



## CAMEROON

# CHALLENGES for Christian Publishers

*Bonkung Handerson Jeku, editor of Baptist Voice in Cameroon, outlines the state of Christian publishing in his country and calls for change.*

With the advent of a multi-party system in 1990, the economic, socio-cultural and political landscapes in Cameroon changed. There has been a remarkable improvement in the freedom of expression. The media landscape has equally been liberalized, at least in principle. This generalized improvement has given a leeway to Christian publishing as well. Publications that could formerly be considered as libel now flood newsstands around the country.

There is a veritable "gold mine" of opportunities in the country. However, Christian writers and publishers have not taken advantage of the opportunities at hand. Most publications are denominational efforts that do not appeal to a broader market. People think that Christian publications have a limited scope.

### **Denominational publishing**

The Catholic Church publishes two newspapers, *L'Effort Camerounaise* and *Cameroon Panorama*. The first, *L'Effort Camerounaise*, is produced in the city of Douala and printed in French and English. It covers both religious and secular news. *Cameroon Panorama*, only in English, is published

in Buea, South West Province of Cameroon. Though the papers could reach the general public, they are distributed through the archdioceses and parishes. These in turn sell to sales agents in churches. The use of only these few distribution venues limits the impact of these publications on Cameroonian society.

The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) has the distinction of being the oldest publishing house in Southern Cameroon. It owns a printing press in the city of Limbe, but its communications department is in Buea. Communications Secretary Achowah Umenei heads a staff of seven. They publish a regular newsletter covering events and activities of the PCC, along with approximately four titles per year plus diaries, almanacs and Sunday school lessons. All printed material of the PCC is distributed through its churches. They do not reach the market at large.

The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) is in a similar situation. It produces many publications, including Bible lesson booklets, religious and other school curricula, manuals and other materials. However, most publications are only for denominational use. The

CBC Communications Ministry publishes the *Baptist Voice* monthly. According to the paper's editor in-chief, Peter Ngong, *Baptist Voice* started over 30 years ago, and is distributed and sold through associations and churches. The CBC also maintains the Baptist Book Depot in Buea. It imports books and sells them to

Health Board material of the CBC, printed by the Unique Printers in Bamenda. Money that could be used to bolster the local economy and to impact Cameroonian society is spent abroad.

### **Challenges**

Twice in 1998 and 1999, Transparency International, a German based NGO,

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schools and to the public at subsidized rates.

Though the CBC has a bookstore and therefore the opportunity to reach beyond the church market, it has other problems. Alfred Saker, a Baptist English missionary to Cameroon, is said to have begun Cameroon's first printing press in the 1850s, but the CBC today does not own even a good mimeograph, let alone a printing press. The CBC spends huge amounts of money each year printing church material elsewhere, usually in the neighboring country of Nigeria. One exception is the

named Cameroon as the most corrupt nation in a study carried out in 99 nations. Democracy and freedom of expression in Cameroon have allowed the growth of corruption, laissez-faire attitudes in the church and in society at large, and the propagation of false doctrines. Christian writing and publishing is needed more than ever, but the industry is stagnant. The following problems hamper Christian publishing in the country.

1. *Bias against local publications:* Most Cameroonians still do not appreciate their

own homemade products. When average Cameroonians learn to love and patronize national products, then other problems can take care of themselves.

**2. Poor sales:** It is well understood that sales alone from a newspaper cannot keep that paper afloat. Yet, the situation is worse when Christians who are supposed to be the main market for Christian papers make little or no effort to buy them. For instance, the CBC has over 700 churches in 23 areas throughout the country, with a membership of about 75,000 Christians. However, only 1000 copies of the *Baptist Voice* newspapers are printed monthly. Sales hardly ever break even. The same is true for the other denominational publications in Cameroon.

**3. Poor distribution channels:** Churches and parishes are the main distribution venues for Christian publications in Cameroon. Unfortunately, not all people in leadership positions have a burden for publishing. Most offset books or printed materials are dumped in the offices of leaders, who make little effort to sell Christian books to their constituencies. After some time, the materials are sent back to the publishers, to the annoyance of the writers and editors. Few sales efforts aim to reach the general public.

**4. Lack of capital:** There are some Christians in Cameroon who wish to spread the Gospel through print media but lack the funding to begin.

**5. Denominational barriers:**

Most Christian publications focus on one denomination or church, with little or nothing to do with other churches or issues outside the church. This makes the publications unattractive to the general public.

**6. Lack of advertisements:**

Though sales often do not break even, most of the

Christian magazines and newspapers in Cameroon carry no advertisements that could support their cost of production.

**7. Lack of trained personnel:** The PCC offers annual seminars where participants from every denomination are taught news gathering, interview techniques, public speaking, and publishing. However, most national writers lack professional training. Pastors need to be trained as Christian writers to address the concerns of believers, to address cultural concerns, and to evangelize Cameroonians.

### **Some solutions**

Cameroon is a country where corruption and false doctrines abound. Christians need to surmount this evil

by proclaiming the truth with power through Christian print media.

Aggressive sales agents should be recruited to take charge of sales in exchange for reasonable commissions.

Cameroonian Christians should learn to patronize their publications by buying them and advertising their businesses in them. Editors and publishers should produce more attractive publications with greater attention to the needs and interests of the market.

At present there is no Christian publishing association where publishers can work to address and solve common problems. Christian publishers need to work together to have a greater impact for Christ.

Christian publishing in Cameroon has every reason to make a difference in today's democratic society. ❖



## **International PUBLISHING EVENTS**

**January 28-February 3, 2001**

Christian Booksellers Association Expo, Louisville, KY USA  
[www.cbaonline.org](http://www.cbaonline.org)

**February 10-13, 2001**

National Religious Broadcasters Convention, Dallas, TX USA  
[www.nrb.org](http://www.nrb.org)

**March 11-22, 2001**

Marketing, Sales & Distribution, ICPI, Colorado Springs, CO USA  
[www.ccmi.org](http://www.ccmi.org)

**March 15-16, 2001**

Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Christian Book Editor Conference & International Rights Forum, Colorado Springs, CO USA  
[www.ecpa.org](http://www.ecpa.org)

**March 16-21, 2001**

Salon du Livre: Paris Book Fair, Paris, France  
[salondulivre.reed-oip.com](http://salondulivre.reed-oip.com)

**March 18-23, 2001**

Jerusalem International Book Fair, Jerusalem, Israel  
[www.jerusalembookfair.com](http://www.jerusalembookfair.com)

**March 25-27, 2001**

London Book Fair, London, United Kingdom  
[www.libf.co.uk](http://www.libf.co.uk)

**April 4-7, 2001**

Bologna Children's Book Fair, Bologna, Italy  
[www.bolognafiere.it](http://www.bolognafiere.it)

**April 19-22, 2001**

Tokyo International Book Fair, Tokyo, Japan  
[www.reedexpo.co.jp](http://www.reedexpo.co.jp)

**April 16-May 7, 2001**

Salon Internacional del Libro Latinoamericano y Feria Internacional de Libro/International Book Fair, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
[www.el-libro.com.ar](http://www.el-libro.com.ar)

**April 25-27, 2001**

Asia International Book Fair and Library Expo, Singapore  
[www.aibf.com.sg](http://www.aibf.com.sg)