

## **“The books belonging to the Church in the Library...” Renewing the relationship between Church and University**

In 1962, the Church of Scotland came to an agreement with the University of Edinburgh about New College Library, the Divinity Library of the University[1]. (This agreement followed a much larger discussion between these two bodies about the New College buildings used for theological teaching and research.) At that point in time, both the New College Library building and the books other collections that it held were acknowledged to be in the ownership of the Church of Scotland, and had continued to be managed separately from the main University Library. The 1962 agreement, ratified by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, stated that the books belonging to the Church would be given on loan to the University on conditions which included that:

- The Church retained the right to terminate the loan and take the books back with 12 months notice
- The Church books must remain available for the purposes of the Faculty of Divinity
- The books must remain at New College and not be moved elsewhere except by permission of the Church
- All persons and bodies who had access to the collections in 1962 must continue to have access going forward

Roll forward the years to 2017. Fifty five years after the 1962 agreement, New College Library has a collection of nearly 260,000 printed books (plus significant archive collections). Of these at least 130,000 of the printed books are known to have been in the library collections before 1962 and can thus be identified as belonging to the Church of Scotland. New College Library’s historic collections, which include about 25,000 pre-1800 early printed books, have preserved the historic library collections of the Church of Scotland and the intellectual record of Presbyterian Church in Scotland largely intact, and at the original New College site. New College Library is a thriving theological library which has recently extended its opening hours, and has attracted investment in online cataloguing projects for its historic collections. The Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland continue to freely access the New College library building and all its collections for theological study and research. These are significant achievements, to which the 1962 agreement has contributed.

### **Library Access for Ministers**

However the 1962 agreement had other consequences for New College Library. This agreement stipulated that all persons and bodies who had access to the collections in 1962 must continue to have access, which had been interpreted primarily to allow access for ministers. This meant that until recently, New College Library was operating access arrangements for ministers and ministry students unique within the University library system, based on a complex set of local and historical arrangements. There were several issues, such as historic anomalies in membership eligibility. For instance, Free Church of Scotland ministers borrowed without charge but Church of Scotland ministers had to pay. Staff were also asked about library access by church employees who are not ministers, (such as family workers), who are not mentioned by the 1962 agreement. There were practical

issues of identification, as neither Church of Scotland or Free Church of Scotland ministers have ID cards and staff were generally accepting them on trust as to their status as ministers. This was unclear for temporary staff covering the New College library helpdesk who were normally based at other university site libraries, e.g. the Law Library. When setting up membership Helpdesk staff had to ask what denomination a minister belonged to and were sometimes challenged about this, as ministers from different denominations were being offered a different entitlement. Finally the unique borrower membership categories had always operated as a local arrangement and were not advertised on the library website.

To address these issues I took a paper to the University Library Committee in March 2017, which proposed that the University should offer free external borrower membership to all ministers, retired ministers and employees of the Church of Scotland and Free Church of Scotland. To register for this free membership, presentation of either an ID card or an official letter confirming the individual's status within the Church would be required. This membership would recognise the historic contributions of these Churches to the University of Edinburgh's Library collections through the collections of New College Library.

For the Church, this presented a significant enhancement to the level of access set out in the 1962 agreement. For the University, this made the access arrangements much simpler for us to administrate. For the first time, access arrangements for the Church were clearly advertised on the library website[2] and I also promoted access in the Church's magazine, *Life and Work*[3].

### **Managing the Library Collections**

The issues of library access for ministers were relatively simple to solve, but the underlying issue of collection ownership and the collections management legacy it had created was much less simple to address. Collection growth, the impact of digital collections, increased collection demand and the need for collections rationalisation at scale were all making the management of the New College Library Collections into a very different landscape to the one encountered in 1962. The very substantial New College library collections had a number of legacy issues, including large collections needing retrospective online cataloguing, and an older classification system needing conversion, which were causing problems for discoverability. With such large collections, a large amount of resource is required to solve these problems. However for the University to commit this additional resource would pose a significant financial risk when it was possible that the Church could decide to remove the collections on 12 months notice. Collection ownership and lack of clarity on rights was also a barrier to digitisation, with less than 1% of the Special Collections digitised. The need to enable the Church to approve moving their books out of the building (and recoup the value of their property when making any withdrawals) – meant that New College Library had been operating unique disposal arrangements, including a regular library booksale, which were not in alignment with the University of Edinburgh Collections Policy. In 2016-2017 staff changes to the long serving team meant that operating any former 'workarounds' needing staffing resource was no longer possible. That was when we opened a dialogue with the Church of Scotland to enable change.

It took a whole year of discussion with senior library staff before the decision to approach the Church of Scotland to discuss the 1962 Memorandum of Understanding was made. It felt like there was a window of opportunity to tackle these longstanding problems, with senior figures in both the Library and the Church engaged with the issues. We formulated a document as a basis for that discussion which began by stressing the University's commitment to maintaining the Church's historic collections at New College. We then set out three scenarios for the future management of the collections with risks and benefits, of moving the collections into University ownership, of no change at all, and of creating a new Memorandum of Understanding between Church and University. Initial discussions with Church representatives and the Church legal team clarified that moving the collections into University ownership was not possible, because charity law prevented the Church from handing over such a large asset. Discussion then focused on developing an amendment to the 1962 Memorandum of Understanding and what that might look like. Step by step discussions are proceeding slowly, and the final agreement will need to be ratified by both the University Court of the University of Edinburgh and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

### **So what will these changes achieve?**

For the Church of Scotland, full access is retained to its historic collections which will continue to be kept securely and appropriately. New College Library continues to provide outstanding collections for the theological training of the ministers of the Church of Scotland, and now offers clear, transparent and inclusive access to ministers and church workers for CPD. The proposed changes to the 1962 Memorandum of Understanding will enable the University to rationalise and reimagine collections, including key working collections for ministry such as the Church of Scotland publications. The door will be open to create digitised New College Library collections which are open access for all of the Church to use. And the University will be better positioned to develop outreach projects and programmes to the communities of the Church, such as the General Assembly. The stage is set for us to move forward into a new era for New College Library.

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1. Scotland, C.o., *Minute of Agreement between the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ... and the University Court of the University of Edinburgh. Reports to the General Assembly with the Legislative Acts, 1962*: p. 243.
2. Edinburgh, U.o. *Joining the Library : Church of Scotland and Free Church of Scotland*. 2017 [cited 2018 13 March]; Available from: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/using-library/join-the-library/church-of-scotland-and-free-church-of-scotland>.
3. Love-Rodgers, C., *Libraries welcome for General Assembly visitors*, in *Life and Work [Magazine of the Church of Scotland]*. 2017. p. 29.