

God Does All Things Well

Veruzka Farfán de Polanco (monapipo@mixmail.com), of El Sembrador in Arequipa, Peru, shares the lessons for publishers she learned from her experience in book sales.

Facing the imminent closure of Siembra (Spanish for “sowing”), the small publishing house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Peru, members of the editorial department decided they wanted to continue in literature ministry.

“In the 15 years that I have worked with books,” says Veruzka Farfán de Polanco, “I have seen how very important they can be in people’s lives. I believe in the power of the printed word. At Siembra, I saw the books that I helped produce change readers. Our goal was to motivate members of the Church to read, and I felt that the Lord wanted me to continue in this work.”

Siembra shut down its operations in July 2004, but Farfán, along with other team members, had begun work to start an independent company the year before.

A new venture

The team decided to open a Christian bookstore in Arequipa, hoping to show and

sell Siembra’s resources as well as the work of other publishers. They sought more direct contact with readers. They rented a spacious commercial property downtown, decorated it, stocked the shelves, and got ready for the inauguration.

“We began our great project of a brand new Christian bookstore,” says Farfán, “with plenty of books and Bibles and many illusions and hopes.”

But, after just a few months, the team closed the bookstore to focus on publishing instead.

“We can say that being a bookseller is very difficult, demanding a lot of sacrifice,” affirms Farfán. The team identified four principal factors that make bookselling a tough task.

■ **Lack of selection.** Clients demand many titles; they want variety. However, acquiring these titles and maintaining a well-stocked store is not easy. Distributors do not offer a good selection themselves, and there are

mission is to bring good African literature to the rest of the world, as we believe that Africa has a valid comment to add to the world. Our books are as good as any the rest of the world might produce.”

After setting up shop in England in 2003, Brice traveled to the United States the following year, hoping to expand Cana’s international distribution network.

“There I was in the U.S.,” says Brice, “with my box of samples, looking for someone to become a distributor of books written, published, and printed in Africa.”

Brice’s efforts met with no success. “I was advised to try Afro-American distributors,” he says. “The inference was that only people of African descent might be interested in books produced in Africa.

business,” he adds. “Had I wasted my time and money coming to the U.S.?”

Demoralized, downhearted, and feeling “quite worthless,” Brice was referred to a friend who had “absolutely nothing to do with publishing or books.” That friend introduced Brice to a new publisher.

“It was a wild card,” says Brice, “but then, God can use them. As we sat and talked, their mission so fit with mine that we soon recognized this was a divine appointment.

“Three days later, I left with arrangements in hand for them to work with us as an import agent. Their distributors would represent our products. I left the U.S. happy that the trip had been a complete success.

“As I sat on the flight home,” says Brice, “I remembered the Scripture where we

“Our books are as good as any the rest of the world might produce. Africa has a valid contribution to make.”

“I felt discouraged and hurt,” he adds, “but still gratefully accepted the contacts I was given.”

But, after spending many “hours and dollars on the phone, trying to contact these people,” Brice found “they did not seem to think that Africa could offer anything worthwhile. I wondered if I was in the right

are encouraged to count the cost of a project before embarking on it. Sometimes we have to count the cost as best we can and then step out in faith. No amount of thinking out of the box or other strategies could possibly help. If you are different but convinced that what you are doing is of God, then all you can do is ‘Just do it!’” ♦

As publishers we must work harder to publicize our authors.

many delays in book shipments to Arequipa.

■ **High costs.** “Typically, we would receive a 25 percent discount off the retail price. Our customers asked for discounts also, and we offered them savings of anywhere from five to 15 percent off the retail price,” says Farfán. This meant the bookstore had only a 10 percent profit margin to cover high operating expenses.

“In the end,” she adds, “booksellers receive no compensation for their work—they are only left the satisfaction of having served their

brothers and sisters in Christ.”

■ **Small evangelical market with low spending power.**

Arequipa has approximately a million inhabitants, but only 0.6 percent are evangelical Christians.

“Surprisingly, our bookstore’s clients were not this evangelical public, but Catholics and non-Christians who were mainly interested in Bibles,” says Farfán. “We had many opportunities to share the good news of the Gospel.”

■ **Competition.** “When each church has its own book-

store,” says Farfán, “this is very good and edifying for the congregation. But, for non-denominational bookstores downtown, this is a disadvantage.

“Our work as publishers was so different” from the realities of bookselling, said Farfán. “We decided to close the bookstore in December 2004 and would return to publishing, since we had experience in that field.”

Lessons learned

From the very start, the team dreamed of more than bookselling. Their mission stated, “We want to publish, produce and distribute Christian literature for evangelical churches in Arequipa in order to support them in the execution of the Great Commission.” So Farfán and her coworkers had also planned to create a new publishing house, known as El Sembrador (The Sower).

The first products to be published by El Sembrador are an almanac and a daily agenda for 2005. By the first week of October, the team had sold 2,000 copies of the almanac, and looked expectantly toward the future.

“Our contact with many different denominations gave us ideas on how to improve Christian products and meet customer needs,” says Farfán. “For example, we see a great need for a book of prayers for children.”

“Our experience also taught us to offer higher discounts to booksellers,” she adds. El Sembrador wants to provide greater sales support to customers.

At the bookstore “we experienced what our brothers and sisters in the industry also experience,” says Farfán. Customers sought bestsellers and the books of foreign authors, showing little interest in books by local authors and publishing houses.

“As publishers we must work harder to publicize our authors,” affirms Farfán, “sending a synopsis of our books to the booksellers so they learn more about our books. We cannot depend on just the back cover and the table of contents.”

El Sembrador is just starting out, but its staff is optimistic about the future. “God knows how to do all things well,” concludes Farfán, “and now we have a better idea of what our products should be, what the public wants, and what Christian distributors and bookstores expect. We will see what God has in store for this ministry.” ♦

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6301 Central Ave. N.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55438 U.S.A.
Phone: 763-574-9983
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