Where Any Two Are Gathered: The Idea of Conferencing in Theological Librarianship (Panel Discussion)

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The idea of a conference, or "conferencing," has taken on new definitions in the last five to ten years. One definition is the "open conference," or "unconference," where all programming is driven by the participants. Another is the "hybrid conference," often associated with "lightning rounds" that are frequently based on *Pecha kucha*, a Japanese methodology to organize a presentation. The "virtual conference" format is used by large organizations like the American Library Association, where participants engage with the content through a video conference or other technology. Particularly among IT professions, the "camp model" (presentations, training, and spontaneous group work) has also become popular. Theological librarians have experienced their own style of conferencing through local, regional, and national association meetings. Looking at interdisciplinary and cross-industry definitions and applications of "the conference," we will examine new structures for the conference format and ask how theological librarians can begin to shape new conference structures that match the content of a rapidly changing religious and seminary landscape.

Part One: A History of the Conference and Its Future in Theological Librarianship by Anthony J. Elia

Introduction

"What is a conference?" Really, the first question should probably be "What is it called when you have a group of people gathered together?" The question then is about purpose. Consider these gatherings, how we define or understand them, and then how we might deconstruct these meanings for our own purpose and usefulness: Gathering, Group, Meeting, Conference, Symposium, Hearing, Lyceum, Colloquium, Crowd, Audience, Mob, a Flash Mob...?

What do these words of "collective humanity" actually mean? Are we beholden to our Greco-Roman sense of collectivity? Or have these terms taken up new meaning? Words like "symposium" literally mean "coming and drinking together," just as "companion" meant "eating bread together." These terms convey the experience and expression of human community and gathering: coming together. It is in the purpose, though, that the expression becomes meaningful: as a "conference" (dating from the 1550s), which is often described as a "formal meeting for consultation . . . " (from 1580s). The Latin word "confero" has several meanings, though its primary meaning is "to bring, bear, or carry together, to collect, gather" (p. 411—*Harper's Latin Dictionary*). It is this "togetherness" aspect that we should first emphasize, a togetherness with purpose that is meant to bring some outcome. Of course, we could argue that this same logic could be used to describe a "mob," which comes together for such things as pillaging, unruliness, and anarchic dismantling of civil discourse and living. I wouldn't suggest

that ATLA conferences come near to these distinctions (but perhaps it depends on how one understands the role of the ATLA conference!).

The purpose of this short paper today is to examine the meaning of "the conference," including how conferences have evolved. Specifically of concern is how the idea of ATLA's conferences have developed and changed over the years, and how new modes of thinking about and approaching conferences may lead us to a new generation of "coming together for a purpose." The fact that in the past decade the term "conference" as a noun has become a verb "to conference," with gerundic variations such as "conferencing," shows that the meaning and expression of "the conference" are in the midst of evolution and radical revisioning.

A History of ATLA Conferences (1947-1974)

The American Theological Library Association hosted its first conference in Louisville, Kentucky, in June 1947. The topics included a basic roster of librariana—seminary libraries, theological library operations, library and instruction, accreditation, indexing, and bibliography. The proceedings of that first conference were 76 pages long. Many of the first conferences had sessions that were either "reports" or "talks." The idea of a "paper," as we now understand it, seems to have been a conflation of "reporting" and a "topical lecture," which only really appears to be distinguished in the conference proceedings of 1950 and 1951. But the standard idea of "gathering" for a purpose of reporting on relevant library themes was consistent from the beginning.

A point of departure for this "report" vs. "paper" clarification seems to have occurred in 1952, when the proceedings' table of contents distinguishes reports as "REPORTS" all in caps, while papers are between quotation marks. This distinction remained constant for a number of years to come.

The first conferences were shorter, as there were fewer participant members and the organization was just getting off the ground. Two-day midweek events (usually Wednesday and Thursday) were the norm. In 1952, for example, the sessions began on Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. and lasted till Thursday around 9 p.m. In 1953, there were five papers on the docket, including the now famous piece by Raymond Morris: "Theological Librarianship as a Ministry."

The first "3-day conference" was in 1954, and it was this event that appears to have shaped the ATLA conference into what it would look like for the next half century. It was held in Chicago at Chicago Theological Seminary from Tuesday through Thursday, and opening on June 15, there were reports, similar to other conferences. Starting at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, June 16, there were devotions led by Dr. Theodore L. Trost, continuing with a full day of (more) reports, a round table on cataloguing and classification (LC, Union, and Dewey)—a topic which continued in subsequent ATLA conferences—and a business meeting. The afternoon of the second day there was a panel entitled "The Library in the Life of the Seminary," which was followed by afternoon tea. That evening there was one paper delivered by Dr. Henry M. Brimm, "The Seminary Librarian as Communicator." Thursday ended the conference, with morning devotions and a workshop on "cooperative procedures."

The years between 1955-1972 were formative years, which moved toward a consistency of topics and conference design. In 1955, for example, the conference at Union Theological Seminary in New York City was again three days (Wednesday through Friday), with a couple

papers, a roundtable discussion, some workshops, and a dinner honoring Julia Pettee. In 1957, the conference was in Fort Worth and one of the featured speakers was the head of the history department at Southern Methodist University, Dr. H.P. Grumbrell, who shared his humor with the librarians in an address titled "Some Texan Traits," (*see p. 90*). Another significant change came in 1959, when the conference first expanded to four days and included nine papers and numerous reports. The librarians also took a scheduled excursion on the Thursday afternoon of the conference—a walking tour of Toronto-area libraries. The 1960s continued in this manner. The early years (1960 and 1961) each had low turnouts—1960's conference at Bethel College in St. Paul was only two days long, with two listed papers. But in 1962, the turnout was substantially higher, and the conference was back up to four days, with participants ending on a trip to a Shakespeare festival in Stratford, Connecticut. The published proceedings of this conference were becoming substantial, now weighing in over 200 pages, while the previous years' were between 70-150 pages. Perhaps one of the most significant milestones of the ATLA conference was in 1971, with a move that reflected the organization's growth. It was the first five-day conference, and took place in Pasadena, California. The executive committee, according to the proceedings, is listed as having met on Monday of that week. (The following year, in 1972, it would meet both on Monday and Friday of the conference, which appears to be the first time this occurred.) In that twenty-fifth anniversary year, the membership had reached roughly 450 individuals, which we find listed on some 15 pages of the proceedings. In the 1972-73 year, the oversight committee was the "Executive Committee," which became the "Board of Directors" the following year, 1973-74—to this day still standing with that name. The only other recognizable change in the next decade was in 1981, when the proceedings moved from a large-format publication to its present 6-by-9-inch compact size.

The early ATLA conferences, in many ways, echo what the regional meetings (such as CATLA, NYATLA, SWATLA, and others) seem to be doing today. They were gatherings, which were relatively small and shorter at first, and dealt with the important matters of any burgeoning association. Over the years, the conference has grown, but its purpose has remained as a commitment to the profession. The change, then, has come with growth, the need for organizational infrastructure, committees, and sub-committees. With this brief historical excursion, let us look at how conferences, generally speaking, fit our individual needs and wants—or perhaps, more candidly put, our likes and dislikes.

Things We Like and Dislike About Conferences

Many of us professionals enjoy attending conferences because it not only gives us a chance to partake in the most up-to-date (hopefully) work being done in our fields, but it allows us to reconnect with other professionals in those same fields. It is this latter attraction that most might not readily admit to, but professional connections are highly sought after, sometimes more than the content of specific sessions. In a TED conference presentation, education and pedagogy scholar and guru Sir Ken Robinson comically remarked about how the nature of learning is so often an act of divorcing our bodies from our minds. Our bodies, he jokes, are merely "transport vehicles" for our brains. As he says, "Just pop your head into a discotech after any professional conference."

Now this is not to say that a session on technical services in theological libraries is more or less scintillating than after-hours jollity at a Chicago nightclub. Not at all. But it reminds

us that we are human beings in both mind AND body. And there is something that we need to pay attention to in our engagement with information and the engagement with such presentational material in just such places as conferences.

We have our likes and dislikes of conferences, which are—just as we approach learning spaces and activities—inextricably linked to our bodies. When it comes to conference likes and dislikes, we ultimately **like** shorter, interesting, entertaining, and engaging talks, panels, or discussions; we **like** a room that is aesthetically pleasing, with comfortable chairs, with light that is amenable to our senses; we **like** frequent or well-timed breaks; we **like** friendly speakers; and we **like** being fed treats and/or caffeinated drinks to keep us on target with our schedules. And, of course, we dislike their opposites. We **dislike** long, uninteresting, boring talks; we **dislike** bad, uncomfortable spaces and furniture, which complicate our listening/seeing experience. We **dislike** things that we feel do us no good, or don't contribute to our knowledge and understanding; and we **dislike** things that seem to be a waste of time. It is this last notion, which gets at the heart of the "conferencing" revolution—that is ultimately a reflection of who we are, who our societies are, and what is seen to be acceptable behavior in our various spheres of life and work. The new model of conferencing reflects the models in other social media, which promotes the democratization of information with increased participation and discussion from all realms.

The Point of Conferences

Conferences, like other social gatherings, have demanded a certain protocol, which has usually been an unspoken but chiefly understood protocol based on respect: respect for the speakers and participants of a panel, respect for those around you, and, ultimately, respect for yourself. I do not suggest that this is no longer the case, but that there has been a shift in how we understand protocol. The rise of the "unconference" may be seen as a dismantling of this protocol: that is, the protocols of respect at other conferences, which may have traditionally shunned or at least given conference members a sense of embarrassment for having to "leave early" or "come in and out" of a talk, is no longer the paradigm of the "unconference." The old paradigm of conferences is based on the protocol of respect and decorum, which had been created in an era without roaming technologies—no iPhones, iPads, cell phones, BlackBerries. The conference has existed since before the time of computers, even televisions, and telephones! The conference hearkens back to a period that was much slower, when people's entertainment (or engagement) was not found in multi-tasking bites, fast-paced images, or anything that was of light-speed. Rather, entertainment, as well as intellectual engagement, came with extensive, long, and often discursive orations. Edward Everett's funeral oration at Gettysburg, shortly before Lincoln's now famous "remarks," which lasted no more than three minutes, was nearly three hours in length, and those at the old battleground were there for that length of time, standing and listening. That was their engagement model, their model of participating in the intellectual and spiritual fruits of the day. In those days, to leave would have been inconsiderate to some; but to leave would have meant you had something better to do (barring emergencies, of course).

So too, the conference, as an archaic (though, not necessarily "obsolete") model, is based on protocols of time, speed, and the relationship between auditors (listeners of the lecture) and those who are presenting. What is different with the unconference, in some respects, is that the

idea of respect has shifted, so that now the visitor (or auditor) now takes possession of his or her desire to come and go as he or she pleases, which is a reflection of how we as a society act, but also how we envision ourselves in society. It is a more flexible model, allows us to do as we wish, and is promoted by the architecture of the "unconference" model.

Conclusion

To this end, what is the new mode of "the conference" or "conferencing," which we can think about, discuss, engage with, and attempt in a setting like ATLA (or even our regional associations)? What options are there, and do the protocols of respect allow for this in our settings? I think that in the coming years, ATLA conferences may see some creative and innovative changes to this enterprise. Now, we are just beginning.

Part Two: Unconferencing…What is That?
by Leland R. Deeds

Over the past few years a number of new forms of conferencing or meetings have made their way into the realm of librarians. This talk introduced three of these: (1) the unconference or "open space" meeting[1], (2) the hybrid model containing some unconference and traditional elements, and (3) virtual conferences. It also briefly gave examples of each and discussed their ability to address certain challenges and needs within the library profession.

The method of meeting known as an unconference is, despite its moniker, a conference. It grew out of a response in the IT industry to earlier invitation-only meetings, such as the Friends of O'Reilly or Foocamp.[2] These early meetings, whether an open unconference or orchestrated, shared the key characteristic of being organized around a theme or issue. They were an attempt to have stakeholders from throughout an industry meet to mutually address an issue or challenge too great to be solved by any one company alone.

The use of a core theme or issue and loose organization mark a pure unconference as using a simplified version of an "open space" meeting. A conference using "open space technology" can also be on topics of public health or public administration, not just IT issues.[3] The basic environment required to make the OST method successful is claimed to have four parts: complexity, diversity, conflict and urgency. The issue being addressed must be complex; the stakeholders involved must represent a diverse constituency within which there is a real or potential conflict regarding how the issue is resolved. All are fueled by an urgency created by a need for resolution "yesterday." The OST meeting model has seven stages: (1) briefing, (2) creation of agenda, (3) sign-up, (4) sessions, (5) session reports, (6) action planning and (7) reflection.

The OST meeting is opened by a facilitator during the briefing, explaining to participants the theme, rules of engagement, basic structure of the day, and breakdown of the meeting space. The agenda is then created by participants who write down on cards or sheets of paper a topic/subject related to the theme that they feel must be discussed. In so doing they have contracted with the community that they are also willing to lead a discussion session on that topic. The topic cards are then placed by participants on a wall or white board within the meeting's main space. This is the meeting's agenda. The process of the first two stages combined should take no longer than an hour and a half.

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