth Shalom, the Jewish congregation's library covers the spectrum of Jewish-Catholic relations. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's "A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair" shares space with the Michael J. Rosen's "The Blessing of the Animals," a story of a young Jewish boy deciding if he should take his dog to a Catholic blessing of the animals.

At St. Bernardine's, the library committee has become active in other ways. It sponsored a concert this week in the church, and later this month Bishop Gerald Wilkerson will come to speak on issues in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, including the sex-abuse scandal.

Like all the library's effort, Hogan said, Wilkerson's lecture is aimed at educating and satisfying church members seeking to learn.

"From the very beginning, this was something God wanted," Hogan said, her hands sweeping among the wooden book cases filled with carefully catalogued volumes. "He wanted to nourish his sheep."

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