



SOUTH AFRICA

Optimistic Christian Publishers

Ilse Dreyer, formerly a missionary in Italy and now a freelance writer in Johannesburg, describes South African religious publishing concerns.

Continuous change is something many South Africans have come to take for granted. Yet new legislation, the incorporation of blacks into business (where employment ratios are prescribed by government) and other changes have important implications for the entire population—and for the African subcontinent and beyond.

Since the 1994 election, South Africa's constitution has been changed to promote reconciliation and tolerance among the people. Whereas the past government considered itself "Christian," and the Calvinistic faith was the only widely-accepted religion, now all religions are given "equal" status in the mass media of radio and television. Nationalization and growth have also affected the national publishing industry.

The National State Library estimates that in South Africa there are 2,046 publishers (including periodicals, magazines and self-publishers). Even so, the book publishing industry is not a very old industry in the country. It grew from local publishing houses established by

overseas companies, such as Shuter and Shooter and Struik Publishers.

Around 1900 all books were imported: mostly in English. Local developments followed in quick succession. Huge printing presses were built. Soon two Afrikaans publishing houses with several publishing arms grew into head-on competition: National Media and Perskor. Both expanded from newspaper companies with an Afrikaans bias to multicultural, multilingual companies working with a variety of media; from fiction and non-fiction books, to education materials to consumer and specialist magazines. Christian materials were published as another lucrative niche.

In 1996, Perskor merged with Kagiso Publishers, a black conglomerate. A few of its divisions have been sold to other players. The magazine and book divisions were split and later amalgamated into the existing operations of two separate companies.

Book distribution channels in South Africa have long been monopolized

by one chain of stores (CNA), but in recent years a competitive franchise has made inroads into the bookselling market. There are few independent booksellers. The reading, book-buying public lives mostly in metropolitan areas which are already served by the existing infrastructure.

For religious material, these outlets all have dedicated sections. Very few Roman Catholic titles are sold. Most sections carry a surprising selection of evangelical books, from Bibles to theology to inspirational books and even fiction.

A few Christian publishers have established themselves, producing local books and marketing overseas publications. The most well-known are Lux Verbi and CUM Books. These publishing houses have both established their own national chains of retail stores. These stores sell books, music, gifts and cards.

Most white South Africans consider themselves to be Christians. The largest Afrikaans denomination has over a million members—

enough to presume the current and future viability of publishing Christian books in Afrikaans.

According to Viv Nezar of CUM Books, Afrikaans translations of American favorites are selling better than ever before: authors such as Max Lucado and Tim Lahaye's books are very well-received in Afrikaans. "These translations are making a huge impact on the Afrikaans market and we plan to continue supplying books to support this trend for as long as the demand exists." Another major seller, says Nezar, is the Afrikaans New Testament paraphrase, *The Message*, to which the Psalms and Proverbs have been added during the past two years. "People enjoy reading the scriptures in a modern-day idiom. We are of course, always watching readership trends and moving ahead of these shifts in readership."

South Africa's largest retail distributor of books, CNA, sees a huge market for Afrikaans Christian books. "It has tremendous growth potential, especially during times of

uncertainty," says Kobus Strauss. "Its potential is bigger than that of English books. As far as other African languages are concerned, we carry the Bible and hymn books, but that is all. We do not foresee this changing in the near future." Kobus points out many local authors publish their books in English and in Afrikaans, to capture both language groups from the start, thereby maximizing sales potential.

South Africa has a high rate of illiteracy (near 29.5 percent) glaringly evident among the rural black population. Interestingly enough, the first ever published work in African languages was religious material based on the Bible, used for evangelism. Translations of the Bible are available in all 11 official languages (more than 40 languages are currently spoken at this Southernmost tip of the African continent).

As literacy improves, publishers will experience marked growth in this growing segment—however, trends indicate that up-and-coming metropolitan black families prefer South African standard English as home and reading language—thus potential sales figures cannot be based on growing literacy figures alone.

There are currently a few well-established Christian magazines on the South African market. Most are published in English. Also, they are non-denominational, reflecting the multiplicity of South Africans' cultural make-up and religious beliefs. Some denominational magazines, that

previously were available only by subscription, are now sold in stores. One bright new addition on the magazine front was the launch, two years ago, of the first Christian female magazine, called *Finesse*. This Afrikaans publication is growing, filling a need in this particular niche.

There is no direct governmental involvement in the contents of printed Christian material, either in the form of subsidies nor editorial intervention. However, according to the tenets of the new constitution, care must be taken not

to offend religious group in any way. To date, there has not been any case of dramatic withdrawal of either books or magazines on these grounds.

Most Christian publishers who have had serious setbacks under the new rules produced religious instruction material for the old curriculum. The new constitution mandates all religions, from Buddhism to Taoism to Hinduism are included. The existing material is now inadequate. In fact, most publishers in the educational arena have landed in hot water: some have come close to bankruptcy due to delayed payments or problems in instituting changes proposed by the authorities.

Kate McCullum, chair of PASA, the Publishers Association of South Africa, states: "The publishing industry is only now starting to recover from these abrupt, far-reaching changes in literature and education curricula. The total turnover for South African publishers in 1999 just topped one billion Rand, less than half of the figure in 1996. Nevertheless, we are still experiencing steady growth, in line with the industry norm for the past 30 to 40 years. I don't think the industry will see an upswing—

need to carry books for readers—not old, redundant stock—we will reach the greater part of our population."

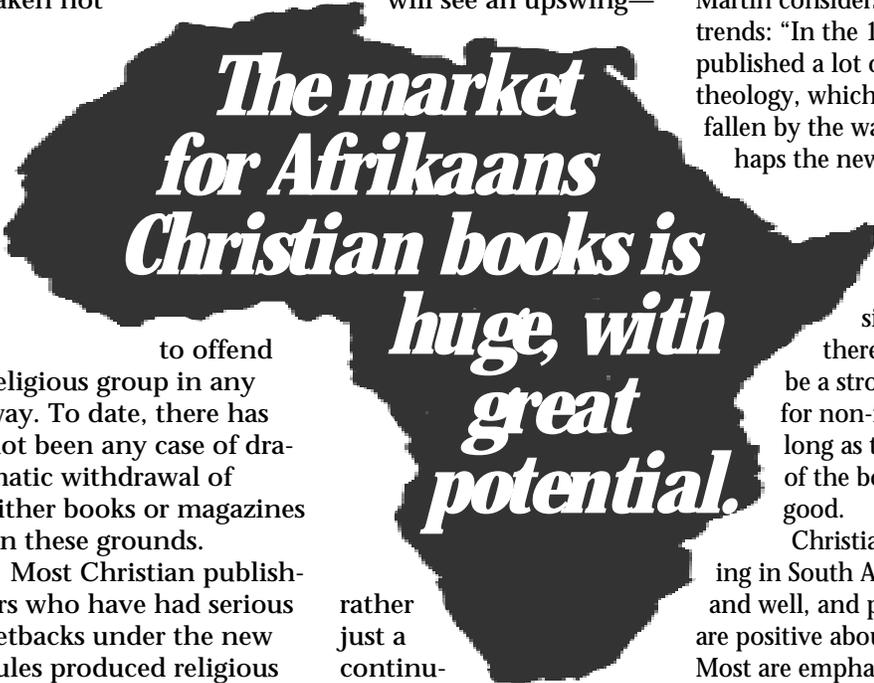
Martin does not see electronic media as a threat to readership of printed books. "The electronic media and the Internet have not made a dent in the reading public. People still like spending time with their books and not just sitting in front of a screen," he says. He points to a lack of support from educational institutions and universities as a reason why few books are printed in black languages. In theology, Martin considers upcoming trends: "In the 1980s, we published a lot of liberation theology, which has now fallen by the wayside. Perhaps the new feminist

theology will replace it." He emphasizes that there will always be a strong market for non-fiction as long as the quality of the books are good.

Christian publishing in South Africa is alive and well, and publishers are positive about the future. Most are emphatic that Afrikaans is not a dying language—in fact, quite the opposite. However, most publishers remain cautious about printing in black languages: their consensus is: "let's wait and see." ♦

rather just a continuing steady growth along its current lines."

One publisher who sees a bright future for the local industry is David Philip Publishers. Russel Martin, publishing director, is optimistic: "I think we have a bright future ahead of us. Our reading culture is growing, with more and more people becoming literate. If libraries obtain the government support they



The market for Afrikaans Christian books is huge, with great potential.