

# **Bridging Borders: A Journey from the Heart of Korean theological libraries to European theological libraries**

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This summer I was extremely privileged to attend two international conferences: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary seminar of the Korean Theological University and Seminary Library Association (KTLA)<sup>2</sup> and the 51<sup>st</sup> European Theological Libraries (BETH)<sup>3</sup> conference.

## **Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> KTLA Seminar: 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Aug 23**

The serendipity of the KTLA event coinciding with my family visit to South Korea added a layer of excitement to my journey. Determined to connect with my counterparts in Korea, I embarked on a trip to the ancient city of Kyung-Ju, the capital of the Silla Kingdom established nearly 2000 years ago continuing for a millennium. Despite the jet lag and the long distance from the bustling city of Seoul, my efforts were warmly welcomed by about 60 attendees, including representatives from various theological seminaries and Christian universities.

During the two-day seminar, we delved into sessions reflecting on their past achievements, celebrating their rich history, and exchanging experiences that shed light on the current landscape of Korean theological libraries. With 47 institutional members representing diverse denominations, it was fascinating to share insight and compare notes on the high and lows encountered by theological libraries in Korea.

Two significant points emerged from our discussions. Firstly, much like our own libraries in the UK, Korean theological libraries are grappling with the declining popularity of theology as a subject. Many librarians find themselves becoming solo operators with tighter budgets, echoing the challenges we face here.

The second noteworthy aspect was the inspiring commitment of KTLA to serve libraries in the majority world. From the pause caused by COVID, they were eager to resume to champion their Overseas Volunteer Corps, where members dedicate around a week to establish theological libraries in areas lacking resources. Considering the brevity of their annual leave compared to ours, they make a tremendous sacrifice for this trip, working long hours. This dedication goes beyond cataloguing and processing books; it's about pouring heart, mind, and body into a community by empowering locals, often regarded as a profound mission trip.

Their dedication sparked an idea. Inspired by their commitment, I am exploring collaboration possibilities to enhance our annual big grants scheme. As we contribute £1,000 annually to an overseas library, the initiative is to channel our support towards the libraries where KTLA's volunteers make a meaningful impact. Hence, I am currently in discussions with KTLA to explore how we can join forces, combining our efforts to enrich the support we provide to libraries in need. Stay tuned for more updates on this exciting collaboration that transcends borders and empowers our shared mission.

## **Reflection on the BETH Annual Conference: 30<sup>th</sup> Sep – 4<sup>th</sup> Oct 2023**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ktla.or.kr/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://beth.eu/>

I also had the honour of attending the BETH (European Theological Libraries) 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference in Cordoba, Spain, focusing on the challenges faced by ecclesiastical libraries in Europe. As well as representing ABTAPL in the BETH general meeting as Chair to report our annual activity<sup>4</sup>, I had the joy of co-presenting a paper with Marni Thurm from the Union School of Theology Library<sup>5</sup>. If the two of us weren't enough from ABTAPL, Anna James from St. Paul's Cathedral Library also delivered an interesting presentation on 'The Formation and Afterlives of Anglican Theological College Libraries,' while Christine Love-Rodgers from the University of Edinburgh discussed 'The Books Belonging to the Church in the Library.'

This conference offered me an experience to gain valuable insight into the challenges and triumphs experienced by ecclesiastical libraries all over Europe. It was particularly interesting to hear an Eastern European perspective from Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hungary, and Croatia. The common threads woven through discussions at the conference resonated with and mirrored the issues of global concern shared by colleagues in South Korea. For example, the closures of seminaries and theological libraries, the sale of collections on the open market resulting in uncertainty about the fate of valuable books and manuscripts, and storage problems – all were recurring concerns in Europe. It was, in some sense, comforting to learn of similar experiences from our European colleagues, that we are all facing the worldwide universal nature of challenges together.

Also, it was particularly inspiring that European librarians have employed innovative approaches to address the challenges. The proactive collaboration and resilience in the face of these challenges was clearly demonstrated amongst our colleagues. Despite all these obstacles, even the war, they tirelessly continued with collective efforts to build communities, with examples from Italy, Hungary, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were finding strength in merging catalogues, sharing collections, and establishing national library associations. Some libraries, like one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, serves as a community hub beyond theological collections.

However, the sobering presentations from Ukraine left the most lasting impression. Libraries in conflict zones face extreme hardship, with one library enduring physical damage from a nearby explosion. The resilience displayed by these libraries in Ukraine, staff, and students served as a solemn reminder of the privilege many of us enjoy in more safe environments. With the highest record number of graduates in the history of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary<sup>6</sup>, it emphasised the critical role that libraries play in preserving knowledge and cultural heritage and sharing and supporting users, especially in times of crisis. Inspired by their determination, we are releasing £1,000, which we reserved to support Ukraine libraries when the war broke out, to fund the shipment of theological books to the library.

The conference affirmed the strength of our global library community. The collaborative efforts, shared experiences, and mutual support among attendees showcased the collective determination to overcome challenges. The BETH Annual Conference not only provided valuable insight into the state of ecclesiastical libraries in Europe but also reinforced the idea that our collective effort makes a significant difference in the communities we serve.

I take immense pride in ABTAPL's active engagement in this collaborative effort. Looking ahead, our commitment extends to maintaining keen attentiveness to listen to diverse voices, demonstrating

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<sup>4</sup> Please see the ABTAPL report from [https://beth.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ABTAPL\\_2022-2023.pdf](https://beth.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ABTAPL_2022-2023.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Please see her profile from <https://www.ust.ac.uk/students/library>

<sup>6</sup> Please see UETS from <https://uets.net/en/main/>

receptiveness in understanding their needs, being sensitive to meeting those needs, and offering our support in humility and solidarity.