

# Literacy and Language Challenge South African Publishers

Dieuwke Horne (dieuwkeh@joburg.org.za), regional manager of Library and Information Services for the City of Johannesburg, provides a sobering analysis of the situation in one of the wealthiest nations of the African continent.

**W**hat is the market for Christian publishing in South Africa? What language should one publish in? What interests the average South African? What is unique to this country? Can Western publishing principles be applied here?

These questions can to a degree be answered by looking at the profile of South Africa: its population, literacy rate, languages, and so on. Is there room for Christian publishers in South Africa?

## *Country profile*

Is South Africa truly a first world country, or is it a third

world country? In South Africa there is a big difference in basic living conditions between the provinces. The Northern Province is the poorest, and the Western Cape the richest. The gap between rich and poor in South Africa remains one of the largest in the world.

South Africa's first world culture is highly literate, able to use a comprehensive system of telecommunications and consumer services. According to the Internet Software Consortium, the number of Internet hosts in South Africa placed it as 32nd in the world in July 2001, but in the African continent it

ranks as first, with 82.3 percent of Africa's hosts. The second ranked country is Egypt, with 2.7 percent of the hosts in Africa.

But, the country also has a third world culture. United Nations statistics state that 42.8 (1999 figures) to 46 million people (2003 figures) live in South Africa, with half the population living in urban areas. Census '96 figures released by Statistics South Africa state there are 23,699,930 adults between the ages of 16 and 65. Of these, 3,283,290, or 14 percent, have not accessed any schooling at all; and 9,439,244, or 40 percent,

have not completed Grade 9. So, 12,722,534, or 54 percent of the total adult population, have not completed a general level of education.

A 1997 white paper issued by

South Africa's Ministry for Welfare and Population Development states the adult illiteracy rate is 27 percent in metropolitan areas and 50 percent in rural areas.

But, according to the October Household Survey 1999, certain provinces have much higher illiteracy rates than others.

In Gauteng, five percent of the adult population has no schooling. In Eastern Cape, 17 percent of the adult population has no schooling. In KwaZulu-natal this figure is 14 percent. In Mpumalanga, 20 percent, and in Limpopo, 34 percent.

Statistics from 1996 to 2002 indicate that there has been no significant progress in adult literacy since the end of the apartheid era. All the statistics imply that there is a strong link between poverty and illiteracy, particularly rural poverty. Those who are illiterate are likely to be poor, either unemployed or

**Christian publishers must consider how to serve the underdeveloped parts of the country.**

involved in informal or agricultural work.

Judgments about levels of literacy must also take into account the diverse language groupings within the country. Now 11 languages are officially recognized, but their use is unevenly distributed. Many people may speak several languages, but their reading proficiency may be low.

### *Development of the country's publishing industry*

South Africa, like most other African countries, was colonized for centuries, first by the Dutch and then the British. Thus English and Afrikaans (an adaptation of Dutch) became the country's official languages. English, with its much longer written tradition than the indigenous and Afrikaans languages, soon gained a very strong hold over the publication industry of the country.

Due to the political advantage of the Afrikaner, the publishing industry for Afrikaans received great support from the then apartheid government. But even so, over time it became less and less economically viable to publish in Afrikaans.

According to authors G. H. Fredericks & Zolile Mvunelo, writing in a 2003 issue of the *South African Journal of Library & Information Science*, mission presses in the nineteenth century carried out publishing aimed at the

black reader, both in English and in indigenous languages.

In 1823 the first mission press was set up in Tyhume Valley in the Transkei, later known as Lovedale. A second press was established at Mari-onhill near Durban in 1887 after the pacification of the Zulu nation.

Missionaries worked on reducing various indigenous languages to a written orthography and compiled systematic grammars and vocabularies so that they could translate the Bible into the vernacular for the evangelization and civilization of the population.

The problem was that the teachers and missionaries tended to Europeanize Africans and did not provide literature related to African needs and interests.

South Africa was dependent on Europe for most of their books and other printed matter during the colonial rule. Early publishers in the country, such as Longmans and Oxford University Press, were primarily branches or subsidiaries of overseas publishing houses. Their purpose initially was to distribute imported books. During the twentieth century, British publishers dominated the South African scene and hampered the development of a healthy indigenous press by agreements such as the British Market Agreement.

According to this agreement the English speaking

market was divided between the British and American publishers from approximately 1930 to 1970. This meant that

the South African bookshops or distributors could not buy a book from the USA unless there was no British edition, nor would an American publisher sell the rights of a book to a South African publisher unless British publishers had already turned it down. British publishers still dominate the South African market.

### *Facing the challenges*

Who is responsible for developing a literate society in South Africa? What can publishers, authors, and others do to improve the literacy rate in South Africa?

The problems authors face when writing in the indigenous languages are mainly that there is not a widespread reading culture, the restricted potential market and a publishing industry that is not well established.

Studies undertaken by Fredericks and Mvunelo show that the most popular indigenous languages for publishing are Xhosa and Zulu. Only a few books in indigenous languages are published each year. Since

Provincial statistics for 1995 list South Africa's dominant languages and their degree of use:

Zulu	22.4%
Xhosa	17.5%
Afrikaans	15.1%
Northern Sotho	9.8%
English	9.1%
Tswana	7.2%
Southern Sotho	6.9%
Tsonga	4.2%
Swazi	2.6%
Venda	1.7%
Ndebele	1.6%

—Dieuwke Horne

1990 the major houses have not published more than 10 titles each in the different vernaculars. Market viability determines what will be published in South Africa, as the market is divided between several languages.

According to six major publishing houses in South Africa, the main problems are the inadequate market demand and a lack of government support. Additional problems included inadequately trained personnel and an insufficient number of authors. It was also mentioned that library purchases were cut back drastically, and the lack of a reading and book purchasing culture.

South Africa is a country of contrasts, and publishers, especially Christian publishers, must determine how best to distribute their resources. The developed part of the country cannot be neglected, because of its impact on a publisher's bottom line. On the other hand, it is also imperative that publishers begin to invest in developing the underserved parts of the country.❖