

Look What the Lord Has Done

Stephen Strang was a young newspaper reporter in Florida when he started a tiny church magazine 25 years ago. Today his company has become a leader in Christian publishing.

Every journalist has a dream. For some it's scooping the year's biggest political scandal or winning the Pulitzer Prize. For others it's getting the front-page byline that lands them a job at a big-city newspaper.

But in 1975 for 24-year-old Stephen Strang, fresh on the news beat for a newspaper in Orlando, Florida, the dream was different. Although he was covering mundane local news by day, he spent his spare moments pursuing a vision God had given him for publishing a great Christian magazine about the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

The result was the magazine you are reading. No look back at the 25 years of what Strang calls "the magazine about Spirit-led living" would be complete without finding out about this publication's humble beginnings.

In the last 25 years Charisma has spawned what is now called Strang Communications: a publishing house (which Strang insists is also a ministry) producing six other magazines as well as Sunday school curriculum serving 8,000 churches and about 60 books a year in both English and Spanish.

When interviewed for this 25th anniversary issue, Strang said he feels awkward focusing on the success of the magazine.

"I know the average person isn't that interested in anniversaries," Strang said. "But maybe my story about our humble beginnings can inspire others. It's not what I've done. It's, 'Look what the Lord's done.'"

After one year at the Sentinel Star, Strang had an opportunity in 1974 to move to the newspaper's Washington, D.C., bureau—a prestigious assignment for a young reporter in the summer that Richard Nixon resigned the presidency. But Strang felt for some reason he should stay in Orlando where he and his young bride, Joy, were active in the ministry of Calvary Assembly of God, one of the fastest-growing churches in the country at the time.

A few months later, needing to earn some extra income so his wife could finish her college degree, Strang had an idea to publish a magazine called Charisma for Calvary. After praying about the idea he approached the board with a proposal: publish six issues a year for a total budget of \$15,000, supported by subscriptions and advertising from church members.

If it didn't break even in a year, he told the church board, he would fold the magazine.

The church board endorsed the plan, and the first issue was launched in August 1975 with Thurlow Spurr, the church's minister of music, on the cover. Spurr had been a force in Christian music for many years and had created the Spurrflows singing group. In that article Spurr challenged 1970s readers not to be judgmental about a new trend known as "Jesus rock music."

"Thurlow was the closest thing to a nationally known 'name' we had at Calvary," Strang remembered later. But putting a national figure on the cover was a foreshadowing that this local church magazine would cover much more than the local church. Kathryn Kuhlman was the cover subject on the second issue . Arthur Blessitt was on the third cover.

The article about Kathryn Kuhlman was a rewrite of an article Strang wrote several months earlier for Florida magazine. It may have been the last magazine article about her ministry written before she died unexpectedly four months later.

Those early

years for Charisma were a struggle. Strang continued to work his full-time job covering the Orange County Commission for the newspaper by day and editing Charisma by night. At one point he took a three-month sabbatical from the newspaper to head up the publicity effort for Jesus '76, a "Jesus festival" in Orlando sponsored by Calvary Assembly. At the same time, the couple's first son was born—Cameron, now 24.

Instead of costing \$15,000, publishing Charisma cost \$60,000 that first year, while bringing in only \$10,000 in advertising. But a dream was taking form in Strang's heart that maybe God had a bigger purpose than Charisma being just a church magazine. Maybe , he thought, it could become national and make a big impact someday.

Strang had no experience except as a writer and lacked other essential aspects of publishing such as advertising and circulation. "We weren't very sophisticated," he admits. The circulation strategy consisted solely of promotions to church members.

Despite his lack of experience, Strang had all he needed: faith and determination. "I had a feeling that my destiny was to publish this magazine, and I was totally focused on making it succeed," he says. "They were very difficult times, but they were also exciting times. When things looked down, the Lord gave me opportunity."

Church leaders also believed God's hand was on the magazine, and the church ultimately invested \$100,000 in Charisma before it finally broke even several years later. In an annual church business meeting, one member stood and asked pastor Roy Harthern when Calvary Assembly would stop "beating a dead horse" and shut down Charisma.

Strang admits now that several times he got so discouraged he wanted to quit. But he didn't—and Charisma grew as readers and advertisers nationwide responded to its professional coverage of the burgeoning charismatic renewal.

Then four pivotal things happened. The first was that a staff member who had credibility with national advertisers joined the staff from Christian Life magazine in Wheaton, Illinois, in 1976. Margaret French, now retired, brought great credibility to the magazine and let national advertisers know the magazine wasn't just local anymore. It was also, perhaps, a foreshadowing that Charisma and Christian Life would merge in 1987.

Then in 1977, the leaders of the Congress on Charismatic

Renewal in the Christian Churches in Kansas City, Missouri, let this unknown magazine have a booth at that huge event. This was the magazine's first national exposure.

The same year Charles and Frances Hunter were featured on the cover of the September/October 1977 issue (see article on page 94). They took a liking to Strang and his magazine and started talking about Charisma as they traveled the nation.

Finally in 1978, Strang developed a relationship with Jamie Buckingham that went far beyond his writing his well-liked "Last Word" column (see page 110). He also brought inspiration and a strong friendship and served as a mentor.

"When Jamie Buckingham confronted me early in our relationship and asked, 'What would you do if you knew you could not fail?' it made me realize I was thinking much too small, and I was in a rut," Strang says. The relationship he had with Buckingham remains one of Strang's most cherished memories.

During those early years of struggle, Steve's wife, Joy, often got involved with the magazine. She was the first volunteer circulation director, keeping the few subscription records in a shoebox. "I never would have guessed it was something God was orchestrating to be what it turned out to be," she says today.

Joy shared her husband's strong faith. "I am a person who has to hear God for myself, rather than live off someone else's vision," Joy says. "By the time we got into it, I knew this was God's plan. God specifically spoke to me at various tough points to let me know what He was up to, so I had faith even in the midst of the difficulty."

Often He gave her encouraging Scriptures that pointed to the future.

“I typed them out and taped them on places I would see continually—the car dashboard and my mirror,” Joy says. “I kept these things in my view during the times that were difficult, knowing that God was going to bring us into a different season eventually.”

During the early years, Stephen Strang wore many hats in every department, including editorial, circulation and administration.

“I would personally OK every word in the magazine,” he remembers. In addition, he made many advertising calls himself, brainstormed circulation strategies and recruited staff.

By 1980, Strang recognized that publishing a national magazine in a local church setting had its limitations. To grow, the magazine needed to leave Calvary Assembly.

For a year he discussed with church leaders how this change could be done in the best interest of all. “I felt we’d grown up and needed to leave the house without leaving the family,” Strang remembers. Finally, they negotiated a buyout that reimbursed the church for its investment and allowed Strang freedom to pursue other publishing ventures.

At this point, Joy joined her husband full time at Charisma as chief financial officer, a position she still holds. There were nine full-time staff at the time.

“It was a struggle, but we never missed a payroll,” Strang says.

The new publishing ventures included Ministries Today, launched in 1983 to serve charismatic church leaders.

Then in 1986, what is now known as Strang Communications took on its biggest financial undertaking ever. It merged with the publishing entities of Christian Life Missions, which published the popular Christian Life magazine, as well as Christian Bookseller magazine and Creation House books.

All this happened after a brief conversation between Robert Walker, the respected, longtime editor of Christian Life, and Stephen Strang at a convention. Walker, then 74, had been looking for a successor but could never find the right person. After praying about it, he realized that instead of a person, God was giving him an organization to succeed him at Christian Life.

At that time both magazines had about the same circulation. But Walker feared the merger would cause Christian Life to lose subscribers because it had a different focus. Christian Life reported what God was doing in evangelical churches, Walker says, and it reported on all major denominations, starting with the Episcopal Church.

Walker's fears were unfounded. Instead, Charisma & Christian Life's circulation became 200,000 after the merger. "Looking back, you can see how the Lord had a hand in it," Walker says.

Other changes occurred as well. Strang reformatted the monthly Christian Bookseller to be a trade tabloid and renamed it Christian Retailing. At 20 issues a year, it now is one of the publishing house's most profitable

publications serving the burgeoning Christian products industry.

And Creation House rapidly grew with many new authors being acquired. Today it publishes 40 books a year under several imprints, including one on health called Siloam Press and in Spanish under Casa Creación.

In 1979, Strang saw a need for Sunday school curriculum for charismatic churches and started CharismaLife. His late father, Dr. A. Edward Strang, served as CharismaLife's first editor-in-chief for five years until his retirement. Today this area has grown to include materials called KIDS Church, which tie into the ministry of Bill Wilson of Metro Ministries in New York, as well as curriculum for nursery through adult.

In 1994, Strang teamed with Promise Keepers to launch New Man magazine as its official publication. Today Strang says he considers his role as publisher of New Man to be one of the main areas of ministry for himself personally. His interest in mentoring men to become all they can be in Christ has led him to author his first book (under his own byline), titled Old Man, New Man, due to be released in September.

Always the innovator, Strang came up with the idea of making the \$ hardback include a one-year subscription to New Man magazine (worth \$20) with each copy sold. His reason: The vision of the magazine and the book is the same—to help men put off the old nature and become new men in Christ.

The same year, seeing the potential in the growing Hispanic market and blessed with talented staff who could publish in Spanish, he launched Vida Cristiana ("Christian Life").

In the early 1990s, the organization began sponsoring women's conferences, and 8,000 women attended one held in April of this year. Joy Strang had the vision for these conferences, and in 1998 she launched SpiritLed Woman, a digest-size bimonthly magazine that grew out of the powerful ministry of the women's conferences.

The company's newest magazine is an offshoot of Christian Retailing. Also a trade tabloid, Inspirational Giftware serves the huge giftware industry for products aimed at Christians.

"A lot of people don't realize that sometimes the Lord opens doors of business opportunity," Strang explains. "Even though the trade magazines aren't ministry-oriented, they serve those markets well, and in that way we minister. But mostly they provide funding for other projects we couldn't afford to do otherwise."

This includes sponsoring much of the work of Christian Life Missions, the nonprofit ministry founded in the 1950s by Robert Walker. It sponsors projects such as Bruce Olsson's ministry in Colombia (see page 56) and raising \$250,000 to send Bibles to China, a project Strang promoted in Charisma last month.

During these years of growth the staff moved several times, first to other offices in Winter Park when Charisma became independent of Calvary Assembly in 1981. The Strangs built their first 7,000-square-foot office building in the Orlando suburb of Altamonte Springs in 1984 and in 1989 moved to the present location in the suburb of Lake Mary. There they developed a master plan that included constructing a warehouse first and later a headquarters building built in two phases. That 67,000-square-foot building was occupied last fall and

dedicated in February.

Along the way, something else was added to the Strang family. Another son, Chandler, was born in 1987. As a result of their own need for child care, the Strangs developed a preschool for employees' children, which is still open today and has served as a model for other companies in the Orlando area considering adding this employee benefit. The company also offers workout facilities, locker rooms and a racquetball court for its 200 employees.

It was these innovations and the fact that Strang Communications had created so many local jobs that prompted the Economic Development Commission of Mid-Florida to name the company "Industry of the Year" in 1994.

The next year Strang was honored for his achievements by Lee College (now Lee University) in Cleveland, Tennessee, with an honorary doctor of letters degree.

The magazines have won many awards through the years, but the one Strang values most is the one from the Evangelical Press Association, which gave Charisma the Award of Excellence for most outstanding magazine in the general interest category last year.

But for all the successes, there have been failures:

The Buckingham Report, a high-level weekly newsletter for senior pastors by Jamie Buckingham, was a critical success and a financial flop before being folded into Ministries Today in the mid-1980s.

For three years the company struggled to make a go of Inside Music, aimed at the contemporary Christian music market. After investing “lots of money,” Strang said he decided to fold the magazine, allowing him a few months later to start New Man.

A similar thing happened before Strang launched its Spanish magazine. For several years Strang worked to launch a Russian version of Charisma when communism fell in the early 1990s. It was a mission outreach, but Strang spent a great deal of his time trying to make it succeed. Finally he concluded that the Lord had closed the door in Russia.

About the same time it seemed the door opened to publish in Spanish. This opportunity continued to expand and later led to publishing books and Sunday school curriculum in Spanish.

“None of us like to admit our mistakes,” Strang says. “People may not see the mistakes and failures because of God’s blessing, but they are there. However, I believe when God closes one door, He opens another door of opportunity.

“Some people think we’re an overnight success, but I’ve been doing this more than half my life,” Strang continues. “And also, I’ve found that if you keep doing something long enough you’ll probably outlast your competition and be a success. The problem is, most people quit before they have a chance to be a success.

“I’ve also had to learn to walk in faith because we’ve had to believe God for everything that exists today.”

There have also been tough times and problems, including cash-flow problems, disappointments with trusted staff members who

left and the stress of building a growing ministry.

One of the most difficult times was when Jamie Buckingham died in 1992. Strang said he didn't know how much he depended on Buckingham's counsel until he was gone. Today Jack Hayford, formerly pastor of Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, fills that pastoral role for Strang and the staff. Walker is also a trusted adviser who visits the staff several times a year.

In spite of the success of the company, Stephen and Joy Strang say their motivation is not for monetary growth. Both say their ultimate goal is ministry.

This was their motivation in starting conferences. Their goal at the Charisma women's conferences, according to Joy, is to minister to each person there. There is an attempt to minimize any hype at the conferences—so much so that Strang Communications products are barely mentioned.

The same is true of the New Man Events beginning next month in Jacksonville, Florida. In fact, to avoid the need to "sell" the attendees subscriptions to New Man, attendees get a one-year subscription included when they register.

The goal of the New Man Events, Strang says, is to help men break free from sinful habits so they can pursue a deeper relationship with God.

"Our priority is ministry," Strang said recently. "We may be for-profit, but that just means we're a ministry that pays taxes. That actually gives us a lot more freedom in speaking out on issues and not being fearful of losing our tax-exempt

status.”

Stephen Strang is still overflowing with entrepreneurial ideas. He dreams of reaching nations with magazines in various languages and just published versions of Charisma in India and Africa. He dreams of publishing magazines for children, youth and young adults.

He dreams of claiming the Internet for Christ. He dreams of expanding the Charisma News Service—a daily online publication that was launched in 1999—so that one day it will function like a 21st-century version of CNN.

“I dream of the day when Charisma will have a circulation of 1 million, including online,” Strang says. If the last 25 years are any indication of what the future will hold, we can expect Strang’s dreams to come true.

Melissa Bogdany is the former managing editor of Christian Retailing.