

Cokesbury closes its stores as book buyers go online

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Following a national decline in sales at retail bookstores, the United Methodist Publishing House will shut down all of its 57 Cokesbury stores, including 19 at seminaries, by April.

Cokesbury has served congregations, theological schools and church leaders for more than 200 years, but “a shift toward all things digital” and the convenience of online shopping has led to the closings of such chains as Borders and many independent stores, said Neil Alexander, president and publisher of the Methodist institution based in Nashville, Tennessee.

The new closures will affect about 285 full-time and part-time employees. “Having the stores close and the staff leave is wrenching and deeply disappointing. But as painful as it is, it is also financially and practically necessary,” Alexander told United Methodist News Service after the announcement on November 5.

The Cokesbury stores had fixed operating costs in the 2012 fiscal year that were \$2 million greater than their combined sales. Alexander also noted that Augsburg Fortress, the publishing ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, recently said that its last remaining retail store—at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota—will shut down by year’s end.

United Methodist Publishing, which receives no general church funds and operates as a self-supporting nonprofit, said it would help staff members with severance packages and placement services.

The demise of brick-and-mortar Cokesbury stores was predictable. In surveys taken in 2009 and this year, more than 70 percent of its customers said that ordering books and study materials through Cokesbury.com was their shopping preference. Alexander said that the online service is increasing its operating hours and plans to deploy at least 40 more sales representatives to special church events.