

COVER

# International Christian Publishing Grows Up

Isaac Phiri reflects on the present state of Christian publishing around the world.

One of the untold stories of the last 40 years is how international publishers—that is, those outside the United States and Western Europe—have emerged and grown up.

A survey of the indigenous publishing world reveals success stories. While many organizations were planted by missionaries, others were launched by local entrepreneurs. Areas of growth are many, but literature ministries around the world now exhibit an ability to endure trying times. They are generating more and better Christian resources for the cultures they serve, and overcoming difficult circumstances.

## *Economic instability*

One of the biggest challenges faced by many local publishing houses is the economic instability of the environments in which they operate. South East Asia—where most countries nicknamed “economic tigers” because of their rapid economic growth are located—was hit by a major economic disaster in the late 1990s. Businesses were reeling on the verge of bankruptcy. Governments were pleading for international aid.

Christian publishing organizations were, by all accounts, in big trouble. Cook international staff visited publishers in these countries to gain first-hand

understanding of their circumstances. Publishers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore were under much pressure. Publishers in South Korea were in the red, as were many publishers in the Philippines. For a while it looked like the Christian publishing industry in this part of the world would grind to a standstill.

South East Asia is not the only part of the world where local, national, and regional economic downturns have threatened the lives of indigenous Christian publishing initiatives.

Latin America has had its share of crises. Argentina’s economy crashed, creating political chaos. Brazil’s currency has been known to nosedive. Venezuela was chaotic for a long time; Bolivia was too. Other countries in the region have gone through economic crises. In some cases, international aid spared the countries from total collapse.

Similar or worse stories can be told of countries in parts of Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Despite these economic upheavals, Christian publishers have emerged from the ruins and rebuilt their organizations. They have continued to serve the Church with literature that speaks to the soul. The crises forced them to develop creative business strategies to continue their critical ministries.

## *Political instability*

Political instability is another challenge that publishers around the world must endure. The Latin American countries mentioned above have seen many political crises in the last four decades. At one time Brazil experienced political malaise under military rule. Many of the other smaller countries were war zones between political factions. Peru and El Salvador are good examples. Colombia remains in that situation.

The same applies to Asia. Political stability has been elusive. The Philippines is known for its brutal and corrupt leaders—but at least most of its popular uprisings have been bloodless. That is not the case in other Asian countries. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka still have violent conflicts.

Some say Africa tops the charts when it comes to political violence. The conflicts, both within nations and between countries, have taken millions of lives. Ethiopians have paid heavily for domestic conflicts and wars with neighbors. The same is true of Sudan. In West Africa, depressing news often comes from Sierra Leone and Liberia. Cote ‘d Ivoire seems to have joined the club. During one of Cook’s publishing institutes, a participating publisher from Abidjan learned, from the media, that a

civil war had erupted in his country. He still went back despite the fighting around his home and office.

Other parts of Africa have had—and continue to have—their share of political violence. Chad has had many years of war. Rwanda is well-known for its violence. So is Burundi. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, thousands of lives have been lost.

Despite chaos, Christian publishers have reemerged with a continued determination to serve their countries. Many see their role is even more critical during such upheavals. “It is precisely in difficult times that Christians need words of comfort and that non-Christians need words of hope,” says one publisher in Burundi.

### ***Religion, race, ethnicity and ideology***

Christian publishers in many countries also have to operate in environments where there is religious, racial, ethnic, and ideological hostility. Many Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa are suspicious of Christian literature. The same is true of other states in Asia such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and parts of India.

In Nigeria, many have died in Muslim-Christian confrontations. While the Christian-Muslim rivalry often makes the news, religious hostility against Christians is not limited to Islam. The Christians operating in predominantly Hindu and Buddhist societies also face many hurdles.

Racial tensions still simmer in other countries where Christian publishers operate. Until the mid 1990s, South Africa was marred by racial hatred, and there is still tension among races. Black and white conflict has hurt Zimbabwe's economy and international image.

Ethnicity is still a source of great concern in many parts of the world. Half a million people died in a few days in Rwanda due to an ethnic conflict. Other African countries remain vulnerable to ethnic identity issues, and similar

tensions exist in other parts of the world such as India and Mexico.

Finally, some countries are ruled by regimes with ideologies that are not favorable to the Christian faith. The People's Republic of China, Cuba, and North Korea remain officially Communist states. Myanmar is also a country where there is Church-state ideological divergence. Literature work in these countries must carefully operate within strict regulations or go underground.

The challenges listed are just a few examples, and there are many others. Nonetheless, Christian publishers continue to serve faithfully, despite risks and disruptions. Many say hurdles spur them to seek to have greater impact on their societies with the gospel.

### ***Rewards for endurance***

The second area of growth revealed by scanning publishing worldwide is that endurance is producing positive results. Despite all the challenges, there is a burgeoning of literature ministries. Indigenous publishers distribute millions of pieces of Christian literature in different languages. In some countries, such as Brazil, Philippines, Argentina, Kenya, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Egypt, it is no longer *critical* to ship internationally donated literature. In others, it is still needed, but local publishers are working toward meeting the local needs.

There is also a major improvement in the quality of published products. Book fairs in Brazil, Philippines, Hong Kong, South Korea, South Africa and many other places display drastic improvements in the production quality of Christian books. Cover designs are competitive. Paper is good. Binding is strong. There are parts of the world where quality still needs work, but progress is being made.

There is also much change in the financial state of many publishers. Some publishers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, once totally dependent on foreign aid, are now self-supporting. Others are working diligently at financial self-sufficiency. Their accomplishments are often manifested in improved facilities.

**Some publishers once dependent on foreign aid are now self-supporting.**

A number of publishers have refurbished their office buildings; others have built new ones. Many have been able to obtain better equipment—

including new computer hardware and software for better provision of editorial, administrative, and logistical services.

Another positive development in Christian publishing is locally initiated cooperation between and among publishers in emerging markets. Publishers in Russia and the former Soviet Union come together every year for training and book selling. South Korea has one of the biggest publishers' and booksellers' associations. Christian publishers in Brazil have a strong association that is even considering shipping books to Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. Similar cooperative initiatives exist in Asia and Africa.

The most encouraging trend in Christian publishing worldwide is the rise of superb entrepreneurs and leaders. The quality of people leading and managing literature ministries is impressive. With good, God-fearing people in charge, the future of Christian publishing is bright. ❖