

The Future of Christian Publishing  
Greg Thornton, Moody Publishers

**“The Future Ain’t What It Used to Be”**

According to often quoted baseball great Yogi Berra, “the future ain’t what it used to be.” In my opinion, Yogi couldn’t be more correct in describing the future of Christian publishing. Though we’ll discuss some trends and make some predictions about the next 10 years, I don’t believe any of us in this room can fathom the rate and dramatic nature of the changes we will experience in Christian publishing by the year 2018.

But first, a reminder from Scripture. *“The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.”* Proverbs 16:9, New American Standard. It is good for us to be thinking about and planning for the future, but we must remember that the Lord directs and establishes all of our steps.

We’ll start with some **trends in publishing**. Although I am coming from a United States (US) perspective, perhaps you’ll recognize some of these trends in your country as well.

1. **Reduction in the amount of time spent reading books.** No matter which study you read, all are citing concerns about the amount of time that people are devoting to reading books. At best, reading times are flat compared to recent prior years. In the US, it’s approximately 108 hours a year – less than 18 minutes a day. The giant gorilla in the room as far as media usage (internet, recorded music, magazines, TV) is TV. In the US, TV viewing is a staggering 4 hours and 35 minutes a day! That’s 90 minutes a day more than the world average. I don’t think we’ll see dramatic increases in reading times in the next 10 years.
2. **Changes in where readers are buying books.** In the last 10 years in the US, an increasing number of Christian books were purchased at Christian chain bookstores, general bookstores (e.g. Barnes & Noble), direct from the publishers, and over the internet from retailers like Amazon. Independent Christian retailers face stiff competition. It’s hard to believe what has happened in the last 10 years with mainstream acceptance of the *Left Behind* series (introduced in 1995), *The Prayer of Jabez* (2000), and *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). This trend of greater accessibility to Christian titles will continue to grow in the future, especially with the New York interest in Christian authors who have a loyal following, often through their own TV and/or radio ministries.
3. **Opportunities abound now for authors and publishers with print on demand (POD) and shorter press run options.** In the US, Lulu.com has published more than 236,000 paperbacks in the last five years. A short-term mission team that my wife and daughter

were part in early November has chronicled their trip in a book anyone can buy on blurb.com for \$40. Publishers are using this print option to keep titles in print longer, especially those selling less than 1,000 copies a year. The POD leader in the US, Lightning Source, now manufactures more than 1.3 million books per month. A few larger publishers in the US have purchased POD systems, and print titles in their warehouse, one at a time, as they are sold. This technology will only become more affordable in the next few years, allowing medium and smaller publishers to acquire POD systems. This trend is also changing author agreements as “in print” and “out of print” definitions change.

4. **The world is “flattening.”** It’s easy for publishers to shop worldwide for the best production price and quality reproduction of four color and specialty products. For a time last year, we purchased Bible paper in France to be shipped to Colombia to print leather Bibles that were shipped to Tennessee and placed in boxes before arriving our Chicago warehouse. And, this flattening trend means the opportunity not only to publish in other languages, but with a bit of planning, to create a major splash with a new release by simultaneously publishing the English print and audio edition, along with print editions of several other languages, as well as audio editions in other languages. Moody Publishers did just this with the release in 2006 of *The Five Languages of Apology* by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas. This trend will continue.

Now let’s move from reviewing some trends of the past that will continue into the future, and talk about **radical, unparalleled changes** that are right here, right now. We cannot overestimate the impact of these changes. As publishers, we must develop a great sense of urgency in addressing these matters.

**The digital revolution is coming to publishing.** The wave is coming, and it’s coming hard and fast. Amazon’s Kindle ebook reader changes everything. Even the editor of *Publisher’s Weekly* in a recent column called herself a “passionate” user of the device. It’s a very simple gadget, which makes reading easy on the eyes. The absolute best part – because of its’ wireless connection to the world’s biggest online bookstore, one can download, 24 hours a day from anywhere in the US, any of over 90,000 titles, none right now priced at more than \$9.99. A Chicago-based business/technical writer for a major newspaper equated the Kindle to the iPhone as the most wonderful new tech device of 2007. Wisely he wrote that the Kindle really is “a tablet-based portable Web browser that maintains a cellular network connection to the Internet wherever you go, and which can nimbly read any Web page or blog.”

Just like the iPod radically changed the music industry over the past five years, so the Kindle (and other yet to be developed reading devices) will change our publishing world. Why?

Lisa Johnson calls today’s 18-40 year olds the connected generation. This large group of customers doesn’t know a world without the computer – they’re labeled “Digital Natives.” They think Google and Yahoo before they think of looking for information in a book. It’s imperative that these customers be considered as new titles are written, then delivered to the market. Rupert Murdoch, the 21<sup>st</sup> century media mogul and chairman of News Corp., says that “a media company is basically anything that communicates with people – news, ideas, entertainment, advertising – and allows them to communicate with each other.” Thus, Murdoch purchased MySpace in 2005, recognizing the power of communities and allowing for interaction – this is generation upload as well as generation download.

Another driver for the digital revolution is the green movement. More pressure will be placed on publishers to develop environmental policies. It begins with a plan to use more environmentally friendly paper. Galleys and printed manuscripts will be eliminated. It's then just a short step to eliminating printing altogether in a move to save the planet by saving our trees. Talk about being energy efficient – digital is it!

HarperCollins, the \$1.3 billion publishing house owned by News Corp., is leading the pack by building a digital warehouse, which president and CEO Jane Friedman calls “the digital equivalent of our physical, print warehouse.” Earlier last year HarperCollins had more than 12,000 titles in their digital library.

**Every publisher here should begin to develop a digital strategy.** We owe it to our authors and to our readers/users to make these life-changing messages as widely available as possible. We as publishers must lead the way for our publishing houses, pushing to make this move to digital. I've listed below three books that have influenced my own view of these things.

A starting point is simply licensing your content to software/digital producers like Logos and Olive Tree (their software now runs on Palm and Pocket PC, iPod, BlackBerry and more). Better is to begin developing your own digital warehouse.

**We need not fear this revolution.** But we must be ready. Ultimately, publishing still goes back to the basics – finding authors who are meeting unique needs, then coming alongside them and publishing (“making public”), expanding the platform for their message. I believe the future is very bright for Christian publishing – with John Van Diest, industry veteran and publisher of authors like James Dobson and Max Lucado, I believe the best Christian books have yet to be written. The church more than ever in the next 10 years will look to solid Christian publishing houses to produce and distribute resources that will help believers fulfill the Great Commission.

*“The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.”* Proverbs 21:5, English Standard Version.

### **Recommended Reading:**

*Mind Your X's and Y's* by Lisa Johnson, Free Press ([www.reachgroupconsulting.com](http://www.reachgroupconsulting.com))

*Print is Dead: Books in our Digital Age* by Jeff Gomez, Macmillan

*The World is Flat* by Thomas L. Friedman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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**The future is our achievement for the taking**

Tessie DeVore, Strang Book Group

British statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke said: *You can never plan the future by the past.* That is perhaps one of the biggest truths that we should adhere to in the publishing industry as we look to the future and what the next ten years hold. If we spend too much time looking to the past we will do an injustice to the future.

Having said that, allow me the liberty to start by excerpting from an article published in *Christian Retailing* magazine in November 2007.

HarperCollins Publishers Worldwide President and CEO Jane Friedman encouraged Christian publishers to embrace technology, but she also reassured them that "traditional books will exist forever." The keynote speaker for the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association's (ECPA) Publishing University (Pub U) in Lombard, Ill., Friedman addressed issues and trends in publishing, especially focusing on "the digital revolution." Introduced as "the most prominent woman in publishing," Friedman noted that in her four decades in the industry that "the one constant is change."

"When I first entered the business, I heard 'the novel' is dead," Friedman told about 240 people, including publishers, sales representatives and distributors. "Publishing is about telling great stories." She talked about the popularity of Web sites such as MySpace, YouTube and GodTube, while sharing statistics on the growing number of people who buys books from the Internet and visit Christian sites online.

Additionally, Friedman discussed her "five tenets" of publishing: foster relationships; create great content; remember that the author is the most important asset; move with technology and embrace the digital revolution; and know the market and publish to it.

"I think traditional books will exist forever," said Friedman, who since joining HarperCollins has directed the company to nine years of growth, record-breaking profits and the industry's highest profit margins. "Most people still like the tactile nature of books. ... We want to embrace the future, while we work hard on the present."

On the other end of the spectrum Apple's Steve Jobs recently said that people do not read anymore. He was quoting various reports that show adults are reading fewer books these days. However, there are countless numbers of reports that indicate the opposite and one wonders who exactly is getting polled for these surveys. I would contend that overall, most people are reading the same amount of content as before -- we are just reading it in different formats.

Jobs' revelation came as he replied to the question if Apple would be producing an e-book device. As he put it, "The whole conception is flawed at the top because people don't read anymore." However, let's remember that he downplayed the validity of the cell phone market not long before the iPhone appeared.

I think any e-book device that is strictly built for books is flawed and doomed to fail. The goal should be to focus on content, not just books. Amazon was smart enough to develop the Kindle in a way that it can do more than provide a digital book. Yes, it is mainly an e-book device, but keep in mind this is just Kindle Version 1.0.

Of utmost importance to this audience is the fact that much of the growth taking place in publishing is internationally. Many talk about a general slump in book sales in the United States, but the truth is Amazon book sales are up 24%. American publisher exports are up, too, according to *Publishers Weekly*: China book imports from the U.S. are up 43.9%, Canada up 7.5%, Australia up 15.9%.

## **What's Next?**

In February, HarperCollins will publish *What's Next: The Experts' Guide*, a collection of predictions from 50 "experts" on what to expect in their fields. Among the contributors is Joni Evans, former agent and senior vice president in the book department at William Morris. Evans, who also was for 25 years editor-publisher for Simon & Schuster and Random House, has an optimistic view of the future, but says publishers must adapt to new technologies if they want to see "an explosion in sales." In *What's Next: The Experts' Guide* (HarperCollins, Feb. 2008), Evans says:

The publishing industry is bound to change just as the music industry and the television industry has. New technology is transforming our ways of accessing content. In the future, I'd love to see books available in every format—print, digital, online, print on demand, CDs, wireless audio, and so on. Books, the ultimate software, should be available on all platforms. Once digital publishing becomes common, I believe that all the publishing industry and all writers will have an explosion in sales.

The kind of writers that will appeal to audiences in the future will be (drum roll, please) the good ones, as has always been the case. You can never predict if we'll see the most creative work in fiction or nonfiction. That's what's so great about our business—in fiction, good storytellers, and in nonfiction, informed good storytellers! Just as we couldn't have predicted chick lit a decade ago, it's hard to tell what's coming. But certainly the boom in all new genres—of Christian publishing, the rise of sales among Latino and African American writers, the explosion of young adult stories—each has invaded the very rigid New York Times bestseller profile of old.

The best way for publishers to remain lucrative and grow profits in the future is by getting rid of old systems and old attitudes. Publishers need to stop behaving like venture capitalists (running away the first week the book doesn't sell) and really stick with the books and authors over the long haul. Get rid of the returns system in bookstores (it's like airlines that still use paper tickets). Join hands with search engines to get the books known and accessible. Instead of suing the Googles, work out fair royalty structures, not unlike music publishers did, so that everyone benefits. And what about market research? Why not test-market a jacket or a title now that the Internet makes it so easy to do so? Publishers need to stop being so risk-averse and embrace the new technology.

## **What does this mean for the Christian publishing industry?**

In the Book Industry Trends report released in 2005, The Book Industry Study Group (BISG), estimated total publishers' net revenues in 2004 reached \$28.6 billion, up 2.8% over the previous year. The study predicted that over the next five years total book industry revenues

would increase 18.3%, paced by religious books with a 50% rise. That made religious books the most impressive growth category in the book publishing industry. The category recorded the biggest gains in 2004, with an 11% increase reaching \$1.9 billion in sales.

We need to start thinking globally from the ground up. Historically, most big publishers would acquire a book, develop it and promote it with little more than the United States market in mind. In these publishing models, international publishing and ebooks would not even come into mind until the book made it into the working sphere of those dealing with licensing and foreign distribution. Those days are quickly coming to an end and publishers who are truly serious about growing are having to develop new internal standard operating procedures inclusive of a global perspective.

Speaking purely from Strang Communications' vantage point, I can share with you that our Spanish imprint, the foreign licensing and the international distribution are involved from the earliest stages of the acquisition process. The Spanish imprint approaches the table looking for books that would have potential into the Latino market -- both for the United States as well as internationally. The licensing manager gives input on books that could do well in various languages. The international sales manager starts looking for future hardback and casebound books that may work in an ITP format (International Trade Paper). In the last year we have taken this to another level by looking at how cover designs, titles and subtitles may affect a book's international appeal. And we are now starting to think beyond the printed page.

There are cases when we proceed knowing full well that the book won't work internationally. The factors affecting those decisions are many -- but basically the sales potential of the book within the United States, the nature of the message and if it is something we fully believe needs to get published, are all key factors. On the flip side, there are times when we acquire a book solely on its international viability.

One danger we must all guard against is the temptation to be all things to all people -- which we know can't be done successfully. It is important that publishers analyze each and every book on its own merit and that they understand that every pot must sit on its own bottom.

I do believe that the day is coming when content will be tailored to specific regions and different countries. In today's publishing climate this could be easily done both through the printed page as well as electronically.

It is imperative that we remain relevant to the times we are living in and to the people we are trying to publish for. In order to do so we need to be informed and be culturally aware. Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go.

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Recommended publications, and their respective Web sites:

*The Economist*, [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

*Christian Retailing*, [www.christianretailing.com](http://www.christianretailing.com)

*Publishers Weekly*, [www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com)

*The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

*Times Magazine*, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)

Recommended books:

*What's Next: The Experts' Guide* (HarperCollins, Feb. 2008)

*The Age of Speed* by Vince Poscente (Bard Press, Sept. 2007)

*Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes* by Mark Penn with E. Kinney Zalesne (Twelve, Sept. 2007)

## **The Future of Christian Publishing** **Bob Hawkins, Jr., Harvest House Publishers**

**Introduction:** Without question, every publisher of evangelical books and Bibles—whether they are for profit or not-for-profit, large or small, trade or curriculum-based—would agree that Christian publishing is witnessing greater change today than it has ever experienced before. And while the accelerator is being pushed to the floor, it would seem that the speed of change will increase even more in the near future.

In order to properly consider the future of Christian publishing, we need to briefly remind ourselves of the changes we all have experienced over the last 15 years—changes that have brought us to a very different industry here in 2008. Gone are the days when CBA was considered a ghetto of “religious” bookselling that the general and mass markets snubbed as *separate from* and *irrelevant to* their customers’ interests. And gone are the days of limited media options for consumers—just to name a few big changes we have witnessed. Truth is, to those of us who were contemplating the future of Christian publishing 15 years ago, we simply had no idea the landscape of our industry today would look so different. And I believe these changes represent just the tip of the iceberg.

Before I share my perspectives about what the future might hold, I should say that my views are my own, not based on analytical research, but on my experiences and observations from having worked in this industry for 26-plus years—all, by the way, at Harvest House Publishers. Also, I share from the point of view of a mid-size, family-owned publisher.

Below are six significant trends that I believe will increasingly impact the way Christian publishing is conducted over the next 10 to 15 years—not only in the United States, but internationally.

### **Trends**

1. **The Effects of Consolidation and Attrition of Christian Retail Outlets:** As chains buy up more independent Christian stores, as more independents go out of business, and as publishers’ sales continue to grow in venues outside of Christian retail, we will likely see the following happen:
  - A. *Christian publishers will find it even harder to start up new authors.* This is because Christian retailers are now operating in a financial climate that makes it necessary for them to promote primarily the solid performers, the established authors, the less risky A-level titles that can ensure the successful use of their co-op dollars and growth of their businesses. This means “riskier” titles by newer authors will not be adequately featured by these same retailers. If this trend doesn’t reverse, the health of Christian publishing will decline very quickly in the years to come.
  - B. *Christian publishers will increasingly be tempted to alter content so it is more appealing to the non-CBA markets.* Some publishers will soften the “God talk” in their books in order to be more market-friendly. Others will not. But as more CBA publishers market for the masses, the very real temptation to reach the largest audience possible may result in more books with a watered-down message. Christian publishers will need to make sure they don’t compromise their calling, but instead present sound, biblical content to a hungry, spiritually inclined society.

- C. *More publishers will pursue niche books and markets as they seek ways to compete beyond Christian retail.* At Harvest House, we recognize that a growing number of the books we publish will not sell well in the traditional Christian store, but will do well on the racks, in gift stores, or internationally. One such title has sold over 500,000 copies, with 95% of its sales outside of the CBA channel. The determination to successfully publish niche books to a diverse group of non-CBA markets, including global markets, will intensify in the future.
- D. *The "long tail" will get longer.* Seemingly, every consumer in the world is his or her own market. We all have our own preferences as evidenced by the sales of books on Amazon.com. Some publishers will be more content to publish books that may sell fewer copies per month, but will last for a long time. At Harvest House, we recognize that more can be better. We have increased the number of titles we publish to help compensate for the consolidation and attrition of our sales in Christian retail, and we are finding that to be a successful approach. The value of our growing backlist will increase over time as our publications continue to reach interested buyers.
2. Reaching the Next Generation: Today there are more forces competing for consumers' attention and more products for them to buy than ever before. For the younger generation, there's the lure of iPods, the Internet, movies, cell phones, video games, and "texting," just to name a few distractions. No wonder fewer young people are reading books! How can Christian publishers cut through the clutter and capture the minds of young people, including those who have lost confidence in the church? In our postmodern age, and with the ever-increasing pace of technological changes, the answers are not easy to figure out. Here are some thoughts to ponder:
- While it is true that many of the younger generation desire authenticity, conversation, and story, will proclamation truly be rendered ineffective as a style of communication to this market? Economically, perhaps to a degree. Spiritually, I think not. Christians who take a stand for God in a gracious, loving way with transparency, vulnerability, and balance will attract a spiritually hungry market. While worldviews and technology will always change, the needs of the human heart will always remain the same. Only Christ and His truth can fulfill those needs.
  - Contrary to the way the seeker-sensitive movement of the 1980s tended to wrongly accommodate Sunday preaching and worship to cater to non-believers rather than equip believers, Christian publishers will need to be careful not to publish books that accommodate the message of the gospel to the worldview of postmodernism.
  - To be certain, the long-term future of Christian publishing to all successive markets is largely dependent upon the collective ability of Christian publishers to impact the younger generation of today. Those publishers that are able to successfully build a bridge of confidence by reaching younger readers with life-changing content at their active points of interest will reignite the growth of the industry in the decades to come.
3. Publishing Beyond the Offset Book: Sony's Reader and Amazon's Kindle are beginning to make publishers realize e-books are gaining some serious traction. However, despite the benefits offered by these devices, I believe their purchase prices are still too high for them to take the market by storm—just yet.

Though the verdict is not out on how quickly and to what extent e-books will impact the sales of the printed book, one thing is certain: publishers are now considering themselves as purveyors of intellectual property or content, and not publishers of books. No matter whether the form is

audio, visual, printed, or electronic, intellectual property is what we publish; the book is just one of the formats.

Like all Christian publishers, Harvest House is now thinking more and more digitally with regard to the management of rights and content, and the implementation of digital publishing strategies. In a timely move, ECPA is holding an Executive Leadership Summit in Dallas this May on the subject of “Developing a Digital Asset Management Strategy.” Electronic publishing is here to stay, and books are not going to die out. Therefore, Christian publishers must be prepared to market and sell both of these intellectual property rights formats alongside one another. What’s more, electronic publishing literally has the potential to truly globalize our industry.

4. Marketing on the Internet: Blogging, virtual communities, social networking, banner ads, viral marketing, podcasts, and e-newsletters—these are just some of the elements that make up the new wave of marketing over the Internet that is catching fire across the world. The Internet has quickly and unquestionably become the centerpiece of communication for us all, linking together the world in ways never achieved before. Those Christian publishers that figure out how to best make use of all the technological tools available to their marketing efforts will have a huge advantage in the marketplace.

As an example of how books can be promoted through Internet marketing, Harvest House has recently established an exclusive partnership with ConversantLife.com, a “blog and social media hub that delivers engaging content on faith and culture.” Visitors to the site can “connect with featured communicators, converse about the latest news and current events,” and even “create their own content for the community.” Harvest House publishes books by ConversantLife.com authors, who, through their participation in this vibrant virtual online community, will receive new and increased exposure worldwide for themselves and their books.

5. The Polarization of Christian Publishing: As mentioned earlier, it is the A-level authors who are dominating the shelf space and sales volume in Christian retail. Many of these authors are agented and receive significant advances that are paid mostly by the largest publishing houses in our industry. Over time, the result of this concentration of sales power within a few houses will cause a weakening in the ability of some smaller houses to effectively compete, resulting in more consolidation throughout the industry. At the same time, a number of Christian publishers will grow more determined than ever to find their identity—their specific calling in the market—and refuse to compete where they cannot be successful.
6. International Sales Growth Will Continue: Finally, those publishers that have developed and maintained long-term relationship strategies with their international partners will continue to experience growth on the international front for years to come. Interest in and access to Western culture and the spread of the English language across the globe will continue to create opportunities for Christian publishers as new accounts emerge, existing ties are strengthened, and as companies sensitively publish their books with the international community in mind.

Summary: The landscape of Christian publishing will change dramatically over the next several years. Consolidation at all levels will continue, competition will become stiffer, publishing decisions will need to be smarter, and technology must be harnessed to reach more people around the world by different means—all without compromising the message God has entrusted to us. If we do not speak the truth in love, but compromise the message of the gospel, especially to the younger generation, then Christian publishers are in danger, along with the church, of losing the battle for the hearts and souls of subsequent generations, who will be led by the young people of our day. May God direct each step we take.

## THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING

Chris Johnsen, President  
Christian Art Gifts

Why I believe that the demand for Bibles and Christian Books will grow.

### 1. The Roots of Fear

Terrorism, Immigration, Economy, Global Warming, Health and Gay Marriages, Crime. Will have a very positive impact on how consumers will spend their money.

Publishers who take careful note of the world trends and publish to meet the needs of consumers who are constantly dragged into a pit of hopelessness will find that an increased number of consumers will buy their books.

Books that bring eternal hope and security with emphases on values will be in demand. A publication that addresses the fears and anxieties of the consumers will sell.

### 2. Economy

#### Improvement in the World Economy

For the past four years, the world has grown at a 5.2% annual rate, a full 2% points higher than in the 80's and 90's – thanks to booming emerging markets.

While the United States, Canada and Europe are lagging, most of the rest of the planet is soaring.

#### GDP Growth rates for selected regions and countries

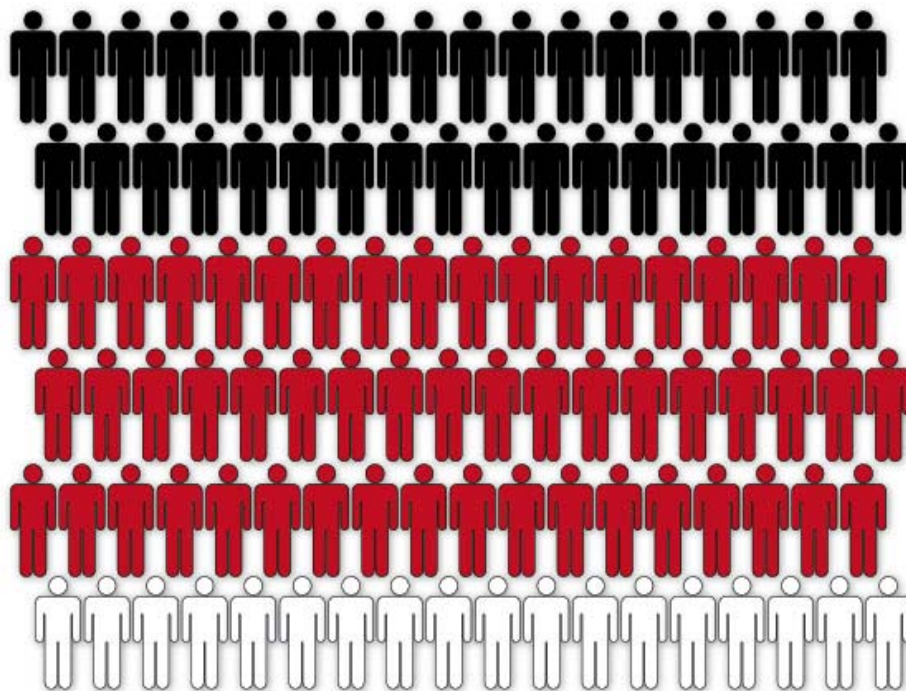
	2007	2008		2007	2008
China	10%	9.5%	Brazil	4.4%	4.2%
Developing Asia	8.8%	8.4%	Spain	3.6%	3.4%
India	8.4%	7.8%	Mexico	3.4%	3.5%
Central Asia	8.3%	7.5%	UK	2.9%	2.7%
Emerging Markets	7.5%	7.1%	European U	2.8%	2.7%

Sub Sahara Africa	6.8%	6.1%	Canada	2.4%	2.9%
Russia	6.4%	5.9%	Japan	2.3%	1.9%
All Africa	6.2%	5.8%	USA	2.2%	2.8%
Central and East Europe	5.5%	5.3%	France	1.8%	1.9%
Middel East	5.5%	5.5%	Italy	1.8%	1.7%
Global Average				4.9%	4.9%

### 3. The X-Factor Seekers

The X-Factor consists of those consumers who are not atheists or anti-Christ but rather those who are disconnected from the church, society or who do not see any need to be part of a institution or organized religious organization.

The X-Factor consists of the large percentage of consumers who are open for spiritual influence that can help them live their lives now.



### 4. Intelligent and Creative Publishing.

Publishers who publish with their nose and ear to the word and ground, who constantly research the market and study retail trends and consumer behaviorism will be surprised how the X-Factor will respond to the right titles.

Example: Left Behind, Purpose Drive Life, Live your life now, Bibles etc, 100 million Bibles were sold in 2007