International Publishers Face Challenges and Look to a Hopeful Future

Trends reveal areas of difficulty and opportunity.

If it's true that when America sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold, then signs of improved health in Christian publishing in the United States might point to better days ahead overseas.

Though part of the 13 percent domestic increase in religious books sales last year can be attributed to the coloring book craze, Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) Executive Director Stan Janetzke sees cautious optimism among members after several hard years.

“I don’t think anybody in our industry expects double-digit sales increases for 2017,” he says. “Still, there is a hunger for quality Christian books that reflect what it means to live honestly and biblically in a world that pulls people in so many different directions.”

The same wary hope is evident in some places overseas, despite some setbacks. “The last few years we’ve seen a number of publishers from different regions pulling back on the number of titles they publish,” says James Elwell, director of international publishing at Tyndale House Publishers, where foreign royalty revenue has been flat to declining in the past few years.

Yet there are some positive indicators. Expolit, the annual showcase of the Spanish Christian products industry, marks its 25th anniversary in August with a four-day celebration in Miami. In March, European publishers and U.S.-based foreign rights representatives met in Budapest at the third annual CBA MarketSquare Europe to discuss business in the region.

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E-BOOK TRENDS

Digital publishing is creating its own opportunities and obstacles for indigenous Christian publishing, from the open doors in countries with sizable church numbers, to the barriers where the evangelical population is small.

“Digital publishing is creating its own opportunities and obstacles for indigenous Christian publishing,” observes CLC European Regional Director Gary Chamberlin.

That broader distribution hasn’t come without its setbacks. In Hungary, the largest general market distributor is in trouble, owing money to Christian publishers like Harmat, among others. “We were from the beginning very keen to reach the general market,” says Founder and General Manager Kornel Herjeczki. “Those who stayed only in church-related selling channels are not affected by this.”

Things were easier in Europe 20 or so years ago, Chamberlin observes, when money flowed into Eastern and Central Europe to subsidize publishing projects after the fall of the Berlin Wall. “I think that people read more and the church was very energetic and dynamic. There were fewer books on the market, so print runs were typically in the thousands of copies. Today that has all changed.”

With fewer than half the number of stores it used to have, WLPM has merged its 10 remaining outlets with six CLC stores, in a new Bible shop.

GIVE VOICE TO INDIGENOUS AUTHORS

Advances in technology give a platform for indigenous voices that in the past may have been ignored in favor of imported or translated titles. Media Associates International (MAI) estimates that in many countries, only one in 10 books on the shelves is by a local writer.

Though Western acquisitions still tend to dwarf homegrown titles, there are some encouraging exceptions. Ramon Roche III of MAI points to the growth over the last decade of indigenous Christian publishing in Ghana, Brazil, and the Philippines. Locally written stories and poetry also sell well in Pakistan’s small Christian market, he notes.

At the same time, new technology “makes it easier unfortunately to publish low-quality content,” says Andreas Beder, director of CLC Italy.

Rocha recognizes that it can be quicker and easier to bring in an American title than to commit to the working back and forth with a local author and that publishers may lack the skilled editors needed to work with original manuscripts. However, he adds, “As the national church matures, the quality of Christian manuscripts improves and the level of acceptance by the readers follows.”

BROADER DISTRIBUTION

Europe showcases the opportunities and obstacles for indigenous Christian publishing, from the open doors in countries with sizable church numbers, to the barriers where the evangelical population is small.

“In countries like Germany, Hungary, Poland, and the Netherlands, a few publishers have been able to find ways to break into distributing their books in the secular markets, and this has made a huge difference for them,” reports CLC European Regional Director Gary Chamberlin.

Nowhere are the challenges more evident than in Japan, where business and cultural changes have put further pressure on Christian publishers and distributors in a country where less than one percent of the population is Christian. Word of Life Press Ministries’ (WLP) income these days is half what it was in the 1980s, according to company Director Don Regier. He attributes that in part to a declining birthrate and an aging church, plus the fact that “this is a generation that does not look to books or printed publications for information.”

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PUBLISHERS AND FOREIGN RIGHTS REPS

Publishers and foreign rights reps meet at CBA MarketSquare Europe.
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—STEVEN K. SCOTT, author, Jesus Speaks

It’s no secret that the Church today has lost its influence in culture.
**BUYING RESISTANCE**

In some parts of the world, the fledgling church is hampered by the legacy of past missionary efforts funded from the West.

"Believers have been receiving free literature from well-meaning mission agencies for so many years," observes Ramon Rocha III, director of publisher development for Media Associates International, which trains writers and publishers. He recalls how one struggling Christian publisher was told, "We can't understand why we have to buy your books when we've had books like these for free for so long."

Nor is the resistance to paying for books limited to past practice—it's also a reflection of contemporary attitudes, as piracy flourishes. "People now can download most books for free, and that has influenced our sales," says BIE's Skovpen.

Meanwhile, "piracy continues to be a huge problem" in Africa, adds Rocha, who notes that corruption—like border guards seeking bribes—has increased the cost of shipping books to different countries on the continent.

**HOPEFUL FUTURE**

Despite the difficulties for Christian publishers and distributors in many countries, determination and hope remain. "It isn't the easiest time for the Christian book business in Russia," acknowledges Skovpen. "But God helps us, and with His help, we keep moving forward."

Providing Christian resources overseas isn't for the fainthearted or for those who want to earn a lot of money, says Rocha. "It will take a lot of patience, perseverance, and determination to pursue the calling to labor in the strategic written-word ministry and business."

—Andy Butcher

**PRODUCT CATEGORIES NEEDED BY INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS**

![Product Categories Chart]

*Source: Friesen International Rights Services, Inc., "Global Trends in International Licensing, 2016 Impact and 2017 Marketing Plans*
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CBA MarketSquare Europe 2018 Announced
Training and rights acquisitions advance international business.

CBA will host the fourth annual MarketSquare Europe event April 18-20, 2018 in Budapest, Hungary. As in previous years, a day of training on April 18 will be followed by two international rights days.

At the third annual CBA MarketSquare last month, attendees from 18 countries, including Slovakia, Russia, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Belarus, and others, gathered in Budapest to learn about opportunities and global trends, and meet with sales representatives to purchase translation rights.

Learn more at www.cbaonline.org/MarketSquareEurope.

Expanding Worldwide Reach from Cincinnati, Ohio
UNITE 2017 MarketSquare offers International Rights and Licensing.

CBA International MarketSquare will occur during UNITE 2017, June 27-30, 2017 in Cincinnati, Ohio. It offers not only international rights and licensing opportunities but also a networking platform for those engaging in international business.

“We are supporting an infrastructure for the Good News to be promoted and to prosper throughout the world,” says Curtis Risley, president of CBA. “We seek to support a strong global network of Christian-product providers.”

International publishing is important and supports many aspects of the industry and its mission. It can contribute positively not only to the bottom line, but also to ministry and quality control of messaging. Dr. Kornel Herjeczki, president of Hungarian publishing house Harmat Kiado, echoes the thoughts of many international publishers, saying that even as international companies develop their local authors and influencers, translating and publishing completed works from other countries can help them control the quality and message of the resources distributed by their company.

Cindy Riggins of Riggins International Rights Services adds that authors are thrilled to expand their reach to global markets and have the opportunity to minister to people in other countries. She also notes that royalty revenues can increase, though potential earnings vary by each country’s economic situation and by the number of Christian readers in various markets.

CBA’s International MarketSquare events aim to support and encourage Christian product providers around the world who operate in different cultures and face unique challenges in producing and distributing Christian products. In addition to general challenges faced by the industry such as increasing overhead costs, fewer Christian books sold, and cultural hostility toward the Gospel, internationals must navigate challenges such as translation costs and sometimes value-added tax.

UNITE 2017 offers internationals the opportunity to share ideas and be encouraged through International MarketSquare and other events such as the Global Crossings Tea, where they can enjoy fellowship and peer-to-peer information exchange with others walking in similar shoes.

For more information and to register for UNITE 2017, go to www.cbaonline.org/unite-2017.
—Sharon Roberts
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India an Example of the Global Church
Christian products support missions and church growth.

India is a country with 1,652 languages, a remarkably high number considering only 195 countries exist in the entire world, some of which speak the same language.

“Our country is a country of countries with around 1.3 billion people,” says Rev. Dr. Susanta Patra, a church planter, mission strategist, researcher, and trainer who formerly served as general secretary of the India Missions Association.

Patra sees the Indian church with its diversity as a replica of the global church. His country has different languages, cultures, castes, and geographical areas, but according to the official census, the Christian population is only about 2.3 percent. The number of Christian missionaries was counted as 313 in 1947 and has grown to more than 55,000 today. In the past few decades, several hundred missions have been established, as have missionary training institutes.

As Patra sees it, God is enlarging the territory of the Indian workers, from tribal to high caste, from rural to urban, from full-time missionary endeavors to tent-making, from church-based missions to marketplace missions. The fast and influential growth of the church and missions in India is necessarily supported by publishing and distribution of printed materials.

THE WRITTEN WORD’S POWER
William Carey, known as the “father of modern missions,” moved to India as a missionary in 1793, bringing with him a printing press for translating the Bible into several Indian languages and providing other valuable written resources.

Today’s leaders haven’t forgotten Carey’s influence or his example of the power of the written word. In a 2016 CBA survey of Christian publishers and retailers in India, 79 percent say that one of the most important roles of Christian literature production and sales is education for the growing Christian church. The next important role is seen as building faith for believers, as selected by 62 percent.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES
When asked to identify the biggest obstacles to increasing distribution of Christian literature in India, 71 percent cite effective marketing and advertising. Economic conditions and production costs follow at 54 percent and 50 percent, respectively. Reasons such as cultural hostility and multiple languages are much further down on the list.

WORKING TOGETHER
The World Christian Expo, which takes place in India every two years, is an opportunity for Christian product producers and distributors to meet and work together. CBA leadership attended this auspicious event in 2016 and plans to join again in 2018 as global unity among brothers and sisters in the Christian products industry continues to be sought and supported.

“Today the various challenges faced in India are seen and experienced everywhere in the world,” remarks Patra.

India’s example of seeking unity amid challenges, barriers, and age-old mentalities that threaten to keep them apart, is an encouragement to the rest of the industry that God’s Word and His message are greater than any one country or culture or language.

—Sharon Roberts