



The Value of Leadership Development for Theological Librarians

by Myka Kennedy Stephens

Measuring the value of leadership development is a contextual practice, shaped by the particular pressures a field or organization is navigating. Theological librarianship is a field being shaped by pressure from many sides: shifts in higher education, trends in religious communities, technological advances, economic realities, and political discourse. Many practitioners, especially solo librarians managing wide-ranging responsibilities, face volatility and uncertainty with little support from their parent institutions. It was from this perspective that this paper was presented at the 2026 Spring Conference of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries held at Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford. Rooted in a theology of diakonia and grounded in the practical experiences of leading a small theological library, it proposes an expanded understanding of leadership—one available to anyone, regardless of title or position—and introduces a model for leadership development that integrates personal, professional, and spiritual growth. While the paper speaks directly to theological librarianship, its approach is offered as a resource for other library work environments and specialties and for any field experiencing volatility and uncertainty at traumatizing levels. Also published in [Bulletin of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries](#), 33, no. 1 (Spring 2026).

Introduction

During an open conversation held at the American Theological Library Association's annual meeting in 2004, the late Dennis Norlin, then executive director of ATLA, expressed the importance of nurturing future leaders for theological education. He shared the observation that our field was approaching a leadership crisis, with a greater number of librarians retiring than new librarians joining the field. To ensure the future of theological librarianship, he said, we needed librarians poised to lead theological libraries, advocate for the future of theological libraries and theological education, and mentor a new generation of theological librarians.

Twenty-two years later, theological librarianship is facing a different kind of leadership crisis. Retirements outpacing entering professionals is no longer our primary concern. Today, positions vacated due to retirements are simply being eliminated. Theological libraries are casualties in the wake of a cascade of closures, mergers, and acquisitions in theological education. The decline of theological education follows from a global fading of religious affiliation and a rise in global instability more generally. Simultaneously faced with the task of collecting and preserving the wisdom of generations past while experiencing rapid technological growth and global instability, theological librarians are stressed and overwhelmed.

Contemplating the value of leadership development for theological librarians during these tumultuous times, I offer three hopes. First, that you might develop a clearer sense of how trauma and post-traumatic stress are shaping our libraries and organizations, with language to notice the survival responses and patterns of rigidity and chaos that show up in your own contexts. Second, that you might carry a redefined understanding of leadership that is more appropriate for small theological library settings—seeing leadership not as a set of heroic or privileged actions reserved for a few but as how we are, how we show up in our work, our relationships, and our theological imagination. And third, that you might be intrigued by Attendant Leadership as a holistic, diaconal model that can guide your personal and professional leadership development in ways that honor service, justice, and peace.

Trauma and Survival Responses in Libraries and Organizations

I believe we must adopt a trauma-informed perspective to understand how trauma and post-traumatic stress impacts our libraries and organizations. During trauma, we are naturally propelled into the survival responses of fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. I know this because I lived it as the director of a small theological library during COVID and, subsequently, an institutional merger. It was not stressful all the time. There was a good portion of my time when I was able to find a healthy balance leading from a place of complexity, a place where I could both differentiate and integrate the specialized and diverse components within the library and its relationship to the seminary into a coherent, functional whole. However, there were many moments when demands and stress became overwhelming, and my autonomic survival responses took over.

During the first few months of the COVID-19 shutdown and our collective attempts to find a new normal, my freeze response activated. I withdrew from my colleagues and focused more on discrete tasks that needed completion instead of proactive outreach to students and faculty. Reopening the library at the same time the faculty began urgent conversations about the seminary's precarious financial state, my flight response was activated. While I did not literally run away, I hyper-fixated on testing new tools and workflows for curbside pickup service while avoiding planning for the library's future. When a regional university signed a memorandum of agreement to acquire the seminary, my fight response activated. In advance of a visit with the provost and university library director, I produced a 35-page document summarizing the current state of the seminary library, comparing its strengths and weaknesses to our peers and what I knew of the theological collections and services at the university library, and proposing a set of strategic explorations to guide how the two libraries might partner and collaborate going forward. At the time I thought this was a strong show of initiative. Now, I see it as overcompensating, signaling a need to prove and justify the seminary library. When it became clear that the university wanted space in the library building to house their personnel and programs, my fawn response took over as I made concessions and accommodations to gain the respect and trust of the university architect instead of advocating for the library's patrons and effective use of space.

Awareness of our survival responses is just one piece of understanding how trauma and post-traumatic stress impacts libraries and organizations. The other piece comes from understanding the concept of self-organizing systems and what happens when they are under stress. Margaret Wheatley, author of the classic *Leadership and the New Science*, advocates for a leadership approach informed by quantum physics, chaos theory, and complexity theory. She argues that when leaders encourage and support a natural self-organizing capacity in their groups and teams, the organization becomes more effective.¹ Complexity theory also shows us how stress affects the well-being of individuals and organizations. How a system is likely to change when under stress directly correlates to patterns of unresolved trauma and post-traumatic stress in individuals.

The goal when leading self-organizing systems is to operate in maximum complexity, which is found when a system, be it an individual or an organization, can balance differentiation

¹ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd ed. (Berrett-Koehler, 2006), 82–83.

with integration.² One way of visualizing this is to imagine a seesaw. Complexity is the balance point, and the sign of a healthy system is a move toward maximal complexity. However, when a system is unhealthy, experiencing overwhelming stress for example, it will find itself tilting one way or the other instead of balanced in complexity. Tilting on one side of complexity is rigidity, indicated by becoming entrenched in habits and beliefs and resisting change and progress. Tilting to the other side of complexity is chaos, indicated by uncertainty and disorganization with seemingly random decisions and actions. Unhealthy organizations can oscillate between rigidity and chaos, or they can experience a quantum state where rigidity and chaos exist simultaneously. Therefore, organizations stuck in or oscillating between rigidity and chaos are exhibiting signs of unresolved trauma and post-traumatic stress at an organizational level. Allowed to continue, these patterns will irreparably damage the organizational system by slowly incapacitating its leaders.

Redefining Leadership for Theological Librarianship

Given these insights about trauma and system complexity, we must redefine leadership for theological librarianship. It is possible to lead from any position within an organization or community. Leadership is not connected to having the right title or sitting high up in an organizational hierarchy supervising multiple people. Leaders are individuals in an organization who others turn to for a positive example, who are a source of guidance and support. For theological librarians, particularly those who are solo librarians or work in smaller contexts, leadership is less about who we are and what we do, and more about how we are—how we perform our work through our presence, our relationships, and the theological imagination we bring into our libraries. Every librarian has the capacity for leadership by how they show up in their role.

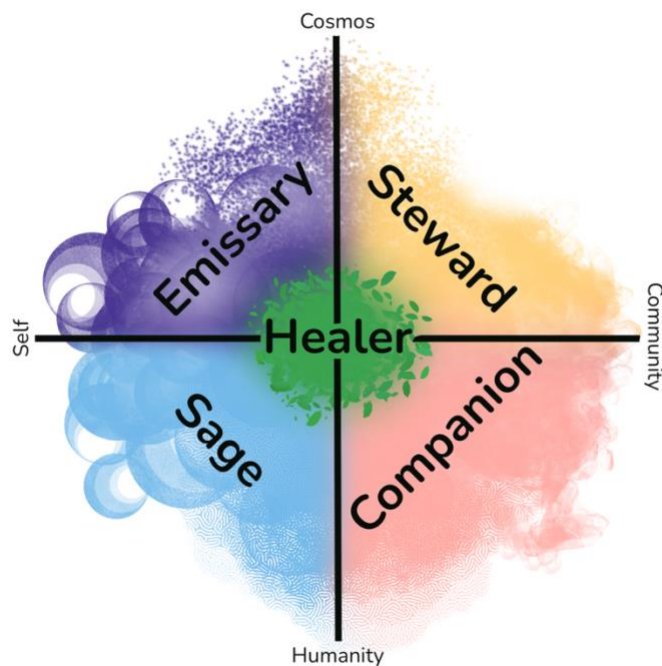
Developing such leaders requires a commitment to growth in understanding and awareness that builds compassion and increases mindfulness. For those serving in small contexts, justifying the expense and time investment for substantive leadership development can be difficult. Yet, the risk to ourselves and our organizations is too great to ignore, avoid, postpone, or delay opportunities and practices that contribute to our leadership

² Daniel J. Siegel, “An Interpersonal Neurobiology of Psychotherapy: The Developing Mind and the Resolution of Trauma,” in *Healing Trauma: Attachment, Mind, Body, and Brain*, ed. Marion F. Solomon and Daniel J. Siegel (W. W. Norton, 2003), 4–5.

development. The long-term benefits of disrupting patterns of survival response to make room for resolving and healing trauma has too great of a potential not to attempt it.

Introducing Attendant Leadership

Adopting a trauma-informed perspective and reconsidering the definition of leadership invites us to consider a new model of leadership. The model I am actively developing is called Attendant Leadership. Librarianship attracts people who like to be helpful, who like to be of service, and as a result many of us prioritize the needs of our patrons, students, faculty, and collections over our own. Thus, Robert Greenleaf's Servant Leadership model is one that I once found inspiring and resonant with my sense of call as a United Methodist Deaconess. However, I have become critical of Greenleaf's model as not just encouraging and enabling my unhealthy patterns but also potentially harmful to vulnerable leaders who have been historically marginalized.³ Digging deeper into diaconal theology, I have combined service with justice and peace, resulting in a holistic approach anchored in the complexity of our relationships with each other and creation.



Attendant Leadership has five expressions that arise from the intersection of two dimensions of relationality. One dimension represents **relational scope** which traces the continuum from a leader's relationship to self to their relationship with community. The other dimension represents **relational depth** and traces a continuum from our shared human

³ Darryl W. Stephens and Myka Kennedy Stephens, "A Post-Colonial Response to Servant Leadership: Reclaiming Diakonia from Greenleaf," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 52, no. 2 (2025), <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/518>.

systems out into the wider cosmos and the ecological, spiritual, and structural systems we inhabit. When we intersect these two dimensions, five expressions emerge.

The Five Expressions of Attendant Leadership

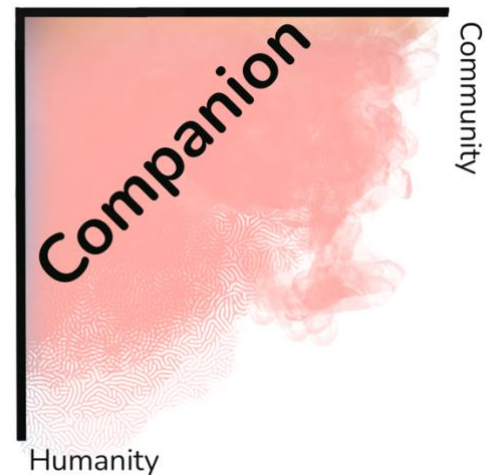


Rooted in the complexity of our relationships to self and community, humanity and cosmos, the **Healer** expression is centered where the two dimensions intersect. It emphasizes restoration, reconciliation, and reparation in all our relationships. It attends to healing trauma that resides in the self; healing our relationship to the wider cosmos, inclusive of spiritual and divine relationships, through grace and forgiveness; healing harm we do to one another in community; and healing creation through acts of care, conservation, and advocacy.

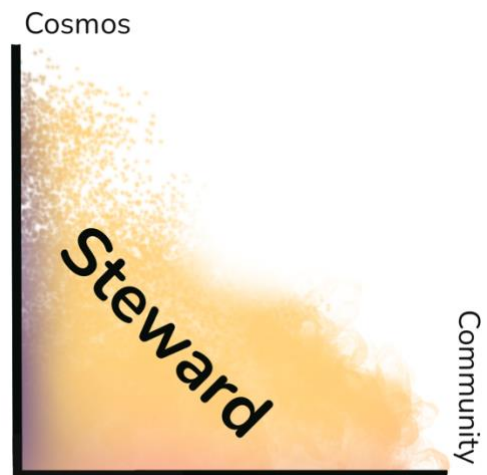


Where relationship to self and our context in human systems overlap, the **Sage** expression captures the need for wisdom and self-awareness as a leader. It invites us to recognize and reflect on individual intersectionality—for example, gender identity, culture, race, economic background, sexuality, and more—and how these [ideas] shape and are shaped by privilege, power, and vulnerability. To lead with service, justice, and peace, we need to sustain healthy self-awareness and self-reflection as we grow into this Sage expression.

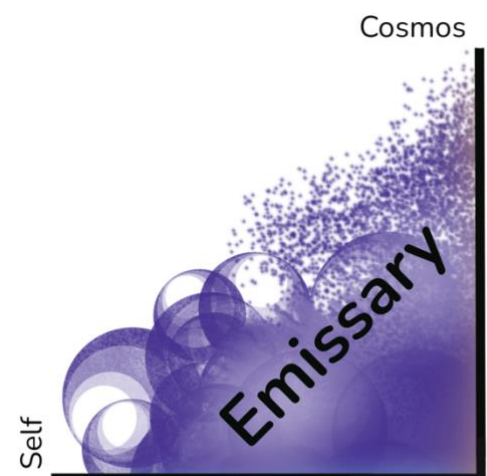
Where relationship to community and our context in human systems overlap, the **Companion** expression highlights the distinct way an attendant leader accompanies the communities they serve. Companionship goes deeper than servanthood and partnership; it conveys solidarity and advocacy. It is a commitment to leading by walking alongside those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, empowering their voice and choice rather than maintaining systems of patronage or dependency.



Where relationship to community and our context in the entirety of the cosmos overlap, the **Steward** expression connects and uplifts our responsibility to care for humanity within the larger context of the cosmos. By watching over the natural world and paying attention to human society's impact on creation, the attendant leader can identify harms, call out injustices, and exercise care that conserves creation while advocating for systemic change toward a more just and loving world.



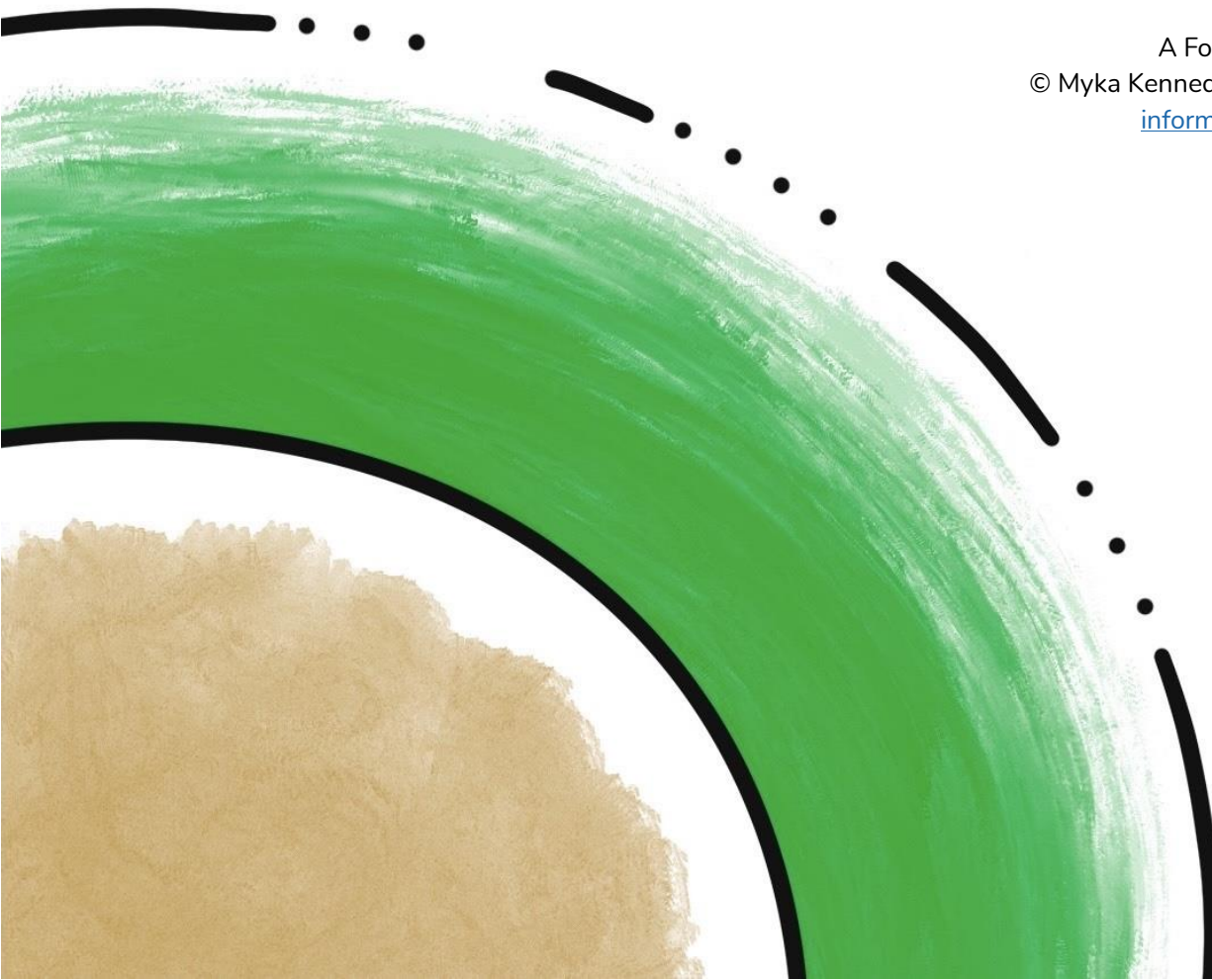
Where our relationship to self and our context in the entirety of the cosmos overlap, the **Emissary** expression speaks to our responsibility to discern and maintain a relationship to the cosmos. It requires a commitment to listen and remain open to learning from the mysteries of the universe—whether understood as hearing and discerning a call from God, receiving the wisdom of ancestors, sensing the presence of deities, or connecting to the ever-present energy of creation. Interpretation of this spiritual learning must be grounded in self-awareness and in awareness of the breadth of relationships that the leader is connected to.



Conclusion

The five expressions of Attendant Leadership—Healer, Sage, Companion, Steward, and Emissary—each offer a slightly different focus, a way of noticing where we are already strong, where we are comfortable, and where we might challenge ourselves and invest in further growth. Its emphasis on relationships and relationality, and its insistence that our relationship to self belongs alongside our relationships to community, human systems, and the wider cosmos, give us a more spacious and holistic way to imagine what leadership can be in our libraries.

The work you are doing matters, and so does the way you are within it. My invitation is to choose one small next step—whether in your personal, professional, or spiritual development—that will support you in becoming a more attentive Healer, Sage, Companion, Steward, or Emissary in your own context. In doing so, you contribute not only to your own healing and growth, but also to the healing and future of theological librarianship itself.



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