Jehovah's Witnesses — Publishing Titans

Who knew? Their *Watchtower* is now the world's largest magazine. But you can't buy it anywhere.

By Jim Meyers

STEP ASIDE, *AARP THE MAGAZINE.* Move over, *People.* The most widely read magazine in the world is a publication you can't subscribe to or find on any newsstand.

The Watchtower, the monthly publication of the Jehovah's Witnesses distributed by volunteers in the course of their house-to-house ministry, now boasts a circulation of more than 25 million.

Last year, the world's 7.3 million Jehovah's Witnesses spent 1.5 trillion hours knocking on doors and handing out *The Watchtower,* a doctrinal guide to Witnesses' beliefs, according to *The New York Review of Magazines.* There are plenty of copies to go around. Every month nearly 40 million copies are printed in more than 180 languages for distribution in 236 countries. The closest competitor, *AARP The Magazine,* has a circulation of just over 24 million.



DOOR-TO-DOOR SCORE Jehovah's Witnesses hand out copious copies of *The Watchtower.*

The Watchtower — the full name is *The Watchtower: Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom* — is published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, with headquarters near the East River in Brooklyn, N.Y. The Tract Society also publishes a companion magazine, *Awake!,* as well as a number of books, brochures, and a Bible.

The operation is funded entirely by donations, mostly from Witnesses who leave contributions at their meeting places, called Kingdom Halls. The Witnesses' overall income is unknown, but in 2001 *Newsday* listed the Tract Society as one of New York City's 40 richest corporations, with revenues exceeding $950 million.

The Watchtower's mission statement is printed on the inside cover page of each issue: "The purpose of this magazine is to honor Jehovah God, the Supreme Ruler of the universe. Just as watchtowers in ancient times enabled a person to observe developments from affair, so this magazine shows us the significance of world events in the light of Bible prophecies. It comforts people with the good news that God's Kingdom, which is a real government in heaven, will soon bring an end to all wickedness and transform the earth into paradise."

The Watchtower, and the Witnesses, had their origin in 1879, when writer and preacher Charles T. Russell released *Zion's Watch Tower* and *Herald of Christ's Presence.*

Russell was a former assistant editor of the Second Adventist magazine, *Herald of the Morning,* and had gathered followers in the years before 1879 through speaking tours and newspaper columns. He parted ways with Adventist doctrine when the world did not end in 1878, as it had predicted.

His new doctrine stated that Christ would return to earth in 1914 to destroy nonbelievers and allow Witnesses to transform the planet into paradise. The religion adopted the name Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1930s, teaching that Christ did return in 1914 but was invisible. Witnesses now "take a less specific approach to the end of the world," according to the *Review of Magazines,* published by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Each issue of *The Watchtower* is planned a year in advance by the nine-member writing committee at the Witnesses' Brooklyn headquarters, and a central theme, such a child rearing or divorce, is chosen for that month.

Members of the 70-person writing department live with about 1,500 other workers in five buildings near the Brooklyn headquarters. □

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