

**An appetite for Christian books;
Spanish-language Christian books sales reported strong, increasing**

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LAM News Service

Miami, (LAMNS)—The world of Spanish language Christian books is expanding not only in the numbers of titles published, but also in the number of distribution outlets.

“Our sales are increasing wherever there is a density of Hispanics,” said Alfonso Triviño, Director of Sales for Editorial CLIE, a Christian book-publishing company based in Spain. “Our major areas of concentration in the United States are from Miami to North Carolina and Texas to California.”

Triviño was making contacts with distributors and bookstore owners at the recent Expolit book exposition held in Miami May 16-20. Expolit is an annual event showcasing Spanish Christian books and music that draws participants from the entire Spanish-speaking world.

“Some of our Lifeway stores are starting to have a section of Spanish books,” said Tim Shupp of the Southern Baptist Casa Bautista de Publicaciones (Baptist Spanish Publishing House) in El Paso, Texas.

“Many bookstore owners are hesitant to carry Spanish materials,” explained Eleazar Peña, Director of Domestic Sales and Services for Casa Bautista. “We offer them a starter kit of the best publications in Spanish to carry in their stores.”

Peña said that while many store owners say they don’t have many Spanish-speaking customers, they would if they carried more Spanish speaking materials. “These managers know how to sell Bibles and they should be able to sell Spanish Bibles and books as well,” Peña said.

“Most bookstore owners want to minister to their community and to reach the people,” Peña added. “Some of them are willing to take the risk.”

“We are working to get bookstore owners to begin to note the Spanish-speaking people in their community,” said Larry Downs, Jr., the newly appointed President of Editorial Unilit, a Miami-based publisher of Spanish Christian books.

“We have teamed up with other distributors to provide Bibles, music and books to the average U.S. English-language mom and pop bookstore,” Downs explained. “We are providing them with a merchandising kit including letters to pastors, newspaper, radio and television advertisements and other promotional material.”

Downs said that many mid-America cities may not yet be able to support a Spanish-language bookstore, but, he said, he thinks that within five years many of them could.

The cooperative effort by Unilit and other publishers will be formally launched at the Christian Booksellers Association convention in Orlando in July.

Publishers and distributors at Expolit agreed that the market for books in Latin America has been affected by economic and political turmoil, especially in Venezuela, Colombia and Argentina.

However, that turmoil can often spark a demand for books. "There is a real appetite because of the economic problems in my country," said Rev. Luis Pardo, the Colombian Director of the International Bible Society. "But, people have priorities other than books when they buy, such as purchasing food and clothing."

Pardo said that his office is raising funds to donate Bibles to people requesting them throughout Colombia.

In other countries, book sales are strong. Shupp said that his organization's largest market is Mexico.

"While Central America is our most stable market, the United States is our biggest market and our growth market," he said.

"We have discovered that the reality is different in Latin American bookstores than in those in North America," Downs said. "This is especially true in the level of training and the size of Latin bookstores."

Downs said that his company is working to train Latin American bookstore owners by encouraging them to expand their stores and offer a wider variety of products.

"The average Christian bookstore in Latin America is selling between \$15,000 and \$18,000 dollars worth of books a year, compared to the stores in the United States that are averaging several hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales every year," Downs reported.

Downs said that as the evangelical churches in Latin America reach more of the middle class, his company is able to find people who have the resources to invest in a larger-sized store.

"These people are stepping in because it is a good business and has an eternal impact," Downs said.

Book sales in both North America and Latin America are expected to increase in the coming years. "We will see an increase in U.S. sales as the awareness of the growing Latin population increases," Downs predicted. "In Latin America, we are seeing a rebound from difficult economic and political times. The industry there has been through a lot, but it is looking good."

Several book publishers and distributors said that their audience reads and buys different products than do their English-speaking counterparts.

“Our readers like issue related books dealing with themes that speak to the real world in Latin America, such as family issues,” said Ian Darke, Executive Director of Letra Viva, a Costa-Rican based umbrella organization that helps to coordinate the work of 37 Latin American Christian publishers.

“We have just published a translation of *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* by Carolyn Holderread Heggen because abuse is such a serious problem in our country,” said Henry Gongora, Director of Clara Ediciones, a Bogotá, Colombia-based publishing house. “We have a lot of pastors who are asking for this book.”

Pastors are also seeking commentaries and Bible study material according to Arturo Baspiniro of the Buenos Aires-based Kairos Ediciones, a publisher of academic books for pastors and educators. “We publish Bible studies and commentaries as well as books about missions, the economy and the social responsibility of the church.”

To meet the needs of pastors and teachers, Argentina’s Certeza publishing house launched its revised 1,400 page *Nuevo Diccionario Biblico Certeza* (Certeza New Biblical Dictionary) at this year’s Expolit.

While publishers and distributors hold different views about how much Latin Americans like to read much (Argentineans as well as Colombians and Mexicans are known to be voracious readers while citizens of other countries are seen as less inclined), most seem to agree that Latins have not yet climbed on the U.S. bandwagon of demanding Christian fiction.

“They do not read a lot of the trade books, but prefer to buy tapes and CDs,” Peña said.

When it comes to reading, Latin Americans prefer a higher level of literature, “not the airport novels or pop fiction,” Darke said. He pointed to high quality Latin writers such as Colombia’s Nobel Prize winning novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez as a model of the style of writing that Latins demand.

However, on the popular market, people do buy translations of well-known U.S. and European writers. “The British theologian John Stott crosses frontiers well,” explained Darke. “He has been to Latin America many times and there are not too many culturally specific translation problems with his work.”

However, Darke warns, “If an author sells well in English, it is not automatic that he will sell well in Spanish.”

Darke said that sales in Latin America always are better if the publisher provides the assistance and promotional support that they do in the U.S.

At the same time, Darke said that U.S. publishers are often slow to buy foreign rights for the translation and publication of Latin American books in North America.

Citing the writing of LAM missionary and popular Ecuadorian conference speaker Jorge Atencia, Darke said that his numerous books on biblical themes would do well in the United States and Canada if a North American company would only pick up the rights and publish the books.

Selling Spanish-language Christian books is not only a business for most bookstore owners, but it is also a ministry.

“Books are little missionaries, they can transform lives,” Darke said. “I have seen the transforming power of books in our book publishing industry.”

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