

Memo on organizing or expanding a small library

Thousands of community groups, churches, and programs in peace and conflict studies in schools and colleges have organized small libraries to help extend their program – or want to. Their collections range from a few dozen volumes to a room-size collection. They are either volunteer-run, or have staff for whom the library is a labor of love on top of a full-time job.

For more than two decades, the PJRC has been leading workshops and advising small libraries and resource centers – and groups who want to set up them up –. Most of the time, these conversations have taken place in groups of people where it is possible to draw on the questions and experience of a variety of such collections.

This memo attempts to share a few insights on organizing or expanding small resource centers and libraries. This note is adapted from one shared on a small library listserv and posted on its web site. It touches on how we organize the books, recruit volunteers, develop visibility advertise our collection, and maintain our energy and spirit.

If you would like to continue this conversation, please don't hesitate to talk with a PJRC volunteer or leader for whom the resource center is "a labor of love added on top of our regular full-time job." Here is the memo:

Over the years, I've been on the library committees for several schools, colleges, and churches. Most have consisted of two or three people who share a love of reading. I have also been a volunteer with a nonprofit library that has been around now for 29 years, the Peace & Justice Resource Center.

Many small libraries have gone the route of putting numbers and small cards in pockets on their books according to a system (such as the Dewey Decimal system). The advantage of doing so is that it not only helps organize the books, it can also help convince members of the seriousness of the library. My only caution is to think well about what you want in a library. You don't want such tasks overshadow what is more important to the success of your collection.

I'll tell you what we have found to be the most important factor in our library: For the library committee to spend as much time as they can *reading* the books. We've found that the enthusiasm of the volunteers for good books can make it easier to help members find books that they will enjoy and benefit from reading. I should add that this is also a trait of my favorite librarians, whether in public libraries or schools, churches or nonprofit resource centers.

In my early years here at this collection, the main library volunteers would meet weekly to work on various tasks (not always library-related). The part I most looked forward to was talking about the books we were reading at home and in reading groups.

Regarding how we saw our mission, instead of just having a library with books on shelves, we would have book tables on the topic of the forum every few weeks or months and we used that method to reach out to others and learn what they were most interested in reading.

We would also each read reviews of books both in our own areas of interest and also in areas others cared about. We would then read the books that sparked our interest, and talk to other members who read books. Volunteers also write reviews of books for the newsletter of our community group, church, or school which helps gain visibility for the library. We try to look for

other occasions to write short articles or make announcements, like when we host a book table at a community event, or when we acquire new books on a topic (which remind folks about our library).

We gradually developed a collection of books that reviewers and readers thought were the outstanding ones on such topics as the peace and justice, history, parenting, women's issues, spirituality, politics, fiction, books for children and youth, etc.

All this time, I was volunteering with the Peace and Justice Resource Center (PJRC) which had developed into a larger collection of several thousand volumes, serving members, teachers and students in area schools, and a wider audience through conferences and workshops. I mention it because the PJRC was part of a network of libraries in schools, colleges, and community centers and widened our understanding of what proved helpful in different settings.

A number of small libraries have found the experience of the PJRC to be relevant to their library. For example, instead of numbering the books, we simply arrange them on the shelves by topic (see sample list at the end of this memo). We don't just have a list of our books, we have gradually developed annotated bibliographies for each of the main sections of the library.

Here's one thing we learned. Once in a while, someone wants to know if we have a particular book, and systems like Dewey Decimal or our annotated lists can help meet that need. But in our experience, they more often want to know if we have a good book on a particular topic. We like it when we can say 'Yes,' and help them locate a book. It is especially nice when we can explain "if *this* is your interest you might like book A, but if *that* is your main concern you might instead consider book B." In the process we're more likely serve their needs – and they are more likely to come back for more.

In fact, every few years, someone new to the library committee would ask if we planned to put numbers on our books. Our answer eventually became this very short, light-hearted comment: "We'd rather be *reading* the books." Don't get me wrong, I think putting numbers on books can play a positive function. I'm just saying that in my experience there is something else that is more fundamental to the success of a library. Some library committees are able to do both. We have walked the less traveled path of not having numbers on our books out of our interest in keeping our focus on the content of the books and our enthusiasm for reading.

One thing that helped us gain visibility and raise a little money for buying books has been to host book fairs and book tables at events. The book fairs are run like smaller versions of public library book sales as a place for members to donate books and to sell books we no longer needed at a big discount. These events became very popular annual events that people looked forward to.

The PJRC has had a separate project that offers book tables at events. Like the PJRC, our Book Service is nonprofit and because it aims to break even each year, it functions as a service to our members and network. The average price of its books is 1/3 to 1/2 of the cover price. Because of our passion for books that are important or helpful, we focus on procuring and displaying only the best books available rather than pushing the best sellers or books we are told to sell like some bookstores.

I'd be happy to share more about how we have functioned. I have very much enjoyed reading about the experience of other small libraries – we too have used a book cart, for example, and have set up parts of our library in different places to serve the needs of various members. I'd also be happy to share more on the Peace & Justice Resource Center which has a slightly different function and experience if anyone is interested. You can also look at our web site at <http://pjrcbooks.tripod.com>.

I'll close with three quotes that have made the rounds with our library committee over the years and brought a smile to more than a few volunteers the first time they encountered them. The first comes from a writer several people encountered in a reading group: "Just the knowledge that a good book is waiting one at the end of the day makes that day happier." - Kathleen Norris

The second comes from the philosopher Erasmus: "When I get a little money, I buy books; and if there is any left I buy food and clothes." The final one has become an informal motto with our group: "I've been in love 300 times in my life, all but six were with books!"

(Posted by a library volunteer and confirmed book lover)

attachments:

Categories for books in a small library

We tend to have a title for each shelf or half shelf of books. When a category gets larger than one shelf, we sub-divide it. For example, when books on international topics expanded beyond a shelf, we set up separate shelves or half shelves for Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Our nonviolence shelf soon had a separate section of books by and about King and Gandhi. We tend to put history books in the section with which it related, but also have a shelf of general history as well. Here's the basic PJRC list of book topics, most of which also appear in what has become our core resource list, "Transforming Our World." Its recommendations have helped many small libraries seek out books that have a track record of being especially useful and inspiring. Many new libraries start with a half dozen section titles like these and let them expand naturally:

nonviolence	parenting, families
king and gandhi	books for children and youth
international issues	education
environment, ecology, simplicity	community conflict and violence
international development	conflict transformation
politics and history	social movements and social change
human rights	leadership, organizing
military and security issues	spirituality and peace with justice
economic justice	peace and justice fiction, poetry, drama...
social concerns	the arts and social change
re-imagining race and prejudice	biography and autobiography
gender, women's issues	resource guides

sample announcement

book table next week...

We are pleased that (name of group or church) will host a book table of several dozen volumes from our resource library (date). There will be excellent items for borrowing or browsing. Subjects include books on current peace and justice concerns, parenting, the environment, history, spirituality, and fiction. The book table is sponsored by (name of your library, perhaps with hours, phone...).