You Are What You Measure: The Importance of Data to Your Library's Survival
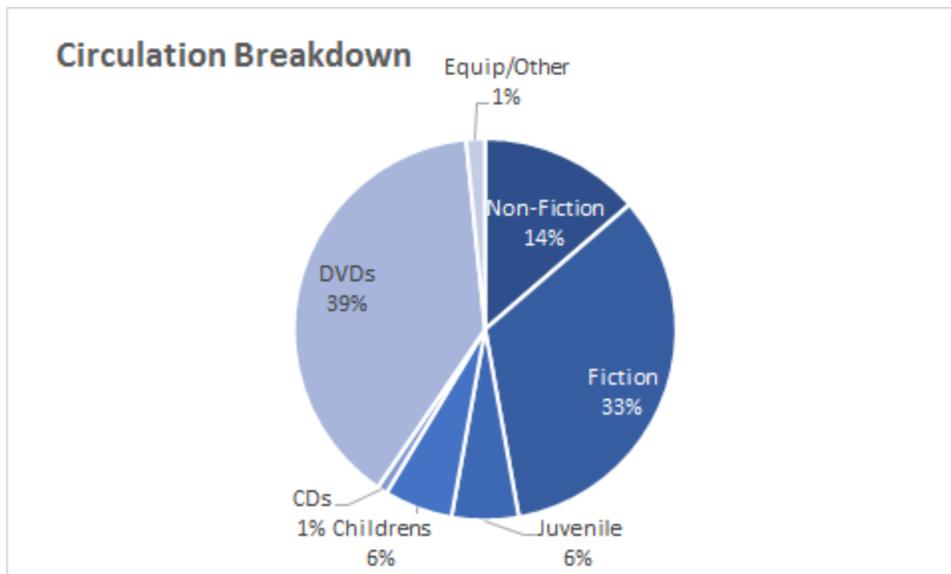
By Mary Odom

Church libraries have an uphill battle to justify budgets and space. Tracking data is not an especially spiritual activity, and other priorities fill the limited time of volunteers. But proving that your ministry contributes to the broader mission of your church is an effective tool for survival. Just ask any librarian whose library has been closed in recent years, and you will hear regrets about the missed opportunities to demonstrate value to church leaders and members.

There are two general categories of measuring effective church library ministry: qualitative and quantitative. Although stories & photos of changed lives are effective tools, this article will focus on using quantitative data. Our library at First Baptist Church, Raytown Missouri includes testimonies from library users in an annual newsletter article that highlights readers of various ages. Photos of story time with children, programs, and users may also included. But the main focus of our annual report is usage statistics.

There are several metrics that can be extracted from your library software (such as Concourse) or tracked manually in a spreadsheet. We record hash marks in a notebook at the circulation desk to record some of these metrics and transfer them to the annual report. Other metrics are pulled from reports generated by our integrated library software.

- Items circulated
- Number of card holders/users
- Number of new card holders
- Items circulated per card holder (Just divide total circulation by total card holders)
- New materials added
- Library collection broken down by type (fiction, nonfiction, childrens, etc.)
- Circulation broken down by type
- Total collection size
- Collection total value in dollars
- Storytime/event attendance
- Website visitors (if applicable)
- Reading program participants

Once you have collected data for at least 6 months, you can compile it in various ways to be attractive to your stakeholders. For example, Microsoft Excel is useful for creating charts and graphs that show metrics at a glance and trends over the years. Below is a chart created for our most recent annual report using Excel.

Circulation Breakdown

- Equip/Other 1%
- Non-Fiction 14%
- Fiction 33%
- Juvenile 6%
- Childrens 6%
- CDs 1%
- DVDs 39%

First Baptist Raytown's most recent annual report "Just Look What You've Done" can be accessed on our blog: http://fbrlibrary.wordpress.com/2014/01/31/just-look-what-youve-done

We typically post it on our blog in January and distribute it to senior church staff via email and put hard copies out for interested library users. The bottom line is to prove how you are fulfilling the church's mission of reaching people for Christ. Our church recently changed their logo and updated their mission statement. We used this as an opportunity to demonstrate how the library plays an essential supporting role. (See the article http://fbrlibrary.wordpress.com/2013/06/15/where-does-the-library-fit-into-fbrs-mission/)

Your efforts to communicate ministry statistics to church members and leaders will help them to see the library as a partner working shoulder-to-shoulder towards the same goal. While I can't say that it's a guarantee against budget or space cuts, I can guarantee that you'll have evidence at your fingertips when you need it the most.

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