

Christian bookstores lagging

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Christian bookstore owner Steve Gray was counting on big sales from the "Left Behind" series—until Wal-Mart started selling the titles much cheaper.

"That hurt us big time," Gray said. "We had invested a lot into those books."

After that, Gray decided to restock his store in Eddyville, Ky., to offer more of what Wal-Mart doesn't have: hymnals and communion supplies.

To compete against chains and big retailers, indepen-

dent Christian booksellers like Gray are looking beyond books and selling music, gifts, jewelry, stationery and church supplies. Books now account for only 40 percent of sales in Christian retail stores.

Hundreds of retailers were in Nashville this week for the Christian Booksellers Association exhibition, which is focused on ways to boost business for independent vendors.

Bill Anderson, president and CEO of the CBA, said independent retailers need to emphasize their strengths: wider selection, more knowledgeable employees and partnerships with local churches.

"The reality is that they have to be more competitive," he said. "How in the world do they make it up against the behemoths of Barnes & Noble and Virgin Records and Wal-Mart? You operate on your strengths."

Christian retailers continue to struggle. Membership in the CBA peaked at around

3,000 in the early 1990s, but now fewer than 2,300 stores belong to the association.

In 2005, 337 Christian retailers closed, according to the CBA.

"This past year was another tough one for many member stores," Anderson said. "The reality is we live in a Wal-Mart ecosystem."

The success of best-selling Christian titles like "The Purpose-Driven Life" and the "Left Behind" series has unexpectedly hurt Christian bookstores by attracting the book chains and discount retailers.

Religious books, primarily Christian, generated U.S. sales of nearly \$338 million in 2003, which represented a 37 percent growth over the previous year. In 2004, the religious segment grew 5.6 percent while the overall book publishing industry remained flat.

"It's almost the only sector or genre that is growing in the book publishing industry," said Robert Baensch,

director of New York University's Center for Publishing.

The increase in religious book sales is likely the result of people turning to God after events such as 9-11, the Iraq war, Hurricane Katrina and the stress of day-to-day modern life, Baensch said.

"You have the major issue of the continuing Iraq war, and it's not only those who've lost their lives but those who have been injured, come back and cause a real challenge to the family unit," he said. "Then you have major natural disasters like the hurricanes along the Gulf Coast. People are learning to pray again."

"When pressures are beyond the control of the individual ... then you reach out. You turn to prayer and God."

John 3

Continued from page 5B

means "let this truly be." So Jesus is stating a truth of utmost importance: only those who undergo a new birth will see God's kingdom. The Greek word translated again can also mean "from above," and Jesus may be using both meanings at once. Thus this new birth is not only a rebirth but it is also "from above" as it is accomplished by the power of God. No one is exempt, not even Nicodemus. Certainly he is very religious. As a Pharisee he keeps himself from everything that breaks God's law. He does not dream of lying, stealing or killing. But Jesus makes it clear that even Nicodemus must be born again. But Jesus makes it clear that even Nicodemus must be born again. No matter how "religious" he is, he will not see God's kingdom without a new birth. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Most of the Jews in Jesus' day expect God's kingdom to be a political realm where Jews will be militarily, politically and materially greater than all Gentile nations. But God's kingdom is within, where God rules in the heart. (Luke 17:21).

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