

Despite sour economy, religious card sales are up

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

December 17, 2010

(RNS) The sour economy may mean fewer presents under the tree for many families this year, but one thing some Christians won't give up on is sending Christmas cards -- especially religious cards.

"It's the whole message of Christmas," said Velma Fann, who returned to the Shrine of the Black Madonna bookstore in Atlanta this year to purchase her cards. "It's what Christmas is really about."

Fann, who lost her writing job in October, said she doesn't have "gift money" for presents this year, but she's still sending cards that feature a trumpet-playing angel, not Santa Claus.

"The cards are just flying out of the door," said Ewa Omo Aba, manager of the bookstore, which carries religious cards aimed at her African-American clientele and produced by Carole Joy Creations.

"You might not be able to give a gift, but you at least want to give a card. We've had an upswing of that."

Across the country, retailers and card companies report that the economy has not halted Christians from purchasing greeting cards. But they're bypassing the boxes of cards that say "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings" in favor of religious cards with nativity scenes,

angels, and, often, Bible verses.

"Christmas boxed cards are doing very well this year, even in a tough economy," said Micah Carter, spokesman for the Southern Baptist agency that runs LifeWay Christian Stores. "Our customers are looking for Christmas cards with a strong Christian message."

Target, which would not disclose sales figures, said demand for religious Christmas cards is increasing, with higher sales this year than last.

"We monitor our guests' needs closely and respond to their buying habits by increasing the assortment of religious cards in stores where they perform well," said Target spokeswoman Tara Schlosser.

"Religious cards remain popular with our guests, therefore a significant number of Target stores carry an expanded assortment to meet guest demand."

Hallmark officials also declined to give specific sales statistics, but said religious-themed cards featuring the artwork of Thomas Kinkade are usually among their top 10 best sellers.

DaySpring Cards, a Hallmark subsidiary and one of the largest manufacturers of religious Christmas cards, say demand has remained steady. Christmas cards comprise 73 percent of the company's sales of boxed cards, said spokeswoman Brenda Turner.

DaySpring cards range from images of church steeples to snowy scenes, and carry messages such as "our hearts rejoice anew at the

Savior's birth." Even a Peanuts series of cards have a spiritual touch, with one sound card featuring the voice of Linus reading the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke.

Overall, Christmas cards -- both secular and religious -- remain the mainstay of all greeting cards sold, with about 30 percent of them featuring religious or inspirational messages or imagery, according to the Greeting Card Association.

"I've talked to some of our publishers this year and they say ... they had seen even a greater interest in Christmas cards, not necessarily religious per se, but expressing spirituality," said spokeswoman Barbara Miller. "They had seen more nativity scenes, more archangels, Madonnas with child."

The economy has put a dent in overall sales, however. Last year, more than 2 billion Christmas cards were sold in the U.S., but industry experts expect sales to be between 1.7 and 1.8 billion this year.

The Knights of Columbus, which for more than two decades has distributed Christian Christmas cards as part of a "Keep Christ in Christmas" fundraising campaign, says sales of its religious cards have increased this year from coast to coast.

"The economy does not seem to be a factor in card sales this year," said Kevin Adler, campaign chairman for the Alaska division of the Catholic fraternal organization.

If the Knights learn of someone who can't afford the cards -- which feature Mother Teresa, the Madonna and child or the holy family -- they will offer assistance.

"I had an elderly lady this year who only had enough money to purchase a single box of cards," he said. "We gave her a second box of cards so that she could send (them) to her family."

But some purchasers say they're thinking more of the religious message than any drain on their wallet when they send the Christian cards.

"That's what Christmas is about," said Don Klippstein, a Kennewick, Wash., retiree who buys the cards with his wife Bonnie every year despite a smaller expendable income.

"We've just made the choice that we want to stay in contact. I'd prefer to send out some nice-looking religious cards than something that's not."