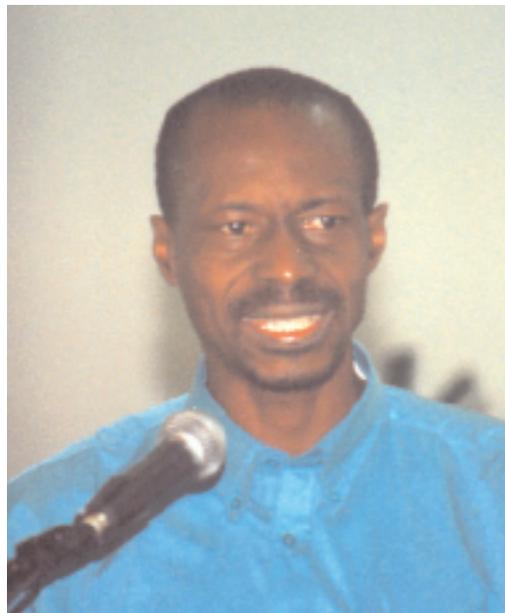


Hope for Sierra Leone

Nelson Clemens, Field Leader of the CLC Bookshop, proposes a way forward in ensuring sustainable development for the publishing industry in Sierra Leone.



Nelson Clemens was a trainer at LittWorld 2002 in Tagaytay, Philippines.

Publishing is one of the slowest-growing industries in Sierra Leone. It has not grown much since the country's independence in 1961.

At least 60 percent of the population is not literate in the official language, so the customer pool is very limited. The future of publishing in a country with a literacy of not more than 30 percent, poor reading habits among the literate, and a crushing cost of living is not optimistic. Any hope of progress will depend on a lot of hard work and sensible investment.

Book publishers

In 1996, there were seven publishing outfits in the country. One was a unit of the Ministry of Education. Two non-governmental organizations (NGOs), PEA and SLDEA, received support from abroad and published booklets. One was established in 1985 to preserve Sierra Leone's cultural heritage. It

published folktales, songs, and other material relevant to the Sierra Leonean culture. The other was established with the primary objective of reducing illiteracy in the country. It published books that met that objective. The Sierra Leone Association of Archivists, Librarians and Information Scientists

(SLAALIS) was also involved in publishing. It launched two magazines that quickly died. Apart from the Christian Literature Crusade (CLC), there were also two privately-owned publishing houses. The first, Nomoli Publishing, was established in 1995 by

Syl Cheyney-Coker, an internationally-known writer. The second, Evangel Publishing, was set up by the principal of the then Sierra Leone Bible College, Rev. Syl Valcarcel. Both had published a few titles (less than five) and some booklets. There were also three international publish-

Evans and Macmillan, are still around. One of the two, Macmillan, has added a Freetown-based bookstore to their operations. The two privately-owned houses have long gone dormant, but another indigenous publisher has come into the scene. Mount Everest Publishing House, established in 1998, has so far published eight titles—seven of which were written by its founder. CLC continues publishing.

The primary distribution channel for publishers is usually bookshops, but the number of bookshops operating in the country now is less than a dozen. Almost all are in Freetown, the capital.

Because of this, "the only way one can survive in this country," says one publisher, "is to publish books that can be used in schools, and lobby hard with the Ministry of Education to get them into their approved list of books. Otherwise," he said, "your

representatives in the country: Evan, Heineman and Macmillan.

The situation today, eight years later, is worse. SLAALIS has ceased publishing. The two NGOs have not grown. Two of the three foreign-owned publishing houses,

"I firmly believe we can turn the situation around in Sierra Leone."



CLC wants to help Sierra Leonean children by providing lending libraries for all primary schools in the nation. In partnership with the Sierra Leone Library Board, the ministry has already equipped six schools in Freetown.

books will simply gather dust on the shelves.”

CLC perseveres

Despite the challenges, CLC, an institution whose primary business is book distribution, has been publishing books and magazines in Sierra Leone since 1990. And, I am convinced that proper investment into the development of local publishing initiatives and a reading culture will give us hope for a thriving publishing industry in the country.

1. Indigenous literature development. To date CLC has published several editions of their magazine, *The Catalyst*, and six books written by four authors. These have not been school texts, but books in keeping with our mission to communicate the Gospel to Sierra Leoneans. Our books are on topics that are critical to our nation. Two of the four titles address national reconciliation and the two others deal with trauma.

We must continue to develop and protect local

publishing initiatives. Keep in mind that that foreigners are unlikely to tell our stories better than ourselves. They have told their stories well, and with the best of intentions they have attempted to tell our stories, but in most cases, they did not capture the whole truth. We want to promote writing by Sierra Leonean Christians.

2. Development of a reading culture. Reading is not a popular pastime in our culture, but CLC has initiated the establishment of lending libraries in government-supported primary schools. In cooperation with the Sierra Leone Library Board we have established libraries in six primary schools in Freetown. The process of setting up and operating these libraries has been very challenging. With our limited resources, we have set up libraries in schools that have never had them. The enthusiasm for our modest

efforts has been a great encouragement to us. Our hope is that such libraries can be developed in all primary schools in the nation.

The way forward

Many believe advancements in the electronic industry are making the book industry irrelevant. What an illusion! The book industry is here to stay.

In *You Are What You Read* (Sam Books, 2003), Keith Danby of Send The Light writes: “In our age of sound bites and text message[s], when many have predicted the demise of the book, the power of the printed page is still formidable. It teaches, inspires and has the potential of changing your life.”

I firmly believe we can turn the situation around in Sierra Leone. Investment into the development of indigenous publishing initiatives and the cultivation of a reading culture, especially among our primary school children, are the best long term investment we can make into our industry. ❖

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