

Thirty-One Years of Purpose: The Early FOCLIS Story

by

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With apologies to Rick Warren and authors of myriad other thirty-one day programs, let me recount some of the remarkable workings of God to enable and sustain a witness for the Gospel in the library profession. The story for me begins in the early 1970s.

Raised in the heritage of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, I became convinced in my college years that the people of God, in whatever venue they worked, needed to come together in a united group that would support, nurture, and outreach. Thus it was not a large leap to believe that Christian faculty members at a secular campus needed to draw together for encouragement and in order to do together things that they were unlikely to do individually.¹ If this could work on a campus, or a group of campuses, then it might be done within disciplines or professions—specifically through groups with academic and professional associations. There turned out to be many models for this, and more as the years went by.²

About the time I began my tenure at the University of Texas at Austin library school, I learned of what was then called the Christian Librarians' Fellowship (CLF), now known as the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL).³ In June 1974 I took the Greyhound bus to Dallas and enjoyed the annual conference that met at Dallas Theological Seminary. At the 1975 conference in the Twin Cities I gave two presentations, one on library management, I believe. In October of that same year (1975) I was asked to bring the keynote address, "What is Your Librarian Worth?" at a joint meeting in Chicago of the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges (now Association for Biblical Higher Education) and the CLF that brought together presidents and librarians of various institutions. I was beginning to see the value Christian librarians meeting together and it was not long before I began thinking of what Christians might do within the American Library Association (ALA).

At these CLF gatherings, and also in Chicago on a research leave at the Newberry Library in December 1974, I met Dick Schock, then librarian of Moody Bible Institute. As the ALA Centennial Conference in Chicago in June 1976 drew near, the two of us, along with Paul Snezek of Wheaton College, talked about Christian librarians meeting for breakfast during the conference. Dick offered to host such an event at his institution. Amid as much publicity as we could mount, including what we thought was an intriguing notice in the ALA Centennial Program, about twenty people met for breakfast on 19 July 1976. We had no speaker, but enjoyed introducing ourselves, sharing our interests, and considering what might be the future of such a gathering.⁴

Though CLF folks supported the initial breakfast, it became clear that most of its members—drawn from Bible colleges and small, evangelical, liberal arts colleges—were not very interested in ALA for a variety of reasons, some more understandable than others. If anything were to be done, those few of us who believed in the idea would have to do it.⁵ We missed the Detroit conference of 1977, but met again at Moody in 1978. By 1979 Patricia Breivik, academic library administrator) and Bob Klassen from the U.S. Department of Education joined Paul Snezek and me in a kind of leadership team, and we

called ourselves now the Fellowship of Evangelical Librarians, associated with ALA. (In this, we were paralleling our British counterpart, the Librarians' Christian Fellowship that has links with the national professional body, as well as Christian consortial groups). About forty people attended the breakfast at the Baker Hotel at the 1979 Dallas Conference, when Edward G. Holley, distinguished dean of the University of North Carolina library school and recent past president of ALA, spoke on Christian witness in the secular professional world. This paper was subsequently duplicated and distributed and had a challenging impact on many of us in ALA.⁶

At the 1980 conference in New York, we met at the Salisbury Hotel to hear Per Larson, Lutheran pastor and family counselor, speak on "Another Perspective on Being a Christian Professional: Interpersonal Relations." At the 1981 conference in San Francisco, the group heard a panel on the People Work by Judith W. Powell and Robert B. Le LeLievre. The breakfast in Philadelphia in 1982, featured Steve Board, executive editor of *Eternity* magazine on "Win Some, Lose Some: An Inventory of Where Christian Strength in American Society Lies—Where We're Winning and Where We're Losing." Calling ourselves now the Fellowship of Christian Librarians & Information Specialists (FOCLIS), the well attended breakfast at the Los Angeles 1983 conference featured Russ Chandler, religion editor of the *Los Angeles Times* who spoke on "The Good News and the Daily News." The 1984 breakfast was held at Dallas Seminary to an overflow crowd with Anne Mathews of the University of Denver speaking on "A Christian Librarian's Perspective on Interpersonal Communication. This gathering officially organized FOCLIS with adoption of a constitution and bylaws and election of officers, including a newsletter editor, Charlene Pierard.⁷ The first issue of *The FOCLIS Newsletter* appeared in Fall 1985 and continues today. We also began to coordinate with evangelical publishers at ALA conferences for publicity, reservations, and sometimes financial support.⁸ Meanwhile, at the Chicago breakfast in 1985 Wheaton College professor Lyle Dorsett, substituting for Clyde Kilby, spoke on "C.S. Lewis Under Fire: A Look at His Critics

Our most ambitious breakfast programs to date were held during the 1980's. At the 1986 breakfast in New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine we heard Madeleine L'Engle, as I recall. This was followed in 1987 by what was the largest crowd ever to come to breakfast, around 150, held at the chapter house of Grace Cathedral and featured David Gill of New College Berkeley. In 1988 we had another overflow crowd when we met at S. Mark's Methodist Church in New Orleans' Garden District with Daniel Holcomb of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary speaking. We were back Dallas Seminary again in 1989 with a large crowd to hear Professor Mark Bailey speak on "Wisdom: Research and Relevance." A smaller 1990 breakfast was held at St. James' Cathedral in Chicago. In 1991 we had our breakfast in Atlanta at a hotel, I recall, a harbinger of things to come. In 1992 we were in New Orleans again. So, for much of this half decade or so, we went Episcopalian and for some big name speakers. Much of this was due to Pat Breivik and her contacts and the expanding circle of leadership which included Robert Klassen, Eva Kiewitt, George Bailey, Sheila Laidlaw, Barbara Nelson, Anne Mathews, Joe Dahlstrom, and Michael LeCroix.⁹

Trying to exploit what seemed to be renewed excitement about Christians associating together within the profession, the British Librarians' Christian Fellowship cosponsored with FOCLIS a Service of Thanksgiving and Rededication at an Anglican

church near the 1987 IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) conference site at Brighton, in southern England. For the past twenty years similar services have been organized for most IFLA annual conference sites. These were as varied as Paris, Sydney, Stockholm, Moscow, New Delhi, Havana, Istanbul, Beijing, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Bangkok, Jerusalem, Boston Glasgow, Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Seoul.¹⁰ They also varied in attendance from large crowds in a nearby Catholic church in Paris and St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, to a hotel room in Beijing and a handful of folks at other sites. Each of these services was planned in conjunction with local people, advertised reasonably well, and attracted delegates from the developing world.

Beginning in the 1990s, as I recall, FOCLIS began to more meet regularly at the official conference center or a nearby conference hotel in order to attract more folk, more conveniently, and with less of a churchy environment. This helped our corporate sponsor, XXX, and kept the venue within reach of increasingly harried delegates. So it was San Francisco in 1992; New Orleans in 1993; Miami in 1994; Chicago in 1995; New York in 1996; and San Francisco in 1997 in short order. Then it was Washington, D.C. in 1998, at which Craig Barnes, one of my favorite pastor-authors spoke and InterVarsity Press gave everyone two of his books. New Orleans was the conference site in 1999 and Chicago in 2000—at which Graham Cornish, Church of England clergyman, British library leader and IFLA president spoke on a millennial theme. After the San Francisco conference breakfast in 2001, with many retirements from my generation, I stopped attending annual conferences and eventually even midwinter conferences. Other, younger and gifted folks capably continued leadership of FOCLIS. Many of you in this room can remember the more recent years.

Retiring completely in 2006, I am currently engaged in faculty ministries of two national campus outreach organizations, as well as doing some lay pastoring for my church.¹¹ As the *Book of Common Prayer* puts it in the eucharist liturgy, “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times and all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.” Surely the ALA annual conference is one of those times and places! I am as convinced as ever of the basic principle of God's people identifying themselves, associating with one another, and organizing for united witness and outreach.

As in faculty ministry on a campus, so in ALA and other academic and professional groups. How can we get persons to identify themselves as Christians? How can we convince them of the values of associating with persons of like faith, and how can we recruit a few leaders who are willing to invest time and energy to make things happen? Only the grace of Christ, love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit can accomplish this. We are privileged be called together and empowered to be a part of God's grand design to reconcile the world to himself. Why does the “bowling alone” syndrome pervade even in the lives of believers?¹²

No matter how daunting and discouraging the situation is at times, may our calling to the task of bearing witness and of reconciliation in the library profession, and in ALA specifically, remain steadfast and faithful. FOCLIS may seem small and inconsequential, but it is the only such meeting place in the profession at large—to borrow T.S. Eliot's language, a still point in a turning world. God help us to implement our calling.

Notes

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- ¹ There is a biblical principle involved here, that Christian believers are “lone rangers” but part of a community that extends beyond allegiance to their local churches, but to others of like faith in the workplace, in the neighborhood, or wherever they live their lives.
- ² There are scores of such groups now, but ones that come to mind in which I have been involved include the American Scientific Affiliation (for pure, applied, and social scientists), the Conference on Faith and History (historians), and the Christian Medical & Dental Society (physicians and dentists), and the Christian Legal Society (lawyers).
- ³ For a description of the Association of Christian Librarians, see its Website: This group should be distinguished from a British organization that combines some the attributes of both the ACL and FOCLIS
- ⁴ Under the rubric Christian Librarian’s Fellowship, an announcement appeared on page 23 of the ALA Centennial Conference program, announcing an “informal (no program) free continental breakfast . . . in the Varley Room of the Coffee Cove, Moody Bible Institute. See my “Twenty-Five Years of FOCLIS” *FOCLIS Newsletter* (Spring 2002: 1-3) for additional details about the early years.
- ⁵ This was a matter of some frustration to some of us who were members of the Christian Librarians’ Fellowship, but who were also active in the national profession represented by ALA. But the unwillingness to enter the ALA arena was apparent, though individuals were active members of both groups—most notably Barbara Nelson, who edited the newsletter for many years until her passing in 2005. See my “Focus on FOCLIS” *FOCLIS Newsletter* (v.1, no.2, Spring 1985: 1-2) for more on this issue.
- ⁶ “Growing as Christian and as a Professional” was a six-page single-spaced essay that outlined Holley’s personal faith and his application to the profession he served for so long. This paper challenged those in the profession to become the persons that God had called them to be. It is a great pity that, to my knowledge, this paper has never been published.
- ⁷ Charlene Pierard was from the Vigo County Public Library, Terre Haute, Indiana. Her husband, Richard Pierard was a historian who was active in the Conference on Faith and History with experience in academic/professional associations of Christians. She was followed by briefly by Jens Holley and for many years by Barbara Nelson. The early issues of the *FOCLIS Newsletter* are obviously good sources for more information on the early years.
- ⁸ We tried to get Christian, and specifically evangelical, publishers involved with FOCLIS, by getting them to be announced exhibits where registration for the breakfast could be made. They would provide brochures, and even books sometimes, for the participants. These publishers included Eerdmans, Zondervan, NavPress, InterVarsity Press (with whom we shared a booth one year) Ballen book distributors, and Emery Pratt.
- ⁹ My archival files have numerous lists of attendees and paid members. The early presidents included: 1984-1986, Donald G. Davis, Jr., University of Texas at Austin; 1986-1988 Patricia Senn Breivik, Towson State University; 1988-1990, Robert Klassen; 1990-1992, George Bailey, Honnold Library of the Claremont Colleges; 1992-1994, Sheila M Laidlaw, Fredericton, N.B., Canada; 1994-1996, Paul Snezek, Wheaton College; 1996-1997, Anne Mathews, U.S. Department of Education; 1997-1999, Michael LeCroix, Creighton University; and 1999-2001, Don Davis again and time for younger and new leadership. There have been really only three secretary treasurers: Paul Snezek until 1993, Eva Kiewitt from 1993 to 1997, and Joe Dahlstrom from 1997 to the present.
- ¹⁰ See my “‘In All Times, And In All Places’: Christian Witness in International Librarianship.” *Christian Librarian* annual (UK Librarians’ Christian’ Fellowship, 1992, pp. 7-14. Some ACL leaders took issue with some of my explanations, but I stand by them. The annual Services of Thanksgiving and Rededication are regularly reported in the quarterly *Librarians’ Christian Fellowship Newsletter* and sometimes in the *FOCLIS Newsletter*. Realistically, these Services are becoming more and more difficult to organize.

¹¹ Faculty Ministries of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ are the only national movements that specifically work in encouraging faculty fellowships on university campuses. Mission Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes me as a certified lay pastor.

¹² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

NOTE: This paper was an address to the annual breakfast meeting of the Fellowship Christian Librarians and Information Specialists held in Washington D.C. on Monday, June 25, 2007, during the conference of the American Library Association.

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