

Balancing the books: Hard times in religion publishing

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

Conventional wisdom holds that when times get bad, people turn to religion. But that's not the case in religion publishing. Like other business executives in the current economic doldrums, religion publishers are cutting expenses in the face of declining sales.

"The overall economy has hit publishing in a significant way," said Bob Fryling, publisher at InterVarsity Press in Downers Grove, Illinois, articulating a truth universally acknowledged among publishers. Bookstore closings and reductions in store inventories are forcing publishers to be nimble in responding to present and future demands.

"For decades we've all said books are recession-proof," said Dwight Baker, president of Baker Publishing Group in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "I still believe books are recession-resistant, but I'll tell you what's not recession-proof, and that's major retailers."

Publishers can hold the line on expenses in a variety of ways, from cutting back on travel and advertising to outsourcing tasks to tinkering with 401K contributions. IVP and Baker, both small publishing houses, have implemented across-the-board salary reductions of 5 percent to avoid layoffs. At Baker, office staff have pitched in at the warehouse to shelve returns. "That includes me," said Dwight Baker.

William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, also in Grand Rapids, has frozen salaries and is working under a mandate to cut expenses by 10 percent, which has meant reducing its advertising and being selective about which conferences and shows it attends. "We've always operated fairly lean," says Anita Eerdmans, vice president of publicity and promotion.

Another small publisher, Paraclete Press in Orleans, Massachusetts, is watching expenses closely—by more tightly monitoring its print runs, for example. Outsourcing saves money for some publishers, but not Paraclete. "We do work in-house because that's how we save money," said associate publisher Jon M. Sweeney.

Denominational publishers don't have all their publishing eggs in bookstore baskets, which is an advantage for them. Selling lectionary inserts, vacation Bible school material and prayer books provides revenue that makes up for the books that the general public isn't buying. Still, Abingdon Press, part of the United Methodist Publishing House, is reporting a sales drop of 8.5 percent compared to the previous year.

"That's a significant shortfall," noted Abingdon vice president Tammy Gaines. "There's no good news in that period." Staffing has been reduced through cutbacks, attrition and elimination of vacancies in UMPH operations, including its retail division, Cokesbury.

At Westminster John Knox Press, the trade publishing partner of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), sales were up a modest 2 percent last year over the prior year—"not as much as we hoped for, but we're fairly fortunate," said Marc Lewis, president and publisher. This year, the first two months showed slight increases, "but March doesn't look too good," said Lewis.

One way in which WJK has felt the economic squeeze is through bookstores. Cokesbury is its best customer, and it depends also on seminary and divinity school stores. The downturn in bricks-and-mortar operations has impelled the press's efforts to deliver content electronically. TheThoughtfulChristian.com is an ecumenical Web-based resource that provides study packets for groups and individuals about issues in scripture and culture. A similar resource for Presbyterian leaders will be launched in June.

Church Publishing, which publishes books and materials for Episcopalians, is looking closely at its staffing and expenses. "We're very definitely behind budget saleswise and looking at every expense item," said publisher Davis Perkins. Last fall, book publishing "was awful," Perkins said bluntly, but sales of curriculum and materials used in worship and church life, such as lectionary inserts, were bright spots. This year, those seem to be dimming as churches feel the recessionary pinch and cut back on discretionary spending. To promote sales, the publishing house has established more favorable sales terms for the Book of Common Prayer and the Episcopal Church's official hymnal. "We're calling it the stimulus package," Perkins said.

Larger publishers experience things somewhat differently. Buyouts and workforce reductions took place at parent company HarperCollins but have not materially affected Harper One, which publishes religion. "We were, relatively speaking, basically unaffected," said Mark Tauber, senior vice president and publisher. Yet Harper One experienced a "tough, tough" fall, said Tauber. "We kept hearing, 'Oh no, self-help and religion and spirituality are not affected by the recession.' They weren't down as much as other categories, but they were certainly down."

Jossey-Bass is a corner of religion publishing inside the parent company of John Wiley & Sons. "The thing that has impressed me is the absence of fear in this management and this company," said Sheryl Fullerton, executive editor at Jossey-Bass. Wiley's diverse publishing program in a variety of markets—professional/trade, higher education, technical/scientific/scholarly—has spread out risk and exposure, rather like an investment portfolio. "Not all their eggs are in one basket," says Fullerton. "It pays off in a time like this."

University presses are also helped by the diversity of materials they publish, even as they seriously scrutinize their business models. University presses seek to publish books with long-lasting appeal that will sell for many seasons (in publishing parlance, they maintain a strong backlist). So, unlike large commercial houses, university presses don't need to hit home runs with the frontlist. "We depend for a good chunk of our books on course use and purchase by scholars, and that's not going to go away during a recession," said Fred Appel, senior editor for religion and anthropology at Princeton University Press. None the less, backlist sales have dropped, even while sales of newer books are strong. "We hope the backlist is going to recover after the recession," Appel said.

Interestingly, religious studies as a field has actually been a growth area for Oxford University Press, which has added commissioning editors in the past few years. Oxford has built a strong list of titles about Islam and works that explore religion and other fields, such as religion and politics, reported Brian Hughes, the press's marketing manager for religion and Bibles.

On the positive side of the ledger, some religion books are still selling. The Bible business remains good. The centennial edition of Oxford's venerable Scofield Study Bible is doing well, as are the new-fangled eco-aware Green Bible from HarperOne and a Wesley Study Bible from Abingdon, which "just flew off the shelf," according to Abingdon's Gaines. Lower-priced Bibles also continue selling.

Academic publishers are particularly pressed to anticipate developments in electronic publishing and research, which can provide them with new sources of revenue as the purchase of print books drops. Religion publishers are also planning for the electronic future. General and academic publishers are steadily developing electronic materials for popular, scholarly and congregational use, watching devices such as Amazon's successful Kindle e-text reader and monitoring how libraries are buying materials.

So far, no religion publisher is requesting a bailout by taxpayers.