

## Dreams to ignite the Spirit: The Strategic Plan of EKE, the Hungarian Association Libraries

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### Introduction

The 50th anniversary meeting of BETH – held in Rolduc, the Netherlands, in 2022 – commemorated the existence of the Association both by looking back on its history and by envisioning a future based on the individual, progressive storylines of its member libraries. The conference thus served as a motivation for the Hungarian Association to look into the future and define key areas with well-defined milestones toward which we should focus our attention and channel our joint efforts.

This strategic plan took half a year to crystalise. It was based on the brainstorming sessions, discussions, and debates of six librarians, each with a leading role in their own ecclesiastical library, and other experts in particular subfields, as will be discussed. All the main denominations of the Hungarian Association were represented in this working group.[1]

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[1] Members of the group: Ágnes Bálint (The Theological and College Library of the Transtibiscan Reformed Church District, Debrecen), Ferenc Balogh (Library of the Archdiocese of Eger), Ildikó Kövécs (Theological Library of Gál Ferenc University), Kornélia Mészáros (Library of the Lutheran Theological University), Balázs Tamási (Jewish Jewish Theological Seminary – University of Jewish Studies, Budapest), Török Beáta (Library of the Sapientia College of Theology of Religious Orders, Budapest).

Imagining ourselves in five, ten or twenty-five years seemed at first impossible to accomplish with any accuracy or credibility, because of the serious uncertainties of the present and the sudden changes of the recent past. For example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine means that we are now neighbouring a country at war. As a consequence, increased energy and product prices are affecting individual households, as well as companies and institutions. A considerable rise in the price of paper negatively affects the Hungarian book market: it is increasingly difficult to purchase books and journals, and almost impossible to continue scientific publishing in our libraries. As for the international market, the acquisition of books, journals, and databases is unsustainable due to the exchange rate of our national currency, the Hungarian Forint. We could list many more factors that have made it difficult to predict even our near future. Who would have thought that we would not be able to meet, travel, or have conferences for almost two years? Who would have imagined a world with closed institutions, schools and libraries, or a working environment dominated almost totally by the 'home office'? Who would have imagined that distance education, digital libraries and online services would almost totally take over traditional library items and services? And what further consequences will these phenomena have?

The case study/example of the Library of the Lutheran Theological University supplies an answer to these questions. From March 2020, the staff of the University were obliged to work from home. The academic years of 2020 and 2021 ended and/or started online, and the library was only reopened in February 2022. This meant that three full university year groups began their studies online.[2] Taking advantage of the situation, the librarians prepared a library development plan during the autumn of 2020. The aim was to prepare for nonstop (day and night) opening hours, in keeping with a long-standing wish of both students and teaching staff. To achieve this, renovations were carried out in the library building during the autumn of 2021. After almost two years of online studies, with half of the students hardly ever having visited the library or met the librarians, the library was reopened with serious doubts as to whether students, now conditioned for online learning

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[2] Those who started in September 2019 are also included here due to the lower library usage of first-year students in their first semester.

environments, would want to visit the library and borrow physical items at all. If anyone had predicted that they would come and borrow materials almost every night, on weekends and during the summer library holidays as well, one would have certainly felt that their prediction was exaggerated. But this was, in fact, what happened. The first 'visitors' on the opening night were students from the first year!

On Maslow's well-known pyramid conceptualizing the hierarchy of needs, the services that libraries provide are mostly at the top of the pyramid.[3] These are needs that point towards growth and self-actualisation. These cognitive and self-actualisation needs consist of the following: knowledge, understanding, cognition, motivation to learn, creativity, personal development, and sense of purpose. In the current situation, with the majority of the population increasingly concerned with basic subsistence, is there enough time, energy, and need to focus on the higher levels of the pyramid? How well can we assess what lies ahead in a few years (or even decades)? The task is not an easy one, but we believe there should always be goals, plans, dreams, and aspirations that inspire individual librarians and the community of librarianship as well.

Maslow's pyramid rightfully assesses the same thing that an old saying expresses as follows: "You can't think on an empty stomach!" To address more layers of the pyramid, our Associations' strategic objectives will be presented in the form of a satisfying menu.

## **Starter: Aubergine Cream with Toast - Easy to Prepare, Easy to Digest**

A lighter, simpler dish to whet the appetite. These objectives are rooted in our existing resources, in collaboration within the Association's member libraries, and on building new relationships.

1. To achieve a 98% completion of electronic cataloguing of existing collections.

The prevalence of retrospective electronic cataloging is quite varied in our member libraries. We have some libraries with 100% completion, but others have much lower figures. The Library of the Lutheran Theological University, for example, is

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[3] Steven Webber, "Look to Maslow's Hierarchy to See Design an Architecture Impacts," Design for Purpose, September 10, 2019, <https://www.iands.design/interior-design-educators-council-idec/article/10168507/look-to-maslows-hierarchy-to-see-design-and-architecture-impacts>.

is 70% complete. The work is in progress, but the library is understaffed – something many of our libraries have in common. Thus, an achievement of 98% is still a challenge in Hungary, but we think that it can be achieved within five years. We do not propose 100%; 2% is left both as a nod to humility, and to account for items in circulation or missing, etc. The Association's renewed union catalogue, where the holdings of all our member libraries will be searchable together, will also help with and motivate us towards the achievement of this goal. The union catalogue will support the exchange of bibliographic data across libraries and library systems, which can accelerate cataloging. Cooperation with universities where librarianship courses are offered could also be helpful: we can provide practical training for students, or even volunteers who, in exchange, contribute to our cataloguing effort. Within the Association, we plan to develop a common cataloging policy to make the exchange even smoother.

2. To elaborate the principles and practice of acquisition harmonisation among libraries..

In this area, the strain is the scarcity of funds and the responsibility of good management of those funds. The idea is to diminish multiple acquisitions of very expensive items and to operate an effective interlibrary loan instead. It builds on intensive joint work, collegial relationships, and responsible management. Member libraries will be expected to make the bibliographic description of the books they have already ordered and to upload them into the union catalogue. In this way, readers can find out whether the item they are looking for will soon be available in a member library. It could also serve a useful function for other libraries and librarians looking to rationalise their acquisitions. This is particularly useful for more expensive documents and those that are likely to be rarely used as they focus on a special area not widely researched in our institutions.

## **Soup: Vegetable Soup with Vermicelli - Do Quick Fixes Work?**

This dish gives an overview of the situation of librarianship in Hungary. If a Hungarian soup is rich enough, it can be a proper main course, like goulash, for example. But this soup is simpler, consisting of water, stock cubes, and vermicelli. It is quick to prepare, but only gives a temporary feeling of fullness. The current situation of Hungarian librarianship is similar. Librarians still exist and libraries

have not been closed, but the rich fulfillment – that is, the long-term solution as to the survival of the profession – is uncertain. Hence, our strategic goals include the following point.

1. To advocate for a better social appreciation of our profession and to address the shortage of young professionals and recruitment issues.

Today there are nearly 3,900 libraries (including branch libraries) in Hungary, and the Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries has 59 member libraries. However, the number of young people choosing the librarian profession is decreasing. According to graduate career tracking data, 174 people graduated from library bachelor's degree courses nationwide in 2013-2014; in contrast, this number fell to 56 in 2018. Moreover, graduates do not necessarily look for librarian positions, preferring other jobs. 43.75% of graduates entered the business sector, presumably working in a non-library field. It is also more difficult to hire new staff in rural areas than in the capital. According to 2019 data, nearly half (43%) of graduates with a library bachelor's degree found employment in or around Budapest.

As a profession, librarianship is not well rewarded, either financially[4] or socially.[5] No wonder, then, that there are so many career dropouts undertaking other jobs. 76.78% of graduates work (19.64% work during their studies), and only 16.07% continue to pursue MA studies.[6] In many cases, librarians are forced to take part-time jobs in addition to their full-time jobs (especially if they are the only or primary breadwinners). Today, in Hungary, the average gross monthly income of a librarian is 861.30 EUR (350,000 HUF), while the net salary is 572.80 EUR (232,750 HUF).[7]

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[4] "Diplomás Pályakövetési Rendszer 2020: Adminisztratív Adatbázisok Egyesítése - Gyorsjelentés," Diplomás Pályakövetési Rendszer, 2020, [https://www.diplomantul.hu/storage/DPR\\_AAE\\_2020\\_gyorsjelentes.pdf](https://www.diplomantul.hu/storage/DPR_AAE_2020_gyorsjelentes.pdf).

[5] Recently a municipality advertised a job vacancy for "librarian and cleaner" from <https://kozigallas.gov.hu/pages/jobviewer.aspx?ID=ij3e3zdvd7>.

[6] "Adminisztratív Adatbázisok Egyesítése 2020," Diplomán Tul, accessed September 2022, [https://www.diplomantul.hu/adminisztrativ-adatbazisok-egyesitese?fbclid=IwAR1ZNroT5IkkwWNtnqTWYql\\_tloj1PQml-z7sYd2VOJZria9MwHkLP\\_bZYU](https://www.diplomantul.hu/adminisztrativ-adatbazisok-egyesitese?fbclid=IwAR1ZNroT5IkkwWNtnqTWYql_tloj1PQml-z7sYd2VOJZria9MwHkLP_bZYU).

[7] As a comparison: the average gross monthly income of a bus driver at Budapest Transport Centre: 1602,4 EUR (651,183 HUF), the net salary 1063.10 EUR (432,000 HUF); 1kg of bread = 2.20 EUR (894 HUF). 1 Euro to 402 Forint in September 2022.

In 2022 the cultural sector received a 20% increase in salary (the figures here already reflect this). The sector severely needed a pay rise, but this is still not a proper wage settlement. Due to inflation, the real value of earnings has not increased. We currently receive the 20% raise as a salary supplement, which means that it will not necessarily be part of the salary in 2023. If it is not maintained, the number of dropouts will increase.

Continuous consultation is needed with other library organisations to confront the government ministry in charge to regulate a proper income for librarians. This is absolutely necessary in order to be able to retain staff in the profession, as well as increasing their commitment through appreciation, adequate working conditions, and opportunities for continuous training.

While the career profile of a librarian is not attractive, the quality of specialised libraries usually requires a second degree in theology or religious studies. In order to find a satisfactory solution to the recruitment issue, special training in theological librarianship, in cooperation with our theological universities, could prove very effective.

## **Main Course: Stuffed Cabbage – Full and Fulfilling But Resource-Needy**

This dish is more substantial: it is full of ambition, vision and ideas which require both cooperation and financial support.

1. Establishment of digitalisation centres and development of coordinated digitalisation plans according to the different denominations represented in the Hungarian Association.

Church libraries in Hungary digitalise primarily for the purpose of preservation, but the goal of providing theological literature no longer protected by copyright has also developed. Some higher education institutions also digitalise and provide specialised literature within the limits of copyright. In addition, the commercial digitalisation of out-of-print titles of ecclesiastical publishers (e.g. the possibility of subscribing to the database of the St Stephen's Society) is also an emerging example.[8]

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[8] See the website <https://szitkonyvek.hu/leiras/10>.

The strategic goal of the Association is to formulate the principles of a planned digitalisation to develop common recommendations (e.g., on the quality, resolution, and preservation format of documents) and resource management in order to avoid duplicate digitalisation. In the current situation (shortage of staff and financial resources), it is not to be expected that all libraries would have their own means and devices for digitalisation. For the same reasons, the Association itself cannot afford to set up a centre to digitalise on demand for its member libraries. The Association can best envisage the setting up of a digitalisation centre as a joint effort of libraries within each of the denominations. It is easier to develop a priority list of documents to be digitalised within the denomination and to agree on the distribution of tasks and joint usage of devices as a good number of libraries already own digitalisation equipment. It is easier to run a professionally competitive centre within a denomination with staff who are experts in the field. One centre, one technical background with the right professional(s), but with common goals, could strengthen relations within the denomination and the representation of the denomination.

This idea is, in fact, based on the good practice of the digitalisation centre established in the Lutheran Church of Hungary which has been operating since 2013. The centre mainly digitalises Hungarian Lutheran-related documents that are no longer protected by copyright and makes them available, free of charge, in the Hungarian Lutheran Digital Repository. The Hungarian Lutheran registers of births and deaths (a useful aid for genealogical research) are also digitised, and provided by a separate database (Őskereső), available with a subscription. The Lutheran collections define their goals jointly, drawing up the priority list together, and the service background is also jointly developed. The library of the higher education institution of the Church digitalises the literature needed for teaching purposes (in many cases, books that are no longer available from publishers but are still protected by copyright) and makes these materials available locally with limited access.

2. Creating repositories in member libraries capable of preserving content and allowing metadata to be collected into UNITAS, our Association's existing union catalogue.

For higher education libraries, there is a requirement to store certain digital

documents, or digitally created documents of authors affiliated with their institution, on their own servers. The Association encourages member libraries to create their own repositories based on this expertise, in such a way as to contribute metadata to the Association's union catalogue. For those member libraries that do not have sufficient financial/technical/professional resources, the intention is to provide the opportunity to make their digital holdings available through the UNITAS catalogue. It is also important to develop common cataloguing principles for processing this digital content.

### 3. Bridging the gap between digitalisation and the preservation of digitally born material – digital legal deposit

Today the production of printed books and journals is based on a digital master copy, so they may also be considered born-digital documents. The aim of the Association is to promote and ensure the long-term preservation of such born-digital documents of ecclesiastical publishers in Hungary. We consider the accurate approach here as well to be denominational. Churches may develop a contract with publishers associated with or maintained by their denomination for the preservation of their publishing output, and supply the documents for their future serviceability to libraries. This requires good relations and mutual trust among the parties involved. The Association is eager to initiate negotiations, clarify objectives, and assist publishers with their knowledge.

Again, a Lutheran good practice provided the idea for this objective. The Lutheran Church cooperates with the Luther Publishing House as follows: at the end of the calendar year, the publisher hands over the digital master copies of books and periodicals produced that year to the Lutheran Central Collection for preservation. The embargo period is usually 5 years, after which these materials can be made freely available in the Hungarian Lutheran Digital Repository. The transaction copies also indicate if further special copyright permission is required for serviceability.

### **Dessert: Dobos cake – layers and filling**

By transforming the theoretical, practical, and tacit knowledge already present in our collections into the library and best practice courses, we aim to create, maintain, and nurture a working ethos based on knowledge sharing and knowledge



management. In order to achieve this, we also plan to maintain the current practice of 'neighbouring', a form of exchange based on personal visits to ecclesiastical and secular libraries. With our culinary image, we may consider the sponge cake layers of the Dobos cake as being the professional skills of those in the field that must be kept fresh. The filling (which truly makes a good dessert) would be their continuous development.

It will be useful to differentiate between objectives requiring extra financial support and those that may be performed by means already available. We begin by listing here those means of knowledge sharing not requiring essential further financial support.

## 1. Neighbouring

The focus of these events is always on institutions that are either in the spotlight because of the documents they handle (e.g. statistical data, rare archival material), or because of the special work or improvements they have accomplished (e.g. digitalisation, library renovation, automatisisation). During visits, we are guided through the institution, meet the staff, and get acquainted with their ongoing work. Neighbouring has proved to be a means to learn about good practices, establish partnerships, and build and maintain professional contacts for the future.

## 2. One-day Conferences and Training

Organised around a topic, presentations include theoretical issues and existing practices as well. Followed by forums or panel discussions, there are always opportunities to ask questions and share thoughts and ideas on the topic. This is important for sharing good practices, but also for joining forces in finding solutions to shared problems.

## 3. Setting up working groups

In order to address special tasks such as strategy development, common cataloguing policy, etc., delegates from the member libraries work together for the duration of the project, representing different institutions and viewpoints to develop recommendations acceptable for all member libraries.

Obtaining an increase in our salaries, improving our working conditions, the development of accredited training courses with invited speakers – for instance on theological librarianship – all depend on further financial support. High-quality digitalisation of our oldest documents is connected to conservation tasks. However, it is a regrettable fact that the bookbinder and conservator professions, so much in need in the conservation-centred digitalisation process, have become untenable in recent years. It would take a national effort to re-establish training and assist all Hungarian libraries in their need.

It would be the icing on the cake if our online and offline library spaces reflect a pleasurable look and feel for our patrons, where they can get quick professional support both through the human staff and the technically secure (e.g., internet, database access) environment. This too would take financial backing and wider support.

With a heavy lunch like this, the Hungarian Association of Ecclesiastical Libraries is approaching the top of the Maslow pyramid. Hopefully, we will have enough physical and mental nourishment to really ignite the spirit of our dreams. However changeable and indefinable the future, we must cultivate our hopes and desires

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