

FUTURE OF Christian Literature

Aradí Rivera tackles the trends that affect the future of Christian publishers and literature distribution in Latin America.

At the close of the millennium, we face a drop in the sale of Christian books in traditional channels, a multiplication of editorial firms, readers purchasing books through the internet, and Christian publishing houses achieving extraordinary sales in secular venues. What will happen in the new century? Will there be fewer readers, fewer books? Are we witnessing the disappearance of the traditional Christian bookstore?

Christian books: static or growing?

Sales of Christian books in Latin America fell in 1998. Last year at Expolit, the Spanish Evangelical Publishing Association reported a reduction of approximately 18.5 percent in the sales of Spanish Christian literature in Latin America and the United States. Many agree that the industry is not at its peak. Some point to the economic situation as the main cause of this decrease. Others note that should have also resulted in decreased Bible and music sales. However, sales in these categories increased.

Sam Rodriguez, publications director at Betania, admits that Christian literature is at a standstill, though in the past growth has been significant and there are many

believers with a great vision to get ahead. "I believe there is an awakening of readers going on. In Latin America people want to better their positions and this change is reflected in the Church," he said.

The growth in small editorial houses is outstanding. "Last year our sales and publications tripled, and we are well on the way to repeating this feat. The same thing is true for other publishers we represent, like Andamio, Certeza, Kairos, and others" stated Marco Guete, director of the Latin American Center of Anabaptists Resources (CLARA, Centro Latinoamericano de Recursos Anabautistas) in Colombia. Guete affirms that as the Church grows, the demand for good books also grows.

However, the number of Christian readers is not growing at the same rate as the Church. According to Zaida Andrade, writing for *Maranatha*, a newspaper in Costa Rica, the average amount of money invested in books, in countries like Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, and others, fails to exceed eight dollars a year. Andrade concludes that Christian literature spending is affected by difficult economic circumstances and competition from radio and television. However, the greatest

hindrance is the attitude of many Christians toward literature. In a consumer society, she argues, a book is just another commodity, probably less useful than a radio cassette or a new pair of shoes.

Saturation problems

For Eliseo Vila, president of Editorial Clie in Spain, there is a problem of saturation in a market whose potential is immense. "We are experiencing saturation. Bookstores can no longer absorb the avalanche of novelties they receive each month. They have neither the space nor the capital to maintain an inventory of all of the titles. And this means that each new title forcibly brings about the death of a title already in existence. Bookstores receive a new book, place it on the shelves, and when it sells they do not reorder it, because the next month another book will take its place. Libraries have gotten used to living on new titles and a few creditable bestsellers from known authors," he averred.

This situation affects editors, authors, and finally, the reader. According to Vila, it is also frustrating for authors, brings little profit to publishing houses that are forced to plan short print runs, resulting in higher prices. Readers are not able

to reap the benefits of the many excellent Christian books that die prematurely.

Christian publishing houses are working with editions of 5,000 units, sometimes even less. From a statistical perspective, 5,000 copies of a book in Spanish, within the market's potential, are only "samples" that do not even amount to one book per store. If each store sold only one book to each of the churches it serves, this would require print-runs of more than 100,000 units.

Vila is sure distribution channels are not working. "There is little agility or assertiveness in the sales process. Sales are passive, not active. Most Christian bookstores don't 'sell,' rather they 'buy,' when the bookstore's motto ought to be that if clients do not go to the bookstore, the bookstore must go to the clients." He emphasized the importance of training sales personnel, affirming "they must know the product and learn what it means to 'sell.' Otherwise, it will be very difficult to overcome this situation."

New authors, new markets

Many believe that the absence of sufficient Latin-American authors also affects sales. Few Christian books sold in Latin America are produced there. "We must work toward developing writers and thinkers that can address our region's needs. We need to get out of the 'evangelical ghetto', to develop books that can cross over to the broad and healthy secular market, including university circles," said Ian Darke, coordinator of Letra Viva, a Christian publishing network in Latin America.

Darke encourages exploration of the connections between the Latin-American Church with Christians of other continents. Latin-America has a lot in common with Africa and Asia. If the Church needs translations, he asks, why not do them from authors in these cultures? On the other hand, while there are numerous translated books that tell impressive stories, why not also publish stories of

Latin American Christians who have remained steadfast in the face of terrorism?

Jorge A. Rousellin, publicity and promotions director for Editorial Mundo Hispano and the Spanish Baptist Publishing House, asserts that the solution lies in adjusting to the market. He states youth, as a segment of the general population, have been increasing at an accelerated rate in the past 25 years. In Central America, for example, the population will double in 20-24 years. Young people are making buying decisions. An example of this is music, which is selling very well. "Our publications must appeal to this age level, with books and topics for the challenges of the future and the opportunities of this coming century," he asserted.

Internet: competition or complement?

Christian books are now being distributed through new channels. The bookstores on the internet that sell a wide range of Christian literature in Spanish increased this past year from five to over 15.

Melvin Rivera, Latin America Publications Director for the United Bible Societies, thinks that internet use will grow faster in Latin America than in the United States. "We are witnessing not only the impact of a new technology, but a radical change in the way that people receive information and make buying decisions," he noted.

"In developed nations there has always been abundant and easy access to information. When someone needs information they find a library or an adequate bookstore near their home. In contrast, when a Latin-American wants information they do not have the same local establishments. The internet is meeting this need. Publishers and bookstores need to see this technology not as a threat but as an ally for the Word of God," he added.

Juan Rojas, director of Caribe, and David Swindoll, editorial director for Vida, are convinced that the internet awakens a desire to acquire the book. Both see this channel, not as a threat, but as a medium

that will eventually generate greater distribution of Christian literature.

The disappearance of the book

Some predict the disappearance of books, but others are sure that books will stick around. "Nothing can come close to the pleasure of reading," said Juan Rojas, despite recognizing technological advances could have some impact in the long run. Technology has helped book publishing, he argues, because production costs have substantially decreased.

For Eliseo Vila, good Christian literature has a very important role to play. Vila believes that recent growth in the Christian population of Latin America has been fueled by emotion rather than intellectual concerns. This, though successful in the short run, in the long run requires publishers to provide materials that offer solid instruction, to substitute milk with meat. "In this sense, I think that Christian literature has a great future," he declared.

Nevertheless, sales in the Christian market have decreased or remained stationary in the last few years. Bookstore closures are not limited to new bookstores that fail due to lack of experience, but include businesses that have been around for over 20 years.

Will discount stores replace bookstores?

Swindoll notes there are countries, such as Mexico, where it is customary to borrow books. "This custom that has gained popularity in many places, due to economic crises, means that many Christians, especially new converts, don't even find out where the Christian bookstores are located."

On the other hand, studies show most Christians do not regularly visit Christian bookstores. This fact, added to the decrease or stagnation in sales through bookstores, has encouraged publishers to enter into the secular market through discount megastores, creating disaffection in many Christian bookstore owners.

The practice began in the United States, but has already extended to

Puerto Rico, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia. Vida, Unilit, Caribe, Betania and Holman have pioneered this strategy. In Colombia, CLARA has placed rotating display racks in secular stores, similar to

them cope with family, emotional and other problems," he added.

Not all publishers see salvation in the secular market. "Our experience in Broadman and Holman has not been as positive," declared Jim

Cook, manager of international sales. "I do not doubt that it can create new readers, and that it benefits us in terms of publicity. However, I do not think it goes beyond this," he said. Cook stated the purchase conditions imposed by megastores offer very few advantages. Even though they purchase very high volumes, he said, they demand return privileges for all unsold books. Thus an order for 150,000 books can mean, for the publisher, sales of 80,000 with 70,000 returns.

Jim Cook is

convinced that the market for Christian literature will increase. Despite this, the secular market is not the answer because they do not understand what they are selling. "We need more aggressive distributors with capital, and Christian bookstore owners who are willing to become more knowledgeable each day, so that they can meet the demand of this market."

Future of Christian bookstores

Discount stores will not supplant bookstores because both have different purposes. The Christian bookstore, because it is specialized,

can offer more alternatives to its clients. Christian bookstores of the new millennium must adapt to the needs of clients today.

People want to go to a place with easy access, where they can find publications to solve their problems and information to help them make buying decisions. Customers want excellent service, sufficient variety to motivate them to visit frequently, and reasonable prices. If bookstores meet these expectations they have nothing to fear.

Bookstores that survive in the new millennium will be those that adjust to meet the needs of their clients, who make Christian literature purchases a pleasant, desirable and profitable experience, and who work to establish a more personal relationship with the client.

There is no doubt the Spanish Christian literature market has grown, but not at the same pace as the Christian population at large. According to Vila, sales of Christian literature are ten times what they were 50 years ago, but the Christian population has multiplied more than 100 times. Publishers are only reaching 0.5 percent of this enormous market.

There is interest in Christian literature. The Latin-American Church continues to grow, and many want to know more about God and how to apply Christian teaching in daily life. Publishers are issuing a great variety of high quality, attractive books. The future of Christian literature is in the hands of distributors and bookstore owners. These need to combine their professional skills with a missionary vision, to be more effective in disseminating Christian books, and to take advantage of the fields ready to harvest.❖

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Obstacles

number of readers not growing at the same rate as the Church

artificial saturation

distribution channels not working

secular market does not understand product

insufficient authors

discount venues have restrictive purchase conditions

those of Choice Books in the United States. Christians are satisfied because they can obtain Christian literature in places they visit more often. Non-believers are exposed, for the first time, to books that were only accessible in Christian bookstores.

"Though traditional distribution channels are stagnant, we have seen considerable growth in non-traditional mass channels aimed at the general market," Swindoll said. He affirms sales in stores like Walmart, Target, and secular bookstore chains are increasing. "The unconverted look for literature to help