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Discard to Discovery: Empowering Majority World Theological Libraries

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Introduction

In an era when information is paramount, ensuring equitable access to information and knowledge remains a significant challenge as information divides persist and even widen across many parts of the world. Through various channels, my roles as the college librarian at Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford, Chair of ABTAPL (Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries) and Vice-president of BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie - European Theological Library Association), have provided numerous opportunities to understand diverse situations of theological libraries globally and the unique environments in which they operate. From many conversations with theological librarians over the past few years, I have learned that we all face difficulties and struggles in our rapidly ever-changing world, influenced by technology innovation, political instability and the demographic shifts in Christianity from the Global North to the Global South (i.e., Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania). According to Zurlo, Johnson and Crossing, “world Christianity changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century with the continued shift of adherents from the Global North to the Global South” (Zurlo, Johnson and Crossing 2020, 13).

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In the West, this shift is compounded by the declining popularity of theology as a discipline and research subject, alongside waning public interest in Christianity. These trends place additional pressure on the existence of theological libraries, leading to surplus theological collections due to library closures, mergers, space limitations, downsizing, updating, or weeding.

Conversely, “the decline of Christianity in the Global North is now being outpaced by the rise of Christianity in the Global South” (Zurlo, Johnson and Crossing 2020, 9). Consequently, many majority world theological libraries face a very different challenge: a lack of resources to cope with a rapid expansion of theological education and ministerial training.

Recognising the global imbalance in access to resources and information, I felt compelled to act. To address this issue from my perspective, I decided to start with 'Why?'—a framework introduced by Simon Sinek in his book, *Start with Why*. In this book, Sinek introduces the Golden Circle, which consists of three layers: 'Why, How and What'. The inner circle is 'Why', the middle centre is 'How,' and finally the outer circle is 'What' (Sinek 2009, 37). According to him, this circle “provides compelling evidence of how much more we can achieve, if we remind ourselves to start everything we do by first asking why” (2009, 38).

Thus, I began by asking myself why I wanted to undertake this initiative, followed by how I would implement it, and finally, what actions I would take. This article will explore each country's trends and situations to elucidate my 'Why' and outline the steps taken to address the disparities in theological resource distribution.

The United Kingdom

Starting on home ground, theological libraries in the UK have been closing or merging. I am often the first one to hear this news as I am Chair of the British Association, ABTAPL. Many theological libraries are struggling with financial constraints and merging with humanities institutions due to the unpopularity of theology as a discipline and a decline in the number of students (Press Office 2019).

This trend is not only limited to institutions, but also to wider society. Church attendance has declined from 11.8% to 5% of the population between 1980 to 2015 (Faith Survey n.d.). Many physical collections of theology resources are discarded or stored away off-site, with more preference for e-resources. For example, institutions such as the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS n.d.), University College London (UCL n.d.) and the Bodleian (Bodleian Libraries 2019) have adopted an “electronic first” policy. However, centuries of theological scholarship, research heritage, and academic excellence in theology and Biblical studies cannot be overlooked.

Ukraine

In the autumn of 2023, I met the librarian from the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary at the BETH conference in Córdoba and heard his desperate appeal. He shared the following story with me. Despite the war, the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary had the highest number of graduations (190 in 2023) in its 20-year history. Teaching and learning are still going strong. However, due to devastation and destruction, many collections were destroyed and ruined. No funds are available to invest in collection acquisition. English language books in theology and Biblical studies are greatly welcomed (pers. comm., September 2023).

South Sudan: Bethel Theological Seminary

Bethel Theological Seminary, founded in 2018 by the Rev. Dr. Enoch Song, is currently a small but resilient institution with around 50 students. Rev. Song serves as the pastor of a small Korean church in Brighton, UK, ministering to the local Korean community, which comprises mostly students and has a congregation of about ten members. Despite his responsibilities in the UK, Rev. Song has a deep commitment to Africa and has been actively engaged in African ministry.

When Rev. Song learned the news about South Sudan’s independence during a visit to Kenya, where he was collaborating with local missionaries on campus evangelism outreach, he was moved by South Sudan’s crucial geopolitical significance in relation to Islamic Sudan. This prompted him to relocate his ministry from Kenya to South Sudan (pers. comm., April 2024).

South Sudan already has many faithful local church pastors. However, they often receive relatively short-term theological education and training before being immediately deployed to serve their congregations. Recognising the need for more specialised and systematic education and training, Rev. Song, along with many Korean pastors serving Korean churches in the UK—many of whom have obtained doctoral degrees in theology from Western institutions—collaborated to provide high-quality lectures at Bethel Theological Seminary. They visit three times a year for roughly two weeks each time. Rev. Song visited Wycliffe Hall and collected 322 books on practical ministry in April and 259 in July 2024, which he plans to take to South Sudan in August (pers. comm. July 2024).

Uganda: Kumi University

I learned about Kumi University through a connection at KTLA (the South Korean Theology University and Seminary Library Association). Kumi University is located in the east of Uganda and was founded by a Korean missionary couple in 1996 in one of the poorest districts of the country. The university now has 500 undergraduate students across four departments including Theology. The library is ill-equipped with books, making it imperative to acquire good quality resources. English language books in theology and biblical studies, as well as Bible commentaries, are extremely expensive and so desperately needed (pers. comm., April 2024).

Myanmar: Emmanuel Theological College

Emmanuel Theological College is an Anglican seminary in Kalaymyo, which reopened in 2022 under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. David Brang Than, who earned his PhD at Sungkonghoe University, an Anglican University in Seoul, South Korea. After completing his education, he returned to Myanmar to minister to his people in a region where local conflicts persist. Currently he has 13 students, with 15 expected in the new academic year. Rev. Than aims to equip the library with 8,000 books. Although classes are taught in their local language, academic texts are often not yet written or translated in the local languages, making English-language theology books essential.

South Korea: KTLA

KTLA (Korean Theological University and Seminary Library Association) celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in 2023. I had the privilege of attending this celebratory event last summer, where I was particularly moved by one presentation. KTLA has been sending their library members to theological libraries in the majority world for one to two weeks each summer to set up libraries or update their systems and collections, all personally funded. During these trips, the Korean librarians work tirelessly from early in the morning to late evening, taking only a couple of days off before flying back (pers. comm., June 2023). In South Korea, where summer holidays are typically very short—often just one to two weeks per year—KTLA views this initiative as their mission and calling. They have been running this program since 2015, with pausing only during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their dedication and sacrifice greatly humbled me.

The reason for their dedication might be rooted in the unique history of Christianity in Korea and the significant impact theological books have had. The history of Christianity in Korea is unusual, as books, particularly theology books and the Bible, played an important role even before the arrival of missionaries by preparing the way. Rausch and Park discussed the crucial role that theological books and the Bible played in Korea before missionaries arrived. Rausch and Park state, “Koreans were first introduced to Catholicism in the early seventeenth century through books on ‘Western learning’” acquired by a Korean diplomat during his visit to China. “When a Chinese missionary named James Zhou Wenmo... arrived in Korea in late 1794, there were already several thousand Catholics there” (Rausch and Park 2020, 12). Therefore, remarkably, the first church in Korea was founded not by foreign missionaries but by Koreans who independently studied theology books and the Bible (Kim and Ko 2018). This fact is echoed by Allen Clark (1986, 39–40).

A similar scenario unfolded with the inception of Korean Protestantism. Robert Thomas, a Welsh missionary, handed over some copies of a Chinese New Testament to Korean passersby just before his execution in 1866 on the shore of Pyeongyang, without an opportunity to engage in preaching or evangelism. This act planted the initial seed of the exploration of Protestantism in Korea. The distribution of this Bible led to the conversion of some individuals (Clark 1986, 62–63). Furthermore, as Rausch

and Park note:

While there were attempts by Protestant missionaries to enter Korea in 1832 and 1866, sustained contact and conversion would not occur until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Koreans abroad in Manchuria came into contact with Protestantism through Scottish missionaries, such as John Ross, and smuggled Ross' Korean translations of the Gospels and then the entire New Testament into Korea before the first resident missionary, Methodist Horace Allen, arrived in 1884 (Rausch and Park 2020, 13).

These theology books and the Bible were truly prepared well in advance of missionaries arriving on the Korean peninsula. Currently, South Korea stands firmly rooted in Christianity, exemplifying its robust foundation by emerging as the second-largest sender of missionaries globally (Moll 2006). South Korea is approximately 99 times smaller than the US in area, and the population of the US is six times larger than South Korea. Considering this population size, South Korea sends out the most missionaries per capita. This stands as a testament to the profound impact of the Gospel and the Word.

These stories are my 'Why'. With my 'Why' established, I now present my 'How'.

How to Bridge the Gap

In the spring of 2023, a casual conversation over lunch with a visiting academic who heads a seminary in a majority world country sparked an important initiative. For safety and security reasons, I cannot name the country or the institution. As a librarian, I inquired about their seminary library. They highlighted the inadequacy of the library in terms of academic resources, expressing challenges in procuring theological books for academic purposes in their country. Recognising that librarians in the West are often overwhelmed by surplus books, I felt compelled to take action to address the disparity between those with access and those without.

Understanding the transformative influence of the Word, I felt a strong urge to connect surplus books in the UK with libraries in theological centres, seminaries, colleges, and universities, expanding rapidly in the majority world and all in dire

need of theological books. Through library and church networks, I began exploring ways to support libraries in need with the following questions: How do I reduce the inequality and disparity in theological resource distribution? How do I bridge the gap between those who have and those who do not? How can I meet the needs of those who are seeking advanced learning? How can I share my surplus theological resources with the majority world?

From the cases mentioned earlier, it is clear that theological libraries in the West hold a wealth of knowledge waiting to be shared. By donating surplus books, we can empower theological education in the majority world, unlocking new perspectives and strengthening global Christian communities. Theological libraries in these regions often lack critical resources, hindering the ability of students and researchers to access foundational texts. Identifying and addressing these gaps can open new avenues for learning and growth. This is where my charity, Oxford Theology Resources Link, comes into play.

What to Do: Oxford Theology Resources Link

In addressing the core issues I have identified, the ultimate answer lies in the mission and activities of my charity, Oxford Theology Resources Link. This initiative aims to bridge the gap between surplus academic theological books in the UK and theological libraries in need within the majority world. Our goal is to ensure that every community has access to the transformative power of theological knowledge. The Oxford Theology Resources Link operates on three core principles.

1. Providing Good Quality Academic Resources: Ensuring that the books sent are relevant and beneficial for academic and theological education.
2. Giving the Right to Choose: Allowing the recipient libraries to select the books they need most in line with their curriculum and community.
3. Ongoing Support for Sustainability: Offering continuous support to ensure the long-term sustainability of the receiving libraries.

Through these efforts, we aim to bridge the gap and foster an environment where theological education can thrive globally, benefiting from the wealth of resources available in the West.

Empowering Access

- **Intellectual Nourishment:** Robust theological collections inspire critical thinking, theological reflection, and the exchange of ideas.
- **Educational Advancement:** Access to theological resources can elevate educational opportunities, equipping the next generation of pastors, scholars, and community leaders.
- **Contextual Relevance:** Providing culturally appropriate materials ensures the content resonates with local contexts, fostering deeper engagement and application.

Sourcing Surplus

- **Identifying Opportunity:** We reach out to academics, seminaries, and libraries to uncover theological resources no longer needed.
- **Sorting and Listing items:** Donated books are carefully sorted and listed to ensure they meet the needs of recipient libraries.
- **Coordinating Logistics:** We arrange safe, legitimate, and efficient transportation of donated books to their final destinations.

Delivery and Distribution

- **Packaging:** Books are carefully packed with all relevant paperwork for smooth processing.
- **Shipping:** We collaborate with logistics partners to ensure timely and cost-effective delivery.
- **Distribution:** We work with local partners to efficiently process customs clearance, then distribute books to theological libraries in need.

Collaborative Efforts

- **Partnership:** We foster collaborative relationships with organisations, charities and individuals to amplify our impact.

- **Networking:** We connect with a global community of stakeholders to share knowledge and best practice.
- **Teamwork:** We leverage the diverse skills and resources of volunteers to streamline the donation and distribution process.

Contextual Relevance

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** We are not dumping the books we no longer need. Where possible, we first send a list of available books, then let the recipient library choose what they want to receive.
- **Topical Alignment:** When direct selection is not possible, we consult with professional theological librarians in the UK to curate books to meet the needs of the recipient communities, maximising accessibility and understanding.
- **Ongoing Support:** We maintain open communication with recipients to continuously improve the relevance and impact of the donated resources. Additionally, we offer ongoing training for library staff and volunteers to empower the local workforce.

Progress

From inception until May 2025, OTRL has continued its mission to support theological libraries in the Majority World through the collection, curation, and distribution of academic theological resources. Our efforts in 2024 and this year have focused on three strategic areas: international book shipments, institutional partnerships, and training and consultation engagement.

Book Shipments

- **Uganda:** Building on our established shipping route with Books2Africa, a resource distribution UK charity, we successfully delivered two full pallets—approximately 2,600 books—to Kumi University in Uganda in early 2025. Kumi has now expressed interest in expanding their library to include Business Studies materials. We are actively sourcing relevant titles.

- South Sudan: A planned shipment to a theological institution in South Sudan had to be rerouted due to delays in building infrastructure and the worsening political situation in this region. The books were instead sent to Bethel Seminary in Uganda, a sister institution, where they will directly benefit theological education and ministerial training until the situation in South Sudan is more stable.
- Ukraine: OTRL has been regularly sending books to a theological institution in Ukraine. So far, 13 successful shipments, totalling approximately 2,000 books, have been delivered safely via a secure, door-to-door route. This complex but well-organised logistical operation is a model of successful international distribution. We are now in conversation with another Ukrainian seminary to expand our support in response to growing on-the-ground needs.
- Antioch Project: In collaboration with Book Aid Charitable Trust, OTRL supported the shipment of 10,000 books to the Antioch project site. The books have safely arrived and are currently undergoing customs clearance. We are hopeful that they will be released and delivered to the recipient library in the coming weeks.
- Pending Projects:
 - A library partnership in Myanmar has been temporarily paused due to ongoing logistical complications and political changes. We hope to resume this project when the situation improves.
 - A request from a West African theological seminary remains on hold due to a shortage of available volunteers to lead and coordinate the initiative.
 - An additional project, Azra, is currently delayed due to challenges in establishing shipping routes and navigating customs clearance. We continue to work closely with our international partners to find viable solutions.

International Collaboration and Global Outreach

- OTRL continues to build strong links with theological library associations such as ABTAPL, BETH, Atla, KTLA, other resource distribution NGOs, missionary organisations, and churches.
- We are currently coordinating a joint conference and training programme for June 2025 at Wycliffe Hall with KTLA delegates and representatives from 4 The World Resource Distributors (USA). Also, representatives from Atla and Theological Book Network from Scholar Leaders will join the discussion. This event will strengthen

our reciprocal learning and catalyse sustainable partnerships for cataloguing, book distribution, and theological librarian training in Africa and Asia.

Training and Consultation Engagement

A recent pilot initiative in Sierra Leone has been completed successfully. OTRL provided training materials and tailored instructions to equip a mission team of four students from Wycliffe Hall, who travelled to Sierra Leone to set up a theological library on-site. The team successfully catalogued over 1,000 books, laying a solid foundation for long-term theological education in the region. This model of student-led mission, backed by OTRL's remote guidance and planning, offers a promising blueprint for future scalable projects.

Conclusion

In an era of profound global disparity, the need to bridge the gap between surplus theological resources in the West and the pressing needs of libraries in the majority world has never been more critical. The Oxford Theology Resources Link seeks to address this imbalance by facilitating the transfer of valuable theological texts to regions where they are in urgent demand.

Our mission is driven by a recognition of the transformative power of theological education. By ensuring that high-quality academic resources reach those who need them, we aim to empower theological institutions in the majority world, fostering intellectual nourishment, educational advancement, and contextual relevance. Through a structured approach—ranging from sourcing surplus materials and managing logistics to fostering collaborative efforts and ensuring contextual sensitivity—our initiative is designed to maximise the impact of every book donated. The process of bridging this resource gap involves not just the physical act of transferring books but also a commitment to understanding and addressing the specific needs of recipient libraries. By working closely with local partners and maintaining open lines of communication, we ensure that the donated resources are both relevant and effectively utilised.

The challenges are significant, but the potential for positive impact is immense. The Oxford Theology Resources Link stands as a testament to the power of collaboration and the profound difference that dedicated effort can make in enhancing global theological education. As we continue to build and refine our approach, we remain committed to the goal of creating a more equitable distribution of theological knowledge, thereby strengthening Christian communities and advancing scholarly engagement across the globe.

In conclusion, the work of Oxford Theology Resources Link not only addresses immediate needs but also fosters long-term growth and sustainability in theological education worldwide. By connecting surplus resources with those in need, we contribute to a more informed, educated, and spiritually-enriched global community.

If you are interested in this cause and want to learn more about Oxford Theology Resources Link, please visit our website at <https://oxfordtheologyresourceslink.web.ox.ac.uk>.

Links to Other Institutions Mentioned

- American Theological Library Association (Atla): <https://www.atla.com/>
- Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries (ABTAPL): <https://abtapl.org.uk>
- Books2Africa: <https://books2africa.org/>
- European Theological Library Association (BETH): <https://beth.eu>
- Kumi University: <https://kumiuniversity.ac.ug>
- South Korean Theology University and Seminary Library Association (KTLA): <https://ktla.or.kr>
- Sungkonghoe University (Anglican University in Seoul, South Korea): <https://skhu.ac.kr>
- Theological Book Network (TBN), Scholar Leaders: <https://www.scholarleaders.org/tbn/>
- Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary: <https://uets.edu.ua/en/main/>
- 4 the World Resource Distributors: <https://4wr.org/>

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