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Culture



Members of The Catholic University of America Chamber Choir sing during an Oct. 10, 2017, rehearsal at the Washington campus' St. Vincent Chapel. Recent guidelines distributed by the U.S. bishops on how to safely reopen parishes amid the coronavirus pandemic suggest against singing, as the act of projecting your voice can propel respiratory droplets that might carry the virus. (CNS/Chaz Muth)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Leaders at the three major U.S. publishers of Catholic worship resources are expressing concern about how the continuing coronavirus pandemic will impact their operations, which largely rely on bulk sales of hymnals and missalettes to individual parishes.

In separate NCR interviews, officials at OCP (Oregon Catholic Press), GIA Publications and Liturgical Press each highlighted significant dips in sales due to the earlier lockdown orders and closing of parishes to prevent the spread of the virus.

As parishes reopen with limits on numbers allowed in attendance and restrictions on distribution of printed items so as to stop possible routes of virus transmission, the officials also wondered about the pandemic's continued effects on their companies.

"We've certainly seen a big drop-off in the things that the churches would ordinarily be ordering from us," said Wade Wisler, publisher at OCP, which estimates that its products are used in about three-fourths of parishes across the country.

"There's also a sense of uncertainty as we look to budget for the coming year," said Wisler, noting that OCP, like many organizations, would normally project its budget for the next year based on recent past trends of its spending and income.

"How do you budget for a year when it looks like the churches will be hurting for quite some time and not needing as much from us?" he asked, before adding: "We'll just do our best. We will certainly budget for a down year. There's no doubt about that."

Shannon Chisholm, publisher for parish resources at Liturgical Press, said each of the publishing houses had seen their income "pretty much evaporate" as parishes closed during the lockdowns and lost their own income streams, largely based on donations.

"It's been really hard for all of us," said Chisholm. "We're here to support the parishes, first and foremost, but … we're also in a tough place ourselves."

Chisholm said that representatives of the three publishing houses have taken the unusual step of meeting together every other week to analyze the market and talk through the developing situation.

Matt Reichert, director of outreach and engagement for GIA Publications, focused on how sales and distribution methods for worship resources will likely shift, not just in the short term but for a longer, indeterminate period.

Reichert noted that parishes may be able to welcome limited in-person assemblies but will also likely have to keep providing livestreams for those taking part from afar.

"We will be doing livestreamed liturgies for a long time — until we can get to a point where everyone who normally would have come to a particular liturgy can come," he said.

"We know that [for] next year, the year after perhaps … we will have to continue to serve and pray with members of all of our parish communities differently," said Reichert. "We have to anticipate just how the ground has shifted and it probably won't settle back to where it was."

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OCP, based in Portland, and GIA, based in Chicago, are both known particularly for their hymnal and music resources.

OCP publishes "Journeysongs," a hymnal with hundreds of songs that parishes frequently buy in bulk for use over a period of years. GIA publishes "Worship" and "Gather," hymnals that are often purchased in a similar manner.

Both Wisler and Reichert noted that guidelines distributed by the U.S. bishops on how to safely reopen parishes suggest against singing, as the act of projecting your voice can propel respiratory droplets that might carry the virus.

"We're really trying to find creative, safe, appropriate ways that people can continue to sing as part of worship," said Wisler. "It's a concern, it really is."

Liturgical Press, based at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, publishes Mass settings and "The Collegeville Hymnal." It is also a book publisher. Chisholm said that sales of worship resources normally make up less than half of the company's annual income, but are usually a reliable source of funds.

"This is sort of income we can depend on … because it's the same customers year after year who subscribe," said Chisholm.

Despite the economic difficulties for OCP, a not-for-profit that will celebrate its centenary in 2022, Wisler remained optimistic."It's certainly a difficult time for all of us," said the publisher. "And yet, we're Christians. We are people of the resurrection. We have hope."

"If you're Catholic, you have 2,000 years of history," he said. "There have been so many difficult periods, so many tragedies and difficulties that the church has gone through. You maintain hope that we can all work together and get through this."

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