

Challenges

Of Bible Publishing In Africa

David Waweru, of Bookprint Creative Services in Kenya, draws upon his experiences with Bible publishing to describe the challenges in Scripture production and distribution today.

Africa's population stands at 650 million people. It has the world's highest growth rate, at 10 percent per annum. There are over 3,000 ethno-linguistic peoples with 1,800 known languages—about 30 percent of the world's total. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached extensively and Christianity is now professed by 60 percent of Africa's Sub-Saharan population. However, there are still unreached peoples.

Bible translation work

Of the 1,800 languages, only 620 have Scripture in one form or another. The complete Bible is available in 115 languages. The New Testament is available in 225 languages, and 280 other languages at least have Bible portions.

Still, over 400 million people have nothing. Though work is in progress in 295 languages, translation has not yet begun for almost 900 indigenous languages.

Those who do not have Scriptures in their languages struggle to read and interpret Scripture from the official languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish) which often leads to gross misinterpretation. They struggle to read the Bible—if they can read at all.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has more than 426 known

language groups while Kenya has about 65. Some of these language groups are comprised of only a few thousand people. For some, Bible work must begin with development of an alphabet, which makes the projects very expensive. Even where it is not necessary to develop an alphabet, Bible translation and eventual publishing takes a long time, often between seven and 16 years. The length of the project adds to the cost, even when, as in most cases, the translators are mainly volunteers who are only refunded transport costs to attend translation meetings. In a few cases, a small honorarium is paid.

Local resource mobilization for translation work and publishing has largely been unsuccessful, not just due to economic hardships, but mostly because Christians are not adequately sensitized. In fact, there are hardly any comprehensive or sustainable programs designed to sensitize and interest the Church in this area. In addition, traditional overseas donors are starting to show signs of fatigue for translation work although they eagerly continue to sponsor publication.

Financing

Even when print-runs are fully funded, they are often grossly inadequate. One Bible Society prints an

average of 10,000 copies each print run for a population of over two million. The Society distributes all printed copies in just a few months. Because most vernacular readers are rural people with very low incomes, Scriptures are sold at highly subsidized rates. Little, if anything, is plowed back into publishing, and reprints are delayed for years.

The most suitable format for Bibles distributed in Africa is hardback due to its longevity, tropical conditions and heavy use (in some cases, one Bible could be read by an entire village). Hardback editions are also more widely accepted. However, due to the high unit production cost for low print-runs, Bible societies could probably plan paperback editions and promote them effectively. This would enable more copies to be printed and distributed for the same cost.

Production

Almost all Bibles distributed in Africa are printed overseas, mostly in Asia, Europe and North America, primarily because, except for South Africa, and more recently Mauritius, no other country in Sub-Saharan Africa has had pre-press and printing technology to effectively handle Bible production. Attempts to print locally have often led to disastrous results—poor binding and paper

quality, and delays in production schedules.

Whereas good quality is almost always achieved overseas, freight charges, high import duties in some countries, and port clearing costs often inflate the cost substantially. In most countries, the government-imposed pre-shipment inspection process can be long, cumbersome and confusing, especially when government policies frequently change. In one case in Nigeria, a Bible agency almost lost two containers of 40,000 Bibles shipped from the United Kingdom in 1998. Government policy on pre-shipment inspection changed twice by the time the containers docked. Since it took a very long time to sort out the paperwork between the Bible agency, the supplier and the inspection company, customs impounded the Bibles. They were later "saved" just before the fall of an auctioneer's hammer, approximately five months after docking and after incurring punitively high demurrage charges.

Most African currencies fluctuate erratically and unpredictably. In many cases, because payments have to be made in hard currency, prices change substantially by the time Bibles are printed and shipped. Bible agencies should explore the possibility of negotiating with their printers a clause allowing for cost adjustments when the currencies fluctuate within certain limits.

Distribution

The publishing process only becomes effective when it leads to distribution. Most distribution in Africa, as in many areas of the world, is done through bookshops, churches and schools. Books principally reach urban and peri-urban areas. Rural areas have very few bookshops, and where one exists, customers only check in to purchase textbooks. Many distributors cannot justify, in financial terms at least, spending so much to reach areas whose sales returns are near nil. So how shall people in rural areas believe, if the Word of God is not made available to them?

Illiteracy

Two-thirds of Africa's population are non-literate and depend on other people reading for them where Scripture is available. Two hundred million people cannot read or write.

With illiteracy at a high of 60 percent, merely translating and publishing the Bible is not enough. Bible translation and publishing often involves the preparation of primers, that is, materials in the language to encourage people to learn to read. Many Bible agencies are actively involved in literacy work. In certain areas, they have to begin by developing an alphabet, where it is non-existent.

"Faith Comes by Hearing" is another creative way that Bible societies in Kenya, Nigeria, and other countries are addressing illiteracy. In this program, Scripture audio cassettes in local languages are developed. They are enhanced by music and dramatization, an approach similar to the African story-telling tradition. At the most basic level, the audio cassettes open up the Bible to people who cannot read. These have proved so successful that non-literate people are now able to recite Bible verses with ease and accuracy.

Political environment

Bible work in most of Africa continues to be negatively impacted by political and economic upheavals. The number of refugees and displaced people grows each year. For years now, war has raged in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Sudan and Sierra Leone. Bible work in these and other countries has been badly disrupted. Sometimes translation projects have halted.

In conclusion

Whereas there have been real gains in Bible publishing in Africa over the past few years, the shortfall between Scripture supply and demand remains very large. Most of the Bibles currently distributed are not in the languages people can easily read and understand.

There is a direct relationship between the inadequate supply of Scriptures in Africa and the needs of the Christian Church. A statement by one observer that the Church in Africa is "a mile wide and an inch deep" is, sadly, true. Most pastors are either inadequately trained or have no training at all. Church schisms and cults abound on the African continent. Can there be qualitative Christian growth in the African church if God's Word is not available in languages that people can understand? During the launch of one translation in Ghana, an elderly lady said, "I never knew God could speak my own language!"

The challenges facing the African Church and Bible agencies are big, but not insurmountable. The call to publish is urgent. How can Bible publishers effectively spread the Gospel? If the Great Commission is to be fulfilled, and Christ is to be made known to even the very least, then love for the lost, and not just costs, must drive Bible publishing. ❖

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