

Byron and Beth Borger, independent Christian bookstore owners, face uncertain times

## **“There are very few self-defined Christian bookstores like Hearts and Minds,” said author John Fea.**

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue



Byron and Beth Borger. RNS photo by Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans.

Byron and Beth Borger have long been an anomaly in the world of Christian booksellers.

After the Borgers launched [Hearts and Minds bookstore in Dallastown, Pennsylvania](#), during the faith-based bookstore boom times of the 1980s, they bucked evangelical conventions by including Catholic writers such as Thomas Merton and featuring books on topics such as racial justice. They faced boycotts, picketing, and even death threats from the Ku Klux Klan over a display of books by Martin Luther King Jr., Byron Borger said.

The store survived and thrived for years, appealing to mainline Protestants and to those Beth Borger calls “thinking evangelicals.”

“Thinking evangelicals are one of our core customer-based groups,” she said. “I don’t feel like a lonely voice.”

Now the future of this idiosyncratic venture is uncertain with Christian retail stores going out of business and the continued dominance of online sellers such as Amazon. In recent years, the Borgers have cut back on staff and dipped into their savings to keep the store going.

“I’m not embarrassed to say that we have not been doing well,” Byron Borger said. “We have not been self-sustaining.”

Most of the store’s support comes from people in the mid-Atlantic and Midwest regions. A third of the Borgers’ business involves traveling to conferences and other events, like the annual clergy retreat of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, where Byron Borger gave book recommendations at the speaker’s mic and the adjoining room became a pop-up retail venue.

They haven’t had the money to put their entire stock online, and the software needed would require another full-time staffer.

Hearts and Minds’ struggles come amid turmoil in the Christian retail world. In 2017, the nation’s largest Christian merchandise chain, Family Christian, went out of business, shuttering more than 240 bookstores across the country.

At the same time, *Publishers Weekly* religion editor Emma Wenner noted that there’s an increased interest in books on religion and spirituality.

“Publishers are doing OK,” she added. “It’s the retailers who are really suffering. The retailers have to find the book buyers.”

That has led to a kind of love-hate relationship between bookstores and publishers.

“It used to be that writers wrote books, publishers published them, and bookstores sold them,” said Byron Borger. “Now writers have to market their books and publishers sell them half off. They are our friends one day, enemies the next.”

A recent report by the American Booksellers Association, the independent bookstore trade group, found in mid-December that sales were up by around 5 percent over the previous year. Preorders online proved especially successful.

[Hearts and Minds continues to have a loyal fan base](#) both among book buyers and authors who have developed personal connections with the Borgers.

“There are very few self-defined Christian bookstores like Hearts and Minds,” said John Fea, author of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*. When Fea gave a book talk there last summer, “the place was packed,” he said, estimating that 200 people came.

Fea appreciates that Hearts and Minds’ shelves are filled with books rather than “kitschy” Christian products like figurines, diaries, and framed Bible verses.

For now, the Borgers, who are both 64, plan to keep the store going. They lack money to retire, and they still enjoy the work. One-on-one interaction, such as the emails they exchange with online book buyers, is time-consuming but rewarding, Byron Borger said. And it fits the store’s personality.

“Is there a way of being online and still being small-scale, inefficient almost on purpose?” — Religion News Service

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “People: Byron and Beth Borger.”*