

A Great Awakening

\$9.8 million in grant money will fund the renewal of the Burke Library

The thick oak doors at the base of the Brown Tower—bolted shut for many years—were re-opened last fall, the first outward sign of the massive changes stirring within.

The Burke Library, whose unassuming entrance stands just inside the historic portal at the corner of 120th Street and Broadway, was once considered the finest theological library in the Americas. But the tight budgets and soaring book prices of the last 20 years have threatened that status.

Now, thanks to a team of talented grantwriters and several generous foundations, the library has a new lease on life. In November, Lilly Endowment Inc. gave \$8 million for the renewal of the Burke Library. That gift was the largest in a series of recent grants that will transform every detail of the library's work.

The renewal project will begin with a complete renovation of the library's interior—to provide more room for books and periodicals, a more welcoming environment for researchers, and a new state-of-the-art conservation laboratory. Over the next five years, the grant will support increased spending for acquisitions; off-site storage for part of the collection; better care for deteriorating materials; new heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems; an upgrade in library security; and investment in the library's special collections.

A \$1.25 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation will pay to complete conversion of the library's card catalog into digital format. Funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and a portion of the Lilly Endowment grant will safeguard the Seminary's own records and support a new archival collection in feminist theology. And a \$500,000 gift from William H. Scheide will go directly to the library's endowment to support its ongoing life and mission.

"The Burke Library is integral to Union's self-understanding as a center for theological scholarship and theological education," said Seminary President Joseph C. Hough, Jr., who made the library's needs a top priority when he arrived at Union in 1999. "Theologically, the

library is the embodiment of memory and hope, the bearer of the wisdom of religious tradition and the record of the faith and practice of worshipping communities. It represents the possibility of critical engagement with tradition."

Hough isn't the first Union president with a passion for books. In 1838, with faculty salaries badly in arrears, the trustees mortgaged the Seminary's barely completed building to purchase the 13,000-volume library of Brother Leander Van Ess, a Benedictine professor at Marburg in Germany. The cost: \$5,070. The Van Ess collection, one of the finest libraries in the United States at the time of its purchase, formed the nucleus of Union's new collection.



By the turn of the century, when the Burke Library became known as the ex-officio theology collection of the New York Public Library system, it was considered the greatest theological library in the Western Hemisphere.

But libraries are an expensive asset. On the surface, they seem calm, even static. In reality, they must cope with relentless cycles of growth and change. Their health depends on the vigilance of a skilled staff and investment in a sound infrastructure. "Libraries look benign," said Hough, "but they eat voraciously."

President Hough and Library Director Myers display one of the Burke Library's hundreds of Bibles

continued—next page

Library Awakening (continued)

All academic libraries struggle to meet the skyrocketing expense of keeping their collections current. Since 1970, the cost of books has risen dramatically. In the same period, the price of scholarly journals grew at nearly twice the rate of inflation. In recent years, tapping the resources of rapidly changing electronic media has become an increasingly costly challenge as well.

At Union, this battle to maintain currency has been waged alongside institutional struggles for financial survival that have left the library significantly underfunded. "The Burke Library has been allowed to become a tattered treasure," explained Library Director Sara J. Myers.

But not for long.

"One of Lilly Endowment's primary interests is encouraging, building and supporting a strong tradition of Christian ministry in this

country. Among the fundamental elements of that goal are theological sources and literature that form the context of the traditions and history of Christianity," said Craig Dykstra, Endowment vice president for religion. "The Burke Library at Union Seminary is one of the indisputable pillars and keepers of that tradition. The Endowment is pleased to be able to make such a strategic grant to this institution."

Over the years, the Endowment has invested heavily in theological education, Dykstra said. The \$8 million gift to the Burke Library is the

largest grant the Endowment has ever given to a theological library.

MORE ROOM, MORE BOOKS

The transformation of the library will begin with an overhaul of the space it occupies. Later this year, the library will be reconfigured to provide more—and more welcoming—room for books and readers. Among other things, this capital renovation will mean:

- better lighting in the main reading room and general stacks;
- convenient computer access and additional study carrels;
- better access for the disabled;
- new shelving for current periodicals;
- plumbing repairs; new heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems; and the electrical upgrades necessary to support new technologies.

At the same time, infrequently used books and periodicals will be moved to an offsite storage facility. It is common for New York's large research libraries to store an overflow of books in specially designed warehouses just outside the city. These books can be transported back to the Seminary on short notice, as they are needed by researchers.

The changes will make more room for new books. And for students and faculty, that is welcome news. For the last 15 years, the library's acquisitions budget has been shrinking, both in purchasing power and in real dollars. Lilly Endowment has committed \$2.2 million to filling the resulting gaps in the collection.

"The library has a wonderful collection, but there are some new directions in scholarship that need to be added," said Professor Delores Williams, who often arrives at the library before dawn to write in solitude. "The library's strengths and weaknesses influence the research interests of the faculty and the development of new courses," said Williams. "We need to start building our collection in theology and science. We need more sources from around the world. We need more sources from Africa, more sources from Asia." And where emerging theological perspectives are well documented in the collection, she said, the library needs to add works that are critical of those perspectives.

Hough agrees. "If our libraries are to remain the bearers of the full range of wisdom, faith, and practices of Christian worshipping communities," he said, "the collection of the library should reflect the intellectual and cultural pluralism of theological inquiry."

IMPROVING ACCESS

The vision for the library's renewal began to take shape more than a year ago, when Hough and Myers, both new to Union, invited a



Yasuyo Tanaka, assistant in the preservation lab, delicately cleans an old volume

consultant from The New York Public Library to study the Burke Library and propose a plan for meeting its most immediate needs. "The depth of the need was surprising," said Paul Bradley, a third-year M.Div. student and Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations in the Seminary's Development Office. Bradley, a former library fundraiser, played a key role in writing the grant proposals. "It became clear that we needed to make a case for the entire library," he explained.

Throughout the spring and summer, the team worked long hours, developing a theological framework for investment in the library, soliciting input from its staff, meeting with representatives of the Endowment, and finally, hammering out the details of budget numbers, project by project.

"It would be easy to see this as a lot of independent projects," said Library Director Sara Myers. "For me, the overall project is about better access to the collection—for students, for faculty, for other researchers. It doesn't matter if you have 100 million volumes. If no one can use them, you don't have a library; you have a museum."

From cleaning books, to re-opening the doors at 120th Street, to processing archival collections—every dollar spent will improve access and increase use. No single project will do that more concretely than the conversion of the library's manual card catalog into an electronic format. At present, only materials added to the collection after 1976 are part of SOPHIA, the library's online public access catalog. That leaves more than 300,000 volumes accessible only through the fragile card catalog or the printed shelf list.

That conversion process, funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, will take a team of specialists 30 months to complete. Every detail of information on the cards, from standard information about the book's publication to the faded, hand-written marginalia of diligent librarians, will be captured in the digital version. Each volume will get its own barcode. And when the project is done, researchers will be able to access the entire catalog at local computer workstations and via the Internet. The conversion is expected to fuel a dramatic increase in the circulation of the library's older collections.

PROTECTING THE PAST

Meanwhile, the library basement will be transformed into a state-of-the-art conservation laboratory. A professional conservator and several assistants will work full-time to preserve the library's general collection and protect its rarest treasures.

This initiative marks a shift in Union's ability to care for its holdings. For several years, the library has been without a professional conservator trained to monitor storage conditions and repair damaged volumes. "We haven't had the capacity to deal with deteriorating books," said Seminary Archivist Claire McCurdy, noting that about one of every 20 volumes in the library is in disrepair. The new lab will be the destination for armloads of fragile books she receives each week from students and staff. It will be fully stocked with rebinding equipment, special tools for removing stains from paper, a press for stamping titles into rebound books, and a large paper cutter for fashioning boxes and bindings. "It's like being a kid in a candy store after eating vegetables your whole life," said McCurdy, days after the Endowment announced its grant. "Everything is possible."

While the conservator and assistants will spend the bulk of their time maintaining the circulating collection, they will also attend to the library's most unique holdings, including Greek census records from 20 CE, a rare twelfth century manuscript of the Life of St. Boniface, a 1520 imprint of Martin Luther's first published writing, and one of the first African-American hymnals, published in Philadelphia in 1818.

continued—next page

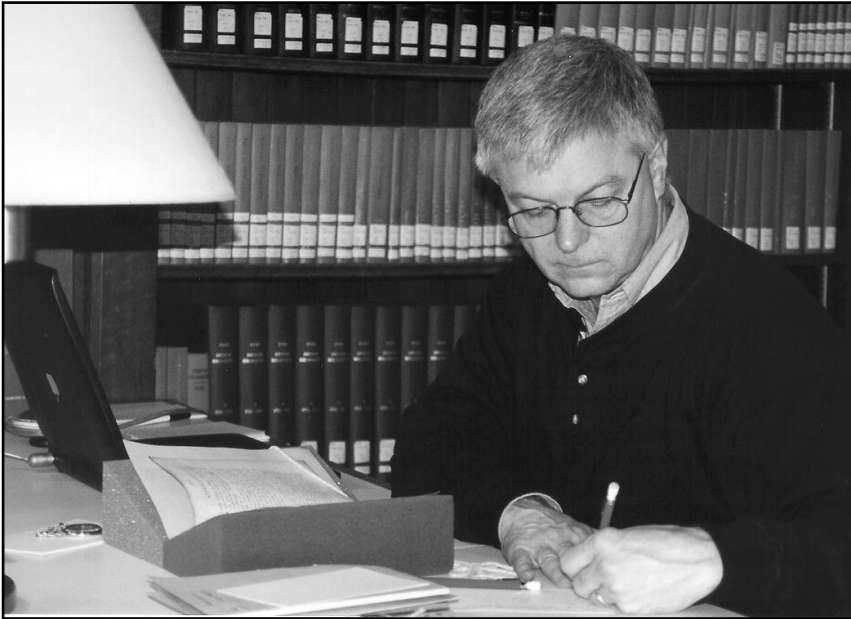
Funding the Library's Renewal

Lilly Endowment Inc.	\$8,000,000	the overall renewal of Burke Library
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	\$1,250,000	conversion of the card catalog into digital format
William H. Scheide	\$ 500,000	building the library endowment
NHPRC	\$ 79,325	processing collections in the Archives of Women in Theological Scholarship
Lilly Endowment Inc.	\$17,200	to upgrade the Bonhoeffer collection
TOTAL	\$9,846,525	

Library Awakening (continued)

"The Burke Library holds the most distinguished historical collection of theology anywhere in this country," wrote Yale Divinity School Librarian Dr. Paul Stuehrenberg in 1999. "As such, it is an invaluable resource for scholars in many fields." Researchers comb the collection for insights into history and politics, music, art and bookbinding as well as theology and religious studies.

"We have a responsibility to scholars of the next generation," said Myers, "to make sure our collection is still intact for them."



W. Clark Gilpin spent part of his sabbatical leave from the University of Chicago doing research on letters from prison in the McAlpin Collection at the Burke Library

PRESERVING THE PRESENT

The Burke Library's rich archival collections make it an important resource for research on contemporary reform movements within the church, most notably the ecumenical movement and the theological contributions of women and African-Americans. The Archives of Women in Theological Scholarship (AWTS), for example, is documenting the contributions of feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* scholars to theological education and progressive social change. With funding from both Lilly Endowment and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the AWTS has grown rapidly in the last year, both in size and in stature.

The grant from Lilly Endowment also includes money to process the records of Union's last three presidents and preserve more than 1,300 hours of audio recordings dating from 1944 to 1975. The recordings, rich in theological material, also capture the voices of people prominent

outside the world of theological education: Eleanor Roosevelt; John Foster Dulles; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Daniel Berrigan; and Rollo May, among others.

The Burke Library Scholar-in-Residence program, a new initiative made possible by the Lilly Endowment grant, will encourage the use of the collections by scholars. [See announcement on inside back cover.]

A separate grant from Lilly Endowment is funding a joint project of the Burke Library and the International Bonhoeffer Society of America to upgrade Union's Dietrich Bonhoeffer collection, one of the most extensive in the world. The German theologian and ethicist, who studied at Union in the academic year 1930-31, was executed in 1945 for his leadership in the Confessing Church and for his opposition to the Nazi regime. The Endowment's \$17,200 gift has purchased microfiche copies of the original Bonhoeffer documents housed in Europe and unpublished material dealing with his life and legacy. The grant will also make the bibliography of this collection available online.

MOVING FORWARD

The grants have meant not a moment of rest for library staff. Indeed, the scope of change projected for the next five years is startling, even to those who had a hand in writing the grant proposals. While some of the projects—like installing humidity monitors—will be simple, others will demand elaborate timelines and involve multiple layers detailed planning.

Meanwhile, in the Development Office, Paul Bradley is hard at work on the next round of grant applications. "The needs are still great," Bradley said. The Development Office will continue raising money to support the library's special projects, to endow staff positions, and to fund acquisitions in particular subject areas, even while staff work to meet the whole range of Union's needs.

"This is a vote of confidence from the major foundation funding religion in America, one of the biggest foundations in the country," said Bradley, referring to the grant from Lilly Endowment. And the way he sees it, the renewal of Burke Library is a sign of more good things to come. "I think people have been waiting for a signal that Union is ready to move forward." ■

— Letitia M. Campbell