

Churches move into small businesses while serving community

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Traditional church functions include worship and teaching, Sunday schools and youth ministries, choirs and Vacation Bible Schools.

Some modern-day congregations are expanding to include ministries that involve an economic component while serving their community.

“Our ministry is to equip people with information,” said Kirk Andresen of Parkland, the Resource Ministries Director of Fort Lauderdale’s massive Calvary Chapel. “Our church’s book store is an extension of that through which we are able to get books into the hands of our members. They allow the people to read, study and answer questions.”

Calvary Chapel’s large bookstore is located adjacent to the church’s sanctuary where up to 17,000 people attend services each week.

“We are open seven days a week and obviously Sunday is our biggest day,” Andresen said. “If we want to serve, we must be open on Sunday. We get a lot of foot traffic that day.”

The church offers three services each Sunday, plus several on Wednesday and Saturday evenings.

Traditionally, Christian bookstores have been closed on Sunday, although the national chain of Family Christian Stores operated by Zondervan Publishers recently decided to open most of their mall-based stores on Sunday. Southern Baptist-operated Lifeway Stores recently decided not to follow the Family chain and will remain closed on Sunday.

Miami’s largest Spanish Christian Bookstore, Lucianos, has been open on Sunday for years to serve visiting church members and leaders who attend area church services and then stop by to pick up material before flying back home.

The Calvary Chapel store varies its hours to be open when the largest crowds will be at the congregation’s facility. While the store is open from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, it doesn’t open until noon on Wednesday and Saturday when there are evening services and closes as late as 10:30 on Wednesday to accommodate those attending.

The store’s biggest seller is the New King James Bible according to Andresen, though he said that California pastor Rick Warren’s popular *Purpose Drive Life* and any book in the *Left Behind* series also are selling well.

Andresen emphasized the bookstore’s purpose as ministry, not raising funds for the church. The store hires several paid employees, but also uses church volunteers to run cash registers and do other jobs.

Ministry is also the motivation behind the Mount Bethel Baptist Church bookstore on Sistrunk Boulevard according to Phyllis Wimbley of Fort Lauderdale, the store's manager.

"We are here to get the community involved in community things," Wimbley said. "Books help them to do that."

The church, which is located on 11th Avenue in Fort Lauderdale, purposely established their bookstore offsite so that it could reach the community with Christian literature. However, officials plan on opening a small branch at the church to serve those attending services. "Our church holds 1,200 people and it is full every Sunday," Wimbley reported.

The store carries Bibles and a full line of other literature, including Christian and some secular fiction," Wimbley said.

Both bookstores screen what they sell to insure that books and other material reflect the theological position of their sponsoring churches.

"We do not sell anything that is not a part of the vision of our church," Wimbley said.

Wimbley describes the church as having a "large vision." Programs include an outreach to pregnant women who carry the HIV virus, a ministry to first time offenders and their families, a foster care program to support church families who take in troubled children and an effort to train and help first-time home buyers obtain resources and financing.

"We put a lot of effort into the community," she explained.

Some churches have also developed other commercial enterprises for a variety of purposes.

Calvary Chapel operates a major cafeteria that serves full meals to people attending services or conferences or working at the church.

In turn, the Mount Bethel congregation has discussed opening a café-style restaurant as a form of ministry. "Many people go to a Happy Hour in a secular restaurant," she explained. "Our idea is that a café will give people a change to socialize and eat in an alternative Christian environment."

Both Calvary Chapel and Mount Bethel say that they did not begin their commercial enterprises to support the church, but to provide ministry.

"Our church members support our church through their offerings," Wimbley said. "Most of our income is fed back into the bookstore so that we can restock."

At Calvary Chapel, “We pay all of our own bills,” Andresen said. “Anything extra goes back into the church to support our other ministries.”

“We don’t have to satisfy stockholders, we just have to honor God through what we do,” he affirmed.

Some congregations find that commercial enterprises can help a shortfall in expenses. At Hollywood’s Hallandale Jewish Center, a recently opened thrift shop is helping to support the synagogue. “It helps to maintain the synagogue since we run a deficit,” said Diane Chillage of Hallandale, the congregation’s Office Manager.

The synagogue’s Sisterhood opened the store in early January in space previously occupied by a congregation-operated Judaica store. “Everything we take in helps,” said the store’s manager Ruth Castelblanco of Hallandale. “We donate to Israel and other causes.”

Several local synagogues are struggling to maintain their Judaica shops because of stiff competition from large commercial Jewish supply stores that have sprung up in area malls according to Chillage.

Castelblanco, who had ten years of sales experience in Chile before emigrating to south Florida, saw the empty space in her synagogue’s building and decided that the thrift shop would benefit both the congregation and the community.

She said that by selling donated items to local residents, the congregation is also able to help needy people in the community.

The Best Bargain Shop is open on Monday and Thursday mornings and is looking for donated items that can be sold within the store.

Meanwhile, Calvary Chapel plans on opening a branch bookstore at the Festival Market Place in Pompano Beach in January.

Churches operating business enterprises are becoming more common in the United States as well as overseas according to Dr. David Befus, president of the Miami based Latin America Mission and the author *Kingdom Business* a book that promotes commercial ventures as a way to raise income for ministry and expand a congregation’s outreach.

“I recommend that they be managed in separate operational entities from the church, with a few professionals who have background and management assigned to oversight.” Befus said. “They should be separate, but controlled by the church.”

Befus said such efforts are a ministry in that they provide books, health care, education or other services, but they are also services that people will pay for.

Such efforts can distract church members from other traditional tasks. “That is why it is better to select a group with desire and ability to manage these projects,” Befus explained.

However, they can also provide a venue for more traditional ministries. “They provide a natural context for talking about Jesus,” Befus said.

Andresen said that his bookstore maintains excellent relationships with similar enterprises in the city. “We are in touch with Lifeway and other stores on a cooperative basis frequently,” he said. “We call each other to see if a book is in stock and cooperate in similar ways.”

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