



Publishing Trends and Their Effect on Publishers in the Developing World

By Barine Kiriimi

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Watching the developments in the Christian publishing industry locally and overseas, I have noted five trends that are having a significant impact on old and new publishers in developing countries:

International sales as an avenue for growth

Every publisher desires to grow his or her annual sales. I've yet to find a publisher whose budget forecasts a dip in their annual sales. The pressure for continuous growth requires new strategies every year.

This has pushed publishers in the developed world to focus on international markets, including the developing world, as an avenue for growth. It has also led to mergers or buyouts in the hope of expanding market share through taking advantage of the core competencies that each partner brings to the negotiation table.

Among other strategies, publishers have been trying to expand distribution networks through the appointment of distributors, either regionally or internationally, with the aim of reaching a wider market. This approach has not been without its challenges. Some are logistical; others result from diverse trade policies for different countries.

For instance, in Africa, a company would be positioning itself for failure if it appointed a distributor in Nigeria and expected them to serve South Africa—or vice versa. There are logistical challenges and differences in international trade policies even for countries in the same region. In the process of decision-making, sometimes these factors are either assumed or ignored; this certainly has a negative impact.

Impact of global trade English-language editions

Also, the initiative adopted by some publishers of printing an international trade paper edition has its own challenges. The

idea of providing a high-quality, low-priced and highly discounted book is noble. However, what may appear as a reasonably priced book in one part of the world could prove expensive elsewhere. The regional economic differences explain this further. A good example is the pricing of books in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. What may appear a good price in Kenya will be deemed very expensive in Tanzania and Uganda, yet all these countries are in East Africa.

At the same time, as publishers in developed nations focus on selling English versions internationally, they fail to recognize that they are stifling local publishers' ability to provide translated versions of these materials. Normally, publishers in the developing countries get most of their income to finance translations from sales proceeds of the English versions. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of publishing in Africa is aware that the section of the population that reads English is also the one that has the highest buying power. Thus, when publishers in the developed world insist on selling English versions of their books internationally rather than through rights to local publishers, the latter run out of resources and cannot afford to produce local translations.

Moreover, experience has shown that the population that reads books translated into local languages is not big enough for large print runs that afford low unit prices. Worse still, this audience comprises people who are generally poor and cannot afford books that are priced normally. Literature intended for them must always be priced low or, better still, be subsidized.

In the past, publishers in the developing world would invest the little income they made from the English edition to produce a translation of the book in the local language. With publishers from the developing world distributing globally, publishers in

developing nations cannot get English rights—and thus cannot afford to invest in translations either.

Celebrity publishing

It is often said that the Church in Africa is “a mile long, but only an inch deep.” This echoes a valid concern that cannot be addressed without input from Christian publishers. They want to offer books that meet local needs. The fundamentals that guide book publishing decisions—like the number of copies a book is likely to sell, which mainly depends on the popularity of the author—often disqualify would-be helpful books from being published. But with the recent leaps in technological development, books published in the developed world are reaching Majority World markets as soon as they are released. This is good for readers, but is not without negative consequences for the local publisher. The situation leaves the publisher from the developing world with no option but to seek licenses to publish popular books, if only to remain afloat, whether those books meet local needs or not. It is really a case of faith versus fundamentals.

Emerging technologies

Ignoring the developing technology would be to the publisher's detriment. More and more publishers are moving into digital publishing through e-books, downloadable digital or audio books. In some cases, it is possible to download only a chapter or section of a book and not the entire book. Whereas authors build up their message as they write a book. Downloading part of a book raises the chances of misunderstanding the author's message and this predisposes the reader to error.

This technology is not without its limitations in the developing world. The infrastructure necessary to exploit it is mainly confined to cities and big towns. The

bigger challenge, however, is the cost of providing these services in the developing world.

Business and ministry balance

Christian publishers have found themselves walking a tightrope as they struggle to maintain a balance between publishing for business and ministry. A publisher must make enough money for operational costs and to power growth, yet the end does not always justify the means. Christian publishers must also put into the market books that will serve the need of reaching souls for Christ and grounding them in the faith. Christian publishers have a role in the global harvest. Lately, the establishment of Christian divisions among general and trade publishers cannot go unnoticed. Even secular publishers sense the existence of a viable market of Christian literature.

At the same time, there is the development of what I may refer to as “economic ecumenism,” where Christian publishers choose to use, or work with, secular publishers in the area of distribution—even when there are other Christians in those regions who could serve their needs. This is in spite of the fact that the secular publisher or distributor has a different motivation, vision and mission than that of the Christian publisher or distributor.

I believe anyone who is genuinely involved in Christian publishing is concerned with the message in the same way they are with the bottom line. I am not in any way suggesting that we should not use general publishers if they provide an avenue for our publishing efforts, but [we should remember that] the secular publisher may look at the bottom line more than the message.

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