



Establishing Links Beyond Distribution

By Elsa Ramirez de Aguilar

Elsa Ramírez de Aguilar has directed the [Estudios CLASE](#) theological education by extension program at [SETECA](#) since 1993. [Estudios CLASE](#) is an extension program of the Central American Theological Seminary in Guatemala, better known by its Spanish-language initials, [SETECA](#). It focuses on training Christian leaders who do not have the opportunity to enter a seminary or Bible institute full-time.

Estudios CLASE is much more than an academic program. It is highly flexible in the way it can be developed and integrated into ministry activities. Its gradual and holistic progress invites students to participate so as to gain not just theological and Bible knowledge, but also formation in the character and commitment to Christian life and ministry.

For these, and many other reasons, Estudios CLASE has been widely accepted throughout the Spanish-speaking world. It is known and used from Chile to Canada, and outside the Americas in Spain and Germany.

At the same time, its simplicity and its profound Bible truths have made it useful in different indigenous communities. This has led to its translation into diverse languages such as Shuar, Ashuar, Quechua, Mam and others.

The widespread acceptance of the Estudios CLASE materials—a complete array of courses published in booklet form—has created the need to have distributors in some Latin-American countries. In others, we still sell directly to churches, Bible institutes and other users.

One of our challenges has been how to get our materials to other countries. Our communications are not only expensive, but often unreliable. Until the 1990s we had the big advantage that Guatemala's mail was the cheapest, allowing us to send large quantities of materials for a very low cost.

When we entered the new millennium we also entered a new era of change in our country, including the privatization of various government entities. One of them was the mail. Costs went up not just 100 percent, but 1,000 percent! This almost paralyzed our shipments. Our distribution on a continent-wide level, and beyond, dropped significantly. The reorganization of the shipments and the reorientation of the means have turned into a big process.

A second challenge we are facing is how to do bank transactions for product payments. It is only in the last few years that credit cards have become the most feasible way to make payments for our customers from outside the country. Many buyers do not have an international credit card, so obtaining foreign currency in order to send checks, postal orders or arrange for wire transfers has been a headache.

We could write a book about all we have experienced and continue trying to resolve today. In some countries it is becoming nearly impossible to buy foreign exchange, let alone import goods. Yet the demand for our materials continues to grow, and we have had to devise ways to make them reach their destination.

Customers in certain countries asked us to have our materials printed there. We were concerned that this would lead to a loss of control. We did not know how to handle it, so we started to design strategies and to consider what other organizations had done in similar circumstances. We knew another ministry had required royalties for every copy printed in another country. To track how many copies were made, they supplied the covers.

This gave us a way to begin; we first tried it in Venezuela. They were to print the material from a PDF electronic copy we send them by e-mail, which they could not change. We established a royalty price per printed copy, and they agreed to do all distribution of the products inside their country, with the caveat that the study program would be still administered by Estudios CLASE from Guatemala.

But when we sent the covers, after assurances that the books would look just like the ones we produce in Guatemala, we found we still had the problems of shipments and importation into Venezuela. Therefore, we agreed our partners could also

print the covers. We sent the cover design in a high-quality program ready for printing, but without allowing changes. They only work on printing and distribution; every print run must have our previous authorization.

To confirm our agreement we put it in writing, specifying all the details regarding printing, sales and royalties. We sent the original contract by mail, by fax and e-mail. Both parties signed the agreement—not as individuals but as organizations.

We have already printed the materials for one of Estudios CLASE's three programs. The next challenge was arranging for the payment of the royalties, and for the covers sent from a country where foreign currency was available to our partners. That was another headache—not for us, but for our distributors.

We are still refining the process. We know it will be of great benefit to many in the long run. In the meantime we have new challenges and needs to satisfy.

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