

Letra Viva Publishing Network

Ian Darke

Despite the crises and instability throughout the continent, book publishing in Latin America is surprisingly vigorous – over 100,000 new titles are published in Spanish each year, a good percentage in Latin America. Book publishing isn't just important in terms of sales, but also cultural impact.



Protestant denominations have a long history of publishing within the continent: in many cases print media was a first point of contact, and many Christian publishers were established during the first three decades of the 20th Century. From the 1950s the evangelical publishers linked together to form LEAL (Literatura Evangélica para América Latina), in order to improve the quality of publications, develop national writers, and reach beyond the confines of the few 'Christian bookstores'. Though those aims were never met, changing times, and a shift of many Protestant publishers to the US, meant that LEAL died

out during the 1970s.

In 1995 representatives of a group of Spanish language Christian publishers found themselves thrown together at a conference in Ecuador. They shared the same challenges – distribution, particularly between countries, lack of technical expertise, and limited resources. They also shared the same dreams – producing relevant Christian books, to help the church grow in depth, as well as being agents of change within society.

From that encounter, the Letra Viva network was formed, with its first organised meeting in 1996. Its slogan is 'Christian literature for transformation in Latin America' (it sounds better in Spanish!). The first ten members were convinced that what was needed was not an association or organisation, with a top-heavy structure, but a network. The idea was, and is, that the network provides an environment in which members can do together those things which they cannot do on their own. From that original group, the network has grown to 38 full members – each one publishing in Spanish in Latin America – plus associate members.

Much of the activity of the network occurs between 2 or 3 members, without others even knowing. For example, publishers in Bolivia and Peru decide to distribute each other's books; or publishers in Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica agree to a three-way co-edition, so reducing costs.

For some projects eight to ten groups work together. For example, in 2000 a book fulfilment centre was set up, as a co-operative venture, to improve distribution around the continent. Not all groups have been able to participate, because of the monthly financial commitments required to make it work. That has been the most audacious idea to come out of the network, and the one fully to test members ability to work together!

Perhaps the activity of the network which has distinctively symbolised our relationship together, as well as providing the springboard for collaboration, has been the annual Consultation. The basic idea was to provide an opportunity to come together for 'training'. By other means publisher training in Latin America is both hard to come by, and expensive. As a network we have

been able to arrange professional training on financial planning for book publishers, editorial management and distribution. Beyond any formal process of learning though, the Consultations have provided a forum to learn from each other, build trust, and as an opportunity for theological reflection.

The 2002 Consultation on “New technologies and Christian publishing in Latin America” was far from being a utopic discussion by techno-enthusiasts! Sessions analysed the use and abuse of the Web, digital print, CD-ROMs, and a plethora of other possible technologies, but always from the perspective of committed and experienced Latin American publishers. Some of the papers from that Consultation can be found on the Letra Viva web site: www.letraviva.com (in Spanish only!).

Working as a network has been deeply rewarding, but in practice has also been frustrating. All the 38 member groups are incredibly busy, work under tight budgets, and don't always have time to communicate. Three or four groups may agree to develop a new book, or arrange a workshop for writers, but then Argentina suffers economic meltdown, violence erupts on the street in Bolivia, or the security situation makes travel impossible around Colombia. In a way it would be so much easier if projects were carried out by a central staff with a stable budget! But by using working groups of member publishers, the network is forced constantly to evaluate what it is doing and how, and focus on what best enables its members to produce and distribute those books that work ‘for the transformation of Latin America.’

Further information regarding Letra Viva may be found on the web site www.letraviva.com or from Ian Darke, who is the elected co-ordinator of Letra Viva for 2002-2006. ian@letraviva.com

Ian has been a publisher in Peru and Costa Rica. Photo from the Letra Viva Consultation, Lima 2002