

Buy the book: Churches open their own stores to serve parishoners

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Bookstore operators form national gathering, train first-time managers and raise the level of professionalism.

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When Geni Hulseley came to Houston First Baptist to open a café for the 23,000-member, 160-year-old congregation, she'd had more experience with a café than a bookstore but says, "It didn't take long to realize that what God had really brought me there for was to do a bookstore."

The store began with four 6-foot tables up against the wall in the café, that soon expanded into using half of the café space to offer books the pastor authored and other best sellers. Before long the café was merged with the main kitchen, and she says the café and the books are just like a Barnes & Noble but "with a few walls that separate us."

People enjoy the food while browsing the books, she says.

Thirteen years later the store is a 2,000 square feet operation and has revenues of a half million dollars a year.

If that success sounds like the church is making a windfall on profits, that isn't always the case with church bookstores, even as more churches want to provide those services to seekers and believers, and as operators of stores in churches are growing in their professionalism, networking and contribution to ministry.

Hulseley says her operation is mostly break-even — "that's all the church has ever asked of us" — and most profits are turned back into improvements and expansions.

A few miles up the road in Plano, TX, Deb Graham says the same thing about her million-dollar operation at Prestonwood Baptist Church, a church of some 24,000 that has not one bookstore but three in that sprawling facility.

Profits feed improvements

"We have our own bank account and our own payroll separate from, but still under the supervision, of the church," says

Graham, who reports to the business administrator. Any profits are put back into improvements. "This year, we bought new computers and fixtures, and those are

our expenses." Graham began in the bookstore business when her husband, Preston-wood's pastor, and she were at First Baptist Church in West Palm Beach, FL. Churches from the medium to the mega-size are opening stores for the convenience of parishioners. As churches grow beyond 2,000 attendees, bookstores are a self-supporting department that goes well beyond the few items of the pastor's books and sermon CDs. The Prestonwood stores are open 40 hours, seven days a week. "We don't have a Christian bookstore within eight miles of us, and other bookstores don't carry the selection we have," Graham notes.

In the five Zipcodes that touch Houston First Baptist, an area of some 300,000 people with both residential and commercial sectors, there are no other Christian bookstores. "So I feel very well positioned and motivated by a mission from the Lord to minister to the community, because they have no one else to turn to," Hulseley says.

Integrity of operation stressed

Both operators speak of the integrity that must be a part of a church's store operation, especially when churches in the past were known to order inventory and sell it at heavily discounted rates, undercutting local retailers and getting a poor business reputation.

"We have the right to put items on sale, and to hold special events, but we also have the obligation to maintain our integrity as a retailer and not to discount everything that we handle," Hulseley says.

Says Graham: "There is a Costco down the street that may undersell me, but I have more product and I have knowledge of that product. The Big Box is our competition, it is not the other Christian store or the other bookstore in town. We have a large customer loyalty."

Prestonwood purchases all the church's curriculum and runs it through the finance office of the bookstore rather than the church. They also deal with ordering communion supplies and other things that support ministry programs.

POS software helps

Operating professionally is made easier for church stores with point-of-purchase software put out by Bookstore Manager, a business of owner Randy Voorhees who has some 1,500 customers today both in churches and with independent Christian retailers. Voorhees says "there are a lot of bookstore inventory management software on the market, but ours was written specifically for the Christian market."

More recently the company has expanded its video library line into a full loan library, "so that church libraries can use Bookstore Manager to manage their loan library. Now you can go to the counter and check out a video or buy a book." The

company is also adding a café feature to be introduced this spring that integrates into Bookstore Manager's POS software.

Before a church opens a bookstore the common wisdom is it should have 2,000 or more people coming into the church each weekend.

Appealing to the community is best done through mailings or catalogs, and both stores use the Munce catalog group in Florida. Prestonwood, like more churches today, finds that city zoning laws are very restrictive when it comes to roadside signage.

Bringing out Max Lucado

And then there are special events and book signings by authors. Prestonwood in recent months had Max Lucado and Gov. Mike Huckabee signing books they authored, with news stories the next day in the Dallas Morning News. They average some five signings a month.

C.C. Wyans sang at services, and her CDs were available in the stores for sale. Coming up is the Big Secret Keepers women's conference that will have name speakers and artists — and related items to buy. "Our church membership is that of a small town so when you are here you've got everything," says Graham. "A place to eat, a place to buy books, we're a campus."

First Baptist has a gift line and greeting cards too. "Church goers are the strongest card senders I know," says Hulsey, "and that's a strong department for us."

"Our members find it so wonderful to be able to run in the store, buy a last minute gift to take with them to the hospital. They are able to trust the gifts that we carry, to know that the children's gifts, regardless of what they pick, are going to be safe for the children they buy for," Hulsey says.

Prestonwood's Graham says that the church's bookstore "affords the congregation an assurance in buying trusted products that we feel will help benefit their spiritual lives." She depends on the pastoral staff to review some suggested purchases. And on all items, she notes that "we put things in our home that reflect our faith and honor the Lord, so it is a search for us all the time to find quality gifts."

Operators will gather

Geni Hulsey's church will host the second annual Gathering of Church Bookstores April 19-21, a networking organization that has been taking shape over the past couple years through the support of Strang Publishers. They expect 350 store operators, up from 100 a year ago, from 200 churches, representing 30 states, and 60 vendors. Hulsey is speaking at one of the many workshops in a session for first time operators and new stores.

Strang started a magazine, The Church Bookstore, and a Web site, www.thechurchbookstore.com. Hulsey found there were several small networks on a regional level helping each other, but sees the national network a larger resource for managers and the wider organization able to provide more services.

For the most part, Hulsey sees herself a part of the education program of the congregation and the bookstore plays a large part in that training and discipling ministry.

“A good part of my day is spent knowing what’s going on in the church so that I can complement the education and teaching program and have exactly what’s being taught that they will need. We support every other ministry in our church,” she says.

For larger churches, and for those growing larger every week, having a store is a convenience for parishioners who want to grow personally and share just the right gift with seekers and believers alike.

- Begin with a business plan. Consult others in Christian bookselling to help plan your space, choose vendors and equipment.
- Be aware of your state laws regarding nonprofits and retail sales. Some states require churches to restrict sales to their congregations.
- Your state’s tax laws may differ. Most states do not have a tax on Bibles but that could be changing.
- Understand the sales tax laws of your state. Be sure there are no restrictions on advertising to the general public.
- Act like a true retail outlet. Don’t try to discount everything.
- Refer customers to local Christian retailers. Encourage them to go to their neighborhood Christian retailer if they need the product immediately and there isn’t time to order.
- Make it your goal to strengthen Christian retail as a whole and not just within the church. This is a ministry in an environment where almost everyone is comfortable shopping.

— **Geni Hulsey**

One store, three branches

Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, TX, has such a sprawling campus that one store would not have been convenient to the 24,000 people who attend there regularly. They went to three stores, each with a different focus and product line:

Main Street Store. This store is located in what is called the main street of the church which holds a commons area and a Starbucks, and is Christian living oriented in its products: items for men and women, marriage, relationships and contemporary music. This store has a large children’s section, gift items, and is where most

of the people come in for the sports and fitness center and to eat. The wedding chapel is near by and the store is busy on Saturdays.

Kidz Store. Newly opened, this store features products for birth to 12 years of age. Product includes books, Bibles, games, music and clothing.

Atrium Store. This store is at the front of the facility near the worship center. It features materials from the broadcast ministry (PowerPoint) and inhouse DVDs and CD recordings are sold from here, along with autobiographies, classics, commentaries, apologetics, evangelism products, fiction, and Bible study materials. Products here are those related to theology and doctrine and Bibles are a large part of the inventory. Greeting card lines and gifts also are included in this store. A special section features music CDs by the Prestonwood choir and orchestra.

— **Deb Graham**