

## **WESLEY OWEN – URGENT UPDATE!**

Dear Church leader/fellow christian

First of all may I apologise for the hasty manner of this email and the fact it is not on official letterhead. Time is very short and like may of you I am focused on ministry this Christmas!

I am writing to you concerning the future of the Wesley Owen book store in Walsall. As many of you know we have been praying that a buyer will be found for the store. Some of the stores have been sold as going concerns, but the Walsall store is not included in the sale. The store is now in administration and is being run in such a way as to achieve the most cash possible in order to pay off the creditors of the business.

If we do nothing the administrators will run the store for a few days/weeks, sell the stock off at half price (the posters are already in the store to go up after Christmas) and then close the store and lay off the staff. That will be the end (they already have a new payment system in place in the store). We know from other closures in town, when the end comes that is it!

This potential outcome is not what many of us believe is right for Walsall!

A potential solution has been arrived at through some discussions with other churches and also talking with people at the Crossing.. It is also the preferred option for the staff team who are committed to keeping a christian bookstore in Walsall.

This solution has a longer term vision and a short term interim arrangement.

Longer term the store would be run under the banner of a church cooperative. It would be run commercially in order to break-even, or even turn a small profit to be put back into the business. It would have a board of trustees to oversee the business made up from people from local churches with relevant experience. There would also be a commitment to exploring exciting missional opportunities that present themselves from its location and the fact that many who are searching for faith come into the store.

The short term reality is that on Monday the administrator looks at the situation, the offers he has on the table and decides the future. I have spoken to him last thing on Friday and I know he has a bid in place just for the stock in order to run things down as set out above.

Obviously time is of the essence and to put together a cooperative of churches etc will take careful planning and several meetings and legal processes. This will of course be impossible before Monday therefore I want to propose to you an interim arrangement which can be put into action in the next 48 hours.

In anticipation of this the Board of the Crossing which is owned by St Paul's and has charitable purposes for the Christian Faith have agreed to step into the gap. We have agreed to make a bid either for the store as a going concern, or for the stock. Both options will involve employing staff, paying rent and the other costs of the business. We do have some advantages as we already have things in place to run the Crossing business ie staffing, bookkeeping, accounts etc. We would run the bookshop in an interim period to discern and work towards its longer term viability (please be clear that the business will be carefully monitored and losses can be sustained for only a short period of time). The bookshop business would be ring-fenced within the overall Crossing business and a small working group made of of people from local churches with relevant experience as well as representation from the existing board will oversee the shop and ensure there is no financial confusion between the businesses. This is an interim option, st pauls

does not want to own the shop, it is simply the best placed to act.

In putting forward a bid the Crossing is opening itself to a number of risks and is stepping out in faith. The directors have agreed to go ahead on the basis that this is a shared undertaking with other churches who will stand alongside. What does this look like?

1. A commitment to support the store in terms of volunteers both shopfloor and board level.
2. A financial commitment to cover the start-up costs and any potential liabilities should things not work out. To give you an example a similar email request in Coventry received pledges of £200 per year for 5 years from over 40 people and churches. We do not feel able to ask for pledges over such a time period as this would be for the longer term planning. We do feel as a board we need to have a commitment of £10,000 which would be a threshold for going forward. This money would be placed into a restricted account and ring fenced for the shop. If things do not work out then the money would cover the shortfall. If as we hope things do work out then the money could be put into the longer term business. This amount could be made up from churches providing larger amounts eg £500 or £1000. Individuals offering cash amounts or commitments to support over a period of say 6 months of say £20 or £50 per month from churches or individuals.
3. That churches commit to trade in the store as much as possible.

To this end we need an urgent response. I know it is Christmas and difficult but only an urgent response will suffice:

I am aware that this is a significant challenge and normal church structures are not set up for swift decision making. You may have all kinds of questions, doubts about the business model (our figures are based upon actual figures from the business and the advice of people who have been in business for many years) and there will be a time to go through them carefully. The reality however is that we need to act by Monday morning. If we do not, the administrator will act on the basis of the bids he has in place (see above).

Please respond to this. Please pass it onto others (use your contacts, clergy please pass onto your congregations), please pray and act.

yours in Christ

Mark Kinder (vicar of st pauls and on behalf of Crossing Board)