



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

I just love bookstores. In one of the places where we lived for a time we were within walking distance of a huge bookstore, many a day would find me wandering over to comfortable chairs within the store and paging through a wide variety of books. More interesting often-times than the huge megaplexes are the smaller bookstores in out-of-the-way places. On a recent sabbatical Jackie and I found many such bookstores in rural New England, one of our favorite at Blue Hill, Maine. College bookstores are also a treat.

Unfortunately for my rapidly aging back, I have tended to accumulate scores of books from every era and locale of our life. Therefore our home and office tend to overflow with books of every stripe and sequence, the vast majority of them, not surprisingly, echoing religious or spiritual themes. I cannot truly imagine living without books, for they have become consistent friends in an age when other friendships are often fleeting. Something will trigger a thought or idea and it will send my scurrying to some obscure chapter in a well-marked book. More often than not, I find just the words I need.

Whenever a new communication medium appears on the scene, our first response is to conclude that the new will completely eradicate the old. Of course history demonstrates that sometimes this is true. The advent of the railroad did eventually take over from the steamship, and the arrival of the automobile made the horse and buggy obsolete. But all reports that the internet and television will eclipse books and book reading is certainly premature. Browsing today with large numbers of people in a myriad of bookstores suggests that such endeavors are in no danger of disappearing.

The Christian Century Magazine recently contained an article entitled "Religion Sells," a feature about the growth of religious literature, particularly books. For instance, the Association of American Publishers reported that religious publishing grew by 37% in 2003, and is well underway to expanding growth in 2004. This does not suggest that book publishing is an endangered species. Surveys have found that 18% of all book buyers have purchased at least one religious book within the past year.

While religious books still only make up about 5% of the general market, its increasing success is surprising to just about everyone. The conventional wisdom a few years back was that religion would tend to fade away as reason advanced and when "benighted souls saw their error of their superstitious ways." But there is strong evidence today, not only in the most recent election, but also in the sale of religious books that the secularization hypothesis is bogus. American is not going the way of Europe.

Instead, everywhere you look religious issues and values are pervading both popular and serious culture, and such growth is appearing in some of the most unlikely places. The article said that Christian literature has become so influential today that many people are using the language of Christianity without really knowing if they understand it or even accept it. It is clear that something profound is happening in the culture, for it is even penetrating people's imagination and changing their world view.

I think of a book review I read of Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life. The review was written by a person who was not a Christian, who had no interest in or understanding of Warren's faith. But he gave much praise to the book as a guide to people who want to find meaning and purpose in their lives, and recommended it to all readers. I was almost shocked.

To no-one's surprise, the most explosive growth of Christian literature is found among distinctly evangelical publishers. Zondervan and Tyndale House can cite very impressive growth in the past five years. About 40% of all religious book buyers identify themselves as evangelicals, the "born-again" population. They enthusiastically buy books for themselves and others and the publishers have to rush to put books into their receptive hands.

What is remarkable today is how religious literature has deeply penetrated the general market, which was not the case a generation ago. Christian books can be found widely in a whole variety of bookstores, in price clubs, in big box retailers and in discount stores. I even find them in some supermarkets. Christian publishers are doing a good to excellent job of marketing and selling, and they have improved their capacity to make sure the data from

the evangelical Christian market is included in sales data in the general market.

Lutheran historian and theologian Martin Marty says that the evangelical writers such as Warren fill a huge vacuum which has been left by mainline Protestant and Roman Catholics. So much of what comes out of the "spiritual but not religious crowd," as Marty calls them, blend rather imperceptibly into the secular culture and do not offer any distinctive portfolio of beliefs. But the most successful evangelical authors today have mastered the mass media, while most mainline Christians have kept a distance.

Of course the smell of commercial success invites a crowd, especially when the overall publishing market is flat. Thus major publishing houses have snapped up some of the major evangelical lines: Random House with Water Brook, AOLTimeWarner with Warner Faith, Harper-Collins with Zondervan.

There is also some sense in which this surge in book buying and selling is lifting all boats. Lutheran publisher Augsburg Fortress as well as Presbyterian House Westminster John Knox both report modest growth in sales. They are clearly riding the coattails of this surge in religious publishing.

The elephant in the living room, undoubtedly, is Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?, which has sold almost nineteen million books. Amazing. Many times a successful religious book sells 5,000 or 10,000 copies, Warren is pushing 19 million and climbing. His book has also spawned a number of ancillary books, including one by a Lutheran pastor, a friend of Pastor Mike and myself, named Eric Burtness from Beaverton, Oregon. His book, published by Augsburg, is entitled Leading on Purpose: Intentionality and Teaming in Congregational Life, focuses on "purpose driven principles."

The article described in Warren's book, although written by a Southern Baptist, uses deliberately unchurched language. Thus it appeals to a broad audience, both to a spectrum of congregational study groups, as well as individuals who are examining their own lives. The publisher is struck by how this book has become a resource for communities, helping to define a group which is exploring something together, while also building community.

The Da Vinci Code, while challenging many Christian beliefs, has also given birth to considerable literature in its wake. Also Mel Gibson's movie The Passion of the Christ, has sold not only movie tickets but also books.

Lord of the Rings also has spawned not only a successful series of movies but many books examining Tolkien's theology.

A growing segment of Christian publishing is also fiction, both serious and escapist. Some of these books are about religious themes, others are more subtly an engagement with spiritual questions and values. While the National Endowment of the Arts has noted a decline in fictional writing of late, some religious publishers are opening new fictional lines or adding to them. The whole Left Behind series is a case in point.

While academic presses are less likely to be affected by swings in the commercial market, some of them also found good response to religious biography. Yale University Press has a strong response to a biography of the 17th century New England theologian Jonathan Edwards, a book by George Marsden.

Mainline publishing companies have seen much red ink in recent years, but they are more hopeful of late, seeing new opportunities in the current religious scene. Historians, theologians, spiritual guides and creative artists are helping to provide substance and sustenance to those reaching for spiritual formation. Publishers are increasingly urging their best minds and creators to speak to larger audiences, to write accessibly on the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

In summary, turn off the TV and the computer, buy a book and enjoy a great gift. Browse at our bookstore at Hope, wander the religion section of the bookstores at the mall, frequent the Christian bookstores and find those quaint and eclectic bookstores in obscure places. The article concluding by quoting theologian Paul Tillich:

"Religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion." Back to the article, "The vigor in religious publishing is simply helping to make more and more explicit how deeply grounded in religion our cultural forms really are."

Books are such a gift, celebrate books.