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Zotero in Faith Community:

Encouraging Religious Literacy Through the Use of an Online Library

Rebecca L. Klemme Eliceiri

University of Missouri – Columbia

Abstract

Zotero, known in academic institutions as a research tool for students, faculty, and other scholars, has tremendous potential for use in faith communities as a place to store and share nearly any type of digital information encountered in congregational life. This paper opens with defining the role of information in congregations' lives, followed by a discussion of religious literacy within a metaliteracy framework. It continues with the use of Zotero at Liberation Christian Church, covering its benefits, including a more fully-integrated intellectual presence in the congregation's faith life. It also discusses generating interest and skills within the congregation about Zotero through marketing and educational efforts, which provide congregational members greater opportunities to benefit from the resource. It concludes with the potential issues, such as ethical and copyright concerns, of using Zotero within faith communities, as well as a summary of Liberation's current Zotero use.

Keywords: Liberation Christian Church, faith thinking, information literacy, metaliteracy, religious information literacy, religious literacy, Zotero

Zotero in Faith Community:

Encouraging Religious Literacy Through the Use of an Online Library

Libraries can trace some of their origins back to religious figures and organizations (Garrett, 1999);[1] however, many congregations have not kept pace with those intellectual origins, as noted by theological educators such as Edward Farley (1985). Religious illiteracy has a great many real life effects on people of faith, hindering their ability to integrate faith and intellect. It also affects many areas well outside of faith and religion. "…[O]ne of the most troubling and urgent consequences of this illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for pluralism, peaceful coexistence and cooperative endeavors in local, national and global arenas…" (Moore, 2006, para. 1). While a congregational library and information management tool does not build religious literacy on its own, it provides people of faith with a foundational and robust means with which to thoughtfully build a solid religious literacy foundation, a step toward the "disciplined, activist incarnation" (p. 200) that Fowler (1995) describes as part of Stage 6 faith, the pinnacle in the stages of faith he names.

This paper describes the role that the information management tool Zotero (2014) plays as a congregational library and archive in facilitating religious literacy as seen through a metaliteracy framework at Liberation Christian Church, a small, relatively new congregation in St. Louis, Missouri. It begins by defining information, religious literacy, and metaliteracy, and their roles in congregational life and continues with the current and potential uses and benefits of a Zotero group library at Liberation Christian Church and other faith communities. It also discusses generating interest and skills within the congregation about Zotero through marketing and educational efforts, which allow congregational

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[1] Indeed, the creator of the term translated as "library science" was Martin Schrettinger, a 19th century Benedictine monk and librarian, author of the book whose translated title is *Toward a Complete Textbook of Library Science; Or a Guide to the Librarian's Complete Administration, Written in Scientific Form*.

members greater opportunity to benefit from the resource. It concludes with issues that may be encountered with the use of Zotero, as well as a summary of Liberation's current Zotero use.

Information in Religious Congregations

Wright (2007) defines information as "[…]the juxtaposition of data to create meaning" (p. 10). One may broadly categorize recorded information encountered within religious communities in three ways, each of which tells different stories about, provides narratives for, and is maintained or preserved by the congregation out of which it originates. The first, information that is about the community, generally refers to archival information and anything that solely falls under that categorization, including church records, photographs, important correspondence, and commemorative works. The second, information for the community, tends toward items normally included in public, academic, or personal library collections and databases: books, audio-visual materials, journals, newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, conference papers – information that is relevant and of interest to a congregation but not directly about the congregation. The third type of information, a hybrid of the above two, is both for and about the community. This category includes items such as sermon videos, podcasts or manuscripts, congregation-created worship resources such as liturgies, orders of worship or other worship plans, and congregation-created educational resources including Bible study or learning group handouts, booklets, overviews, or outlines. Zotero may be a helpful tool in the organization and preservation of all three types of information.

Information is contextual, as Reitz notes: "Whether a specific message is *informative* or not depends in part on the subjective perception of the person receiving it" (2014). Each person encountering information does so contextually, their particularity informing each information encounter. Additionally, it is virtually impossible to discuss information and its management in a twenty-first century context without addressing the concept of information overload, though Wright (2007) asserts it is not a new issue, and Lugo, Cooperman, O'Connell, & Stencel (2014) note that the percentage

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of Americans who feel overwhelmed by information has dropped from 27% in 2006 to 18% in 2014.

Badke (2010), however, cautions that many have embraced information chaos in lieu of skillful

information management.

> The Net Generation has learned how to deal with the flood of data simply by picking what is
>
> easiest to access and letting the rest go. Sure, there might be better data deeper in the pile, but
>
> there seems to be no practical way to sift through it – unless you never sleep again. If the easily
>
> accessible data looks OK, then it has to be OK. Bye-bye information overload. (p. 52)

Whether or not one feels overwhelmed by information, the speed of life in the twenty-first

century now more than ever demands that people of faith manage information with finesse. Competent

information management may not necessarily increase or diminish one's faith, but helps clergy and laity

alike do the work of ministry more efficiently and effectively. Managing information well with helpful

tools means that one may struggle less with considering the "what" and "how" of faith questions and

focus more on the "why."

Religious Literacy Within a Metaliteracy Framework

Within certain pockets of Christianity there have been strides toward serious religious literacy

efforts in churches but no formal unified movement exists. Nearly thirty years ago, Farley (1985)

recognized the church's inconsistency of theologically-educated clergy and non-theologically-educated

laypeople, and named a number of changes which he believed must happen before church education

becomes theological education. "Cumulative, rigorous educational process and post-Enlightenment

tools of analysis and interpretation (historical, literary, social, psychological, philosophical) will have to

be introduced into church education" (p. 171). Rather than blaming laypeople for failing to take an

active interest in their religious education and faith formation, he instead noted that church structures

at their deepest levels provide laypeople with church education but not theological education that

encourages members toward religious literacy.

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Additionally, while those with internet access often turn to Google or other internet search engines for answers to many types of questions, the same may not be said for many people regarding questions of a biblical nature. Goff, Farnsley, & Thuesen (2014) noted that fifty-six percent of Americans who have read the Bible within the past year do not seek help regarding its interpretation, and of the forty-four percent who do, only twenty-nine percent of those who seek assistance in biblical interpretation report doing so online (p. 28). How religious congregations, including Liberation, respond to these trends and challenges, will surely influence the trajectory of faith and intellect's existence in congregational life.

Vibrant congregational libraries are important partners in a congregational response to the above religious literacy challenges. As church financial and human resources continue to decrease, those charged with articulating the need for a library within a congregation will find it fruitful to provide clearly-defined library goals, objectives, and outcomes that directly benefit congregational members. Toward that end it becomes important to define religious literacy and consider the means by which one becomes religiously literate. This task is not necessarily a straightforward endeavor. Rein (2009) wonders, "Most [religious studies faculty] are reluctant even to *define* religion. Is meaningful 'literacy' possible in this context" (p. 40)? The question is certainly worth asking, and yet, since religious studies is an academic discipline, a preliminary definition of religious literacy can provide people with an elementary understanding of the goals of religious literacy.

Prothero (2008) appears to have limited religious literacy to mostly content or factual knowledge about religion, while others consider it important to also emphasize research practices within the discipline that lead to the type of informed and ordered learning that Farley (1985) discusses. Bogen (n.d.) focuses on religious literacy through understanding religion as a "universal human phenomenon," knowing specific factual information about religions, and building "habits of mind" that

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allow one to think about religion in a balanced manner (para. 7-9). Moore (2006) provides a more

comprehensive definition, stating that religious literacy is

> 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and
>
> contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of
>
> and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability
>
> to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions
>
> across time and place. (para. 2)
>
> Gallagher (2009) also notes that
>
> …in addition to providing factual knowledge, teaching for religious literacy needs to involve
>
> sustained attention to how religious people use that factual information to orient themselves in
>
> the world, express their individual and group self-understanding, and give their lives direction
>
> and meaning. (p. 208)

Additionally, no current religious literacy competency standards exist for those seeking a broad

framework by which to assess and evaluate religious literacy educational efforts. While the ACRL

"Information Literacy in the Disciplines" wiki provides information about accrediting agencies and

professional associations for religious academic institutions, as well as selected articles and

presentations on information literacy in religious studies (ACRL, n.d.), no competency standards or other

evaluative tools are listed on the page. At least one Christian denominational body (Episcopal Church &

Diocese of Arkansas, 1991) has created its own standards, and while those standards provide a

framework in which to assess and evaluate religious literacy efforts, they are largely content-based, with

little focus on the processes and behaviors that grow a thinking faith.

With the above things in mind, I propose the following working definition of religious literacy:

religious literacy is knowledge about religion, including its place in human experience and its impact on

the world. It involves understanding the cultural contexts of religious beliefs, practices, and texts, as well

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as familiarity with processes and tools used within the discipline of religious studies to study religions. Additionally, as a step toward more comprehensive religious literacy competency standards, I suggest situating this definition within the emerging information literacy framework of metaliteracy as articulated by Mackey and Jacobson (2014):

> Metaliteracy expands the scope of traditional information skills (determine, access, locate, understand, produce, and use information) to include the collaborative production and sharing of information in participatory digital environments (collaborate, participate, produce, and share). This approach requires an ongoing adaptation to emerging technologies and an understanding of the critical thinking and reflection required to engage in these spaces as producers, collaborators, and distributors. Metaliteracy is not about introducing yet another literacy format, but rather reinventing an existing one – information literacy – the critical foundation literacy that informs many others while being flexible and adaptive enough to evolve and change over time. (p. 1-2)

Religious literacy, particularly when situated within a metaliteracy framework, assumes that all people are lifelong, reflexive learners and provides them with more expansive and fruitful ways in which to encounter and explore information from both religious and secular points of view. It sets a higher standard for believers' interaction with religious information at the same time that it better articulates goals for people's lifelong use of information. It respects the contextuality of religion and information, as well as the people who encounter it, and is at home within a postmodern worldview in which multiple narratives coexist simultaneously.

Rather than solely pointing information users toward library-vetted sources deemed authoritative, metaliteracy is far more concerned with people being able to critically and effectively encounter and share information at the point of information encounters. While Lugo et al. (2010) state that "educational attainment – how much schooling an individual has completed – is the single best

predictor of religious knowledge" (p. 7-8), a metaliteracy framework considers the possibility that the same tools, processes, and behaviors that lead to academic success may also encourage lifelong learning success outside of a formal classroom setting. Congregations like Liberation who are committed to lifelong open inquiry within religious education will likely find metaliteracy a helpful strategy in their educational endeavors.

Religious Literacy at Liberation Christian Church With Zotero

Liberation Christian Church is a five year-old Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) church plant in St. Louis, Missouri. It consists of one half-time pastor, the Rev. Dr. Dietra Wise Baker, two volunteer ministers, and forty dedicated members. Membership is mostly female, African American, and under the age of fifty, with many members claiming an LGBTQI identity. The projected church budget is $60,000 per year, but often operates on as little as two-thirds of that. The church has significant strengths, but also struggles with things such as its budgetary shortfalls, lack of permanent space, embedded theologies that shut down more liberative readings of scripture, occasional resistance to the type of deep intellectual work that undergirds the church's mission of "liberating lives and liberating communities with every breath of our being," and a lack of time to devote to church matters, which sometimes leads to disorganized ministry efforts.

Liberation has from its beginning valued religious literacy, generally under the more accessible term "faith thinking," which means it is unafraid of open inquiry from its members, friends, and visitors. Rev. Dr. Wise Baker is less concerned with being the sole source of theological or other authority within the church than she is with helping people experience the living Christ. Her womanist rally cry, "I would rather die with my questions than live with your answers" (2014, p. 6) has taken the church to spiritual and intellectual places of inquiry that many congregations do not reach. Liberation believes that Christianity is perfectly compatible with critical thinking and scholarly inquiry, and that such inquiry ought to be normative of Christianity and a part of becoming fully activated disciples of Jesus. The

church also espouses that people should not have to attend seminary to use scholarly tools to seriously study religion and theology. Liberation is particularly concerned from a religious literacy standpoint of reconciling religious beliefs with non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. Such an environment is hospitable ground in which the fourth goal of metaliteracy, lifelong learning, may flourish (Mackey & Jacobson, 2014, para. 6).

Liberation's openness to intellectual inquiry as a church would ideally mean that it would have thriving print and online library ministries. However, its lack of space and funds made the development of a library quite difficult. Liberation's Zotero group library, which is currently *the* church library, began as a way for me, the church librarian, to store and share documents with church members and save documents for archival purposes. After exploring Zotero's group library capabilities, in October of 2013 I introduced the Zotero library to Rev. Dr. Wise Baker, who agreed that the library should be shared with the rest of the congregation. She has enthusiastically supported efforts to provide religious literacy education and tools at Liberation, and has encouraged me to share the library and other congregational information resources with the congregation through online, print, and in-person educational opportunities. Churches and their members who hope to begin and maintain a vibrant library ministry of any sort will find it exceptionally helpful to do so with the support of pastoral staff.

Liberation's library not only consists of items that help build the congregation's religious literacy through metaliteracy; the Zotero platform itself is very amenable to metaliteracy goal, "share information and collaborate in a variety of participatory environments," 3.1, 2, 3, and 9 (Mackey and Jacobson, 2014, para. 5). Zotero is a free, open source program that is more typically known as a scholarly tool. Its intellectual intentions and origins strongly support Liberation's religious literacy development for a reasonably-priced $60.00 per year for the 6GB of storage space used by the library.[2]

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[2] All Zotero library users receive a free 100 megabytes of storage space.

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Additionally, unlike many free online tools, Zotero does not mine user data for the organization's financial purposes and instead extracts web site metadata to the advantage of the user. Cohen (2008) discusses its capability of reading certain fields/metadata, which means that users spend far less time inputting information than they might in similar programs since Zotero automatically populates bibliographic fields and saves PDF and MS Word attachments within the program. Metaliteracy's third goal is met through most libraries, but Zotero libraries offers members the opportunity to do so online, with more control and stability than many online formats.

Liberation's library allows its six current members to quickly and easily add and store citation information in a highly organized fashion, allows for full-text documents to be attached to items, and creates screen shots of full web pages. Zotero conveniently organizes all of these items in ways that encourages long-term successful record and document retrieval. Library members may also tag items, make notes on item records, and in some cases, the documents themselves. They may also search the full-text of documents, and quickly make this information available to those with whom they choose to share it via the Zotero Firefox browser extension, stand-alone program, or its web-based interface for those who choose not to download the program. The library is partially accessible on the open web; item citations, abstracts, and links to documents are available to any web site visitor, while links to stored full-text documents are available to logged-in library members.

Liberation's Zotero library consists of 753 items consisting of all three types of congregational information as discussed previously. It includes links to streaming video, generally in the form of sermons from Liberation's YouTube channel, as well as bibliographic records for books, articles, and theses. It also includes many full-text items, including blog posts, journal and magazine articles in PDF or HTML formats, and reports, books, encyclopedia articles, conference papers, newspaper articles, and book chapters, generally in PDF or ePub format.

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While a congregational library or information management tool by itself will not miraculously create religious literacy where there was none previously, it provides a solid framework in which to encourage religious literacy within congregations. At the same time, using Zotero for the above purposes provides Liberation with a more social way of being scholarly, allowing Liberation to participate in theological discussion as individuals, a church community, and within the broader community of Zotero users and groups. "True scholarship does not sit by itself, and is worthless as a disconnected piece of writing; being part of a network of thought and publication is what makes all scholarship active and relevant" (Cohen, 2008, para. 18). A key aspect of metaliteracy that was not explicitly articulated within information literacy previously is the necessity of collaboration and cooperation in the use of information. Zotero provides its users with such a network in which to make that happen, particularly through the capability of making and saving notes both on an item's record as well as within many items themselves. Zotero group libraries are incredibly dynamic and responsive to the needs of their users.

Marketing and Educational Efforts

Marketing Liberation's library and educating its members about it has been a regular challenge. As with 95% of church librarians (Shelley, 1983, para. 9), my church library work occurs as an unpaid volunteer. Developing and maintaining the library could easily take ten to fifteen hours per week, but ends up taking less than five due to my other schedule demands. Such time constraints hinder marketing and educational efforts. Zotero's versatility ironically makes it more difficult to market: should I do so as an information tool that is freely available to all congregation members or focus solely on its capacity as the congregation's library? Zotero does amazing things as a personal information management tool, but when questioned, the congregation identified far more with the phrase "online church library" than "information management tool." The above constraints and dilemmas are important considerations when planning marketing and educational strategies for Zotero at Liberation.

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While some librarians may have previously believed that libraries and their resources "sold themselves," such an attitude, particularly in light of strained budgets, has largely been replaced with an understanding that the importance of information resources and tools is neither self-evident nor self-explanatory. Wisniewski and Fichter (2007) remark, "As user attention is a rare commodity, we need to market our products and services—and do so aggressively and effectively" (p. 54). One of a librarian's most important tasks these days is to formally and informally let their library users know about library resources and teach them how to use those resources. It is important to match members' information needs with library resources, which are only valuable inasmuch as they are used by those in the congregation. The introduction of tools and concepts that have typically been within the realm of academic institutions into the realm of the congregation is new ground for Liberation. It is thus important to find phrasing and vocabulary for those tools and concepts that resonates with members' spiritual needs.

Liberation held two formal opportunities at which interested members and friends could learn about the Zotero library. In March of 2014, I hosted a workshop focusing solely on the Zotero library. A week prior to the workshop, I asked a church member her opinion of the workshop. She responded that she had never previously heard of Zotero, was confused about its purpose and the reason for the workshop, and mentioned that she really didn't need help organizing her information. However, I persevered, mentioning that Zotero is a very robust tool, and that the church's online library is a Zotero group library. She responded far more enthusiastically, "Oh, an online library! That sounds interesting! You should talk about it from that perspective."

I promoted the March 22 Zotero workshop at Liberation through all of the church's usual channels, including fliers, a Facebook event, and a church-wide e-mail, and had a preliminary attendance total of 6 people, which is quite good for a Liberation event, but only two attended the actual event. Some people might see that as poor attendance or failure, but it was heartening to work with two

interested and motivated people who wanted to learn more about this information tool. From my perspective, the workshop was a success, and though neither of them installed Zotero on their computer that day, they did sign up for Zotero accounts and join the library.

In May and June of 2014, I also taught Faith Thinking Foundations, a course that integrates religious literacy and metaliteracy, as the church's learning group for the month. It covered all four metaliteracy goals in some capacity, and the course's subject matter allowed some excellent discussions regarding religion and information that may not occur in day-to-day congregational life. There were a total of seven class attendees, two of whom attended the Zotero workshop, most of whom signed up for Zotero web accounts and joined the Zotero library group. All course documents, including the syllabus, were available in the Faith Thinking Foundations section of the library. Attendees were asked to choose a topic to consider from a faith thinking perspective for the month, and over the month researched their topics using basic library research skills, exegetical methods, and collaboration with the rest of the class and the church. I was consistently challenged throughout the class in connecting the library content with members' information needs and faith questions, and helping members to feel comfortable adding items to the library themselves.

Information Ethics With Zotero

An understanding around the ethics surrounding information use is essential for those involved in any congregational library endeavor, though the subject often goes unaddressed due to a lack of awareness on it. Metaliteracy's second goal, "Understand personal privacy, information ethics, and intellectual property issues in changing technology environments," (Mackey and Jacobson, 2014, para. 4) also addresses information ethics quite thoroughly. The World Council of Churches (2008) published a free e-book, *Love to Share,* that provides a theological treatment of some of the ethical issues around congregational information use and ethics. Though it does not specifically address academic resources and the particular issues surrounding them, it provides an excellent and nuanced theological treatment

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of that mushy middle ground between copyright law and God's realm. In reading the book, one considers that American copyright law perhaps ought not be the final word on information ethics, especially regarding resource use within the church. However, those who wish to avoid being the next test case for copyright law must be knowledgeable about copyright law and fair use guidelines. One must thus manage a Zotero church library ethically through thoughtful and informed library policies and procedures.

Another consideration when using Zotero as a congregational library is the difference between technological capability and legal and ethical boundaries. The maxim "just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean you should do something" is important to remember when considering those boundaries in sharing information. One of the differences between using Zotero as a personal versus group library is that for personal educational use there is often a great deal more flexibility regarding what one may put in that library or even share between a small group of research collaborators versus what is shared in a church's library. All materials in Liberation's Zotero library must be subject to United States copyright law and "Fair Use" guidelines.

While full-text documents in the library are available only to church members who have requested to join the library, Liberation needs to have been granted permission from the documents' originating organizations to use them communally. One who fails at that sets a poor example of ethical information use for congregational members at Liberation and elsewhere. This is one reason why much of what is currently in Liberation's library currently consists of book citations, links to videos, freely available online articles and blog posts, and open access articles, rather than a wider variety of full-text articles and e-books from proprietary sources.

Assessment and Evaluation

Liberation's work with Zotero has slowly grown from one librarian's experiment to an increasingly valuable congregational resource. As the library has evolved into the congregation's library,

its assessment becomes increasingly important, which is tied to metaliteracy goal four (Mackey and Jacobson, 2014, para. 6). As churches are not academic institutions, and unlike academic institutions that have formal assessment policies and procedures, churches may evaluate successes and failures via other means. Thus far I have not articulated many goals or expectations for this iteration of Liberation's library endeavor besides a hope that those in the congregation will find it an interesting and helpful source of information related to their Christian discipleship journey. Wisniewski and Fichter (2007) note, however, that "librarians are increasingly being called upon to justify their libraries' existence with metrics, showing acceptable and increasing levels of use and user satisfaction" (p. 54).

Much of the library assessment that I have done has been qualitative and gleaned through fairly informal conversations with Liberation members about the library. It is currently not possible to provide the church with quantitative assessment of the library in the form of usage statistics since those statistics are not available to users. However, I asked the two Zotero workshop attendees to complete a short survey at the end of the workshop, which produced important feedback regarding their perceptions of Zotero. Both attendees were far more interested in the web-based interface of Zotero than the Firefox browser extension. They wanted to attend the workshop to learn of its use "for ministry" and "preparing sermons." While they provided me with no negative feedback about the workshop, I see in their reluctance to install Zotero on their own computers an opportunity for additional conversation and possible education about Zotero.

I also gathered feedback from attendees of the Faith Thinking Foundations course, including the pastor. Participants enjoyed the course but sometimes found it difficult to connect the concepts, materials, and tools (including the Zotero library) to their day-to-day faith lives. The pastor enjoyed and appreciated the course as well, recommending that the course's themes be more overtly tied to scriptural stories and/or themes. She also recommended that the course be taught in its originally-envisioned eight-week format, rather than the four weeks allotted for it. Their feedback in both cases

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will help me to better refine future educational endeavors involving religious literacy and Zotero at Liberation.

Conclusion

Liberation Christian Church's Zotero library has thus far been a fascinating exploration of what happens when a library 2.0 tool meets church 2.0. As with any library it is "always being reformed" (Guthrie, 2008), which is equal parts frustrating and exciting. Significant challenges have arisen during library implementation: the library currently consists of only 783 items, not all of which are full-text, with limited book capability that comes from restrictive publisher options for shared e-books and articles. There are potential ethical land mines in it that are a symptom of the growing edges of online content and copyright law's inadequacies. Though I am unable to gather and provide statistics on the library's use, it appears to be used less than I would like. In short, this early attempt at building an online library for Liberation with Zotero has been rough and full of potential issues.

There have been hopeful moments in Liberation's Zotero implementation as well. Those within the congregation who understand the point of an online congregational library and information management tool have been very supportive and encouraging of all efforts to expand and promote the library. Also, simply having conversations about the library with church members has encouraged further conversation regarding other religious literacy topics within the congregation. Liberation's experiences with furthering religious literacy through using a Zotero library, both positive and negative, have and will continue to provide valuable learning opportunities for Liberation, as well as an example for other congregations who seek ways to successfully bring information tools into their midst. Zotero's use in any environment, but particularly within religious congregations, has the potential to revolutionize the way clergy, congregational members, and librarians envision faith, intellect, and the integration thereof within religious congregations.

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