



FROM 'FAMILY' TO FAMILY-OWNED

Former Family store employees keep Christian stores alive in their communities. **BY ANDY BUTCHER**

The biggest chain in Christian retail may be history, but some of its individual links are writing a new chapter as former Family Christian Stores staff lead the way in a mini revival of ministry-focused independents.

Six months after the closure of almost 250 Family outlets across the country, following a failed attempt to come back from bankruptcy, ex-employees are among those starting new businesses to ensure their communities continue to have a brick-and-mortar Christian retail business.

Like the Empowered Life mini-chain launched by Troy Wormell, president of Harrison House Publishers, who acquired 15 Family locations, these new indies believe that they can succeed where Family failed.

Among them is Kirk Ford, for whom opening The Christian Store in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is the fulfillment of a 20-year dream to have his own store after 24 years with Family: starting as an assistant music buyer, he worked his way up to store manager.

Being out on his own rather than part of a corporate machine means he can be more nimble.

"It's so much easier to implement new marketing ideas and new product lines in an independent store," he says. "We

don't have to go through the layers of management to start something new or to improve on an existing idea or process. If we try something new and it doesn't work, it's easy for us to turn on a dime and change it up a little or scrap the idea altogether."

Central to his approach is being more locally focused than the Family store was. "It's much easier to buy based on our customers' needs and wants," he says. "We'll make sure that we always have gospel, southern gospel, and instrumental CDs available."

The store also features a sitting area with used dining room tables and chairs, snacks, and a large screen TV, rather than the corporate Family feel.

Bill Harman, a 28-year Family veteran, echoes the importance of knowing the community at his Connections Christian Store in Lynden, Washington. "I've lived in this town and worked in this county for the past 22 years and that is helpful knowing what to provide.

"We've been intentional in making our store look and feel different. Our goal was to create a store that would be a 'wow' experience for our guest, and from guests' reaction, we've achieved our goal," says Harman. "We've shunned the chain-store look with its plethora of signs and opted for a 'clean' look."

There's still a focus on new releases and best-sellers, but he's trimmed inventory, which has meant more room for face-out product. "In the former store, cards were our top performing category, accounting for 22 percent of our volume, and since we opened, books have accounted for 34 percent of our sales," Harman reports. "Sometimes 'less is more' can be true."

'DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY'

Others are taking the best of what they learned working for Family and tweaking it according to their local community's need, including Karen Gadberry, who with her husband, Bill, has opened Christian Life Books and Gifts in Lincoln, Nebraska. Kari Kryder, a former assistant manager at Family's Flint, Michigan, location has opened the doors on the city's new Faith Christian Store.

Not everyone involved in the post-Family wave has personal experience with the chain. Kevin Adams felt led to step into the breach left by the closure of three Family locations in his Central Florida area, opening FIT Books—Freedom In Truth, from John 8:32—in the space the chain vacated in Ocoee.

"Because we are locally owned, we can do some things differently," says Adams, who has employed some former Family staff. "One thing we are trying to do is reach out to the different language communities we have here: Spanish, French, Creole, Portuguese."

Though he has no direct retail background, Adams brings book and business experience to his new venture, having previously been a distributor of Christian books to fellow seminary students and involved in several church planting projects.

Acknowledging he has taken on a challenge, he says, “I am hoping and praying that this will be successful and that God will bless it. Every person that comes through the doors is just so happy to see that there is a Christian store again.”

Both Adams and Ford are going hard after church accounts; The Christian Store offers churches and pastors a 15 percent cut. For Harman, “church accounts as a billable account are not a part of my plan, as the reality is most every church has gatekeepers armed with church debit/credit cards, though that doesn't mean I'm not pursuing their business and partnership.”

‘CHRIST-CENTERED EMPHASIS’

All those who spoke with *Christian MARKET* told how happy shoppers were to see them open.

“In some ways it's been helpful for our customers and churches to have experienced life for nearly four months without a Christian retail experience and we've seen a real ‘support the local Christian store’ battle cry being sounded by many local pastors and by our guests,” says Harman.

Ford notes that “our customers are just so happy to have a Christian bookstore in the area again that they haven't even been asking for discounts.”

These post-Family “revivalists” are fired by a passion for the ministry of Christian resources and a conviction that physical retail is still not only viable but necessary.

“A large percentage of the Christian population still likes to come in and look at and feel the Bible they would like to buy for themselves or for a gift or for a family member,” says Ford. “Our

customers also love the Christ-centered customer service they receive at our store. They feel comfortable staying for a long time, and they also know that their dollars are not going to support causes that are not Christ-centered.”

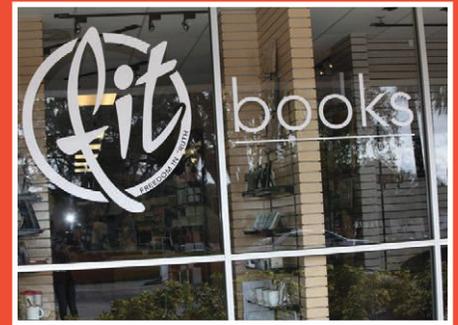
For Harman “the challenge is not the relevancy of Christian retail but the economic viability of affordable rent and rising payroll.” He says, “We make a difference in people's lives every day. Not a day passes without encountering someone who's hurting, troubled, seeking, searching.”

As a newcomer to the industry, Adams has been encouraged by the support he's received from suppliers pleased to see a Christian store returning to the area; they helped with giveaways for FIT's grand opening, which featured freebies, drawings, and big discounts.

What can suppliers do to help the post-Family wave? “Better discounting on gifts and/or easier terms to achieve free freight,” suggests Harman “It's rare I ever pay for freight on any of my book or Bible products, yet gifts, which are a nonreturnable product, has with rare exception the same discount as books and ridiculously high thresholds for any kind of freight discount, let alone free freight.”

Proactive promos for stores, says Ford. “If they could send out an email each month suggesting some of their best-selling product for a certain season or holiday with special discounts, that would take pressure off of the independent store buyers—just something short and sweet that will help the stores create a themed promo with great discounts, maybe even a suggestion for a display. It would be a win-win for stores and vendors.” **M**

Andy Butcher is a British-born journalist whose career has seen him write for newspapers, edit magazines, direct a communications network for an international mission agency, and author/co-author four books.



FIT Books in Ocoee, Florida is reaching out to the different language communities in the area.



Books now account for 34 percent of sales for Connections Christian Store in Lynden, Washington.



The Christian Store in Cedar Rapids, Iowa replaced the corporate look inside the store with a more homey feel.



Kari Kryder, a former assistant manager at Family's Flint, Michigan, location, opened the city's new Faith Christian Store.