

Recycling Ministry Sends 'Love Packages' to Churches Overseas

The shipments of surplus Christian literature sent by an Illinois-based ministry have helped bring thousands to Christ. It's an unlikely sounding strategy for world evangelism, but Steven Schmidt credits some simple spring-cleaning with bringing thousands of people to Christ and starting scores of new churches in other parts of the world.

The former Assemblies of God pastor gathers surplus Christian literature and ships it overseas to parts where the otherwise trashbound materials are like gold dust.

Schmidt solicits literature from publishers, Christian bookstores, churches and individual believers, asking them to go through their materials and pass along anything they don't need anymore.

This year alone his Butler, Love Packages ministry aims to send about 700 tons of discarded and unused books and curriculum. "We have an abundance, a glut of inspiration and information in this country," he told Charisma, "but for people in other parts of the world it's gold."

Schmidt told of visiting a Bible college in the Philippines where only 10 of the 70 students had a Bible of their own, and another in Africa where the school library consisted of just four short shelves of old books.

In 1999 he visited Zambia and met with government and church leaders, later sending two containers of Christian literature. As a result of the distribution, churches recorded almost 160,000 decisions for Christ, he said.

Raised in the Lutheran Church, Schmidt dropped out as a young man, turning to drugs, alcohol and rock 'n' roll. Then he became a Christian and entered the ministry. In the summer of 1975, he sensed God telling him in regard to some old Christian magazines he had lying around his home: "You're wasting that."

He gathered it up, eventually shipping 60 boxes of literature to missionaries overseas in just 12 months. Other people began passing along their castoffs as word of his efforts got around.

Individuals and churches across the country started mailing him materials, too. The work grew so much that he stepped down from the pastorate to devote himself full time to Love Packages.

The ministry took over an old school in Butler, and the several tons of mail it receives each week not only saved the small community's post office from closure, but also required the building of an additional room to accommodate all the materials.

Schmidt drives to collect large donations from publishers including the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptists, who give him excess Sunday school and vacation Bible school materials, as well as devotionals.

Some Christian bookstore owners promote Love Packages to their customers, and even pass along unsold publications that they cannot return for one reason or another. Sometimes they donate Bibles on which a name may have been inaccurately embossed.

“We can never get enough Bibles,” said Schmidt, who has traveled to more than 25 countries to arrange and check on distribution of his supplies. “It’s hard for us in America to understand that there are pastors overseas that don’t have their own Bibles, but that is the case.”

Jim Whitaker of New Life Christian Stores in Lynchburg, Va., supports Love Packages by collecting the donations from his local church—Victory Christian Center—and adding items from his store before mailing the box.

“Maybe books that are not returnable, but are not selling and are just sitting there on the shelf, or leftover Sunday school materials,” he said. “There are folks that will benefit that we will never see, but don’t have the ability to obtain products that we do [in this country]. We want to be able to bless others with the blessings God has given us.”

Individual packages sent fourth-class book rate arrive in the mail and are sorted by teams of volunteers. Cult and secular publications are weeded out, as are magazines with too much advertising or irrelevant material.

Schmidt said he had heard “thrilling stories” of how Love Packages shipments had made an impact. He was told that a tract from some literature he sent to India had been given to a paralyzed Hindu man who was healed and saved, later becoming a traveling evangelist.

“Thousands have come to the Lord and tens of thousands have received a witness through Love Packages literature,” Schmidt’s Indian contacts informed him.

“I have been doing this for a long time, but it still blows my mind, when I see the lack of materials [overseas],” he said.

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