

The Importance of Literature Ministry

By Jim Wilson

The following is a brief history of my personal involvement in literature ministry.

During my second year at the Naval Academy, when I first became a Christian, I had no knowledge that there was any such thing as a Christian book other than the Bible. I began to suspect it a couple of years later, but my real consciousness that there were Christian books came three and a half years after I became a Christian.

In the spring of 1951, the ship on which I served stopped in Hong Kong, and while walking through Kowloon, I came across the Biola Bookstore and bought several books, including an InterVarsity Hymnal. The next several years, while I was on active duty, I would send to InterVarsity Press and buy a hundred InterVarsity booklets at a time and use them in my personal evangelism. I did this for several years.

In 1955 and 1956, we were living in Japan and were able to have some weekend conferences with the Officers Christian Union, and at that time we got the Christian Literature Crusade to provide a book table at each of these conferences. My interest in books greatly increased. In the fall of 1956, we moved to Washington, DC, where I was on the staff of the Officers Christian Union for the East Coast.

After a year of traveling to the Service Academies with a briefcase full of booklets and books, I became very conscious of the need for more literature. I came across six people during that first year who had come to Christ while they were alone, either reading the New Testament, reading a tract, or reading booklets that I had given them. I realized that if I were going to be responsible for many military bases and the service academies on the East Coast, I could extend my personal ministry in an almost unlimited fashion in quality, quantity, and time by the use of books. The books could be in all of those places, while I could only be in one of those places. The books could be written by experts on any subject, while I would not be an expert on any of them. And the booklets and books could be working in the lives of people at midnight, while I was in some other town sleeping. Quality, quantity and time...I could greatly extend my personal ministry. It became apparent to me that we needed more books.

In the next year the Lord clearly led the OCU Council to open a bookstore near the main gate of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. In November of 1958, the Officers Christian Union opened this bookstore, not only to give greater access to people with books, but also to provide more personal access to the same people. Midshipmen and others would come into the bookstore because they were seeking, not because I was seeking them. This turned out to be wonderfully true. However, the Officers Christian Union decided to close the bookstore three years later, the end of 1961.

A small group of Christians formed another corporation called Christian Books in Annapolis, which is no longer in existence. They bought the store from the Officers Christian Union and kept it open. Concurrently I left the staff of the OCU and became a the director of Christian Books in Annapolis. Because I was not traveling, the personal ministry at the Naval Academy greatly increased. One year later, in the spring of 1963, I was meditating on how much effect this literature mission had at the Naval Academy and realized that if we had this much effect at the Academy when it had 4,000 students, and they were locked up behind the walls most of the time, how much more effect could we have if we were at Penn State (State College, Pennsylvania), where there were 20,000 students and an unlimited access to the town. There was really no place else to go.

This had me interested, so I checked in the Christian Booksellers Directory to see if there was a Christian bookstore there already. There was not, which further increased my interest, so I checked other university towns in the country: just from memory -- places like Princeton; Charlottesville,

Virginia; Boulder, Colorado; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Urbana, Illinois; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and drew a blank. There were no Christian bookstores in these university towns, so I kept checking and came up with no Christian bookstores in university towns.

This resulted in some thinking on why it was not so. I found out that at the time, there were probably less than 10,000 Christian books in English, the overwhelming majority of them were written by Christians for Christians, and most of the Christian bookstores in the country were free enterprise attempts to make a living while serving the Lord. In order to make a living selling Christian books, which were written for Christians, the store had to be amidst a population of Christians who would buy a good number of books. This turned out to be in big cities or towns that had a high percentage of evangelicals: places like Wheaton, Illinois, Anderson, Indiana or Winona Lake, Indiana. But the secular university town did not fit this description. There were not high percentages of evangelicals in university towns. In fact, there was probably a very low percentage at the time.

The other reason was that the store had to be where there was extra money. Christian books were luxury items, certainly not necessities. In those days, university towns did not have extra money. This explained why Christian bookstores in university towns did not stay in business. Nonetheless, a university town is a literate community and a seeking community -- a place where people look for answers and a place where they can and do read. This makes it more than a right place to have a Christian bookstore, but it could not function on a free enterprise basis. It also had me realizing that the first place a foreign mission society would open up a Christian bookstore was next to a university campus. It was the last place that Christian bookstores opened up in the United States. Overseas, mission boards did not mind subsidizing an effective ministry. But the United States was considered to be a Christian country; we never thought in terms of subsidizing something that looked like a business in this country. Because of the above reasons there were not any Christian bookstores near universities.

I shared this at a Christian faculty conference that the bookstore sponsored. John Stanford, a graduate student in physics, suggested that rather than thinking in terms of Penn State, we should think in terms of the University of Maryland, because there was a vacant bookstore one block from the university that still had "books" written in the window. In a wonderful way, the Board made the decision to open a bookstore in College Park, Maryland. The Lord led us to the right man, Don Hudson, and him to us. He directed that mission very effectively for, I think, seven years.

In the meantime, we began to receive interest from other university towns in the country, so I corresponded with the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship over a period of several years, encouraging them to open up stores. They were "into" literature: they were already ministering at many campuses, and they had an excellent publishing program. After consulting established Christian retailing experts, they came to the conclusion that it could not be done. After the Booksellers Convention in 1965 in Philadelphia, I saw Jim Nyquist, director of InterVarsity Press. He was not interested at that time.

Then in 1966, I ran into Keith Hunt and John Alexander who were more interested. They decided to open a store in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In June, 1968, at InterVarsity's request and under the Lord's direction, Bessie and I moved the family to Ann Arbor to help open the first Logos Bookstore. Jim Carlson was the manager and I was responsible for the ministry. It became the prototype store for successive Logos bookstores, most of them in university towns.

I stayed with InterVarsity one year, and Jim Carlson for a few years headed up the Logos Corporation, which eventually had more than eighty bookstores. We also did some thinking over the years in terms of the most effective place to concentrate a ministry. Through some study and thinking I had done on the subject of the principles of war, I came to the conclusion that the most "decisive point"* in any one state was a major university in a small town. A major university in a large city was not as decisive as a major university in a small town. We waited on the Lord for direction, and in 1971 we were led to

Inland Christian Laymen (now Community Christian Ministries), a small, non-profit ministry corporation in the Northwest, who wanted to get a literature ministry started. We believed that this fit the model we had thought of before.

There were two major universities in two small towns in two different states, eight miles apart: Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, and the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. We opened One Way Books in Pullman in August of 1971 and Crossroads Bookstore at the University of Idaho in November of 1971. In the fall of 1973, Elmer Hiebert, who founded the Inland Christian Laymen, opened a store in Tempe serving Arizona State University.

I would like to share with you part of our thinking and policy in the way we conduct these missions. Each of the organizations I have been with have had to do with a bookstore. The Officers Christian Union, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Christian Books in Annapolis and Community Christian Ministries have all been non-profit, Christian corporations. Each store could certainly earn profit, but we preferred to remain non-profit for the following reasons:

If we should have a major ministry in a small town with a secular university -- the combination of which forms a "decisive point" -- the retail business is marginal. If it had not been a profitable place for Christian bookstores, free enterprise would have opened up these major universities in small towns long ago. And if we are running a free enterprise, marginal business, and our livelihood is dependent upon it, we are less likely to give away or loan out a book. We may be likely to give away one book, but if one after another leads to hundreds of books given away, then our marginal business has really become submarginal and probably bankrupt as a free enterprise ministry. We could run it as a free enterprise and be very careful in our giving away and loaning of books, but we would rather not be that careful. We are here to reach the population of the state, centering on one place, the university town. Our ministry is two-fold in the store: personal and literature. In order to have an effective personal ministry, we desire to keep the store over-staffed. This is so that we can always take time for people who are looking for answers and wanting to talk without neglecting customers. This marks another reason why it would not work as a free enterprise venture, for we could not keep an over-staffed store afloat. Because of the value of personal ministry, our desire is to have at least one additional person over and above the number of people it takes to run the store. If it takes two people to run the store, we would like to have three people in it; if it takes four people, we would like to have at least five.

Here's just a thought on the actual economics of a store. We purchase books at a 40% discount -- if it retails at \$10, we buy it at \$6. When we sell the book at \$10, we take \$6 to repurchase the book. With the \$4 remaining we pay the postage for mailing the book to us, the rent for the store, the light and heat, the advertising, the telephone and the salaries. In a free enterprise venture it is unwise to spend more than 15% on salaries. If we have \$6,000 worth of capital and put it into book stock, and if we then sell all of those books, we sell them for \$10,000. The \$6,000 we use to repurchase the book and \$4,000 is available for the expenses I mentioned. If we sell each of the books three times during the year, then for our original \$6,000 capital with which we bought books, we can sell \$30,000 worth of books at retail. Remember that only 15% of gross sales (the retail value of what we sell during the year) can be used for salaries. So if we sold \$30,000 worth of books in a year, 15% of that will be \$4,500 available for salaries. This amount is small for one person, and certainly too small for two salaried staff in the store. And \$30,000 is not enough gross sales to make the store self-sufficient. But in a town that previously never had any Christian literature, \$30,000 worth of paperback books amounts to a lot of Christian literature in the town. We think that it is worth it to have the extra people in the store. We do not pay any salaries from the sale of books. This gives us 15% more to work with in terms of giving away books or expanding the stock, or improving the store to increase the total outreach. If we give away a book, say one that retails for \$10, we are not only giving away the profit but also the ability to repurchase the book. We give away our \$6, the light and heat, the telephone and anything more that

could have gone toward increasing stock. So we have to sell at least a dozen books at \$0.50 clear profit to pay for the ability to repurchase one book we give away at \$6. We have to sell twenty of them to make it up completely.

This is as if we work as in free enterprise, but we are not. We are trusting the Lord to provide salaries for the staff. We are trusting Him for money that we can honestly give away books and still not go below our stock level and pay all our publishers. We have been able to do this fairly. However, by most standards, the staff are underpaid. Our bookstores do not sell a lot. Each of them have a wonderful ministry in terms of both personal and literature evangelism. We give away hundreds of books a year, loan hundreds more, and also loan out over 400 tapes. Some of this is probably wasted in terms of actual fruit that we can later identify, but the whole spiritual tenor of the towns that we have been in has changed because of this kind of ministry.

There are other things that we have used bookstores for. We use them as a place to unify the believers, to introduce people who have different doctrinal positions but clearly know the Lord Jesus Christ. We also use it as a place to build up believers. But even more important than the direct ministry of the bookstore, we have used it as a sort of headquarters or command post for many other things that take place in town -- everything from Christian concerts, noon Bible lectures, and courtship and marriage classes. We have also sponsored conferences -- faculty conferences, student conferences, men's and women's conferences -- though not in place of what the churches or what the other groups are doing. If we find a place of ministry that the churches have not covered, we go ahead and sponsor it. This gives us much versatility. We export Christian people every year who have graduated. The character of the churches has greatly upgraded, both in the congregation and in the pulpit. We do not think it is a direct result of the bookstores. We believe that the bookstore ministry has had an indirect effect upon this part of the ministry in the city. We could probably give you hundreds of examples of people who have come to Christ here in the stores.

One example, a few years ago: I was in a counseling situation upstairs in the office when the telephone rang downstairs. I was called to the phone. I got down there and found out that someone else was waiting to see me. I answered the phone. Then I noticed that two of the three staff members were in very strong witnessing situations. I was busy with someone upstairs, with someone else waiting to see me. A young man, a hermit, who lived out in the mountains fifty miles from Moscow, Idaho, came in and said very loudly, "I am returning these two books." Since everybody was involved in a conversation, nobody paid any attention to him. He walked to the rear of the store. I thought he was then going to leave, but he didn't. He turned around and came back and stood there. Instead of going back upstairs to continue my conversation, I went up to the counter to see what books he left there. They were *The Cross and the Switchblade* and John Stott's *Basic Christianity*. When he had come into town before, he had checked the secular bookstore, but it was closed. He was looking for some mystery or occult books to read in his cabin out in the mountains. Since the secular store was closed, he had to come into Crossroads. Barbara at that time loaned him these two books. She had loaned him *The Cross and the Switchblade* to get him interested and *Basic Christianity* to give him the Gospel. When I saw which books they were, I went back and spoke to him. I asked, "What did you think of these books?" "Oh," he said, "*The Cross and the Switchblade* wasn't much, but that *Basic Christianity* was really loaded." I asked him if he would like to talk to somebody. He said, "Yes, I would." "Does it make any difference to whom you speak?" No, he would talk to anybody. Well, there was one person in the store still not involved with anybody. So I called her and said, "Nancy, take this fellow down to the counseling room and lead him to the Lord." He was that ready, and she did.

This sort of thing has happened many times. It does not happen daily, but I suppose that we have at least one good, solid contact a week. This is beside the many Christians who are buying books, reading them and giving them away.

Another instance -- this happened in Annapolis when I was with the store there. A midshipman came in and asked if we had the book *Toward Christian Marriage*, and I said we did. Then I asked him if he was interested in the "Christian" or the "Marriage." He said that he was interested in both. I said, "The book will tell you about the 'marriage'. Let me tell you about the 'Christian'." "All right," he said. So we sat down and I told him the Good News. Two weeks later he came back and I asked him if he had made that commitment we had talked about. "I sure did," he exclaimed. "Are you sure of your salvation now?" I asked. He said something like, "Oh boy, I don't know." I said, "Well, how come you don't know?" He said, "Well, I'm suspicious of all this emotion." "What emotion?" I asked. He said that he felt great. "Sit down," I told him, "we'll talk about it. Is this emotion you are talking about the cause of your commitment or the result of your commitment?" He said it was the result of it. "Don't worry about it," I reassured him.

The literature ministry, in quality and quantity with the personal witness, is effective. When the Apostle Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy, he asked him if he could send Mark and the parchments. He was asking for men and for books. God, when he wanted to reveal Himself to man, sent a man and a Book.* A "decisive point" in warfare is a place at which, if a battle is fought, the winner would gain decisive victory. A decisive victory is more than a victory -- it is a victory that wins the war, provides a breakthrough, or turns the war around from defensive to offensive. It really is decisive. There are two major considerations to help determine the decisive point before the battle is fought: its importance and its feasibility. In our consideration, the major university made the place important, the small town made it feasible. If, however, we have a greater concentration of Christians, big cities also become feasible.