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Some Personal Reflections on the ABTAPL's 70th Anniversary Conference 2026

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This year's conference for ABTAPL (the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries) took place in Oxford on 26th-28th March. This was more than just the standard annual conference, as it also marked the 70th anniversary of ABTAPL as an organisation. On a personal level, it was also a somewhat unusual conference for me as it was not only my first time attending an ABTAPL conference but, as the recently appointed Librarian of Yarnton Manor and Acting Conference

Secretary, I was also involved with the planning and operation. This gave me a dual perspective, as I attended most sessions as a delegate (albeit with some organisational obligations), but was also given a 'behind the curtain' idea of how the conference is coordinated and run.

The main base for the conference was Wycliffe Hall, a Private Hall of the University of Oxford. The staff there were excellent, and I am most grateful for the support they provided to all attendees, but particularly to me during the organisational stages.



[Image 1] Wycliffe Hall Library
(photo provided by Hannie Riley)

After delegates checked in on Thursday morning, two tours were offered in two very contrasting libraries. The Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities was built to offer a new home to the humanities in Oxford and opened in 2025. It brings together seven of the University of Oxford's humanities faculties and research institutes, including the Faculties of Philosophy and of Theology and Religion, as well as their



[Image 2] Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities
(photo provided by Rosslyn Johnston)



[Image 3] The Humanities Library
(photo provided by Daniel Drury)

associated libraries. It also houses a number of performance venues and exhibition spaces. As such, its primary users are the students, staff, and faculty of Oxford University. Staff in the faculty libraries find themselves responding to these studies and research interests, as well as maintaining a world-class collection in the related fields. The Schwarzman Centre is an innovative and expansive space which offers a modern edge to the study of

Theology, a subject which has been part of the University from its foundations in the 11th Century.

In contrast, the other tour offered (and delegates could attend these tours in either order) was to the library of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS). OCMS takes a more global perspective on Theology, growing out of a series of discussions amongst Church leaders from Africa, Latin America and Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These Church leaders noted that the emerging global Christianity was

still heavily shaped by a theology and understanding of mission developed in European and North American contexts - a context that was very different from the one they found themselves in. OCMS was thus established in 1983 to shape global conversations about mission, and to cultivate Christian leaders in the majority world who would then be able to develop their own mission theology that responded to the local cultural context. The library is on the smaller side but is a highly focused and well-utilised resource. It holds around 18,000 items, concentrating on the Humanities and Social Sciences in the majority world. Between them, the Schwarzman Centre and OCMS offer a glimpse at the variety and breadth of theological libraries in Oxford.



[Image 4] OCMS Library
(photo provided by Manda Lam)

Alas, in my role as Conference Secretary, I was unable to attend either tour, as I remained in Wycliffe Hall to await late arrivals and supervise luggage until accommodation was available. However, the conversations I had with attendees afterwards suggest that the opportunity to see these libraries was highly valued. As someone living in Oxfordshire, I hope to visit them myself in the near future.

The following day saw a series of talks around the theme of this year's conference, 'Leadership and Advocacy'.

Whilst all of the talks provided some interesting perspectives and opportunities for professional reflection, it was Myka Kennedy Stephen's presentation which gave me the most pause for thought. Myka is the founder of FOSGAIL, a consulting and coaching firm rooted in the worlds of libraries and theological education, and has a lot of experience working with and developing library leaders. She spoke of a need to counter the top-down, controlling, and autocratic leadership style, which seems

to be becoming increasingly pervasive globally. As a counterpoint to this, she presented a new, more holistic, and power-aware perspective on leadership. Starting with a consideration of Robert Greenleaf's idea of 'Servant Leadership', she spoke of how, whilst this mode was a disruptive and inspirational shift in its original context of the 1970s, some of its ideas need challenging today. She instead argued for an understanding of leadership that is not only grounded in the practice of service but also puts forward a position where the practices of justice and peace are paramount. She called this model 'Attendant Leadership', with a focus on the relational: both the relationship between the self and the community, and that between the Divine of the wider cosmos and the structural, social systems we inhabit.

I enjoyed hearing about this fresh perspective, and Myka's thoughts went far deeper than my potted retelling here can recount. However, she also recognised that, whilst she has been working on this theory for several years now, it remains in an active phase of development. Thus, it is with interest that I hope to follow how her thoughts on this topic progress. In particular, her exploration into reclaiming the idea of diakonia as a more empowering and liberative model of leadership that is both rooted in Christian scripture and theology, and that is attentive to the contextual factors implicit in these positions.



[Image 5] Past and Current ABTAPL Chairs
(photo provided by Richard Johnson)

Winette Field, Librarian of William Booth College, also did an admirable job stepping in at the last minute when a scheduled speaker was taken ill and no longer able to attend. She provided an engaging workshop that considered how we might build up our leaders in theological libraries. Attending this talk flanked by my manager on one side, and a member of the library team that I manage on the other, compelled me to reflect both on how I might better

support those in leadership positions in my workplace, and how I might better act as a leader to others in these spaces.

The programme contained a number of other fascinating talks, creating an intellectually stimulating and fulfilling day that was capped off with an equally fulfilling meal and opportunity for more casual conversations (I also enjoyed introducing some fellow ABTAPLers to the joys of one of Oxford's institutions – G&D's ice cream cafes).

The final morning of the conference saw us relocating to Yarnton Manor's Lanier Theological Library and Learning Centre. Yarnton Manor's dual aims are to care for and assist ministry leaders, and to support scholarship which serves the world and the Church. These initiatives are undertaken proactively, through regular gatherings and retreats, as well as reactively through restful spaces, beautiful grounds, and pastoral support. In doing so, the hope is to refresh, resource, and re-equip Christian leaders and scholars. The work of the Manor and Library is still growing and developing; indeed, the Library has only been open to non-residents of the Manor since January of this year.

The day at Yarnton started with the ABTAPL AGM, with the goal of shoring up the practical running of the organisation for another year. Following this, there was an opportunity to hear a panel for the launch of ABTAPL's new book, *Theological Libraries in the UK and Ireland*. This book explores the history of ABTAPL over the past 70 years,



[Image 6] Discussions amongst ABTAPL members (photo provided by Richard Johnson)

including its publications, membership and meetings, as well as the development of libraries from different faith traditions across the United Kingdom and Ireland. It was interesting to hear more about the work and thought processes that went into its creation, and a good opportunity to celebrate the efforts of the authors and editors in bringing the book to publication. (I hope BETH will permit me a bit of a shameless

plug to say that this book is available now, and doubtless would make a worthy addition to your collections!)

Following this, a series of quickfire teach-meets introduced us to a variety of topics, ranging from helping library users feel more connected in remote areas, to the use of an Escape Room to facilitate student library inductions. These glimpses into the challenges our colleagues face, and the innovations they use to overcome them, helped me appreciate the breadth of experience and skill within ABTAPL.

The main portion of the conference then concluded with a meal together, and some last opportunities for networking and encouraging our fellow librarians.



[Image 7] Lanier Theological Library (photo provided by Hannie Riley)

For those with a bit more time, or who did not have to hurry back to catch transport home, there was then a chance to see the Lanier Theological Library. The library is housed in what is referred to as the Manor's 'old tithe barn', though given its dating to the Jacobean era, there is some debate as to whether it was ever used for this purpose. It has recently been sensitively restored and renovated, with a keen eye for the aesthetic. The collection so far has largely been obtained through donations and the acquisition of private collections. On the shelves there are items from the collections of biblical scholar and Ancient Near Eastern historian Ken Kitchen, scholar of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism Timothy H. Lim, theologian and Bishop N.T. Wright, and mathematician, bioethicist and lay theologian John Lennox. There have also been significant institutional collections received from the London School of Theology, the Oxford Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, OCMS, and the Lanier Theological Library in Houston, Texas. It has been interesting to see how the interests and specialisms of these individuals and institutions have shaped the collection. As the individual leading the tour here, I enjoyed the opportunity to introduce the library to other library professionals, and to hear their thoughts on the work so far, as well as suggestions of what we might implement in the future.

The Yarnton library is still very much a work in progress; even today, I still find myself bouncing between organising the receipt of new donations and collections, and planning what procedures we might introduce to best support our patrons. However, it was my hope that seeing the development of a new library, alongside those more established in the centre of Oxford, would provide a helpful bookend to the conference and offer evidence that, in its 70th year, ABTAPL is still a growing body.

[Image 8] Main Reading Room of the
Lanier Theological Library
(photo provided by Hannie Riley)



In the time since the conference took place, I have been able to reflect upon its themes of leadership and advocacy. It is my hope that I will be able to take some of the lessons learned and use them to work towards a form of professional leadership that emphasises relationality, reflection, and sustainable practices in the workplace.

Overall, I feel very thankful to have had the opportunity to assist with and attend the conference. As Acting Conference Secretary, I was relieved to see that things generally ran smoothly (even if there were a few scrambles behind the scenes to make sure that tech was running, and accommodation was all in order). As a first-time attendee, this was an enlightening introduction to what the ABTAPL conference can bring to our professional knowledge and experience.

Here's to the next 70 years of ABTAPL, and to the fellowship, experience, advice, and support it brings!



[Image 9] ABTAPL members in front of Yarnton Manor
(photo provided by Richard Johnson)