

Meditations FOR THE WORLD

Carmen M. Gaud, editor of The Upper Room edition in Spanish (El Aposento Alto), provides insights into the process of contextualizing devotional materials for an international readership.

When a group of women asked The Methodist Church in 1935 to develop a resource to help families in their devotions, they were not aware that this request would be the beginning of an international ministry: *The Upper Room*. This organization is dedicated to the creation of a variety of resources for the spiritual life. Its magazine, *The Upper Room*, has 70 editions published in 45 languages. Its books have been translated into many languages: Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and many others. Its programs (*An Adventure in Healing and Wholeness*, *Walk to Emmaus*) are transforming the lives of thousands of people.

The magazine filled a deep need at the time it began. The principles upon which it was based have since made it adaptable to many circumstances in different countries. It is amazing to see how a magazine developed in the United States has had success in many places around the world.

Editorial focus

The most important principle in the preparation of *The Upper Room* magazine is the question: What is God doing in individual lives and in the world today? Every meditation is an expression that God is at

work. Even when God's presence and power take different shapes in different places and in each human life, readers can personally identify with the stories as they read the testimonies printed in the magazine. This is the key to the power of this magazine.

International scope

Another important part of the preparation of the magazine is the use of meditations from different parts of the world. At the beginning of the magazine, church leaders planned to do a resource for the United States, but almost immediately they received requests to translate it into other languages. That began the practice of making covenants with groups in other countries to translate, edit, and distribute the magazine. Usually, *The Upper Room* receives a request from the leaders of a Christian organization in a particular country asking for permission to have an edition of the magazine prepared in one of their local languages. After some negotiation and final agreement, the local group establishes a team responsible for the production and distribution of the magazine. Part of their responsibility is to encourage Christians in their country to write about their experiences of God's presence in their lives and to send

the meditations to the United States office. *The Upper Room* receives submissions from people in all walks of life around the globe. Those are incorporated, after a process of selection and editing, into a collection of meditations that are sent to each of the international editors.

As an organization, *The Upper Room* believes that all human beings have the resources that can help them communicate the most important issues in their lives. Average people (not professional writers or theologians) write the magazine, using Scripture to explain their experiences of God. Consequently, the office receives meditations reflecting a variety of cultural practices and understandings.

One interesting meditation was from a pastor in Chile. He told how he took consecrated communion elements to the home of one of his members since the family was unable to attend church. When he arrived, the pastor received miner's bread and *mate* tea as an expression of the family's hospitality. *Mate* tea is very special because it is often taken as a group drink. It is put in a round cup with a straw and passed from hand to hand among family members and friends. Each takes a sip and gives the cup to someone else in the group. It is a popular ritual, not a

religious one, but the practice represents communion and solidarity. The coarse miner's bread was a symbol of the man's work, given to others in love. The pastor realized that, in these simple gifts, this man offered him the common man's communion. The pastor felt that real communion is based on love and in offering the best to our guests, just as Jesus did when he gave himself in love.

This cultural experience served to illuminate a common Christian practice. The meditation invites readers to consider the real meaning of communion. Although Christians are generally attached to the elements used in their particular churches, this meditation helps readers see that the elements used for communion are not as important as the love and the service Christians have for each other. They are also challenged to see new meaning in Jesus' sacrifice.

Editorial process

Every two months, a group of editors and members of *The Upper Room* staff get together to read and evaluate some of the meditations received. Some of the questions they keep in mind are: Is the meditation related to every day life? Will ordinary readers identify with the experience? Are the Scripture verses properly interpreted? Are they relevant to the topic? Are the concepts within the accepted practices and doctrines of the Christian church? Is the meditation offensive to any group or culture?

The process of selection includes a very lively biblical and theological discussion. *The Upper Room* wants to make sure that the ideas communicated in the magazine represent solid doctrines of the Christian faith.

Sometimes it is necessary to explain a word or a practice because they are not widely known. The practice of drinking *mate* tea, for example, is typical of certain countries in South America, so Spanish-speaking persons from other countries may not understand the story without some



explanation. This does not mean one can only mention things that everybody knows. But to make devotions readable for most people, editors must make sure everyone can understand the practices mentioned and the words used.

The Spanish-language version of *The Upper Room*, *El Aposento Alto*, is distributed in almost every Spanish-speaking country in the world. As is true of any internationally-used language, there are regional words and expressions that are not always understood in all of the countries where that language is spoken. Through the centuries, the Spanish language has incorporated Native American and African words and expressions. Editors must use commonly understood terms and explain regional words and idioms. Clarity of expression and the use of words appropriate to the audience are essential in order to reach the most people.

In the development of a devotional magazine like *The Upper Room*, editors must remember its evangelistic potential. *The Upper Room* magazine is used not only by Christians in different denominations, but also by people who are not connected to any church, so the language must be clear to any-

one. Some terms and concepts, such as "justification by faith," are clear to church members but are strange to people who have never entered a church building. The editors must find expressions that make the message clear to the widest possible audience.

Ministry impact

In May 2000, *The Upper Room* led a writers' workshop in Mexico City for people who wanted to write meditations. Only a few of the 25 persons who attended the workshop had any previous experience in writing for publication. Ways to write devotionals were presented and then the participants were invited to begin thinking about specific experiences in which they felt that God was touching their lives. Each one analyzed and meditated on his or her chosen experience. They began to write using the Bible to interpret their own experiences. Later, they adjusted the devotionals they wrote to the specifications required by *The Upper Room*. They worked in pairs and then in small groups to receive feedback about their work. Finally, they read their meditations aloud. Some of them cried. One of them summarized the experience by saying, "I never thought that I would be able to write."

As this group of new writers sees their contributions published in *The Upper Room*, they express the same joy as others who read the magazine. They all reflect the excitement of the disciples once they realized the risen Lord was among them: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Lk. 24:32) ♦