

LifeWay Christian stores to close by end of 2019

The Southern Baptist publishing arm, which has had disputes with authors and artists over content in the past, will focus on digital sales.

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue

LifeWay Christian Resources plans to close all 170 of its brick-and-mortar stores this year.

LifeWay, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, will continue to offer resources through its website and by phone via its customer resource center and network, working directly with congregations. Digital offerings such as online Bible studies and live streaming events are “experiencing strong growth,” said Brad Waggoner, LifeWay acting president and CEO, in a statement.

The shift in retail strategy comes amid declining customer traffic and sales, according to LifeWay. It follows the closure of other major Christian retailers, such as the United Methodist Church’s Cokesbury stores, which closed in 2012, and Family Christian Stores, which closed its stores in 2017. At the time, Family Christian was considered the world’s largest retailer of Christian-themed merchandise.

Stan Jantz, president and CEO of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, said the announcement that LifeWay was closing all its stores came as a surprise. He said it would be challenging, at least in the short run, for publishers that are members of his organization to adjust, but he expects them to retain a hopeful outlook.

“LifeWay stores have been an important channel for Christian publishers, but the life-changing content produced by ECPA members will continue to find and engage readers in ever more creative and effective ways,” Jantz said.

LifeWay has grabbed headlines in the past when it dropped books or CDs over apparent ideological differences. In 2012, it declined to carry author Rachel Held

Evans's book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* after a dispute related to its content.

Evans commented that while she doesn't rejoice over any bookstore closing, "for too long LifeWay's fundamentalist standards have loomed over Christian publishing, stifling the creativity and honesty of writers of faith. I hope this news reinforces to writers, editors, and marketers across the industry that we don't have to conform to Southern Baptist doctrine and culture to sell books." —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "LifeWay Christian stores to close by end of 2019."