

# Bolivia and the Ministry of the Written Word

Lourdes Cordero, of Editorial Lámpara (coorlamp@entelnet.bo), reports on current publishing ministry efforts in Bolivia.

**I**n the heart of South America is Bolivia, a country known for its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. According to the 2001 National Housing and Population census, Bolivia has 8,274,325 people. While the country is made up of nine regions, the population is concentrated in only three: La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba. About half of Bolivia's population is under the age of 20.

With regard to linguistic diversity, a large percentage of the population speaks indigenous languages, mainly Quechua (over two million) and Aymara (over one million). Besides Spanish, such languages as Chiquitano, Guaraní, Guarayu, and Tsimané are spoken.

Social and economic crises plague Bolivia. Despite an increase in the nation's gross domestic product, that growth has not brought about an improvement in the quality of life of its citizens. The precarious economy is reflected in low salaries and a lack of attention to citizens'



*An Aymara group enjoys breakfast near Lake Titicaca, La Paz.*

basic needs such as health and education. In *Correo del Sur*, a newspaper in Sucre, Vladimir Gutierrez Pérez reported that in 2000, among urban adults, 90 percent could not find employment. This percentage is increasing. The lack of jobs is such that even university graduates must accept whatever work is available.

This socio-economic insecurity has contributed to social conflicts in the urban, rural, and indigenous sectors. Public transportation stoppages, road blocks, protest marches, and many other manifestations of unrest affect Bolivia's economy.

Evangelical growth has been notable since 1960. In his 2003 article, "New Social

Players," in *Cuadernos del Futuro*, Julio Córdova writes "[Evangelicals] grew at an annual rate of 8.8 percent, an increase greater than the annual 2.75 percent growth of the population ...These are estimates, since churches do not have up-to-date registries, new congregations are constantly started, and there is mobility among the faithful to and from congregations." Many pastors lack Bible school or seminary training. Christian literature has a critical role in the growth of the Bolivian Christian church, in its evangelism and formation.

## **Imported books**

The work of the first Protestant missionaries to Bolivia, who came as colpor-

teurs distributing Bibles and Bible portions, is well known. Today, most Christian books in Bolivia continue to be imported books translated from English. The variety of themes and authors is very broad; they encompass evangelistic tracts, Bible commentaries, Sunday school materials, and discipleship resources.

A visit to the most well-known bookstores will show there are various publishers represented. But theological books—Bible commentaries and theological study texts—have a very limited presence if they are present at all, perhaps due to the high costs of importing such titles. Sadly, in Bolivia books are still taxed.

## **Books published in Bolivia**

The national publishing industry is still young. The Bolivian Bible Society has been around the longest. Aside from the Bible society, four Christian publishing houses now work in Bolivia: ■ C.A.L.A., a ministry for Aymara literacy and publish-

ing, is now over 40 years old. It serves the country's Aymara-speaking churches on an interdenominational level. Their most important products are hymnals for youths and adults, Sunday school materials for different age levels, and evangelistic booklets. Editorial C.A.L.A. does some publishing in Spanish. It has its own printing press in the city of La Paz.

- Mosoj Chasqui, Quechua for "New Messenger", is a ministry in Cochabamba that works in radio, publishing, and literacy. The publishing division of Mosoj Chasqui has been in existence for 15 years. Its publications, in Quechua, are interdenominational, meet a variety of needs, and are subsidized so readers can afford them. Mosoj Chasqui offers chronological Bible studies, literacy materials, children's books, and resources for women on cooking and the basics of livestock and agriculture.
- Editorial Siembra, a Sucre-based publishing house, began in 1989. It focuses on discipleship and Bible training texts. Its titles are mainly translations from Norwegian.

Though owned by the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church, in the past few years Editorial Siembra has sought to publish materials that transcend its denominational emphasis.

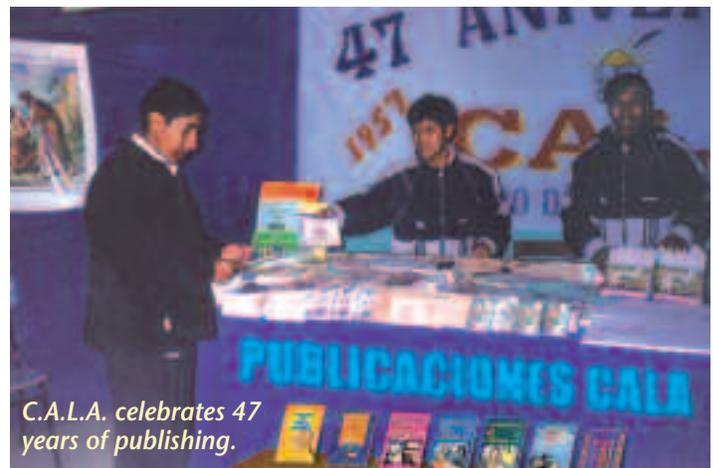
- Editorial Lámpara is a publisher, importer, distributor, and interdenominational ministry with links to the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Bolivia. It began in 1993 to publish books on leadership development, family, and other topics of relevance to evangelical students and urban Christians.

Aside from the above publishing houses, there are authors who not only write, but also publish and sell their own titles. Although there are not many, their motivation and effort is notable.

### *Opportunities and challenges*

Publishers have plenty of needs to meet wherever they turn, for "the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." (Matt. 9:37)

- Bolivia's cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, together with the growth of the Christian community,



opens doors for ministry and marketing. There are many needs for literature of every kind.

- Realizing that 50 percent of Bolivia's population is young will help publishers reach a larger audience.

- A great percentage of evangelical leadership is formed by its lay leaders. There is, then, a pressing need to contribute to its formation with literature that is biblically and contextually relevant to its needs.

However, publishers face numerous difficulties:

- Among the greatest challenges facing ministries is the need to join their efforts. No single ministry can satisfy the needs of the whole Church in Bolivia. Besides working on national networks, publishers need to strengthen their relationships with international networks. An example of this is seen in the Letra Viva network of Christian publishers.

- The publishing industry in Bolivia is still small, and so Christian publishers must integrate their work into a wider spectrum. It is necessary to motivate the population, including

the Church, toward a passion for literature, to develop national writers, to train editors and booksellers, and to develop innovative promotion and marketing strategies.

- When facing unfavorable external factors, publishers must develop creativity to handle difficulties such as social conflict. They must work to lower transport costs for imported books and at the same time offer good prices and discounts.

- Socio-economic difficulties affect the entire Bolivian society. Therefore, a challenge Christian publishers have is to publish books for non-Christians, books with values and principles founded on God's Word in a language that is accessible to a wide audience.

Bolivian society is rife with words. The loudest are those that wound, divide, and even kill. In contrast, Christian publishers work to communicate words that bring wholeness, restoration, reconciliation, and life. The challenges and opportunities change, but this ministry is founded on Jesus Christ, the incarnate and unchanging Word. The commitment of Christian publishers to serve the Church makes an eternal difference.▼

