

Theological Libraries in Ireland

Past Lessons, Present Strengths, and Future Challenges

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This chapter provides an overview of the current state of theological libraries in Ireland, that is, libraries of institutions which teach theology or train for church-based ministry. Threats which they have faced over the last seventy years, recent successes, and emerging challenges will be explored through librarians' survey responses. Lastly, the numerous benefits of ABTAPL membership will be examined.

Theological Libraries in Ireland

This section will present theological libraries in Ireland, giving details of their formation, growth, strengths and users. This chapter is based on responses provided by the institutions' librarians.

Belfast School of Theology (Formerly Belfast Bible College, BBC)

Belfast School of Theology (BST) began in 1943 under the name “Belfast Bible School and Missionary Home” in a private home in Windsor Avenue, Belfast, with one student. This student was joined later in the year by another, and within three years the increase in numbers meant new premises were needed. In 1946, the college moved to Thronemount, north Belfast (Scott 1998, 4–5).

Minimal information is available about the library’s origins and composition. However, student testimonies reveal that there was a small library at Thronemount, which was not well stocked or managed, and books were not always useful for assignments. The room was very small and the building was not in good condition (Grant and Moore, pers. comm., November 7, 2024).

In 1965 the college moved to Marlborough Park South, Belfast, with the purchase of no. 119, and later no. 125, to provide for residential students and the growing number of evening class students (Scott 1998, 15). Little is known about the library’s development from then until 1973 when James McKeown joined the college as its only student. Then a room in no. 125 held a very small library. Book stock was 5,000 volumes. There was no library budget since college finances were constrained. James McKeown joined the college staff in 1986, becoming the librarian. Without a budget, innovative measures had to be taken to provide new books. McKeown held book sales to raise money. Eventually, a £300 budget was given for library resources, increased to £8,000 when a full-time librarian was appointed, enlarged to £14,000 by 2012.

As increased capacity was required at the college, portacabins were installed at the Marlborough Park site. Around 1981 the library was moved into one of these.

The college moved to its present site at Glenburn Road South, Dunmurry, in 1983. The library relocated to its present building in 1988. In 1994 a new library block was built (Scott 1998, 32). A new reading room was added in 2011, which provided extra space for bookshelves as well as a study space. In 2018, study carrels were added to encourage individual working and maintain a quiet atmosphere. An RFID security system was installed in 2019.

The library currently has 19,000 volumes, with an extensive range of biblical, theological and exegetical literature. There are also 900 pamphlets, and 80 print journals, including 10 current subscriptions. In addition, the library subscribes to several databases through EBSCO,

including Atla Religion Database, Atlas Plus, and EBSCO's Religion and Philosophy Collection.

Special collections include a section on Amy Carmichael and the Dohnavur Fellowship, a collection of books in Arabic, and a Missions special collection, which contains histories of various mission organizations and biographies. The Amy Carmichael collection was started by Dorothy Anderson, the librarian during 2005–2012, and developed by her successor, Caroline Somerville. The books in Arabic were the suggestion of an Iranian student who wanted to see Arabic literature made available to international students.

The library's main user groups are college students and external users, including local ministers and past students.

Church of Ireland Theological Institute: Representative Church Body Library

The Church of Ireland's Representative Church Body (RCB) Library originated in 1901 with a small lending library on the Crumlin Road, Belfast. It was part of the Guild of Witness which had been founded in the same year by Rosamond Stephen (1868–1952) and Rev. Raymond Orpen (1837–1930) with the purpose of enabling Church of Ireland members to better understand the claims and history of the Church and to enable them to witness to others. From 1918, when the Guild of Witness was renamed the Irish Guild of Witness, its primary focus became promoting the use of liturgy from Irish origins, in Irish, and encouraging the study of Irish history. At this point the Irish Guild of Witness Library and Archive was relocated to Dublin. Rosamond was concerned about the long-term future of the library and so offered it to the Representative Church Body in 1926, but they turned it down. This caused Rosamond to enter into a deed of trust with the Archbishop of Dublin, John Gregg, the Bishop of Meath, Benjamin Plunket and others in 1928, when the library and archive was renamed the Sir James Stephen Library. Despite the change of name, Rosamond and the Irish Guild of Witness Committee remained concerned about the collection and thus continued to pressure the RCB. Eventually, in 1931, the RCB agreed to acquire the library's collection and arranged for its relocation from Ardfeenish in Mount Street to the RCB headquarters in Stephen's Green during Christmas 1931. Around 5,000 volumes were relocated. In January 1932 the RCB established a committee for the management of the library. Regulations for library use and measures to promote its

collecting policy were devised, and efforts made to record significant donations. Mr. John Roy was appointed as librarian for six months and began the task of cataloguing, using the Dewey Decimal Classification System, the Stephen collection along with the print collection of the RCB Library previously stored throughout departments in the Stephen's Green building. After Mr. Roy resigned, Miss Geraldine Fitzgerald was appointed in July 1932 as the first permanent, full-time Librarian. Six librarians have served in RCB Library.

In addition to the book collection, RCB Library has extensive archival collections. In 1925 the RCB appointed an Ecclesiastical Records Committee in response to the 1922 destruction of the Public Records Office of Ireland, when more than 500 collections of parish records, medieval and early modern diocesan archives, were lost.¹ The committee's first members were prominent clerical historians who focused on collecting copies of Church of Ireland manuscripts that had been destroyed in 1922. These records were catalogued and held securely with other rare materials in the RCB building's basement strong room. Manuscript donations were encouraged. Thus, the RCB records became the primary sources replacing those lost in 1922.

In October 1969, the library moved to its current location of Braemor Park, Rathgar. The library joined the campus of what was then known as the Divinity Hostel which later became the Theological Institute. Generations of ordinands gleaned what they needed for research and training for ministry through the library. In 1969 it held 18,000 volumes. In 1980 an archivist was appointed and an agreement was made with the National Archive of Ireland which stated it was the official place of deposit for all Church of Ireland registers in the Republic of Ireland.

Today the library holds 70,000 books and large pamphlet and periodical collections. It seeks to acquire a copy of all publications relating to the Church of Ireland. Principal subject areas in the hard-copy collection include: ethics, theology, biblical studies, spirituality, homiletics, liturgy, mission, and church history. The library is the Church of Ireland's repository for its archives and manuscripts. Non-current records from parishes, dioceses, cathedrals, the General Synod and the RCB are regularly transferred to the library. Therefore, it holds collections of parish records, the archives of the Church's dioceses, cathedrals, architectural drawings, administrative records of the RCB and its committees, and thousands of manuscripts relating to the Church and prominent clergy and laity, from medieval times to the present. The library also holds the Irish Huguenot Archive. The RCB

Library contains printed books dating from 1552 onwards, such as early *Books of Common Prayer*.

Currently RCB Library is associated with the Virtual Treasury of Ireland, which attempts to reconstruct the content of the PROI lost in 1922, making it searchable and freely available.

Since it is an integrated library and archive, it has a variety of users who can access a multitude of resources under one roof. The print collection is mainly used by students and staff of the Church of Ireland Theological Institute. The archives and manuscripts are consulted by researchers from Ireland and abroad.

Dublin City University

The Milltown Library was originally established by the Irish province of the Jesuit Order to support their third level institute of philosophy and theology: Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy. In 2019, the library was transferred to Dublin City University (DCU) under an initial 10-year agreement with the purpose of forming the nucleus of a new library in Woodlock Hall. The Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy Library contained 140,000 volumes of monographs, periodicals, pamphlets and early printed books. Around 18,000 of the most used volumes are now accessible to researchers in the Woodlock Hall Library, Drumcondra. The Woodlock Hall Library was restored ahead of the relocation to the highest environmental and architectural standards and was awarded one of the Architectural Association of Ireland Awards in 2022 and commended in the Royal Irish Architects Institute Awards.

The main strengths of the collection are philosophy, theology, scripture and dogmatics. DCU holds 10,000 early printed and rare items in the Special Collections and Archives facility in the O'Reilly Library in Glasnevin. This also houses 5,000 early printed items from the Archdiocese of Dublin, which largely relate to theology and religion. Today, the Woodlock Hall Library's main users are DCU students and staff.

Edgehill

Since 1868, students studying for ministry in the Methodist Church in Ireland were trained at Methodist College, Belfast. Separation of the

Theological Department from the Methodist College was approved by the Methodist Conference in 1926 and Edgehill Theological College at Lennoxvale was opened in 1928. The library was originally housed at the back of the main building. This was a multi-purpose space with a lecture room and side rooms for private study. Shelving on the walls provided storage for the book collection. This library served generations of ministry students and other readers.

Following a redevelopment of the entire Edgehill site, completed in 2002, the wing behind the college was reconstructed to provide a conference centre and more extensive library accommodation. The theological library found a new, more spacious home on the ground floor of the new building, with a dedicated study space alongside shelving to hold 16,000 volumes. This specialist theological library was designed to support learners at the higher education level, up to and including doctoral studies. Collection strengths included ecumenical theology, Irish Christianity and Methodist studies.

The 2000–2002 redevelopment included the creation of specialist accommodation for the archives of the Methodist Historical Society in Ireland (MHSI), which were relocated from Aldersgate House, University Road, into a purpose-built centre with storage and study facilities. The MHSI Reading Room includes rare documents of a demographic nature, the Complete John Wesley series, hymn book collections, memoirs, and letters, which are stored in temperature-controlled conditions. The Methodist Historical Society has progressively taken custody of the Connexional archives, with the consent of the Methodist Conference. Around eighty-five percent of Irish Methodist historical Connexional and Circuit records are stored in the MHSI archives. Therefore the MHSI is becoming the primary point of contact for those investigating Irish Methodist heritage. The MHSI develops an awareness of Irish Methodism and theology through talks, visits to Circuits, and its journal, the *Bulletin*.

In 2019, following further redevelopment of the Edgehill premises to accommodate the relocation of all Methodist Church in Ireland Connexional teams, the theological library was moved into a new Learning Resources Centre, and the book stock streamlined to 6,000 volumes. All theological students are now overseen by the Ministries Team of the Methodist Church in Ireland which has an academic partnership with Cliff College, Derbyshire. All Cliff registered students have access to over 600,000 theological texts, 60 million articles and 21,000 journals through the Digital Theological Library. While retaining elements of the earlier theological library, the Learning Resources

Centre, Edgehill House, focuses on providing resources which support formation for mission and ministry, whilst also facilitating wider access to learning and development resources across the Methodist Connexion.

The Gamble Library, Union Theological College

The Gamble Library was established in 1873 thanks to a generous donation of £1,500 from Mrs. Caroline Anne Gamble. The money was used to convert the Common Hall of the Presbyterian College into a library, and to purchase 2,500 books. It was named the “Gamble Library” in memory of Caroline Anne’s late husband, the Rev. Henry Gamble, who had been minister of Ballywalter Presbyterian Church. At the union of the Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synods in 1840, which formed the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the libraries of both Synods were brought together, but it took Mrs. Gamble’s donation to create an adequate library.

From 1855 the library was managed by a member of the faculty with a “sub-librarian,” one of the ministry students, working under his supervision. This continued until 1909 when the college received the bequest of Miss Isabella Brownlee of Lisburn, which brought an annual income of £125. The Board of Trustees appointed to decide how this money would be spent determined that it should be used to appoint a permanent librarian. The first librarian, Mr. J.W. Kernohan, M.A., was appointed on 1 January 1910. Ten librarians have served in the Gamble Library.

Prior to the construction of Stormont, the first Parliament of Northern Ireland occupied the college for eleven years, the Commons meeting in the library. Part of the library was temporarily relocated to 2 University Square.

Initially staff and students of the college could use the Gamble Library, with alumni and other Presbyterian ministers permitted to use the library on the payment of a fee. This was extended to Methodist ministers in 1925 and then ministers from the main Protestant denominations by 1943. Today anyone can be a library member, on the payment of a fee. Life membership is open to college alumni.

Originally there were two Presbyterian colleges in Ireland: the Presbyterian College, Belfast, established 1853, and Magee College, Londonderry, opened 1865, a liberal arts college which also trained individuals for ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. In

1953, the Magee University College Londonderry Act brought about a separation between the Arts Department, which retained the name Magee University College, and the theological training department which became Magee Theological College. Magee University College had a library which primarily served college staff and students so contained arts and theology books. When the separation occurred, the library retained the theological books belonging to Magee Theological College. Magee University College became the New University of Ulster in October 1968. Around this time the Theological College requested the return of books belonging to it. A significant number of books, including rare books, the Magee College Pamphlet collection, and periodicals were transferred to Magee Theological College or the Presbyterian College, Belfast, in the early 1970s. When Magee Theological College and the Presbyterian College were united by an Act of Parliament in 1978 to form Union Theological College, the remaining Magee Theological College books were transferred to Union College.

In 1981, the Gamble Library was extended by the addition of a mezzanine floor above the far end of reading room one. This area was used to house rare books, some of which came from Magee College. Extra bookcases were added to the main library.

Major refurbishment work was carried out in 2002–2003, and the library was temporarily moved to the chapel. Another mezzanine floor was added at the opposite end of the main reading room, with rolling stacks and more security to house the rare books. A computer suite was added where the rare books had previously been stored. During this period, efforts were made to reorganize part of the collection using the Library of Congress Classification system and create a computerized catalogue. A basement storeroom was built in 2011 to store the least used books, older journals and archives. During the summer of 2014, a trial of Atla Databases was organized. Since then, the library has subscribed to this resource, also acquiring e-book access from 2015. From 2019, the library has provided access to three other databases and several e-journals.

Today, the library has 64,000 books, 20,000 pamphlets and regularly receives over 50 journals. It holds several special collections: a rare books collection with items dating from the 1540s, the Magee and Assembly's Colleges Pamphlet Collections of ephemera from the 1600s to 1800s, and the Presbyterian Mission Archive. It primarily exists to support college staff and students, but also has around 350 life members who are college alumni and 60 annual members.

Irish Baptist College

The Irish Baptist College (IBC) was established in 1892. It was originally located in Dublin and had a library. The college moved to Sandown Road, Belfast, in 1964. The move prompted a major clearout of dated material. Dr. David Kingdon, then principal, insisted on deliberately overspending the library budget so that the stock remained up-to-date. The college moved to its current location in Moira in 2003, and the library was renamed the John B. Craig Library. He was a former student who pastored Windsor Baptist Church before emigrating to Canada where he continued to pastor. He and his wife, Marion, were keen supporters of the college's work. A new library annex was added to the building in 2010 permitting an additional study suite which seats 32 students. Today the library is used by the college's undergraduate and postgraduate students, full and part time teaching staff, and occasionally serving Baptist pastors.

The library has 13,000 books with strengths in biblical and historical theology. It contains key texts for the College's students as well as providing postgraduate research material. The library holds the archive of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (minutes of meetings, material on Baptist Missions). It also holds the entire collection of the *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal* (1968–2023), *Insight/Irish Baptist Magazine* (1878–2024) and the *Baptist Magazine* (1809–1861). There are incomplete holdings of the *Baptist Record* and *Baptist Messenger*. The library holds collections of some Irish Baptist pastors' sermons. Also, a collection of IBC students' postgraduate theses.

Irish Bible Institute, Dublin

The Irish Bible Institute (IBI) has its roots in the Irish Bible School, Coalbrook, Tipperary, which was founded in 1982. A significant portion of the library was donated from the Evangelical Library in Dublin, which was closing, bringing the total number of volumes to 5,000. The books were catalogued according to the Dewey Decimal system, and the library was staffed by volunteers, supplemented by college staff.

In 2001, the Irish Bible School merged with The Leadership Institute and became the Irish Bible Institute. At this time, the library moved and was housed in a church building in Pearse Street, Dublin. New mobile shelving was installed, and a part time librarian, Heather Maiden, employed. The library used a card catalogue and Dewey Decimal system.

In 2005 the library moved to the current IBI premises in Ulysses House, Foley St., Dublin 1. It was a purpose-built library space with new built-in shelving, and study carrels. Heritage library management system was introduced. In 2009, the library of Carraig Eden Theological College, Greystones, was transferred to IBI Library, when IBI became the official training institute for the Pentecostal Christian Church Ireland.

The library holds 10,000 volumes, with strengths being biblical and theological, particularly Bible commentaries. It contains an Irish section covering history, culture and politics.

Main user groups are students and teaching staff, along with some external members who are in Christian ministry.

Maynooth University Library

Maynooth University Library (MUL) serves both Maynooth University and St Patrick's College, Maynooth (now St Patrick's Pontifical University and St Patrick's National Seminary). The library was established in 1795 and is now housed in the John Paul II Library and the Russell Library. Special Collections and Archives at Maynooth University are spread over these two sites.

The main strengths of MUL include its Bible collection, comprising 2,000 items in 600 languages and featuring many high points of Bible publishing. Also, archival collections relating to the history of St Patrick's College, the Irish College at Salamanca and All Hallows College, as well as an example of a diocesan Cathedral collection – Otway-Maurice Collection of St Canice's Cathedral Library.

Russell Library

The Russell Library contains approximately 34,000 printed works dating from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century across a range of subjects including: theology, mathematics, science, geography and history. Other important collections include medieval and Gaelic manuscripts, archival material and incunabula. The reading room was designed by renowned British architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852) and completed in 1861.

In 1986, the Hibernian Bible Society, now National Bible Society of Ireland, deposited their Bible collection on permanent loan to the Russell Library. This collection spans eight centuries, the earliest dating from the thirteenth century.

The Thomas Furlong Collection contains approximately 1,349 antiquarian books, with items from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. This collection was donated following the closure of the House of Missions in 1993. It is a rich representation of Christian doctrinal and theological literature, containing works of ecclesiastical history, scripture, theology, philosophy, ethics and liturgy.

The archives of St Patrick's College, the Irish College at Salamanca and All Hallows College can be accessed in the Russell Library.

John Paul II Library

The John Paul II Library also contains theological special collections and archives, which were mostly printed after 1850.

An important and unique collection is the Otway-Maurice Collection of St Canice's Cathedral Library which is on long-term loan to MUL from the Representative Church Body of Ireland. It features over 3,000 titles printed before 1850. Many of the works are theological but works on history, the classics, law, literature, and science also feature. There are archival collections of Father Peadar Ó'Laoghaire and Desmond Forristal.

Main MUL user groups are students of Maynooth University and St Patrick's Pontifical University, and the seminarians of St Patrick's National Seminary.

Mary Immaculate College

Mary Immaculate College (MIC) in Limerick was founded by the Catholic Sisters of Mercy and is now academically linked with the University of Limerick. There is a Department of Theology and Religious Studies within their Faculty of Arts and a theology collection in the library to support this.

The MIC Library has both a historical theological library and a current academic library for post-primary education.

St Patrick's College Thurles opened in 1837 as an educational institution for boys, both lay and clerical students. By 1874, it admitted only clerical students. The original library's exact location is unknown. However, when the new College Chapel was constructed in 1888, the Library moved to the space it vacated, which was notable for hosting the Synod of Thurles in 1850. The library was officially named after

Archbishop Croke on his death in 1902. The college officially closed as a seminary in 2002 and instead began to offer initial teacher education at post-primary level. At that point, the Croke Library remained as a special collection, and a more modern library was constructed in a newer wing of the building. St Patrick's College integrated with MIC in 2016 and is now known as MIC Thurles. MIC Limerick and Thurles both hold several theological collections. MIC Thurles Croke Library contains 10,000 books, covering theology, philosophy and diocesan history.

As the Croke is a special collection, the main user groups are historical researchers.

Reformed Theological College Library

The Theological Library is part of the Reformed Theological College, situated in the grounds of Knockbracken Reformed Presbyterian Church on Knockbracken Road, Belfast. The College primarily trains candidates for the ministry of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. It also offers theological training for church leaders and youth in the wider church.

The library was founded in 1843 by the Rev. Dr. Thomas Houston, minister of Knockbracken Reformed Presbyterian Church, for the use of ministry students. In 1854 the Reformed Theological College was started by the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The college and its library were in College Street South Reformed Presbyterian Church, later renamed Grosvenor Road Reformed Presbyterian Church. The college and its library met there from 1854 until 1972, apart from a brief nine-year period in the early 1900s.

In 1972 after repeated bomb damage² to the Church premises on the Grosvenor Road, the college and its library moved to Cameron House on the Lisburn Road. In 2005 the college and library relocated to purpose-built premises at Knockbracken.

The theological library has over 6,000 books. There is a separate Historical Library which contains all the issues of the denomination's magazine which dates from 1830. It also contains all the Minutes of Synod from 1827. There is a special collection of pamphlets and books relating the history and doctrines of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The library is used mainly by college students and faculty as well as ministers and members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Roman Catholic Institutions Which Taught Theology

There has been a significant decline in the number of Roman Catholic institutions which teach theology both for academic study and the priesthood. Twomey (2003, 141) outlines how “extraordinary numbers joined the priesthood and the religious life,” a trend which peaked in the 1960s, then decline began, interrupted by an increase after Vatican II in the number of lay people studying theology. Hoban (2013, 40) provides numbers of students in Irish seminaries from 1990 to 2013. In 1990 there were 525 in total and just 70 in 2013, an 87% decrease. This has been reflected in the number of institutions, and their libraries. In 1994, the seminary in Kilkenny closed, followed by Waterford and Wexford, Thurles, Clonliffe, Carlow, All Hallows and Belfast. These include: the Mater Dei Institute of Education, Milltown Institute, and All Hallows College. Their library holdings have seemingly been absorbed by larger university libraries or sold. Space does not permit an account of their histories and holdings. Notably, Twomey (2003, 219) states, “there are few libraries in Ireland with the necessary resources for scholarly research, apart perhaps from Maynooth, Trinity College, and the Milltown Institute.”

Trinity College Dublin

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) was created by royal charter in 1592 and its Library was established then. It is the largest library in Ireland with over seven million printed volumes, extensive collections of journals, manuscripts, maps and music. *The Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow* are its most famous manuscripts. Other special collections include the Ussher Collection. In 1801 it was endowed with Legal Deposit privilege.³

The library supports learning and research needs across all disciplines at TCD. A major research library of international repute, it provides services to a wide range of external users and institutions. Its exhibitions attract hundreds of thousands of visitors annually.

TCD Library also has a small number of Hebrew texts, which was enhanced by the addition of the Zuger/Robinson Collection on Jewish Studies in 2004. The Research Area in the Eavan Boland Library contains a complementary collection with a strong emphasis on Patristics. Its shelves include almost complete runs of the following series: *Patrologia Latina*, *Patrologia Graeca*, *Patrologia Orientalis* and the *Corpus Christianorum*, amongst others.

The Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE), founded in 1970, is now part of The School of Religion, Theology, and Peace Studies at TCD. A specialist library on conflict resolution and reconciliation studies existed from the establishment of ISE, and at one stage collections were in Dublin and Belfast: Bea House Library, Dublin, held some 35,000 volumes and 683 Antrim Road, Belfast, had a small library (Hurley 2008).

TCD's Library collections exist for the benefit of not just the university's students but for a wider range of scholars and the public. According to Ayris, Maes, and Raymaekers (2022), the library has developed a significant collection of electronic journals and books, widening the library's reach to benefit scholarly and public engagement, a "core part of its mission" and is also "home to the research outputs of the University, hosting the institutional repository, and the business records of the University."

Whitefield College of the Bible

Whitefield College of the Bible is an independent theological college established by the Free Presbyterian Church, primarily as a training College for its ministers. Inaugurated in 1981 when it moved from the Martyrs Memorial Church to its own building in Banbridge, Whitefield College offers a four-year theological course for ministry candidates and a two-year course for Christian workers and those preparing for the mission field (Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, 2024). Students at the College are mainly members of the Free Presbyterian Church, but entry is also open to students from other evangelical churches (Kyle 2002, 232).

The library was established in 1981 with the new College. New books were bought in line with college needs and a part-time librarian managed the library. The library is currently at Martyrs Memorial Church, Belfast, where lectures are taking place while a new college is being built. The new building will contain a purpose-built library large enough to accommodate the collection. At present, few books are being purchased as space is limited, but this will change when the new library is opened.

The library is composed of Bible commentaries, theology, and church history books, reflecting its reformed theological position.

Table 1: Perceived Threats, 1956 to the Present

PERCEIVED THREATS	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Decreasing budgets	5
Decreasing student numbers	4
Rising costs	3
The impact of online education	3
Changes in theological education	3
Online resources preferred to print	3
Wider institution not understanding or engaging with the library	3
Decreasing space for collections	2
Building issues	2
Security	2
Miscellaneous threats only mentioned once, e.g., noise levels, providing services during the pandemic, losing historical materials during two relocations.	13

Threats, Successes, and Challenges

This section presents the most frequently occurring themes in the librarians’ responses to a survey conducted in October 2024, examined in light of relevant literature. Librarians were asked to name three major threats faced by their library in the past 70 years, identify a success achieved by their service, and pinpoint emerging challenges. Efforts were made to contact the librarian or relevant staff member of each theological library in Section A before the survey was emailed to a total of twelve in October 2024, with the initial deadline of early November. All libraries responded eventually, four after follow-up contact by email, phone and online meeting, with some providing more detailed answers than others. Forty-three responses were received from currently serving and retired staff in Irish theological libraries concerning threats to their libraries from 1956 to the present. These were coded into themes and the most common themes are presented in Table 1.

Decreasing Budgets and Rising Costs

Five librarians reported that their budgets had been reduced, mainly because of a decline in student numbers. Furthermore, three librarians noted that resource costs have increased significantly, aggravating this issue.

For several libraries such as the IBC, the library budget is linked to student intake. If student numbers are low, their budget will be small. This may have serious implications, for IBI budgetary restraints mean they no longer employ a librarian; volunteers are used instead.

Rising costs of journals, textbooks and e-books have made managing the budget more difficult. According to Keck (2018, 35) “there remains a significant disconnect in the rising . . . costs for publishing versus the declining expenditures among theological libraries.” Mowat (2013, 393) notes that when Elsevier purchased Pergamon Press with its significant stock of journals, it retained the same policy that Pergamon established by increasing costs “year by year without any reference to true costs.” Academic publishers, knowing “that universities were a captive market” kept increasing prices (Mowat 2013, 393). If universities were feeling the pinch with the rising costs, how much more would smaller theological colleges? Many small theological colleges reached a point when they were unable to pay such high prices and had to cease certain subscriptions. Even TCD, the largest library in Ireland, has found rising e-book licensing costs challenging. In 2020, with the increased demand for e-books, librarians struggled to meet the extortionate costs involved and were frustrated by the limited number of e-books available. The #ebooksos campaign began in the UK with its primary objective “to call for an investigation into the academic ebook market,” and continued in Ireland due to what they called “the electronic content crisis facing libraries and library users” (The Library Association of Ireland, 2025).

Changes in Theological Education and the Impact of Online Learning

Three librarians stated changes in theological education have threatened their libraries, with a further three identifying the impact of online learning posing a notable challenge.

Over the past seventy years numerous changes have occurred in the nature and delivery of theological education which have impacted on library resource provision.

Gale and Reekie (2008, 7) summarise these as: the 1990's drive to consolidate training provision in fewer institutions; the development of more flexible part-time training pathways; changing attitudes to mission-impacting mission training institutions; and a "more rigorous quality assurance regime" which has precipitated closer ties with local universities who are validation or accreditation partners. They state, "For some libraries these changes have brought closure, merger, or relocation," and for those linked to university validating partners, "questions about access to resources, reciprocal arrangements, and duplication" (Gale and Reekie 2008, 7).

Two responses mention an accreditation partner, Queen's University Belfast (QUB), the consequences of that partnership, and the changes which resulted when QUB terminated this in 2019. A consortium of colleges was established to create the Institute of Theology, QUB, which included Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Catholic colleges, as well as the interdenominational Belfast Bible College. This arose as QUB "was . . . forbidden by its charter to teach theology" (Cheesman 2009, 188). While academic standards were increased, and students received university-accredited awards, colleges had less control over course content, which could only be changed with the consensus of all colleges (Cheesman 2009, 188). The library collections of the Gamble Library and BBC had to keep pace with curricular changes as well as the move to other accreditation partners, namely St Mary's University, Twickenham and the University of Cumbria.

Three responses indicate that the move to online learning changed students' expectations. More digital resources and 24/7 online access are expected, with the physical library generally decreasing in importance. Kennedy and Laurillard (2023, 1) while noting that new technologies in education were being developed during the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, state "the possible futures for online learning received a remarkable uplift from . . . the COVID-19 pandemic." Online learning is now an accepted part of academia and "has brought a revolution in redesigning library services" (Shahzad and Khan 2023, 544). It can assist with the "successful implementation of user-centric services" producing higher student satisfaction (Shahzad and Khan 2023, 529). Numerous barriers to implementation of e-learning technologies exist, such as librarians' lack of skills. ABTAPL has and does assist with the upskilling of staff through the annual conference which

offers CPD sessions, online training sessions covering a wide range of themes, and emails with suggestions of other training opportunities offered to librarians.

Decreasing Numbers Studying Theology

Four librarians reported that decreasing student numbers was a significant threat. Three of these responses were from institutions which train for ministry (Edgehill, RTC and MIC). Ultimately, declining student numbers produced the closure of MIC as a seminary in 2002. BST linked declining numbers to difficulties getting visas for international students.

Decreasing student numbers have been reported throughout the UK. For instance, the Rev. Dr. Mark Cartledge, Principal of London School of Theology, stated “recruitment is challenging, and numbers are lower than pre-pandemic levels . . . I anticipate that some programmes will close, others will be streamlined and merged” (Church Times 2024). Churches are employing various strategies to maintain or increase ministry intake numbers. For example, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland have “ministry interns,” “ministry taster days,” and “flexible pathways” for training. The Roman Catholic Church experienced a drastic decline in numbers joining the priesthood and religious orders so that, “in the Autumn of 1997, the country woke up . . . to the sensational news that no-one had entered the seminary in Dublin that year” (Twomey 2003, 142). As Gribben (2021, 215) states, “the collapse in clerical recruitment in the Catholic Church compares to declining recruitment into the ministry of the principal Protestant denominations.”

Improving Library Spaces

Twenty-seven librarians responded to the survey questions regarding success achieved by their service (see Table 2). Nine librarians stated that they viewed building renovations, extensions, conversions, or new builds as by far their biggest successes. The fact so many had experiences with notable changes in their library buildings reflects the “significant development of learning space in university libraries” which has occurred since the turn of the century in academic libraries generally (Matthews and Walton 2014, 238). As Vos states (quoted in

Table 2: Successes. Twenty-seven responses were received

SUCCESSES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
New build, building renovations, extensions, or conversions	9
Expanding the physical collection	3
New library management system/ online catalogue/ self-issue and return facilities	3
Expanding the electronic collection	2
Digitization and open access initiatives	3
Rare books conservation projects	2
Miscellaneous successes only mentioned once, e.g., weeding the collection to make it more relevant, partnership to give access to more e-resources.	5

Khan and Thebridge 2022, xvii), “the design of that library is critical in helping the staff to serve its community.” It is clear that Irish theological libraries are considering the needs of their communities. Evidence suggests libraries are aware of physical needs and those related to particular learning styles, not just to comply with legislation, such as the Equality Act (2010) and Disability Discrimination Act (1995). John Paul II Library, for instance, has had several major renovations over the past 15 years, including a €20 million extension opened in December 2012 and, more recently, a major renovation of the older west wing. These incorporate study spaces, group study rooms, a “wellness zone” with “energy pods” for students to nap in and a “Cubbie sensory hub,” an immersive multisensory space where neurodiverse students can reduce their sensory overload. TCD’s library has similarly gone through a major refurbishment to allow students and staff with different sensory preferences to flourish. The IBC reported the provision of more study spaces, while BST added a new reading room in 2011, which provided additional space for bookshelves and study. The RTC moved to purpose-built library facilities in 2005. Khan and Thebridge (2022, 124) state that “the physical library in the first two decades of the 21st century has undergone a major transformation from collection-centric to user-focused space, in line with changes in society and a rapid pace of

technological development.” Consideration is being given both to physical and digital collections, and access to these, in library design. Much literature points to libraries providing space to collaborate, which is reflected in responses from Maynooth and TCD. As Matthews and Walton (2014, 241) state, students attach a lot of importance to libraries as part of their higher education experience, so if theological librarians are effectively designing and using their spaces it is a success the library community should be celebrating. It will be crucially important that we “continue to adapt to make . . . buildings fit for purpose for the collections they hold, physically and digitally, and the range of services they provide to increasingly diverse communities” (Khan and Thebridge 2022, xxv).

Expanding Physical and Electronic Collections

Responses indicate that librarians feel that their efforts to expand their libraries’ physical and digital collections have also been successful. As Brophy (2005, 130) notes, collection management, including stock selection, “lies at the core of the academic librarian’s work . . . [it] is essential if the library’s users are to have access to the information they need.” Surveyed librarians’ additions to the physical collection came through donations in IBC, or the collection of primary archival materials in RCB Library. As Calhoun (2017, 118) states, “special collections and archives are what remain most distinctive about research library collections” – they are unique and therefore appeal to particular users. Effective collection management requires “comprehensive knowledge” of the subject and its literature, and “most important of all, excellent understanding of the needs of users, both current and – most difficult of all – future” (Brophy 2005, 118). The expansion of electronic resource collections was also counted as a triumph by several libraries, including the Gamble Library and BST Library, both of which have seen an increase in online students numbers recently. Atla’s 2024 Global Survey (Kutsko 2024) results reveal that two of the top five ways in which theologian librarianship is changing include “the increase in online education” and the “increase in digital resources.” Doubtlessly this will continue; hence theological librarians need to be aware of new e-resources, such as Perlego, and relevant issues, including digital rights management.

Embracing New Technology to Support Research

Several of the librarians stated that they are embracing new technologies to support research. These technologies include digitization (RCB) and open access initiatives including an institutional research repository (Maynooth), which make unique collections and research freely available online. Other libraries (Edgehill and IBI) are installing new library management systems (LMS) with online catalogues making their collections more discoverable and searchable, which may include new self-issue terminals (Edgehill and BST).

Calhoun (2017, 118) asserts that, “the results of cultural heritage digitization projects suggest that if . . . special collections were more discoverable online, they would attract new users and uses.” Therefore, there is huge potential in heritage digitization projects, especially given the unique collections of Irish theological libraries. They also preserve valuable assets. Small libraries often need to work with larger institutions or companies (e.g., Hathi Trust, Google) who have the resources to enable digitization, make its products available online, and backup digital files. Obtaining long-term financial commitments from funders is one of the biggest challenges facing digitization projects (Khan, Shafi and Ahangar 2018, 5).

Maynooth is involved in open access (OA) initiatives. They have created transformative agreements, are establishing and promoting institutional repositories, and advocating for making research freely available online. As IFLA (2022) states, “Libraries are uniquely positioned to support the equitable and inclusive development of publishing opportunities, including serving as infrastructure for publishing initiatives and educating authors about pathways for publishing their works open access.” Maynooth is one of the larger institutions surveyed, which may explain their ability to be significantly involved in OA. Given cOAlition S’s Plan S, to make publications which are publicly funded immediately and fully open access, the European Commission’s appointment of an Open Access Envoy and, the UK’s Research Excellence Framework, which requires all outputs to be open access, OA is likely to be an increasingly important area for all libraries. Without doubt “much more work needs to be done” (Calhoun 2017, 207) in terms of making theological research OA, but whether this is feasible in smaller theological libraries is questionable.

Writing in 2008, Gale and Reekie (2008, 25) stated that “most theological institutions now have a computerized catalogue, and many have moved to a fully automated system.” This shows not all theological

libraries had this technology then. All the libraries involved in the survey had an LMS with an online catalogue and would seemingly agree with the literature which lists numerous advantages of having this technology, such as it “allow[s] timely access to current information, increases customer satisfaction, increases retrieval rate, improves service delivery” (Mamatlepa and Maluleka 2024, 3). Although some research has found a lack of motivation to change LMS due to factors such as shrinking budgets, mounting prices for these systems and complex migration processes (Dalling and Rafferty 2013, 400), three libraries have invested in new LMS. This has made their collections more discoverable and visible, allowing researchers to access details of their collections at a convenient time. Although the future of the traditional LMS is uncertain, (Crump and Freund 2012, 11) this is progress for small theological libraries.

The Challenge from Electronic and Online Resources

Twenty-seven librarians responded to the survey questions seeking to pinpoint emerging challenges (see Table 3). Six responses asserted that one of the biggest emerging challenges came from online and electronic resources: specifically, the rise of online library platforms such as Perlego, and students’ preference for online resources compared to print. Several librarians expressed concern at the rise of online library platforms which made material easily accessible and are arguably making libraries obsolete. Perlego has seen considerable growth since its 2017 creation, with over 250 institutions and 100,000 students using the platform globally, which gives access to over one million e-books. Two librarians perceived students had a preference for online resources, or simply searched the internet for information, rather than using hardcopy collections. One response expressed concern that this would be worsened by AI.

The Academic Reading Format International Study, the largest and most comprehensive study of students’ reading format preferences, actually found that “the vast majority of students throughout the world would prefer print or either format over electronic only,” for their readings (Mizrachi et al. 2021, 262). Those who preferred print did so as they believed they had “better learning engagement and outcomes,” with less detrimental physical effects, for example, eye strain (Mizrachi and Salaz 2020, 817). Convenience and accessibility were the most motivating factors for students using electronic format (Mizrachi and

Table 3: Twenty-seven responses were received

EMERGING CHALLENGES	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Ensuring the collection remains relevant	3
Online resources preferred more than hardcopy resources	3
Online library platforms, e.g., Logos, Perlego	3
Promoting the library within the institution, denomination, and generally	3
Developing information literacy skills including in relation to AI	3
Preserving special collections	2
Lack of staff	2
Miscellaneous challenges only mentioned once, e.g., increasing opening hours, equitable access to resources, diversifying collections.	8

Salaz 2020, 814). Many other studies over the years have found a similarly strong student preference for print (Mizrachi et al. 2021, 252). The implications for libraries are that the question is no longer when print OR electronic format should be used but rather “WHEN is print, electronic or either format preferable” (Mizrachi et al. 2021, 263). Mizrachi and Salaz (2020) found that format preferences were contextual, determined more by personal learning styles and goals than technological trends. As Chohda and Kumar (2023, 38) assert, “libraries have to comprehend the right blend of print and e-resources,” which requires a knowledge of their institutions’ unique learning culture and student populations to understand which format would be best in any given context.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns had a significant impact on students’ internet use as they became “reliant on the internet for all academic activities,” since access to physical libraries was not possible (Salubi and Muchaonyerwa 2023, 526). This has formed habits such as an overreliance on the internet for research with students failing to evaluate information sources, settling for whatever they find online. Librarians have a key role to play in “offering training on efficient

and effective use of internet-based tools and resources,” “digital skills and competencies” training so they can “navigate the online world responsibly and make informed decisions,” and “use the internet in a healthy and balanced way” (Salubi and Muchaonyerwa 2023, 528). Libraries are sources of especially curated, reliable, scholarly information which serve their research communities. We need to actively present our essential educational role and the wealth of high-quality resources our libraries contain to our stakeholders. The next section reflects further on advocacy.

Advocacy and Engagement for Survival

Six librarians felt that promoting their libraries and the resources they contain so that they are used is another major emerging challenge. The audiences to receive promotional messages included the institution, their denomination, and the wider religious and academic community. The desire for the collection to remain relevant to the related teaching schools and library members was an overriding concern.

It is more imperative now than ever that librarians promote their libraries and resources – it is a “central activity of the profession” (Hicks 2016, 615). Societal and cultural shifts in today’s distraction-rich world mean that all sectors are being challenged to demonstrate “relevance, need and value for money” (Kendrick 2021, 1). As a result, “library and information services are often losing market share” (Kendrick 2021, 3). Librarians seek to promote the library and its resources to generate usage, but aim at something more than this. It is about creating an involvement with the library which leads to an ongoing relationship, during which engagement deepens, and the co-creation of services is enabled (Kendrick 2021, 1). In this way, the library service can stay relevant to its users and also innovate to ensure continued relevance. Innovations can attract new users.

Responses saw the building of relationships as necessary at three levels: institutional, denominational, and the wider community. Over a decade ago, *The ABTAPL Guidelines for Theological Libraries* (Gale and Reekie 2008, 37) included the suggestion that theological libraries are becoming “increasingly dependent on institutional support,” hence they need to raise the library’s profile and “demonstrate its value.” This is even more true today. Stakeholders want to know how allocated funds are being used to meet information needs of clientele: costs and outcomes are crucial. For denominational libraries, the denomination

represents a source of financial and practical support, providing a ready-made network of potential members and natural supporters. Most other libraries simply seek to reach those who would be interested in their collections from the wider academic community. This is a significant challenge for numerous reasons, including the difficulties of how to reach and communicate with a very disparate group.

A planned strategic approach to marketing and engagement is required to ensure the library offer is clearly and attractively stated and communicated (Kendrick 2021, 2). Networks like ABTAPL and CILIP's Impact Toolkit (CILIP, n.d.) can assist in the development of that plan, anticipating future needs, and upskilling librarians.

Information Literacy After the AI Revolution

A lesser emerging challenge identified in three responses was equipping library members with the information literacy (IL) skills to function in today's world, which includes embracing positive aspects of AI, recognizing relevant academic sources, but not plagiarizing, and exercising critical thinking.

AI by its nature “challenge[s] our understanding of information literacy” (Hirvonen 2024, 47). The use of AI technology has seen rapid growth in all sectors and is now used to perform many routine tasks. AI systems are being used to mediate our interactions with information and are integrated into wider systems of technologies so that they permeate every aspect of our lives, in everything from search engines, personalized results, autofill forms, and chatbots. In effect, we have delegated our active searching efforts and evaluation of information to AI. The concerning question is this: Who makes the decisions and evaluations for us and on what grounds? Commercial companies? Can anyone actually tell? AI can also homogenize the information we are exposed to, narrowing our information landscapes as it personalizes results based on our preferences. In response to this, librarians need to teach IL skills which aim to increase understanding of AI, including “raising awareness of the operations of AI technology . . . as well as new skills such as prompt engineering” (Hirvonen 2024, 50). “New strategies” may also be required to influence the information we are exposed to, such as displaying multiple identities online to avoid unwanted personalization of content (Hirvonen 2024, 50). As Murovana (2020, 49) asserts, “the important part” of IL is “critical thinking.” Furthermore, “In order to reach ‘cognitive and behavioural autonomy’ it is a must to

be critical about theoretical and practical knowledge of information communication work, how digital platforms and devices mediate our information interaction, and how the AI systems of search engines, social networks and recommender systems operate” (Murovana 2020, 52). IL has been linked to critical thinking for some time, therefore existing IL frameworks, such as the ACRL Framework, can be adapted to incorporate the teaching of IL skills connected with AI (James and Filgo 2023; Bryan 2014; Goodsett and Schmillen 2022).

A major aspect of concern expressed by librarians is likely linked to “the need for ongoing professional development . . . in AI technologies and pedagogical practices” (Walter 2024, 20). Librarians feel they lack sufficient knowledge of AI to teach effectively, added to by the fact AI is developing so rapidly.

The Benefits of ABTAPL

This final section will examine how ABTAPL has helped member libraries and their staff over its 70-year history. Of the twelve libraries surveyed, four are current ABTAPL members. Members were asked to describe how ABTAPL was beneficial to their library and them as information professionals (see Table 4).

Surveyed ABTAPL members felt one of the most important benefits of ABTAPL membership was the networking opportunities it provided, both through in-person events and online meetings and communications, like the discussion group. This is especially true for solo librarians. This network presents the opportunity to get advice from others and glean from the network’s combined experience.

The annual residential Conference was similarly viewed as a significant benefit for reasons such as:

- High-quality training on relevant topics
- Opportunities to hear from publishers, professional bodies like Atla, and service providers, such as EBSCO
- Inspirational library visits
- Heritage User Group meetings
- Conferences, which brought librarians together to share best practice, successes, and encourage each other.

Member discounts for electronic resources, journals and books were similarly advantageous. Free online training and the sharing of resources, including interlibrary loans, were noted as other merits.

Table 4: Benefits of ABTAPL

BENEFIT	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Networking	3
Residential Conferences (included training, library visits, connecting with publishers etc).	3
Member discounts	3
Online training	2
CPD resources	2
Sharing resources (e.g., interlibrary loans)	2

ABTAPL has been an invaluable support to members as they faced and overcame numerous threats throughout its history. To effectively face emerging challenges, like those presented by electronic and online resources, the difficulties of engaging with stakeholders, and the work required to teach IL after the AI revolution, Irish theological librarians will need, more than ever, to be actively involved with, and learn from, the ABTAPL network. The ABTAPL network provides opportunities to develop skills and share experiences to face these challenges. ABTAPL should take note of the emerging challenges identified by librarians in Ireland and ensure their training and discussions address these. Theological libraries who are not current members should consider joining ABTAPL to experience its benefits for themselves.

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Notes

- 1 The Public Records Office of Ireland (PROI) was destroyed on 30 June 1922 at the start of the Irish Civil War. Anti-treaty forces occupied the Four Courts complex, which incorporated the PROI, and there was an explosion and fire. The fire spread to the Record Treasury, destroying many key historical documents.
- 2 This bomb damage was caused by the Troubles, a conflict which lasted for around 30 years from the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It was marked by clashes between Republican and Loyalist Paramilitaries and the British security forces, which impacted on civilians.
- 3 This is the statutory obligation on publishers and distributors to deposit one copy of every publication, without charge, in designated legal deposit libraries. This is to preserve the nation's published heritage.