

local booksellers they could help to break down the prejudice against religious books. But above all they could release into the languishing life of many of our churches a spiritual flood which, irrigating along this channel and along that, would produce a rich harvest of lasting benefit to all concerned. The times of revival in our churches have always been times when literature has circulated widely. New books have been born to live on, to influence the thinking and devotion of succeeding generations. Thus, in the cycle of God's blessing, effect can become cause. Biography shows again and again that those who have been raised up to lead the Church at such times have themselves been awakened or confirmed in their faith by Christian books. It is with such possibilities in mind that members of the GF are invited to co-operate with those who are publishing religious books and pamphlets and with the booksellers who are distributing them, and, as they have opportunity, to persuade more and more churches to take up this ministry seriously.

## *Starting a Church Bookstall*

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This article is an extract from *Christian Literature and the Church Bookstall*, a Falcon Book just published by the Church Pastoral-Aid Society. Although the author is referring to Anglican churches, it is plain that the principles with which he is dealing are widely applicable.

THE first need in starting a church bookstall is the full approval, and if possible the whole-hearted support, of all interested parties. It is worth spending a month or two in allowing the PCC or the sidesmen (or, in other circumstances, the committee of the Christian Union) to get used to the idea of a church bookstall; especially if it is likely to mean that the hymn books will have to be kept somewhere else, or that the empty cupboard in the vestry in which the choir ladies put their hats on Sundays will now be taken over by the bookstall secretary.

This approval should be expressed in a practical way by a vote of money; the PCC should be asked to underwrite the bookstall's activities, and to put up a capital sum (£25 seems a usual amount, but something can be done with less than that if necessary) which will be repaid in due course if the bookstall 'succeeds'. It is worth getting a clear decision over what will happen to the profits (or who decides what will happen to the profits), if any, when they begin to flow. They will not be large, even on a large turnover. But many PCCs or Finance Committees are more ready to permit

the discretionary use of hypothetical profits than to give away a steady annual income which has actually materialized. Plan for your profits, therefore, from the start — but apart from this do not think too much about them. A church bookstall run simply in order to make money is likely to be a failure at every level. Resist well-meaning attempts to set up a bookstall 'in aid of the building fund'.

Next to the approval of the authorities comes the appointment of a bookstall manager or secretary. On his or her faithfulness, enterprise and vision the project will largely depend. It is to the bookstall secretary that this chapter and the next are particularly addressed.

Before anything further is decided, the situation and hours of opening must be considered. These will be linked with your choice of book table or display stand, the question of whether the bookstall should be actually in the church, or in the church porch, and whether or not it is shut on Sundays.<sup>1</sup>

Here are some of the main questions that must be answered:

(a) *Where is the best position for the main bookstall?*

It must be somewhere that can be well lit and affords ample display space; but where potential customers or 'window-shoppers' will not impede the flow of traffic through a vestibule or porch.

(b) *Can any part of the bookstall be portable?*

Is yours a situation where the idea of a bookrolley has anything to commend it? Or would 'branch depots' of the main bookstall help to make Christian literature available to church organizations? Or is this a matter which can be left for the moment and considered again in the light of experience?

(c) *Will the bookstall be 'self-service'?*

This is usually best; with the secretary or one of his helpers on hand from time to time to advise, guide and inspire those who are interested in the display.

(d) *Will the bookstall be permanently open?*

It may well prove best to have a permanent display of small booklets available in the church porch; and to exhibit larger stock, or more expensive books, on Sundays and at the mid-week church meeting.

The answers to these questions will depend on individual circumstances, and therefore it is worth while putting some hard thought into these matters from the start. Situate the bookstall where it has room to grow. Try not to invest in a cupboard which neatly holds your present stock but will be hopelessly small in two months' time. Often when as much thinking has been done as is possible in cold blood, the experience of running the bookstall for a month or two will suggest improvements both in where it is situated and in its hours of opening and business methods.

## STOCK, ORDERING AND ACCOUNTS

The bookstall secretary (or in the case of a large bookstall, the committee), with the guidance of others probably, will have to decide on the scope and range of the stock. This will depend on the space available, the financial capital involved, and the aim of the bookstall. It will also have to take

<sup>1</sup> These questions are discussed in a previous chapter of the book.

into account, later if not immediately, the question of what other facilities for buying Christian books can be found in the parish or neighbourhood.

It may be best to begin in a very small way. Many bookstalls have started on an investment of only £2. This is enough to buy a small selection of the better-known tracts and booklets, many of which have a value in terms of ministry out of all proportion to their cost, but it will take a very long time for a bookstall to grow to any size from so small an investment. It may, alternatively, be possible to start with a bit of a splash, to invest £25 or even more in books, and to make sure that the new venture becomes a talking point for a week or so. Christmas is obviously a good occasion on which a bookstall is likely to be successfully launched (that is, in preparation for Christmas — say the first week in December, not, of course, over Christmas week itself).

However brisk business proves to be at the start, it will not be long before the new bookstall secretary discovers that it is easier to add to the stock by ordering than to dispose of it by selling. It is important, therefore, to keep a very careful eye on what sells and what hangs fire; and to learn in this way what is in demand. You will want gradually to build up stocks of steady sellers so as to avoid constant re-ordering. Experiment slowly by pushing up the ceiling of your price-range, probably buying a single copy at a time of the more expensive books which, as far as you are concerned, have yet to prove their selling powers. But as you find more and more books and booklets being bought, and the bookstall becoming an integral part of the church's life, do not lose sight of your original objective. Make it your aim to offer nothing on the bookstall that is not, to your personal knowledge, likely to have a real spiritual ministry to its purchaser. At the beginning, at any rate, it may be better not to offer anything that can be bought easily at a local shop, and so to concentrate on small publications while you gain experience.

Of course you would soon find, if you started buying your stock over the counter in a bookshop at retail price, that you were sadly out of pocket. Postage charges, if you buy by post, are substantial, because books weigh heavily; soiled stock may be a big item, and there will be unaccounted-for losses from time to time in all but the best-managed organization. There will be charges for such things as display material and account books — and no spare revenue to put against their cost. A church bookstall, therefore, can only be a serious proposition if it is buying its stock at a price below that which would be asked of private individuals, or is getting some other special facilities to help it do its work. There are four main ways in which this can be done: 1. Bulk buying from publishers; 2. Sale or return; 3. Registration on the Directory of Booksellers; 4. A Book Agency. It is this last method which seems most likely to be what the average bookstall needs.<sup>1</sup>

### A BOOK AGENCY

This agreement confers recognition by the Publishers Association on a bookstall as the accredited *agent* or subsidiary of some established professional bookseller. At one blow, it absolves the bookstall secretary from complicated correspondence with a variety of publishers, and makes the bookseller

<sup>1</sup> The author's discussion of the other alternatives is not included here for reasons of space.

his local 'wholesaler'. He ceases to buy any books from publishers (though there may be certain exceptions) and buys everything from one source. It is not hard to imagine what a saving of time and thought is effected by this plan. The Book Agency scheme is of special value to church bookstalls, who form, in fact, the bulk of recognized agents. The scheme has been increasing steadily in recent years: 67 agencies were granted in 1956; 74 in 1957; 122 in 1958; 134 in 1959; 139 in 1960 and 163 in 1961. The parent bookshop may be a local shop in the town, not necessarily one that has any great interest in religious books. If there is such a shop and they are willing to co-operate, this is probably the best solution.

But if there is no local bookshop suitable or willing to get books from a variety of publishers with whom they do not usually have dealings, then it may be best to get in touch with some well-known Christian bookshop in a big town or city, and to order by post. You will find postage charges are heavy; but because they will be able to supply most of what you want from their own stock, you are likely to get better service than non-specialist bookshops can offer. If you do decide to go to a city bookshop, it is worth making your choice with some care. You want one that is familiar with the special needs of Book Agency bookstalls; and that is efficiently run, accurate in its accounting, and prompt with orders sent by post. If members of your church travel to work in the city (supposing you live within commuting distance) then it is worth seeing if some helpful person works near to one of the big Christian booksellers, so that postage charges can often be avoided by calling for books instead of posting them. Choose a bookseller who can offer you the most comprehensive service, covering not only books and booklets, but Bible-reading notes, magazines, and Sunday-school material. Make sure that you go to a place which actually *stocks* on its own premises the majority of items you will want.<sup>1</sup> Any bookseller can obtain items for you from the appropriate publishers; but this involves a delay which may hold up delivery of an entire order, some of which you may be wanting urgently.<sup>2</sup>

A Book Agency is an official arrangement, made between you and one or more booksellers (not between you and any publisher; a book agent has no direct dealings with publishers, except in special cases) and approved by the Publishers Association. No bookseller is able officially to accept you as a book agent without the Publishers Association's approval.

A recognized book agent can expect a discount of about 10% (in certain cases, a little more, since the maximum he may receive is half the discount received by the bookseller; and in some cases less) on all that he buys through the parent bookseller. He signs an undertaking not to buy new books at a privilege discount except from the bookseller named on his Agency licence; and to charge in full for special services rendered in connection with the sale of any new book (postage on individual orders is specifically mentioned; this means, of course, postage from the book agent to his customer; and not postage from the parent bookseller to the book agent, which is one of the overheads that the discount is given to cover).

<sup>1</sup> Two London booksellers with considerable experience of Book Agencies are: Scripture Union Bookshop, 5 Wigmore Street, W.1; Christian Literature Crusade, 106A Church Road, Upper Norwood, S.E.19.

<sup>2</sup> Certain booksellers seem to be trying to develop Book Agencies devoted only to paperbacks, or linked with one specific publisher. I cannot feel such a plan to be in the best interests of my church bookstall.

He also undertakes not to offer any new book for sale at less than the full published price. You cannot pass on the 10% to your customers; this would not be fair on other booksellers. Whether or not you will be able to get sale-or-return facilities under any circumstances is a matter you must discuss with the parent bookseller. Probably you should not expect them, since the books you return will often not be likely to sell to the general public. A Bible bookshop with a good stock may, however, be able to offer sale-or-return for a particular occasion.

You are not, of course, obliged to conclude the matter with the first bookshop you approach. If the manager is a bit doubtful about whether he wants to be troubled with Book Agencies at all, and suggests a regular discount of 5% rather than 10% (with a gloomy warning that you cannot expect him to get books in a hurry from hole-in-corner religious publishers whose travellers never call on him, and with whom he has no account) then take the hint; pass on to your next alternative.

When you have found a bookseller willing to accept you, write to the Publishers Association at 19 Bedford Square, London, WC1, and ask to be considered as a book agent of that bookseller, explaining that your church (or Christian Union or whatever it is) has asked you to be responsible for their bookstall. A form will be sent to you, and if your application is accepted and the licence granted (subject to the conditions already mentioned) a copy will be sent to your parent bookseller, and you will be entitled to the agreed discount from then on. You will want to come to some arrangement about the rendering and payment of accounts; and about the address to which parcels are to be sent, if you are doing most of your buying by post. If you live some way away from the church, it may be better to arrange for an 'accommodation address' with the caretaker, or at the vicarage, to save lugging heavy parcels from home to church every time there is a delivery of stock.

And now a word of warning: it is not worth while attempting even the simple business of becoming a book agent unless you are in earnest. You will only cause a lot of work to yourself, the Publishers Association, and the bookseller concerned. Church bookstalls do not always enjoy a particularly high reputation in 'the Trade' because so many of them prove to be little more than a flash in the pan. There are plenty of cases on record where a church has acquired a book agent's licence simply in order to buy a set of hymn books or new literature for the Sunday-school at special rates; and thereafter has ceased to use the licence at all. This may be contravening no actual agreement, but it is not fair play. If you are granted the privilege of buying books at a reduced price, remember that it is a valuable concession and must be respected. It is made to you on the implied understanding that you will use this privilege, not just for your own benefit, but for the benefit of the authors, publishers and booksellers on whom we depend for all our literature, by helping to distribute their product — in short, by selling books. You can certainly expect to buy your Sunday-school prizes at the discount you are allowed, and possibly your hymn books too, if they fall within such an agreement; but this ought not to be your only purpose in acquiring a book agent's licence in the first place.