

Plenary II

Planning Committee

Remarks on the future of Beacon Press

Bob Lavender

Beacon Press part of the UUA's mission?

Absolutely. In fact, Beacon is the one program activity that is engaged every day in active affirmation and promotion of every one of the UUA's seven principles. It bears our banner and proclaims the things we believe. It is unique among religious publishing houses because it is not bound to any limited theological perspective, nor subject to the stifling oversight of its hierarchy.

Financial impact on the UUA of conducting a publishing company.

The Financial Advisor is correct in his summary of the Press's financial picture and he is correct to insist that we confront the truth in this regard, however unpleasant we may find it.

Have we run Beacon like a business?

Yes, we have, and therein lies part of the problem. We're good at running a religious organization, but there is nothing gained in the experience of operating a religious organization which equips one to oversee a publishing company. We have tried to be very corporate in managing Beacon, holding it to a standard of bottom line profitability, allocating headquarters overhead, expecting consistent performance in a most inconsistent industry, even though we don't approach any of our other departmental responsibilities from that perspective.

There's not a whole lot of point in trying to run something like a business when there is no real likelihood it can be operated at a break-even level. We're dealing here with a publisher whose health derives from its ethical strength, not from the amount of revenue it generates. It is an ugly fact that you cannot make a living in the publishing industry on \$5 million in sales. Beacon is analogous to most university presses -- none of them make money -- they exist because they have endowments or receive direct subsidies from their academic owners.

Perhaps the message here is that we should operate Beacon as if it were another program-driven department of the UUA and accept the fact that it will cost us a certain amount per year to go forward, more or less as we have.

Organization of total UUA publishing activities.

The Association does a lot of publishing beyond Beacon:

- the WORLD
- Skinner House
- a wide range of RE publications
- the consistently profitable Bookstore

My figures may be a bit out of date but, the last time I looked -- at Fiscal 2000 -- Beacon's annual revenues were \$5.9 million as compared with overall UUA publishing revenues of \$7.125 million. Looking at all publishing in the aggregate, revenues exceed costs by some \$600,000. This may suggest ways of grouping responsibilities and accountability, to the achievement of cost efficiencies.

Can we unload the financial burden but keep the Press alive?

What about taking in a financial partner, or selling the Press to a buyer who would continue to put out the same nature of book? This may be to dream the impossible dream. The only ongoing value Beacon Press would have to a potential buyer would lie almost entirely in the back list and, because of changes taking place in the publishing industry, this value is diminishing. No new owner could be counted on to continue Beacon's publishing style.

Is there a possible solution to the Beacon problem that we have missed? The last time Beacon's situation came before the General Assembly was in 1978. Guess what! The Press was losing money. The responsible, fiscally oriented types wanted to get this particular monkey off our backs. The Administration was uncomfortable with the thought of a somewhat unpredictable entity that had to be fitted into our neat, predictable formula for budgeting revenue. At that time it was made clear the delegates saw the Press as within the scope of our mission and wanted it to continue -- but making this happen was left to the Beacon Press Review Committee and the Board.

To put the problem and a possible solution in perspective, let me set out a simple minded little analysis. The UUA has some 160,000 adult American members. Beacon generates \$1 to \$2 of revenue over costs on each book sold. Therefore, if each member were to buy two Beacon books in the course of a year, financial concern for the Press could be allayed.