

Augsburg Fortress plans layoffs, store closings, end of consumer sales: Textbook offerings to be increased

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The publishing arm of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is ending its consumer-oriented book sales and will focus instead on supplying materials for congregations and textbooks for higher education, it was announced last month.

Augsburg Fortress, the ELCA publishing ministry based in Minneapolis, will eliminate 55 jobs among its 242 full- and part-time employees, starting at the end of 2008, and will add 13 positions in shifting its priorities to Lutheran needs.

Augsburg Fortress will close its nine U.S. bookstores by April 30, leaving only a rented bookstore at Luther Seminary in St. Paul and two in Canada bearing the publisher's name.

The publisher is upgrading its Web site and has plans to work with ELCA synods and congregations to offer new resources and faith formation techniques. "This adds value for synods and for us," said Beth A. Lewis, Augsburg Fortress CEO and president. Some changes "are very painful on a personal level as we say good-bye to wonderful colleagues," she told ELCA News Service.

The new strategic plan was adopted unanimously by the publisher's board of trustees meeting October 24-25 in Minneapolis.

"This doesn't surprise me," said Lynn Garrett, former senior religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*. "There have been continuing financial struggles at Augsburg Fortress to slim down. This move is not just a good idea, but probably inevitable."

Garrett, who has a publishing and editorial consulting service in Evanston, Illinois, said there was a time decades ago when Fortress books were "dominant" in

academic publishing.

Augsburg Fortress now will no longer accept new book proposals or sell new titles in its consumer-oriented book line, though it will continue to honor current contracts and to market stocks on hand. That does not mean that the publisher will reduce its academic publishing, said Sheryl Burmaster, director of customer care. "Our new business strategy will in fact focus more resources on the academic sector," she said by e-mail.

Under the Fortress imprint, the publisher will continue creating textbooks and reference materials for collegiate-level schools teaching religion and theology while "increasing textbook offerings for undergraduate and entry-level theology classes," she said.

"The Augsburg imprints which we are discontinuing are of general interest, self-help and devotional in nature, most often purchased for individual use," Burmaster said.