

# Growth & Opportunity.

## Evangelical Publishing in Spanish Today

*Ian Darke, coordinator of Letra Viva, a network for Spanish-language Christian publishers (www.letraviva.com), reviews the opportunities and challenges to increasing distribution of Spanish-language books in the United States, Latin America, and the rest of the globe.*

**C**riticas is a new magazine that helps English-speaking staff of bookstores and libraries understand the growing Spanish-language market in the United States. A recent issue led readers through the “Spanish-language book challenge:”

Today the U.S. is home to more than 31 million Hispanics from over 21 countries... Why, then, is it so difficult to get Spanish-language books into the United States? ... Most likely you can't find the books you need through your traditional jobbers, you don't have the bilingual staff to effectively communicate with international publishers, and you aren't familiar with ordering processes in other countries. (*Criticas* Spring 2001, pp. 9, 10)

The article explains that international publishers in Spanish—based principally in Spain, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina—do not mail catalogs to U.S. libraries due to the high costs, and that in the United States there are no large jobbers that carry hundreds of thousands of Spanish-language titles. In other words, buying Spanish-language

books in the U.S. is a challenge—except for those buying from one special category of publishers.

For historical reasons as much as extraordinary foresight, a substantial group of evangelical Christian Spanish-language publishers were based in the United States long before the vertiginous growth of the Hispanic population in that country. Therefore, those companies have been excellently placed to grow rapidly in sales to this new Hispanic community in the U.S., due in part to the development of distribution systems parallel to Christian Bookseller Association (CBA) channels.

### *Statistics that talk*

According to *Publishers Weekly*, the Spanish book publishing industry in Latin America today is worth approximately U.S.\$8 billion and is growing, despite the ups and downs of the economic situation. Fred Perkins, president of Pearson Education in the Spanish-speaking world, comments:

I think the potential for growth in Latin America continues to be enormous, both in educational and in trade publishing. But

change tends to occur gradually. We tend to forget or ignore that the average per capita income in Latin America continues to hover around U.S.\$4000, which is where it was when I started in the business 40 years ago. We must all be patient, hang in there for the long haul, and not expect miracles. As those non-book buyers get better educated, and earn more, the market will definitely expand. (*Publishers Weekly*, 18 Sept 2000, pp. 54-60)

Naturally, Spain continues to be one of the great publishing countries of the world, and a major exporter as well as importer. Throughout other parts of Europe, and also as far afield as Australia and Japan, the Latin American diaspora, created out of economic migration, is another important market for Spanish-language books.

Within the U.S., apart from the dramatic increase in the size of the Hispanic community to 30 million people, over 650,000 college and university students are enrolled in Spanish-language courses, and approximately half of the 20,000 public and academic libraries have



**The market for Spanish books in Latin America is 23 times larger than that in the United States**



The above graphs illustrate the great potential that exists for sales of Christian books in Latin America (U.S.\$450 million, up from the current figure of \$24.6 million), if these had a measure of sales success in Latin America in proportion to what they currently have in the U.S. market.

Spanish-language collections. Demand for books in Spanish is healthy everywhere, it seems.

According to Werner Mark Linz, religious publishing in the United States accounts for five to ten percent of the book market (*Logos*, 7/1, 1996). In recent years the American public has spent approximately two billion dollars on religious books (6.6 percent of the 30-billion-dollar market).

The general Spanish-language book market in the United States is valued at \$368 million (*Publishers Weekly*, 18 Sept 2000, pp 47-52). If the U.S. Hispanic market buys Protestant Christian and evangelical books at a similar level to the English-language market, then sales would be expected to be about 6.6 percent of \$350 million, which is \$23.1 million. In fact, this matches very well with the 2001 figures published by the Spanish Evangelical Publishers Association (SEPA), which show that combined evangelical book and Bibles sales in the United States are \$24.4 million. In other words, Spanish-language

evangelical publishers in the U.S. are at least as successful as their English-language counterparts.

At an international level, though, the sales of evangelical books and Bibles in Spanish are quite low. Ignoring for a moment sales in Spain and in the *diaspora* markets, the size of the Latin American market alone would suggest evangelical book and Bible sales around \$450 million. In fact, SEPA indicates that international sales, including both Latin America and Spain, are barely \$24.6 million.

Reasons volunteered for the difference between the volume of evangelical Christian sales in the United States and Latin America are legion. It is important to note that the SEPA figures do not include all Spanish-language publishers, as many Latin American groups are not linked with SEPA, or do not report their sales figures.

Another factor will certainly be the high level of affiliation to Protestant churches found amongst Hispanics in the U.S. According to the 2000 PROLADES survey, nearly

25 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. call themselves Protestants or evangelicals, compared to 10 percent within Latin America. On the other hand, the Catholic and non-Catholic markets are not sharply divided. Many Catholic clergy and laity purchase books by Protestant authors, while many evangelicals purchase commentaries from Catholic publishers—and so one would still expect higher sales within the very religious context of Latin America.

The growth of the evangelical Hispanic church in the U.S. is one factor, though there has been growth in the churches in Latin America as well. Within the U.S., the ready accessibility of books through church book tables, Spanish-language stores, direct mail order services and other points of sale is a distinctive feature of the Spanish Christian book scene.

Many would argue that one key point is the nature of the product. A very high percentage of Christian books in Spanish are still translations. One theory is that Hispanics

in the U.S. are drawn to authors who they see as being successful in the *anglo* scene, particularly if those writers tackle issues that they too perceive as important. Meanwhile, those *anglo* authors may be unknown or of limited appeal in Latin America.

Further, as Mike Berg and Paul Pretiz note in *Spontaneous Combustion: Grass Roots Christianity, Latin America Style* (William Carey Library, 1996):

There is a great need for regional publishing houses—Christian literature written and published by Latin Americans. The great bulk of Christian books (most of them straight translations), videos and films are financed, produced and distributed by publishing houses based in the United States or controlled by foreign sources. As in the case of theological development, now Christian literature must come from the mind and soul of Latin Americans.

Whatever the reasons, and without entering into polemics, there are certain conclusions that can be drawn from the state of Spanish-language evangelical publishing today.

### *Challenges, opportunities, and suggestions*

*No one* is being really successful selling evangelical Christian books in Latin America today. Though some of the larger Protestant and evangelical publishers based in the United States are selling what appears to be a reasonable volume, it is small compared with the size of the markets in Latin America. Some blame the unstable economies in Latin America, but general book sales do prosper in Latin America. The potential for Christian books in Latin American countries continues to be enormous.

Hundreds of thousands of pastors and church leaders around the continent have few study resources, masses of folk are looking for a relevant application of the Bible to

their needs, and at the same time the wider society is open to issues of “spirituality” and is interested in what Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, have to say. A major challenge is appropriate marketing and book development. Another key challenge is distribution.

*No one* in the industry is successfully tackling distribution. There are exciting new evangelical publishing ventures around the continent, ministries producing excellent titles with new authors, who speak with a fresh Latin American voice and profound biblical content. However, neither these groups, nor U.S.-based publishers, have achieved the penetration level enjoyed by general publishers of comics, New Age or self-help books.

In Latin America books for general markets are being retailed through many new and traditional channels: on buses, at street stalls, in rural markets, through city supermarkets, in new coffee-shop bookstores, and as supplements to newspapers.

Some lay part of the blame for poor sales of evangelical books at the feet of mission agencies, which used to give books away, and so perhaps engendered a distrust of entrepreneurs. Whatever the case, the dynamic distribution of good Christian books in Latin America must be a key priority today for those same mission boards: superficiality in many sectors of the church leads some to think the evangelical church may implode unless something is done to challenge pastors and leaders to give biblical truth priority.

Many missions and service agencies do recognize the needs of Latin America have changed. With the evangelistic fervor in the continent, it is not strategic to send missionaries to plant churches. However, the Latin American church still calls for missionaries to work alongside national leaders, particularly to consolidate growth. Christian publishers throughout Latin America would welcome missionaries with experience in literature distribution, marketing, sales, and the use of new

technologies. Though this sort of partnership may seem unusual, such work can have far more impact in the healthy growth of the church than other more traditional “mission” tasks.

### *Developing distribution*

According to a survey by *Publishers Weekly* the market for Spanish language Christian books in the United States is not only large, but will continue to grow. The same article notes that the nature of the market will change, as Spanglish matures, and second-generation Hispanics continue to speak Spanish, but read it with more difficulty. At one end of the market, Hispanic pastors in the U.S. will increasingly be bilingual, thus less interested in buying translations of commentaries when English editions are available sooner and cheaper. At the same time, demand for Spanish books from “back home” in Latin America will likely increase.

Spanish titles are in increasing demand in English-language evangelical Christian bookstores throughout the U.S., as well as through libraries, colleges, mail-order and Web sales. *Criticas* reported the lack of jobbers carrying a wide range of Spanish-language titles in the general market. For Protestant and evangelical titles, the U.S. market has three principal distributors: Pan de Vida, Riverside, and Producciones Peniel. Moreover, the largest jobber for the CBA English-language market, Spring Arbor, last year began to distribute Spanish House’s titles and has continued to expand its offerings to the Spanish Christian market. At the moment, the number of titles they carry from publishers based within Latin America is low.

Publishers in Latin America have been frequently chided for failing to respond to the U.S. situation, but surely they have a big enough challenge in the continent they know best, rather than venture upon the very different and perplexing world of the United States. Instead of diverting their scarce resources to the North American scene, there is

a need and an opportunity for a bridge to be created, bringing Latin American books to the North.

Although Latin American communities in the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and Japan may be smaller than in the United States, they are together a powerful if semi-hidden force. Their Spanish-speaking congregations attract newly arrived, sometimes illegal immigrants, and are vigorous in evangelism, often attracting other cultural groups. Even in Spain, Latin American evangelicals want to obtain the Christian literature they are used to. Bookstores to serve such immigrants exist in Germany, yet supply is a major problem.

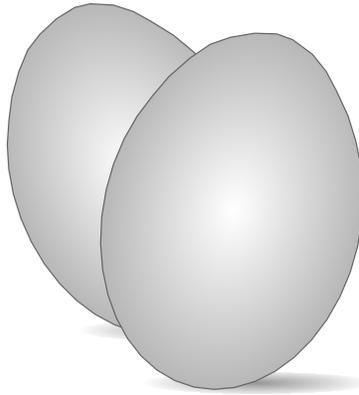
Within Latin America the networks of Protestant bookstores, many of which were established by missions, are insufficient to reach expanding populations. Many evangelicals prefer to visit Catholic bookstores, where there is often a better and more serious range of material. Despite this, some Catholic stores are reluctant to stock books from Protestant and evangelical publishers.

For some Protestant publishers in Latin America, general bookstores represent a major part of their sales. Others face a chicken-and-egg situation: to obtain sales through general bookstores they can either make direct contact, or use a distributor. Developing direct publisher-retailer contacts, in countries where face-to-face business dealings are important, can be incredibly time consuming, thus expensive. On the other hand, while working with distributors saves valuable time, they require high discounts, only justifiable when sales are high. For publishers with small-to-medium print runs, this can be a high risk. In either case, stock control, when a large proportion of the inventory is out on a "sale or return" basis, is quite complex—particularly when the "return" only happens if the publisher goes to the store to collect unwanted stock.

Some of the grass-roots methods of book distribution and sales in

Latin America work because the products are pirated. Finding ways to sell on the streets, buses and trains, while at the same time producing the books ethically and legally, as well as paying taxes due to the state, is a major challenge for many publishers today, both Catholic and Protestant.

Latin America is the fastest-growing internet market in the developing world. An estimated 13 to 16 million people (3 to 4 percent of the population) are now online, and that number is doubling each year (*Global Future*, 2001/1). The



## ***Some publishers are facing a chicken-and-egg situation...***

internet sales of books and other commodities in Latin America are limited, however, due to unreliable and expensive postal services, as well as limited access to banking. Persons with a bank account do not all have credit cards, and fear of using bank account numbers over the Web is widespread. Disposable credit cards are now available over the counter through banks in Peru. Like phone cards, these permit even persons with no bank accounts to make internet purchases. The guarantees offered by Amazon.com to its consumers from Latin American countries help create growing confidence in e-commerce.

Other developments are the use of instant digital print technology,

to reduce the delays and costs of shipping between countries. Several groups are developing CD-ROM publications of reference books, as well as a basic bookshelf on CD-ROM for Bible colleges and theological students.

Increasingly Christian publishers and distributors are participating in book fairs organized by national book chambers. A growing number of Christian book chambers are organizing their own activities. For example, an event held recently in a modern covered shopping mall in Costa Rica was far more successful than previous book fairs held in church-related venues.

One characteristic of Latin American evangelicalism is the high number of independently-published books, produced by zealous ministries, fearful of losing control. Many excellent materials are impossible to obtain outside of a narrow circle of influence. Publishers are developing strategic alliances with such ministries. Further alliances are being developed between publishers in different countries, to expand distribution.

The Shining Path terrorist leader, Abimael Guzmán, captured in 1992, always used to be portrayed with a book in his hand. Today, Latin America is open to a new sort of revolution, brought through knowledge of Christ. Books are playing an essential role in the introduction and the consolidation of that revolution. Better distribution channels for Christian books, essential to fulfill that mission, is both necessary and achievable. ❖