

Unless It Dies

Certeza Argentina director Beatriz Buono and general manager Daniel Rodríguez, together with Silvia Chaves, hope that the story of the crises faced by Certeza (www.certezajoven.com.ar) will encourage other publishers facing difficult situations.

Who among us enjoys closing bookstores and letting staff members go?

In Certeza's history, we have faced these situations.

1980

Certeza CIEE (Comunidad Internacional de Estudiantes Evangélicos, which means International Community of Evangelical Students) went bankrupt. A publishing house that had served Latin America came to an abrupt end.

In our post-mortem analysis, we discovered two main problems: insufficient national and international distribution, and a lack of public awareness. The same thing happened with many other publishing houses, especially those affected by the military dictatorship and economic instability.

We decided to reopen Certeza. This time it would have a different relationship to the ministry of the Asociación Bíblica Universitaria de Argentina (ABUA), the University Bible Association, the Argentinean affiliate of CIEE. Our goal was to serve Argentineans with literature written principally by Argentineans and Latin Americans.

Prior to restarting the publishing department, we spent several years pursuing excellence in national sales and distribution and in getting to know our market.

Our start-up capital consisted of a few books we inherited from the previous company and Bible study guides developed by student leaders to disciple

those they evangelized among their peers. We also were able to collect on debts some clients owed Certeza CIEE.

Thanks to God and to the strategic leadership of our first director, John Harrower, together with editor Sheila Dale and Beatriz Buono in sales, we grew until we opened eight bookstores, a national distribution center, and Certeza ABUA publishing house, now known as Certeza Argentina.

Out of the ashes of bankruptcy, something very good was born: an organization that became exceptionally strong in distribution, and sensitive to identifying and understanding the public it serves.

1990

That year we sold, on credit, a quantity of books equivalent to the cost of a ten-story building. When we collected the revenue from those sales, we could only buy a one-room flat. All of this resulted from that phenomenon known as hyperinflation.

The consequence was a strong reduction in operating capital that could have led to the death of the ministry. To prevent this, we decided just in time to concentrate the little inventory we had left in one place to reduce our costs, and to put up a good fight. We had to close six of our bookstores.

On the personal front, this meant many nights without sleep due to our sorrow for having to let go of faithful employees who had grown very dear to us. Convinced it was necessary, we put the plan into practice. We honored those employees we had to let go with



"We truly desire that those who are sowing with tears will reap with joy," says Buono.

severance pay and meeting all obligations due to "Caesar."

Our motto was: "Regroup and resist," and we did! Once again we began to grow, brick upon brick and book by book. We are grateful for the advice of international consultants and for the training we received at Cook's International Christian Publishing Institutes: Adrián Intrieri received training on marketing, Daniel Rodríguez on finances, and Beatriz Buono on strategic leadership.

We developed a five-year strategic plan to consolidate and grow our national distribution, to focus our publishing on youth, pastors, and Bible study, and to progressively open up international markets. It was only in 1998 that we expanded our vision to serve all Spanish-speaking countries.

We reaffirmed our vision to network with other publishers and strongly sup-

ported the formation of Letra Viva, an association of Christian publishers in Latin America coordinated by Ian Darke, and its creation of a shipping office in Miami.

Together with other CIEE publishing houses—Andamio in Spain and Lámpara in Bolivia—we restarted Certeza Unida (previously Certeza CIEE) under Ruth Padilla's leadership. Certeza Unida handles projects, such as a new Bible dictionary, that due to their size and complexity, are too big to take on alone.

From the loss of dedicated and equipped people (whom we are trying to recover), the loss of capital, and the closure of bookstores, something very good emerged: We became strong in crisis management and more open to advice. We encouraged the formation of networks and strategic alliances to shore up our weak areas.

2001

We discerned a strong change was coming to our country and wondered whether we should dive in the water with the great projects we were planning, or stay in the boat. God gave us a specific verse at that time: "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." (Matt. 14:28).

Facing storms and strong crosswinds, we decided it was not a time to come to a halt for fear of drowning, nor to press on stubbornly, but a time to walk on water with our eyes fixed on our Lord. We prayed as never before. We

our currency. From a ratio of 1:1, it fell to four pesos to a dollar.

Though our total debt amounted to only about a third of the value of our inventory, dealing with the currency devaluation on the sales side proved to be very difficult. How can one sell books at a price four times more expensive than before, in a country where salaries remain the same, or are even lower?

Certeza's ministry consisted of our publishing unit, our bookstores, and a nearly bankrupt distributorship of imported books. The star that had sustained 70 percent of our organization was in crisis as a result of the instability of our national currency and a lack of supplies. At the most critical time, we renegotiated our debts with suppliers, who demonstrated great generosity in sacrificing their profits so that we could sell books at half their actual value.

In Certeza we turned the steering wheel 180° and in a short time our publishing unit (at last!) began to occupy the place it already had in our prophetic vision and mission. The opportunity to sell our products abroad powered our internal systems with dollars, and the proportion of income we received from our publishing climbed from 4 percent to 30 percent. As in-country cash sales also increased, we were able to pay off our debts and avoid staff reductions. We were even able to add new employees in different areas, and we recycled others, such as the manager of the bookstore in Southwest Buenos Aires, who became our marketing manager.

We opened new sales points in our city. We rented a warehouse and expanded our offices buying the adjacent flat, which we already shared with ABUA, the University Bible Association in Argentina. We also executed our long-desired plan to implement a new, more flexible fulfillment system for better customer service.

No magic formulas

It seems a bit crazy, perhaps, but it is the truth: There are no magic formulas to get through a crisis. At times the strategies we implemented included hunkering down to survive; at other times, transforming and expanding. Strategy and planning are important in making decisions, but far more important is remaining aware of, and sensitive to, the presence of the God of Jesus Christ in our own contexts.

"Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed." (Prov. 16:3)

Words like "bankruptcy," "layoffs," and "bookstore closures" connote death. But, we must be willing to change, to let go, to allow some things to die... so others can be born. (See John 12:24.)

As we conclude this article we hear, with joy, that Clara is sending the workbook for one of our bestselling titles, *Viene David (Here Comes David)* to the editor; that Adrián via chat is sharing news of the training he imparted to booksellers in Chile; that Pablo and Silvia gladly received the latest edition of our newspaper, *ConCerteza*; that Fabiana is singing as she issues invoices; that Miguel and his assistant, Walter, are drinking mate (a highly caffeinated herbal tea considered Argentina's national beverage) to celebrate that they just sent *Rebeldes con causa (Rebels With A Cause)* to press; part of our sales team is traveling to Córdoba to a youth event, and the remainder are attending clients in our showrooms, which are full during Holy Week.

There is life in Certeza. Glory be to God! ❖

Our motto was: "Regroup and resist," and we did!

surrounded ourselves with intercessors and pastors, fostering a culture of settling down to pray and await an answer from God.

Finally, at the end of 2001, after ten years during which the government kept the value of the Argentinean peso tied to the U.S. dollar, a political crisis in our country forced the devaluation of

During this time we proved how the hand of the Lord sustained us and gave us wisdom to work in a country with devalued currency, without banks, without credit, and with a high rate of unemployment. The ministry was able to grow as our different teams—publishing, distribution, and bookstores—worked together in harmony.