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Faith and the Filmstrip

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August 2026

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their generosity in funding this research opportunity, my supervisor, Professor Rice, for his constant support throughout the research process, granting me the freedom to focus my efforts towards the aspects of the project that I found most compelling, and the staff working in the National Library of Scotland's Special Collections, who have been extremely helpful in facilitating my access to the materials and in answering my many questions throughout the research period.

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Introduction

This essay examines the relationship between filmstrips and amateur theatrical performance within the missionary programmes of the Church of Scotland's (CoS) Overseas Committee during the mid-twentieth century. It draws on archival research undertaken at the National Library of Scotland (NLS) special collections as part of the *Relocating Filmstrips, Remapping Europe* project. I began my research with the broader task of identifying and databasing previously underexamined filmstrips and related script materials within the CoS collections. As this process developed, repeated references to theatrical presentations in materials associated with CoS mission groups prompted a narrower investigation into the relationship between projected media and amateur performance. The research subsequently expanded to catalogue not only filmstrips, but also the scripts and minute books that could provide evidence of their intended and actual contexts of use.

This shift in focus addresses a gap in the already limited existing approaches to filmstrip history. While filmstrips have been examined as audiovisual and educational media, less has been outlined relating to the social contexts in which they were presented, particularly where projection formed part of wider programmes involving theatre, discussion, music, devotional activities, and audience participation. The archival material examined here indicated that filmstrips were often embedded within these broader forms of communal activity. In some cases, slides or filmstrips functioned as visual accompaniment to dramatic dialogue. In others, projection was incorporated directly into the narrative structure, with characters presenting images as part of the dramatic action itself. This distinction is significant to changing how the filmstrip's intended function and audience could be understood.

Identifying the audience for missionary filmstrips alone presented a particular difficulty. The filmstrip itself could identify a geographical subject or provide an indication of its educational purpose, but this does not necessarily establish who encountered it, in what setting, or alongside what other activities. Programmes, theatrical scripts, and minute books began to provide answers to these questions by anchoring projected media within specific groups and forms of activity. This essay therefore proposes a shift from considering the filmstrip primarily as a visual object towards understanding it as part of a multimedia event. By reconstructing the relationships between filmstrips, theatrical scripts, programmes, and organisational records, I examine how filmstrips were incorporated into the practices of

domestic CoS mission groups and what further exploration in line with this process can reveal about the materials' intended audience and broader educational context.

Research Period and Methodology

My research began with a broad survey of the CoS materials held within the NLS Special Collections. Rather than beginning with a fixed selection of filmstrips, I initially worked through the available material with the aim of identifying and databasing items relevant to the wider *Relocating Filmstrips, Remapping Europe* project. This involved recording information about individual filmstrips and associated scripts, including their titles, dates where available, geographical subjects, intended audiences, organisations involved, and any references to their presentation or use that were not already observed. At this stage, the purpose was primarily to establish the scope of the collection and identify areas in which further investigation could be undertaken.

The process of reviewing these materials gradually revealed that many filmstrips could not be understood fully through their visual or textual content alone. References within scripts to slides, filmstrips, projected images, or specific forms of presentation provided indications that the materials had been designed for use within larger events. This led me to expand the research beyond the filmstrip material itself and examine the associated theatrical and organisational records. In particular, I consulted scripts for plays and illustrated conversations, programme notes, and minute books relating to CoS groups. The minute books were especially useful for establishing the activities of individual groups and identifying occasions on which presentations, missionary evenings, or other forms of group entertainment took place. Where these records referred to a presentation without providing its content, I could then use the associated scripts or filmstrips to investigate what that presentation may have involved.

This process of moving between sources was important to the development of the research question. The repeated appearance of projected media alongside theatrical performances suggested that this was not an isolated feature of one particular programme or group. I therefore began to record not simply whether a filmstrip existed, but what other materials it was associated with and how it was intended to be used. This included noting whether projection was mentioned as part of a dramatic script, whether individual characters were

instructed to present or respond to images, whether a separate narrator or operator was required, and whether the filmstrip appeared alongside other forms of educational or devotional activity.

I used these observations to establish a set of comparative criteria for the material. For each relevant item, I recorded the type of projected media involved, its relationship to any accompanying performance, the apparent audience, the organisation or group for which it was intended, its position within a wider programme, and any practical instructions concerning its presentation. I also recorded references to alternative arrangements, such as programmes in which a slide lecture could be substituted for a filmstrip or performances that provided an option for groups without access to a projector. This allowed materials that differed in format or subject to be compared according to their function within a programme rather than simply according to their content.

A similar process was used to examine the wider programmes in which filmstrips appeared. Rather than treating a filmstrip as an independent item, I considered its position alongside other activities, including dramatic presentations, maps, music, prayer, discussion, costume talks, photographs, and other visual material. This made it possible to ask what the filmstrip contributed to an event as a whole and, importantly, whether its intended audience could be identified more clearly through its surrounding material. A filmstrip might indicate its geographical subject without identifying whether it was intended for children, Women's Guild members, prospective missionaries, or a general church audience; a programme or script could provide this missing context.

This approach also informed the archival implications of the research. As I moved between filmstrips, scripts, programmes, and minute books, I recorded instances where the relationship between items was evident in the archival material but not immediately apparent from their individual catalogue information. I also noted incomplete titles, undated material, duplicate copies, annotations, and revisions, particularly where these could affect the interpretation of how an item was used. Rather than treating these inconsistencies solely as obstacles to cataloguing, I considered them as evidence of the materials' movement between the central organisation and local groups and I was able to reconstruct aspects of their intended contexts of use while also identifying where the surviving archive prevented firmer conclusions.

The resulting analysis did not seek to establish how every filmstrip was used, since the surviving material could not support such a comprehensive claim. Instead, it identified recurring relationships within the material and used individual examples as case studies through which to examine those patterns. This distinction was important to the conclusions reached below. The findings therefore rested on the convergence of evidence from multiple archival formats: scripts demonstrated how projection was incorporated into performances, programmes established how these performances related to other activities, and the filmstrips themselves provided the visual material around which these events were structured. Reading these sources together made it possible to consider the filmstrip not simply as an individual object, but as one component of a wider multimedia practice.

Challenges of Archival Research

One of the principal challenges of this research was reconstructing social context from incomplete evidence. The surviving material provides considerable information about what organisers were instructed or encouraged to do, but considerably less about what audiences actually experienced. Typed scripts often show changes made to dialogue and blocking, and, as in the case of *Conversation piece illustrated with slides*, handwritten notes on where during the performance slides should be changed (see fig. 1). It is unclear as to when these changes were made during the production and distribution process, and as such the reasoning behind the changes and reception from audiences is difficult to ascertain. A script can indicate that a projector should be used, for example, without establishing whether a particular congregation possessed the necessary equipment or whether the suggested programme was performed exactly as written.

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J. ^{It seems to me what} This work is helping the refugees to help themselves?

K. ^{Slide 4} That's right. They have built for themselves ^{houses.} roads, schools and ^{Slide 5} clinics. Inter-Church Aid helps by giving skilled advice and wages in the form of food.

Miss J. ^{But what about the ones who do not live in camps?} ~~Are there many refugees in camps?~~ ^{Are there many left?}

Mrs. K. Yes. Thousands of them.

Miss J. What's going to happen to them? Are they going to stay on there for ever and ever?

Mrs. K. ^{Slide 6} ~~I visited the~~ Camp at Jericho and learned that the big problem

fig. 1 Conversation piece illustrated with slides. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/65 "Plays and dramatic presentations., Undated." at the National Library of Scotland (NLS).

Overseas Coincidence demonstrates this problem particularly well. The script explicitly provides an alternative for groups without access to a projector; the performance can simply end before the visual section (fig. 2). Where projection was possible, detailed instructions specify that the screen should be prepared. The projector could either be operated on stage by one of the performers or positioned independently elsewhere in the hall. The document therefore tells us that while filmstrips and slides were considered valuable, they were also acknowledged to not be a universally available medium. The filmstrip was consequently designed around the practical circumstances of its intended users.

For those who cannot have the use of a projector, the "play" may be terminated at the ~~x~~ followed by the final loud-speaker announcement; but, for those who have a projector, it should be placed ready for action, focused for clear presentation of pictures on the back-screen and as the ladies seem to collect slides to compile a survey, someone assisting the operator should put off the lights, and let the visual part of the presentation get started. Although the projector could be on-stage, and operated by one of the cast, it may be more convenient to have it located on the floor of the hall, independent of the cast, but it is most essential that the sequence of "lights out" and commencement of pictures be speedy.

fig. 2 Overseas Coincidence. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at the NLS.

The archival record also presented problems of categorisation, especially moving from the original CoS cataloguing system from the 1940s and 1950s to the modern NLS order

numbers. Theatrical material is frequently found referencing filmstrips, slide lectures, programmes, and other material, but these relationships are not always explicit in the titles or catalogue information available to a researcher. Some slides have no recorded titles, while some materials lack catalogue numbers altogether. This creates difficulty in establishing a clear method for analysing this archive, but also reveals more about the different ways we view these materials as opposed to their contemporary use. If a filmstrip was historically one part of a larger programme, separating it from the script, programme, or performance with which it was intended to operate emphasises its position as a multimedia persuasive tool.

Findings

Filmstrips as Visual Accompaniment

At the close of this research period, I identified two broad relationships between projected media and theatrical performance.

In the first, slides or filmstrips function as a visual accompaniment to a dramatic presentation while remaining separate from the canonical events of the play. *Conversation piece with illustrated slides*, concerning Church of Scotland work in Jordan and Palestine, provides a clear example. The dialogue between two women, Mrs Keen and Miss Johnstone concerns a recent visit to the Holy Land, where Mrs Keen says she has only enough time to tell Miss Johnstone (the audience-proxy) about “the Church’s work.”¹ When she describes touring the various missionary outposts, the script directs the presentation towards the projected images:

¹ *Conversation piece with illustrated slides*, Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/65 “Plays and dramatic presentations., Undated.” at the National Library of Scotland

Miss J. Did you have time to visit the Hospital run by the Edinburgh Medical Mission? ^{Slide 14}

Mrs. K. Yes. It is a ^{wonderful} hospital and I was ^{most} ^{impressed by} very interested in the new chapel with its beautiful ^{and} unusual cross outside and ^{Slide 15} the very attractive Communion Table inside. It is a carpenter's bench.

Miss J. What a lovely idea. ^{Slide 16}

Mrs. K. From Nazareth ^{Slide 16} I went to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. I'll never forget my first sight of the lake where Jesus spent so much time teaching and healing. I was thrilled ^{Slide 17} to see the Church of Scotland Centre. ^{Slide 18} *The bookshop window is on the right of the

fig. 3 Conversation piece illustrated with slides. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/65 "Plays and dramatic presentations., Undated." at the NLS.

The images are positioned behind the conversation rather than within it. The characters do not respond to the images as objects; instead, the projections provide visual context for the information being discussed. This allows the dramatic dialogue to remain relatively simple while the images provide additional geographical and spatial information.

A similar structure appears in *Overseas Coincidence*. The purpose of the piece is explicitly stated as demonstrating the "blend of Committees under the new OVERSEAS COUNCIL." The subsequent slide presentation is intended to "underline the points already made" by the speakers.² Ostensibly the slides would function as a visual summary of the discussion between various characters for the benefit of the audience's imagination.

² *Overseas Coincidence*. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at NLS

SETTING

Very simple
waiting room
at a Middle
East Airport.

Everyone very
wearily looking
at magazines
for a minute
before the
announcement is
made by Loud-
speaker (by a
young man's
voice if possible
- this can be
recorded before-
hand).

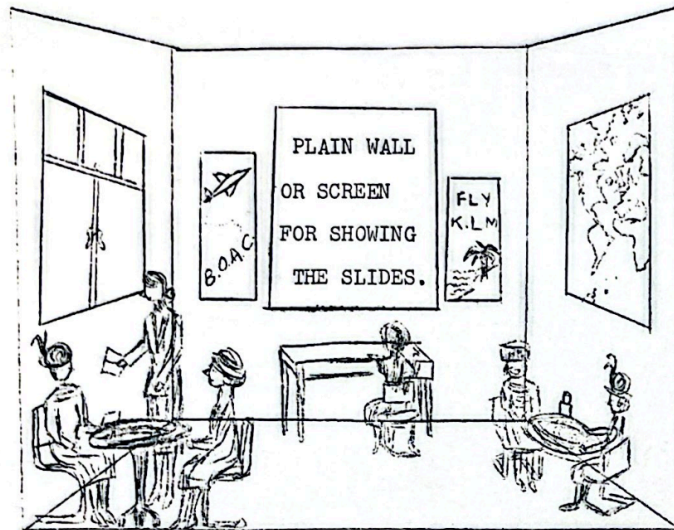


fig. 4 Overseas Coincidence. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at the NLS.

In these cases, projection is a tool used to consolidate information that has already been communicated through speech, rather than introducing new information independently. This suggests that the combination of drama and projected media served a pedagogical function. Audiences encountered information through multiple channels, with the dramatic component providing a narrative or conversational framework reinforced by the use of filmstrips.

Filmstrips Within Dramatic Action

The second pattern of filmstrip use is more closely integrated. In *Made in South America*, two women, an unnamed minister's wife and Mrs. Butler, shows slides to a Miss Davidson while explaining to her the Church's more recent work in South American countries. The slides therefore become part of the action of the play rather than a backdrop (see fig 5) This produces an interesting overlap between the audience watching the play and the audience-proxy within it. She is introduced to information about places she has not encountered and responds to it as the real audience is expected to do.

Mrs.Alson: I just wish Miss Davidson could hear about the rest of the work the Church of Scotland sponsors in South America.

Minister's Wife: (still fingering the slides) Don't worry about that, Mrs.Alson - no sooner said than done. Luckily the projector has been left in position and Mrs.Butler and Mrs.Carson know I'm just dying to see the slides we've just received from Chile and the Falklands.

Mrs.Butler: I believe there are a few of Buenos Aires itself in this box - so Miss Davidson will see a good wide range.

fig. 5 Made in South America. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at the NLS

The Healing Church, as part of the CoS Overseas Council theme for 1968, adopts a similar question-and-answer structure. It is described as an "illustrated conversation for 5 women", with slides directed by an announcer behind a naturalistic conversation. At the end of the discussion, one character states that their "thought provoking conversation" has made her "more aware now of the way in which the Church is caring for the whole man throughout the world".³ The purpose of these discussions is to anticipate the questions and concerns of the audience, so that they may be contented as the characters themselves are by the end. The filmstrip projections within and without the meta-narrative of these plays are meant to aid the performers in achieving that goal.

Media Designed For their Context of Use

It is the relationship between filmstrips and theatrical performance that changes how each can be understood. The programmes in which they appeared were themselves often structured around scripted or semi-scripted contributions, with individual participants assigned particular readings, presentations, dramatic parts, or discussion points. *Suggested Programme for Jamaica Evening*, for example, recommends "50 coloured miniature slides with script giving a glimpse of the country, the people and the work of the Presbyterian Church of Jamaica."⁴ These slides were intended to run alongside maps, pictures, prayer, slides, and music in an event designed to provide audiences with a structured and comprehensive encounter with a particular place, often for the purpose of educating those yet to go on their first overseas mission.

³ *The Healing Church*. "Overseas Council Theme for 1968-69: What in the World?" Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at NLS.

⁴ *Suggested Programme for Jamaica Evening*. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at NLS.

SUGGESTED PROGRAMME FOR JAMAICA EVENING

Opening Singing Psalm 121 or 126.

(These psalms were read and sung by the newly
liberated slaves in August, 1834.)

Scripture Reading: Isaiah Ch. 42 v. 1 - 12.

or Psalm 145

or Matthew Ch. 22 v. 15 - 22.

Readings included at Service
held at Westminster Abbey on
the occasion of the attainment
of independence by Jamaica.

Prayer

Solo: Jamaica Guild Hymn

Slide Lecture (50 coloured miniature slides with script giving a
glimpse of the country, the people and the work of the
Presbyterian Church of Jamaica.)

Jamaica Music or Choir singing Negro Spirituals.

Twenty Questions or Quiz (can be conducted similar to Radio presentation.)

The Pioneer Club Song or Jamaica National Anthem (can be sung by Audience.)

Hymn 29 or Doxology:- "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow" (sung at
both celebrations in 1834 and 1962.)

Benediction.

fig. 6 Suggested Programme for Jamaica Evening. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63

"Copies of play committee file., Undated," at the NLS.

The same principle is visible in the *West Pakistan Programme*. It suggests either the slide lecture *Home Life in West Pakistan* or the filmstrip *Background to West Pakistan*, following maps, posters, music, and a "costume talk" (see fig. 7). The filmstrip was thus incorporated into a particular sequence of activities and could be replaced by a slide lecture if necessary. This accompanying filmstrip was specifically directed towards Scottish schoolchildren; "Many people have come from Pakistan to work in Scotland. Perhaps there are some Pakistani boys and girls in your school. What kind of country do they come from?" This example also demonstrates the limitations of considering the filmstrip independently from the material surrounding it. While the filmstrip could communicate information about Pakistan through its images and commentary, the programme provides information about the particular audience for which this material was being presented and the context in which it was

expected to be understood. Reading the two together therefore gives a more complete indication of the filmstrip's educational purpose than the projected material alone.

This supports a broader interpretation of these materials as media designed around the spaces they engage with. The programmes demonstrate attempts to integrate projected media into church halls, Women's Guild meetings, Sunday schools, and other existing forms of communal activity. The flexibility of these programmes suggests that the institutional goal was to make and distribute media that incorporates well into various local settings.

COSTUME TALK
SLIDE LECTURE -- "Home Life in West Pakistan".
or
FILMSTRIP -- "Background to West Pakistan"
DRAMATISATION -- "Clinic Chat"
or
"Adult Literacy Work in West Pakistan"

fig. 7 West Pakistan Programme. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/66 "Assorted plays., Undated." at the NLS

Implications

Archiving Church of Scotland Materials

These findings have implications for a practical study of the CoS archives beyond the interpretation of individual filmstrips. They also raise questions about how the Church of Scotland materials are organised within the NLS and, more broadly, how filmstrip data should be catalogued to best suit research purposes at other institutions. The most important consideration is the need to preserve and communicate relationships between different forms of material. A filmstrip accompanied by a script is not equivalent, from a research perspective, to a filmstrip without one. A programme identifying a filmstrip as part of a dramatic presentation provides further information about its intended use and audience. A staging diagram may establish how the projection was positioned within a performance.

This does not necessarily mean that materials should be physically reorganised within the established archive. There is sound logic behind maintaining a cohesive organisational structure between old and new acquisitions. However the research suggests value in making these relationships more visible through catalogue descriptions, linked metadata, accession notes, or other forms of cross-referencing.

For example, an entry for the *Background to Zambia* filmstrip becomes more informative when connected explicitly to the *Zambia Programme*, the accompanying photo talk, and the conversation piece on rural health services. The same applies to the *India Programme*, where “The Story of Yesudass” and “United and Uniting” appear alongside three dramatic presentations (see fig. 8). Without these connections, a researcher approaching the filmstrip independently may understand its content but miss the evidence for how it was intended to function.

OPENING DEVOTIONS
INTRODUCTION
MUSIC
TALK ON SARI
SLIDE LECTURE - "Indian Journey". This talk gives a broad picture of our Church's work in India with some detail of the areas where our missionaries are working.
or
FILMSTRIP (1) "The Story of Yesudass" - Traces the story of a Christian young man of South India through school to college where he is trained for the ministry and on to marriage.
 (2) Filmstrip - "United and Uniting" - The Work of the Church of Northern India.
or
PLAY There are several plays on the different aspects of the work in different areas. Any one of these plays would be suitable:-
"Serving and Sharing" - Five Women and two Men. (These can be changed to women's parts.) A visitor to Ullipur learns of the work of a missionary and his wife in a village community experiment.
"Mure Memorial Hospital" - Story of start of medical work in Nagpur to present day.
"A Woman's Guild Meets in Santalia" - Seven representing Santal women.

fig. 8 Zambia Programme. Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/66 "Assorted plays., Undated." at the NLS

The significance of these relationships is heightened by the fact that some of the materials themselves are incomplete. The current organisational system has filmstrips and slides without titles, undated plays, duplicate copies, revised scripts, and evidence of materials being updated over time. One example is the ‘illustrated Bible study’ *Go - - - - Do* (Reference no. Acc. 10903/66), for which a later note identifies an addition to slide 18 and the crossing-out of slide 23 because it was considered “out of date,” adjustments not made on the duplicate copy featured in Acc. 10903/63. Such instances indicate that these were working materials which audiences experience differently depending on the version distributed to them. An archival approach attentive to the use and reception of these items would therefore preserve the existence of individual items through their support by evidence of its circulation, adaptation, and association with other materials.

Conclusion and Recommended Further Research

The research undertaken during the Laidlaw project suggests that missionary filmstrips associated with the Church of Scotland at the NLS should be understood within the broader performance environments for which they were produced. Across the material examined, filmstrips and slides were repeatedly paired with amateur dramatic performance, devotional activities, discussion, music, maps, posters, photographs, and other forms of communication. Two particularly clear relationships emerged: projected media could function as visual accompaniment to a performance, or become central to the dramatic action.

There are, however, limits to what can be established from the surviving evidence and in so limited a research period. The material provides considerable information about intended programmes but relatively little regarding audience responses or the extent to which individual church groups followed the suggested formats. It is also difficult to determine consistently where individual performances took place or how frequently particular filmstrips were used. Further research could therefore extend this project by examining Church of Scotland periodicals, Women’s Guild records, congregational minutes, correspondence, photographs, and other local records of evidence of actual performances and audience responses.

A further direction would be to examine the representation of the people and places depicted in these materials. The present research has focused primarily on use and performance, but the scripts themselves contain claims about missionary work, education, medicine, religion, migration, and local cultures. Closer study combining this representational analysis with the performance context could ask how the staging of images affected the interpretation of these subjects.

The prevalence of women in these examples is also noteworthy. The materials repeatedly position women as speakers, performers, presenters, and organisers in programmes intended for Women's Guilds as well as general church groups. This suggests a potentially productive connection between the history of filmstrip use and the history of women's media work within religious organisations, especially since both acting and projection were intended to be accomplished by an amateur audience. Such activities may not fit conventional accounts of media production media production, which tend to prioritise professional producers, directors, broadcasters, or technicians, but the archival material demonstrates that the effective use of audiovisual media also depended upon people who presented, staged, narrated, and organised them. The boundary between producer, performer, and audience could therefore be considerably more fluid than a study of the filmstrip as an object might suggest.

These findings demonstrate that the historical significance of the CoS filmstrip collection lies in the relationships between the images it preserves and the people, performances, and organisations that give them context. The filmstrips examined in this research were adaptable materials, capable of being incorporated into different programmes and presented to different audiences according to the needs of individual groups. This adaptability also means that their historical use cannot be reconstructed from the filmstrips alone. Scripts, programmes, minute books, annotations, and duplicate copies provide evidence of the circumstances in which the materials were presented and the ways in which they could change between contexts.

The research therefore supports understanding the filmstrip as part of a multimedia event rather than as an isolated audiovisual object. This approach not only provides a fuller account of how missionary filmstrips operated within CoS groups, but also demonstrates the value of preserving the archival relationships between associated materials. Further research into local records and audience responses could establish how these planned forms of multimedia

communication were experienced in practice, while closer analysis of their representations could examine what audiences were being taught about the people and places depicted. Making the connections between filmstrips and their accompanying materials more visible would enable future researchers to move beyond the question of what a filmstrip contained and towards the more revealing question of what it was used to accomplish.

Archival Material Bibliography

Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/63 "Copies of play committee file., Undated," at the National Library of Scotland

"Go - - - - Do"

"Home Life in West Pakistan"

"Made In South America"

"Overseas Coincidence"

"Overseas Council Theme for 1968–69: What in the World?"

"Suggested Programme for Jamaica Evening"

Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/65 "Plays and dramatic presentations., Undated." at the National Library of Scotland

"Conversation Piece Illustrated With Slides"

Church of Scotland, Acc.10903/66 "Assorted plays., Undated." at the National Library of Scotland

"India Programme"

"The Reading Church Programme"

"West Pakistan Programme"

"A Woman's Guild Meets in Santalia"

"Zambia Programme"