

CBA Nigeria

Tackles Hurdles, Seizes Opportunities

InterLit's Isaac Phiri outlines the challenges faced by CBA Nigeria as it hosts the continent's first Pan-African CBA convention.

CBA Nigeria—fashioned after the CBA in the United States—admits problems but also sees open doors for Christian publishing in the country.

“Nigeria is a land of opportunities,” begins a CBA Nigeria statement on the book industry. “The land is large and multi-ethnic.”

The organization, formerly led by Thomas Sule but now headed by Esther Olumide Aworinde, with Justice Okoronkwo as administrative secretary, is comprised of more than 100 retailers, suppliers and distributors. It is encouraged by the growth of the Church and the fact that the population of over 120 million is at least 52 percent Christian.

According to the CBA Nigeria statement, the explosive revival witnessed in the Nigerian Church triggered “a huge appetite for books, Bibles and other Christian resources.” This has given rise to many Christian stores all over the country. With the revival also came the establishment of many Bible schools and theological colleges with a resultant increase in the demand for books. This improvement is evident especially among youth and in the urban areas. The market has witnessed a remarkable growth and this has accounted for the huge volume of Christian books that

come into Nigeria annually, as could be testified by many international publishing companies.

CBA Nigeria is eager to change the poor international image of the industry in its country.

“There is a wrong perception in Europe and America that the Christian publishing industry in Nigeria still lacks depth, integrity and professionalism,” says its document. “Nothing could be further from the truth,” it declares. “The fact is that the Christian publishing industry in Nigeria is among the most vibrant within the nations of the Southern hemisphere and probably the most vibrant in Africa.”

CBA blames this bad image on past government regulations that made it hard for the industry to thrive. But in the mid 1990s, the Nigerian govern-

ment began to deregulate the foreign exchange controls, making it easier to purchase and remit foreign currency.

Consequently, CBA Nigeria has about 10 member publishers offering 80 to 160 titles in their current catalogs. Book sales are also on the upsurge—some titles now hit 100,000 copies or more in sales of the first edition.

CBA Nigeria affirms that books published now in the country have become competitive. “As for printing quality, the industry has experienced great improvement,” it says.

There is hope that further improvements in quality could give Nigerian publishers access to export sales. One publisher already produced a book for use in Britain and other parts of Africa. Many Nigerian ministers have their books on sale in the United States, the

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United Kingdom, and other foreign nations. CBA Nigeria affirms, "The market for substandard books is gradually becoming history in Nigeria."

CBA Nigeria also points out that Nigerian publishers are out-pricing other African publishers. At the 2003 CBA Nigeria National Convention, publishers from some African countries said they were strongly considering printing their books in Nigeria for sale to other parts of Africa as the quality was good and prices unbeatable. Some books they brought to market in Nigeria could not sell, as the retail prices of similar books were even cheaper than their discounted prices.

CBA Nigeria is energized by these developments and pleased that the poor image appears to be disappearing. To top it all, CBA Nigeria—in conjunction with the international arm of CBA in the United States—plans to hold the first all African book fair in Abuja this year. The focus will be on local publishing in Africa and with input from the United States, Europe and Asia.

"It seems Africa is set to receive another great blessing from God this year," concludes the CBA Nigeria announcement.

Challenges

Despite the optimism, CBA Nigeria admits that the industry still has problems. For example, although printing is currently cheaper than in other parts of Africa, the cost of goods publishers have to cover continues to rise.

"Though we have made progress in local printing, we still have to contend with the increasing costs of raw materials," says the association. "This is so because about 75 percent of paper, 85 percent of ink and 90 percent of machinery has to be imported, with attendant bureaucratic delays."

Complicated import regulations, rising fees, freight costs, and currency fluctuations are constant challenges for Christian publishers.

The costs do make books too expensive for some Nigerians. For instance, there is a disparity between book sales in urban and rural areas. CBA Nigeria observes that while getting books to rural areas is "cumbersome due to bad roads," there is also the reality that sales of books are generally poor in these areas. "The most successful book in rural areas is the Bible, especially the translations into Nigerian languages." But, other "literature has not done well."

The CBA Nigeria statement also alludes to the fact that its members observe that the "circulation and distribution of imported books is effective," but sales are not always as desired. It seems the cost of bringing in imported books makes them too expensive.

"Purchasing power for such books is decreasing," says CBA Nigeria. The solution, it contends, is for publishers to get more rights from partners abroad for local reprints. "Distribution will increase and more people will be blessed."

CBA Nigeria also sees the country's poor reading culture as another problem. While efforts are being made by the government,

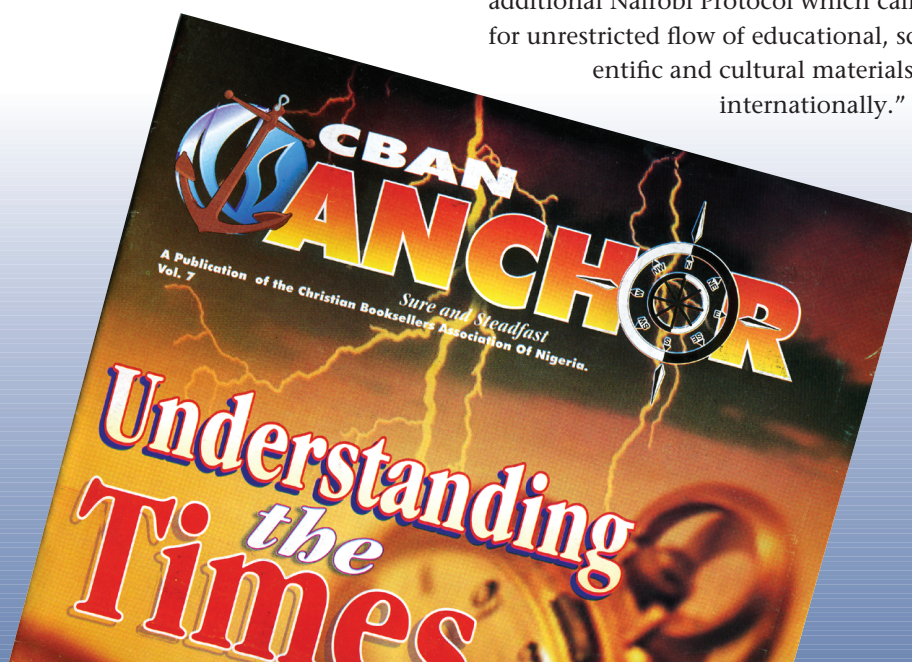


Esther Olumide Aworinde, president of the Christian Booksellers Association of Nigeria (CBA Nigeria), is also chief executive officer of Lase Books in Lagos, Nigeria.

publishers, authors and booksellers to improve the reading culture of Nigerians, there is still a long way to go.

CBA Nigeria asks the government to reconsider the import duties placed on all printed materials brought into the country.

According to CBA Nigeria, the restrictions are "contrary to the UNESCO Florence agreement and its additional Nairobi Protocol which called for unrestricted flow of educational, scientific and cultural materials internationally."



Finally, the industry also has some problems in the areas of editorial, management and writing.

"These are areas where local skill is still lacking and there is a need for organizations like Cook Communications to train Nigerians," says the statement.

However, despite these and other challenges, CBA Nigeria sees a Christian future for publishing in the country.

"The whole world is set to hear of the publishing industry in Nigeria," says the statement. CBA Nigeria's goal is that what the international community will

hear and see of the Christian publishing industry in Nigeria is "high standards, integrity and honesty." ♦

"HELP GROW THE KINGDOM"

A couple decades ago, I visited a Christian bookshop in Jos, Nigeria. The shelves were empty. One book would "fill" 10 feet of space.

I noticed there were a number of Bibles in the Bible section, but all of them were the same translation. In fact, they were all one edition. So I asked the store manager, "Is this a very popular translation here?" His response: "No; actually, their terms are quite helpful." In other words, no supplier would sell to this store, except those who never expected to be paid.

I went back to Nigeria recently. What a difference. Not only are Christian stores full of product, but also Christian books and Bibles can be found everywhere—street vendors, "sidewalk" bookstores, etc. The demand is incredible. Publishers ignore this market at their peril.

When I look at the world of Christian resources, I see many places where the market is static or growth is measured in tiny percentages. Even in places where one thinks the Gospel is well known, the Christian trade struggles. Not in Nigeria. Here the market is vibrant and growing. New ideas, new approaches bring excitement and strength to the industry. I applaud those that are ready to take the risk to participate.

While in Nigeria, I visited several Christian stores. One owner shared how she travels to Lagos monthly to purchase stock for her store. Where is the trucking system? Are not lorries traveling all around Nigeria? For security and credit reasons, this owner knew the only way to obtain the stock she needed was this monthly trip. In Kenya, the major distributors have teams going out in their own trucks to visit stores. There is just no other way to move stock in many developing countries. The requirements of a "cash economy" and inadequate transportation systems add tremendous challenges to the normal difficulties of a retail business.

I challenge publishers in Nigeria, and other countries where transport and trade terms make the market more difficult than it needs to be, to understand the ministry of their customers. Success as a Christian publisher demands knowing not just "my" business, but that of my customers—especially retail stores. That's where the volume is. If stores cannot receive and sell my product easily and profitably, then I must fix that problem.

Unfortunately, we in the West have a hard time grasping these problems. We want everyone to conform to the way we do business. The result? We make it more difficult all the way up and down this critical marketing chain. That's one of the important reasons CBA holds regional conventions in Asia, and now in Africa. It's an opportunity for others to see and experience what life is like at "ground level."

I am deeply grateful for those across the world who see the potential and the obstacles to the trade in places like Nigeria. Let's give them all the help we can. Not only will we add to the growth of an already vibrant market for Christian products; we will help grow the Kingdom. And, that, dear friends, is what it's all about.

—Jim Powell, international director, CBA



Jim Powell, at an event in Brazil, speaks at CBA events around the world.