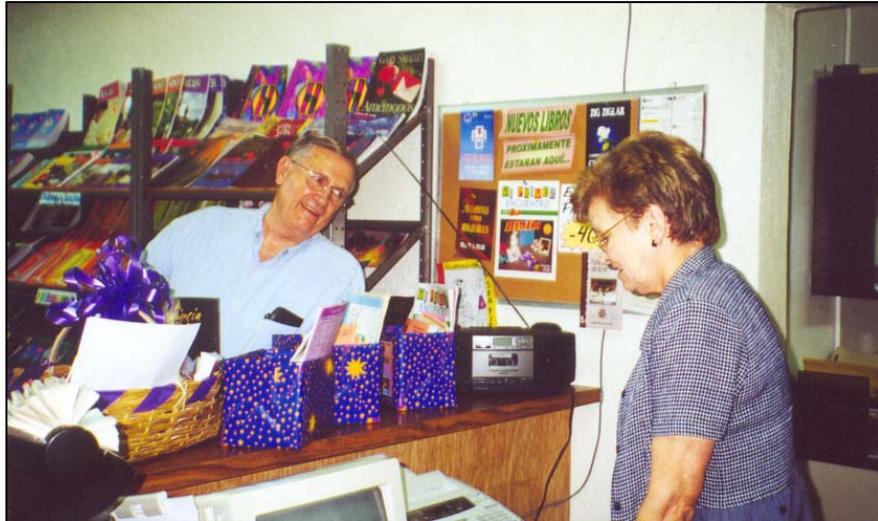


**Goals are not financial;
Baptist missionaries work to put Bibles and books in Venezuelan hands**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Valencia, Venezuela—As the manager of the Baptist book deposit in Venezuela, Leon Champion needs to operate with good business procedures. However, his yearly business plan must make his supervisors at the Texas-based Baptist Spanish Publishing House turn slightly pale.



“Our goal has never really been to set a dollar or financial goal,” Leon explains. “Our goal is to put more Bibles and books into the hands of people in Venezuela than any other deposit puts in the hands of their people.”

Leon’s unconventional business plan is working. “For the last three years, outside of Mexico-- which we don’t count because it is so big--we have been in first place in sales in Latin America,” he says. Mexico leads the region in book sales from deposits.

The veteran missionary believes that if the book deposit’s goals are spiritual, the Lord will bless and they will lead the continent in sales.

Leon, who was born in Anniston, Alabama and grew up in Oxford, says that there is a hunger for Christian literature in Venezuela. “We are in difficult economic times here in Venezuela, but God has blessed the sales,” he says. “We believe that God is moving through Venezuela.”

“As a ministry, we have touched more lives than any other ministry in the country,” he exclaims. “I say that not with pride, but from the reality that anytime someone reads a Sunday school lesson, sings a hymn, reads a Bible that they have purchased from us, we have impacted that life.”

The deposit’s biggest seller is, as one would expect, the Bible. But, the distributor also carries tracts, Sunday school material, discipleship guides and books on the family along with other Christian publications.

There are no Baptist bookstores in Venezuela although Baptist church members operate several private outlets. Leon and his wife Jean serve as wholesale distributors, providing books to a wide gamut of Christian stores throughout the country including a number of Pentecostal stores.

The Champions are aggressive in their promotion of good Christian literature. Many weekends find them loading up their large van with over 1,000 books and driving hundreds of miles to set up a book sale in a local church.

Leon, who served as the pastor of Lauderdale Baptist Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and First Baptist Church of Wellington, Florida as well as other churches in Mississippi and Alabama before joining up with the International Mission Board, preaches in the Sunday service and then sells books for much of the afternoon.

“On Margarita Island, an older lady came and upgraded her Bible to a large print, leather-bound version,” remembers Leon. “She sat down in a chair in front of the stand and sat there until we closed the exposition just reading her Bible. Some people teased her and told her that her new Bible wasn’t any different than her old one. ‘No,’ she said, ‘This Bible has big letters, is very clear and I can read them. It isn’t worn, it is a much better Bible than I had.’”

“She sat there for three hours and just read that Bible,” Leon says. “That was a highlight--being able to see the joy in the eyes of people as they light up when they can get the Word of God.”

No all of the Champion’s customers purchase expensive books. “We go places where they have no means of getting material,” says Jean, who is from Mobile, Alabama. “To go out into the Amazon region and see the people pay with just coins--that’s all they’ve got--to see their face light up when they have the Bible is a joy.”

Leon tells of a small boy who took a Bible from their sale table in a small jungle town in the Amazon. “The father came back and returned the Bible to us explaining that his son wanted it so badly, he stole it,” Leon explains. The Champions made arrangements to give the boy a free copy of the Bible.



The Champions, who served as Southern Baptist missionaries for nine years in Argentina before transferring to Venezuela seven years ago, are dreaming of new ways to make books available. “We did a book sale at the Baptist seminary and sold \$2,000 dollars worth of books in two hours” Leon says. Now, he and Jean want to return with funding from a U.S. church that will allow them to sell books to the seminary students and local pastors at

half-price. “It was amazing how those young seminary students and pastors came in and bought,” Leon remembers.

In addition, they are looking for a Baptist church in the United States to partner with them in reaching Valencia’s police force with literature, including New Testaments. “We want to penetrate the police force, develop Bible studies and exchange techniques with a U.S. based police department,” he says. “The idea is that if you are going to build an honest police force, you need to change the heart of the policemen,” he explains.

When the Champions are not traveling to sell books, they are active in Valencia's New Jerusalem Baptist Church. The couple has arranged for several work teams, including some from Alabama and Florida, to help the church construct its new building.

"We had one group from the Colbert/Lauderdale Association in the Muscle Shoals/Florence, Alabama area come to do a construction project at the church and they gave us \$2,500 for literature," Leon says. "They said that they wanted us to grow a physical plant and a spiritual plant as well," he explains.

For all of their success, the Champions give God the credit. "When you have an economy such as ours, when it comes down to buying a book or a loaf of bread and you buy the book—that's beyond me," Leon says. "That's God!"

Related web site:

Baptist Spanish Publishing House: <http://www.casabautista.org>

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