

What Future for the Christian Book Trade?

■ by Steve Mitchell



In this positive article, Steve Mitchell draws on his long experience in the Christian book trade to take a realistic look at the state of the trade today. Comparing the revolutions of the past with the seismic changes in today's reading world, he suggests that the new world of the internet offers opportunities to booksellers and the churches which can deepen the reading life of believers in unexpected ways.

In recent times business and retail commentators have been predicting the death of the bookshop. As the High Street has lost some notable stores such as Borders and many independent shops, it seems that the traditional bookshop has had its day. Yet the majority of books are still sold in a physical form from physical retailers. So what does this mean for Christian books? Are they following the same trends? Are they subject to different influences and pressures?

This article will explore the role of Christian books in its context of the Church and its business environment. With a brief tour of the historical role and development of the book trade, it will then look at the current situation for books and theirsellers in a world that is moving online and digitising. I will finish with some thoughts about what the future may hold for the world of Christian books.

I write from an insider's perspective, having opened a Christian bookstore in the mid 1990s, then overseen the largest specialist retailer in the UK, and now run a publishing company which has retained an online retail brand with a couple of stores.

This article is drawn from research and thinking submitted for a recent MBA dissertation. One of the interesting facets of

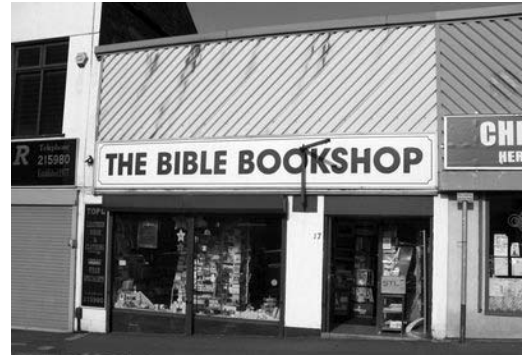
this project was engaging business academics with the unusual motivations, culture and methods of operating the Christian book world. In order to help them understand why this niche trade functions in the way it does, I needed to explain its history, context and role in the faith world. So as historians teach us, to look forward correctly we need to understand the past. It is therefore with the past that we need to start.

The Past....

In the 14th century when Johannes Guttenburg invented moveable type printing, the world changed. Reading, learning and self-discovery became available for the general population, and this created a new commercial sector. No longer was the Bible hidden behind the altar, only accessible to the priests, and no longer could new forms of teaching be contained. The book developed as the cultural artefact which defined the Renaissance and the Reformation. Attempts by the church to restrain new scientific discoveries by Galileo or English language translations of scripture by heroes of the faith such as William Tyndale were thwarted by the success of the physical book. It released and redefined the manner in which biblical Christian teaching spread and aided the foundations of the modern Protestant church. "Sola Scriptura" became the new cry of a literate generation. ▶▶

▶▶ The explosion of the book as a means of teaching was supported by a new industry of printers, bookbinders and booksellers. Initially they were one and the same, but as industrialisation created the ability to produce huge volumes of books, and with the emergence of paperbacks in the early 20th century, the roles between producing and selling books began to diversify, so booksellers started appearing in large numbers across the country. By the end of the second half of the 20th century, there were over 4000 bookshops in the UK, with a number of significant chains.

As the number of bookshops widened, specialist Christian booksellers appeared, often founded by local groups with a passion to see Bibles and Christian literature made easily available locally. These developed over the years, peaking in the 1980/90s with over 600 specialist bookshops, with a number of chains such as CLC, SPCK & Wesley Owen. These stores grew their product range to include music, church supplies, cards and gifts. There was also a vibrant independent sector, which became the largest specialist group within the Booksellers Association, the official book trade body. These Christian stores often had a charitable and local constitution, supported by churches and volunteers. They rarely located themselves on High Streets, choosing lower cost tertiary locations. They weren't renowned for their retailing excellence and professionalism as their motivation was for

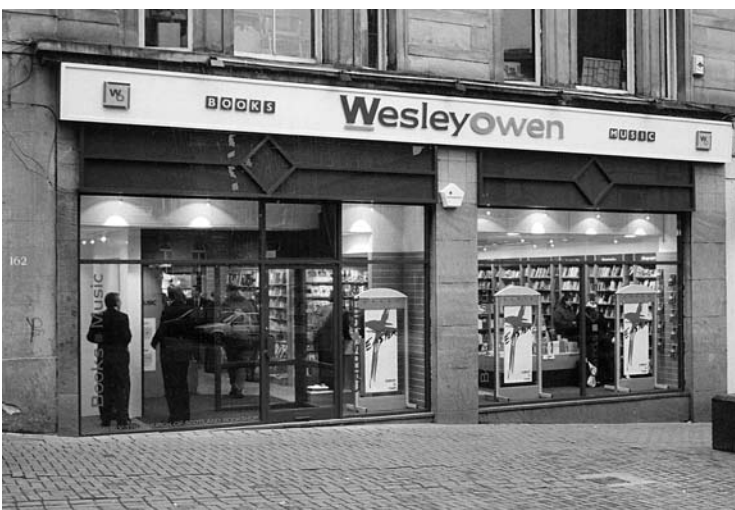


*The Bible Bookshop in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent
'...rather dowdy stores ... but committed...'*

evangelism and ministry rather than profit and retail expansion, and this meant they could be rather dowdy stores with an amateurish but committed feel. The roles between authors, publishers and booksellers were clearly defined and separate. It was a truly inter-dependent community.

However the world began to change in the mid 1990s when two key events took place. Firstly the retail price maintenance law, the Net Book Agreement which ensured that books were sold at the same price as set by the publisher, was legally challenged, and when the government decided not to uphold the agreement it was abolished, and quickly the world of discounting and price promotion arrived. Very soon the supermarkets joined the bookselling world and quickly became major players.

The second key event was the emergence of the internet. The impact of this technological change has been described as important a cultural event as the arrival of the printed book 500 years ago. Not only did it create a new sales channel for books, but has redefined the way in which writing, reading, learning and information discovery is based. It would be simple to look at the growth of Amazon as the effect of the internet on bookselling, but the web has had a far greater, deeper cultural impact on commerce and the church which we'll examine further in a while, but the pressures that these two changes had on the book trade, and in particular the non-commercially minded Christian book trade were drastic. ▶▶



▶▶ The trading environment became increasingly competitive with stores beginning to use price to attract customers, and the availability of titles grew quickly with new online stores that were offering a far wider range of products than offered in bookshops. The once genteel Christian trade began to fragment as retailers came under increasing pressure, as publishers began to look to supply churches directly and as authors began to connect directly with readers through blogs and social media.

If the impact of the internet and changing bookselling environment were tough enough for an already beleaguered trade, then the global recession that started in 2008 removed the financial capacity to change business models quickly enough. This led by the end of 2009 to the financial collapse of the trade's main distributor and wholesaler with some of the retail chain stores that tended to be located in better but higher rental locations closing first, but being accompanied by a swathe of independents.

These changes meant that publishers and authors had to change their thinking and business tactics towards a very different future. The church and business environment is unrecognisable to thirty years ago. It is proving very difficult for a trade that has local ministry & mission at its heart to recognise and respond to these changes.

The Present...

The book trade finds itself in one those periods of rapid business and cultural transition, having to reevaluate its purpose, its constitution and financial model. The emergence of the internet didn't just bring a new and highly disruptive sales channel, but it started to redefine the whole nature of information exchange; no longer do writers have to wait

to secure a publishing deal before their voice can be heard. The internet allows them to communicate widely and immediately without any barriers. For church leaders this brings immediate benefits, with ministries, resources and their church community in place, they have a ready made platform. Some forward-thinking church leaders along with academics became early adopters of using this new technology, building a loyal online following to blogs or podcasting.

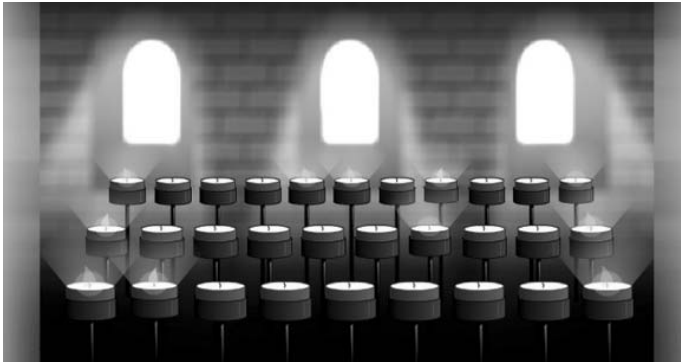
So the new business and church context that booksellers are operating can be summarised as:-

1. The printed book is being challenged by online reading and the ebook.
2. The traditional bookstore is being challenged by the online retailer.
3. The publisher is being challenged by self-publishing.
4. The published author is being challenged by the blogger and social media.



Kindle Paperwhite E-book

These challenges run far deeper than just the technologies themselves but the sociological and cultural changes wrought by the web are probably greater, and less-easy-to-interpret threats to publishing and book-selling, which are having to develop new strategies to cope with the mass amateurisation of publishing. ▶▶



London Internet Church

You click on a 'virtual' candle, submit your intention online, and an actual candle is lit at St. Stephen Walbrook weekly prayer service

- ▶▶ The internet has also affected how we engage with culture and faith, creating new opportunities and new concerns. We have the ability now to create our own church, with podcasted sermons for teaching, recorded live worship and online forums for community, which allows for a new self-first consumeristic style of church. In that uneasy relationship between consumerism and church we run the risk of commodifying our faith, separating belief from practice, and people from community. At the same time, the internet gives amazing new ways of engaging with people of faith and none. It opens new doors, new expressions of faith and is to be celebrated, used and developed. But like every new media its implications need to be considered and understood, as there is the potential to lose as well as gain in this brave new world.

The breadth of the online reading material gives traditional publishing and bookselling another challenge. It becomes so easy to flick between articles, videos and posts that it becomes more difficult to focus for a long period of time on an extended narrative or text. In the thoughtful development of an argument or theme it becomes more difficult to hold the attention of a reader.

So what does this look like in real life, for the remaining bookseller and for readers looking for books?

At a retreat held in May of this year publishers and retailers met to talk, pray and spend time together. The conversations had a number of common themes, which were about the decline in numbers of people visiting stores, reduced turnovers and the changing manner in the way churches are providing resources for themselves. There was a sense of this is the 'new normal' and not a downturn from which better days will return. It was clear that the commitment which booksellers have to their towns and ministries remains as strong as ever. There is acceptance that as the current trends continue then it will become even harder for the stores to stay open. Some retailers are attempting to change by relocating, moving from shops to market stalls, adding coffee shops, or managing their businesses more tightly.

It is noticeable that the response to the plight of the specialist Christian bookseller from the churches has been negligible in the main. There is little direct support from churches, who - having their own issues with maintaining income - are seeking to be good stewards of their money and using the cheapest supplier for their requirements. There are few churches that recommend books on a regular basis. This all paints a pretty gloomy picture for the traditional bookseller. ▶▶



Bookstall in a three-church united benefice in Tenterden, Kent. Encouraging Christian reading, or competition for Christian Bookshops? On display are Bible Study books, biographies, and advice for families, but, sadly, none apparently on daily work.

▶▶ So what does this look like for readers? They now have immediate access to a far wider range of writing. The web has opened up a whole new spectrum of online writing through ebooks, blogs and social media, yet the majority of books are still sold through physical stores. As the number of Christian bookshops decrease, and the secular stores continue not to stock a range of evangelical titles, the challenge the readers have is to find books that attract them, and most often (in fact up to 80% according to a recent survey) they buy because of recommendation from a friend.

The volume of reading material has increased exponentially online; you only need to look at the number of self-published digital books available. It is so easy these days to make your writing available to the wider world, but getting your voice heard above the digital noise of the internet is becoming more and more difficult. New approaches by authors are needed to stand out from the crowd. Not only has your message to be well written, it must be original and authors need to create their own platforms so they can be heard.

The role of publisher and bookseller needs to change as well, from trying to be a one stop shop, to a guide and curator of relevant and quality writing. There are many opinions about the state of the book trade, but there is one fact that cannot be ignored: that those businesses that choose to trade in the same way as they have in the past will not survive.



Discoverability

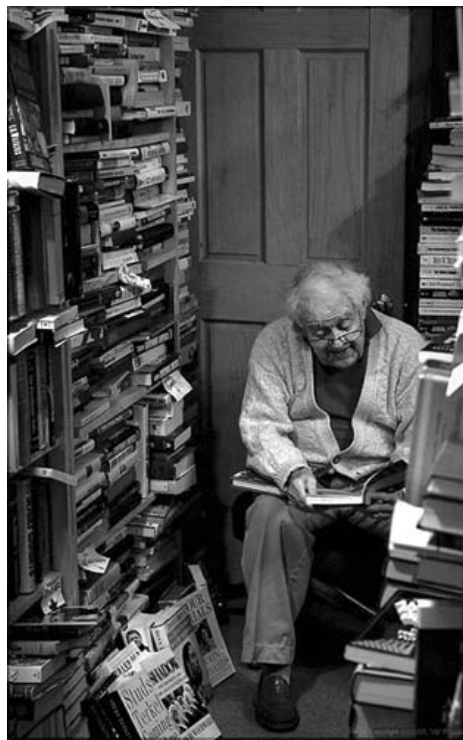
A new iPad app called Zite surfs the Web and uses your social network and online reading behaviour to find reading material you might like

The Future...

So what does the future look like then for the Christian book trade? In the summer of 2012 a wide-ranging survey was undertaken across 20,000 Christian book buyers to try and understand a number of issues which included their buying motivations, the context in which they use books, and their preferred reading formats and purchase methods. The results and conclusions could make a book in themselves but there were some findings which highlighted some interesting trends:-

1. Christian literature is being bought for multi-contextual use, with the development of the individual of prime importance. Readers are looking for products that have use in various parts of their lives, not just for one area.
2. Existing readers still place importance on the reading of books and plan to read more in the future.
3. Printed books are still the preferred format.
4. The biggest barrier to maintaining or increasing the number of books read by an individual is a lack of time.
5. There is however, an increasing use of ebooks, which is followed by a growing acceptance of online reading. The continuing preference of printed books shows the pace of change to ebooks is slower than the media may suggest. There is variance in subject genre to the speed of uptake of ebooks. The pace of change in the Christian sector is evolutionary rather than revolutionary.
6. The emergence of online reading, rather than a longform book (in printed or electronic format) is causing ripples in not just retailing, but in creating new forms of writing. The internet acts as a catalyst for more public writing which becomes part of the pool of products from which to draw new authors, publishers and retailers.
7. Online reading can give text new life in a world of other fast-emerging and visual media through the connectivity that social media provides. Discoverability becomes an increasing challenge in the increasing online noise. ▶▶

- 8. The change to a preference of purchasing of physical product from online retailers rather than traditional bricks and mortar retailers is confirmed.
9. The decline of physical bookshops will continue as online channels grow in popularity with the general consumer rather than just from early adopters.
10. A majority of customers state they prefer their retailer of choice to share their beliefs and values, but in practice price and availability are the overriding factors.
11. Specialists will struggle unless they develop clear additional, tangible benefits to the consumer.
12. The general online retailer will continue to gain market share especially in a younger demographic.
13. Store customers are older and more conservative about changing formats; they are also less positive about the amount of books they expect to read in the future.
14. Specialist publishers and retailers need to embrace fully the idea of communities and social media, and the tangible and extra benefits these can provide to win customer loyalty.



Store customers are older and more conservative...

The survey reveals a relatively disloyal consumer, one who freely shops around, and who in practice is not concerned from where they buy. One of the suggestions that Christian retailers often talk about is to give more emphasis to growing loyal communities, be they geographic or theological. The survey showed the harsh reality that today's

consumer doesn't give loyalty unless the benefits offered are tangible and add real value. So calls for support based on anything else but being the highest provision of value may well fall on deaf ears.

As the fragmentation of this sector continues, the pressure on physical booksellers to evolve will increase. The survey suggests that the emerging online preference will continue the disintermediation of existing booksellers.

The research shows that the adoption of online reading,

purchasing and ebooks is developing in a similar fashion in Christian bookselling to the general book trade, though the addition of the faith element brings in some extra factors, such as the theological relationship between the consumer and the publisher. An understanding of consumerist pressures within a religious context suggests that the adoption of online reading is having a double movement, with wider exposure of religious resources to a larger group allowing for more product engagement, mixed with exposure to other media and content which can distract and reduces the consumer's interest in spiritual reading.

The Christian book sector has not yet fully grasped the long-term depth and impact of the ongoing changes. Individual organisations are reacting tactically to their own circumstances. Publishers, who tend to have a broader market view, are adapting more quickly through tactics such as diversifying their product range and internationalisation. The retailers are more insular in their approach; being more committed to a specific ►►

▶▶ location, they are evolving their retail model to cope with declining sales volumes and greater competition. The trade organisations are helpful at a tactical level, but unable to provide enough direction to create industry-wide engagement to the issues facing the retailer. At an industry sector level there needs to be far greater acceptance of the issues and strategic engagement to provide insights to both the value and supply chain.

Conclusion

The indications are that the Christian book trade will be forced to adapt to the same commercial environment that the general book trade is experiencing. However there are some opportunities that the Christian trade has not fully explored, and those involve behaving with a Christian rather than a commercial mindset. The motivation of the vast majority of authors, publishers and booksellers in this sector is not for profit, but a genuine desire to see the Gospel communicated, and spiritual lives deepened. At a time when business is hard we can look to our own interests or we can be more creative and inter-dependent. The Christian book world needs to re-engage its primary community, the Church, with titles that inspire, whatever the genre or theology, and so far there has not been a concerted, trade-wide initiative to make the Christian community aware of the benefits of reading, in all its forms. There have been individual initiatives but not a trade-wide strategy.

Traditional physical bookselling is likely to continue to become a more local expression, with new, smaller, more agile retailers appearing, and online retail will continue to gather momentum. Publishing is likely to see the cold wind that has blown through the retail world enter its domain. This will lead to consolidation, diversification, to digital-only models and to new entrants who don't



For authors, it feels like the Wild West

play to the old rules. For authors, it feels like the Wild West; the landscape is vast but rugged. Those willing to make the journey onto new paths, and make the hard climb, can succeed in a way unheard of before. However most writers may not be willing to make that sacrifice.

The Church needs to re-discover the benefits of having a reading congregation: one that engages with stories and study, with longform narrative in which an argument or story can develop, with new thinking and old, and across the age range. In an era of instant knowledge, taking the time to read and think through a subject, to dwell on it and let it engage deeply in the heart, mind and soul will be important for a deepening faith.

So can the book trade re-inspire the Church? The signs at the moment aren't promising, but there are some new voices appearing in the world of books that are pushing, challenging and unsettling the status quo.

So next time you are browsing Amazon, or wandering the aisles of a bookshop, ask yourself what does this mean to me? And how do my purchase decisions affect my community? ■

Steve Mitchell is Managing Director of Authentic Media UK, a Christian publishing, distribution and retail company. He is married with three children and lives in Cumbria, where he is involved in a New Frontiers church. He recently completed an MBA in Retailing and is a lover of books, music and good coffee.

