

Books without borders: Supplying third world seminaries

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

Pity the poor book. Its obituary has been written many times as prognosticators glance over the horizon and predict that the Internet and downloadable literature and e-books will soon replace pages-between-covers.

These prophecies are stirring debate in America and Western Europe, where computers are widely available and Internet access is cheap. But the same prophecies do not apply to the developing world, where even a relatively wealthy country like South Africa has only 62 computers per 1,000 people. Fewer than one in five people in Africa have reliable access to electricity. A pastor in Kenya has to pay \$225 per month for dial-up Internet access in his rural area—service that is out of operation for weeks at a time. Church historian Kurt Berends observes, “We in the ‘minority world’ take political stability and infrastructure for granted.”

Bibliophiles, take heart. People are clamoring for theological books in many places where the church is growing fastest. In an effort to meet this need, Berends and his business partner, Wayne Bornholdt, cofounded the Theological Book Network (TBN) in 2004. Their goal is to send high-quality theological literature to fledgling seminaries overseas.

With an endorsement from the American Theological Library Association, which encourages its 267 member libraries to send its unwanted volumes to TBN, the organization has received hundreds of thousands of books. As the church continues its spectacular growth in the non-Western or “majority world,” theological educators struggle to keep up. When Berends hears reports about this growth, he asks, “What kind of church do we want?” Majority world and minority world Christians alike hope that the church will have a clergy that is not just enthusiastic, but learned.

Jack Graves, who came to TBN from Overseas Council International, estimates that during the 1990s two new graduate programs were opening in the non-Western world *every month*. Seminaries overseas have been enrolling more ministerial

candidates than their counterparts in the West. These schools do not lack for students or zeal, but they do lack resources for teaching.

Shipping books abroad is not a new idea. Other organizations, both religious and secular, run similar programs. But TBN does the job more efficiently and cheaply by sending large quantities in each shipment. During the past fiscal year, for example, TBN shipped 200,000 books to dozens of places in Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, and did so for a mere \$2.80 per volume. For the amount of money that a single church or school would pay to ship 500 volumes overseas, TBN sends 12,000—and provides the required labor.

Word spreads fast. Of the 73 institutions receiving TBN books in 2005-2006, 70 initiated contact with the organization through its Web site (theologicalbooknetwork.org). After a participating school describes its library's needs in an online application, TBN tries to meet those needs. It asks schools to share the costs if they can, but it knows that many Third World seminaries have \$200 or less in their annual budget for book buying.

Normally it costs about \$20 to add a single volume to an African library collection. With TBN, a library can add a volume for ten cents—stretching that annual budget of \$200 to buy not just ten volumes, but 2,000. Lillian Sullivan, a librarian at St. Paul's Seminary in Fort Portal, Uganda, where enrollment has been doubling every year, could spend her entire budget on one book. But TBN provided Sullivan with 650 books in one year and thereby quadrupled St. Paul's collection.

TBN's motto is "Converting EXCESS in our world to ACCESS in the rest of the world." Theology texts are so plentiful in the U.S. that it is difficult to give them away. School libraries receive boxes of books from alumni or faculty—books that they do not need. If the schools refuse the donations, the donor may be offended. If the books are accepted, the librarians must hunt through thousands of volumes to find a few usable ones. Then the schools hold used-book sales for the rest, which undercuts local bookstores—and provides clever students with a way to make money by reselling the books.

Publishers have hundreds of leftover new books that they cannot sell, in addition to damaged "seconds." To unload these books on the used market would undercut their sales of new books even more.

In each of these cases TBN can help. Individuals and institutions can ship donations of fewer than 1,000 books to TBN's warehouse in Grand Rapids, Michigan. (The location is ideal. Eerdmans and Baker Books are also located there, and donate generously.) TBN picks up the larger loads. Its full-time staff of four cull through the donations, discard those that are inappropriate, organize the rest by theological field, and package and ship them. Seventy percent of the books shipped are used, 30 percent are new. Professors overseas, accustomed to getting books only after they have known about them for years via the Internet, have been astounded to receive newly published works.

Nathan Hoppe, librarian of Albania's Resurrection of Christ Theological Academy, marveled that the 50 boxes of books he received "contained excellent resources that simply have not been available anywhere in Albania at any library or bookstore until now." President Charlemagne Ndittemeh of Cameroon Baptist Seminary in Kumba wrote, "The used books in the U.S. that I saw people just throw away . . . are fresh gold for us here."

Katharina Penner, a librarian at International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, the Czech Republic, thanked TBN for its 2,348 new books. The school kept 746 of them and plans to distribute the others to nearby seminaries, to students for courses or to visiting pastors. (TBN asks that books not be given away to those outside the seminary community so as not to undercut local booksellers.) Assessing a book's worth at \$20 on average, Penner said, "This way IBTS library has in one day gained an additional \$14,920 for its book budget."

A university in a country in which the church is outlawed agreed to let Christian courses be taught in its philosophy department, but provided no funding. TBN is planning to stock the university's library with its first theology section.

Berends and Bornholdt have strong theological commitments to the project. Both are from evangelical and Reformed backgrounds; both value ecumenism. They prefer to send books to places where ecumenical cooperation will be fostered (though this is not always possible; Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo is one school that has few Christian neighbors). The two have a preference for old books, which reflects Bornholdt's first career as a used-book dealer in Chicago's Hyde Park. (Seminarians and faculty still mourn the closing of his theological bookstore.)

TBN hopes its work will also help stop the brain drain to the majority world. If theological libraries can help build more rigorous graduate-level programs, perhaps scholars who currently choose to remain in the U.S. after they study here will be more inclined to return home to teach.

What about the fact that most of the donated books are in English—hardly the native tongue in Albania, Cameroon, the Czech Republic or most Islamic countries? Berends and Bornholdt respond that English is the new Latin.

Jack Graves estimates that 80 percent of non-Western seminaries (as opposed to Bible schools) require proficiency in reading English by the third year. TBN's Web site says English is a necessity for "Koreans to share insights with Latin Americans, for Middle Eastern Christians to read the writings of Eastern European or Chinese pastors." In addition, the number of non-English resources has increased. The TBN warehouse now has books in Italian, Arabic and French; thousands of these volumes have come from BETH, the association of European seminary libraries.

Berends hopes that those who read these texts will go on to write theology in their native languages and out of their experience. "That will be their gift back to us," he says.