

Church Enjoys In-house Advantage

The in-plant for the African Methodist Episcopal Church uses a variety of printing methods to produce magazines, journals, books and more in support of more than 3,000 churches.



Dr. Johnny Barbour, president and publisher, stands with the African Methodist Episcopal Church Sunday School Union's Presstek 52DI press.

THE AFRICAN Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) Sunday School Union has been in continuous operation for 127 years, making it one of the oldest continuously operating black publishing companies in America. Located in Nashville, Tenn., it publishes a range of items to support more than 3,000 AME churches across the United States.

In addition to supplying church school material, the Sunday School Union operates a fully functioning printing plant. Some of its work includes the *Missionary Magazine*, *The AME Review*, *The Christian Recorder*, *The Journal of Christian Education*, *The YPD Gazette* and *The YPD Handbook*. The in-plant also prints general conference material, combined minutes, Episcopal district conference guides and souvenir journals.

The AMEC Sunday School Union produces more than 200,000 books per month and has all of the necessary finishing equipment in-house to do so, with the exception of some hard cover books. The Sunday School Union creates much of its own content and has three graphic artists in-house. While people can visit its online storefront to purchase materials, about 90 percent of the material the Sunday School Union produces is subscription-based.

"For example, we produce new hymnals four times a year, and we also have a number of magazines and newspapers that are subscription based," says Dr. Johnny Barbour, president and publisher. "That helps us manage our workload, since we can project what we will need when with some certainty."

Staying Current with Technology

The AMEC Sunday School Union employs 30 people, 21 of whom work in printing.

"We have found it much more cost effective to produce materials in-house," declares Dr. Barbour. "Although we do have to outsource some things, such as case-bound books, by keeping our technology current, we have been able to keep up with the growing demand for our materials by producing most of them in-house."

To accomplish this, AMEC Sunday School Union has an Océ 4110 for black-and-white digital printing, along with two Heidelberg presses: a two-color perfecter—primarily used for long-run black-and-white materials—and a four-color Heidelberg press. The newest addition to the AMEC family is a Presstek 52DI digital offset press.

"We were interested in the DI press because we wanted to bring even more of our work in-house, as well as accommodate growth," explains Barbour. "We liked its extreme automation and simplicity of operation. We can run the press with only one operator, which helps us keep our costs in line."

At AMEC, black-and-white contents of books and magazines are produced digitally or with the Heidelberg perfecter, depending upon the quantity required. The four-color Heidelberg press or the Presstek 52DI are used for color covers.

"We usually put anything full color with 10,000 sheets or less on the DI," Dr. Barbour explains. "We also find it works well for thicker covers or folders than we can otherwise produce, since it takes up to 24-point stock. We also do a lot of coated stock work on the DI."

When asked why AMEC didn't acquire another conventional press to meet growing demand, Dr. Barbour's lists the many benefits the DI has brought to his operation.

"We were happy to find a press that was more environmentally sound, with its chemistry-free platemaking, waterless printing and minimal waste," he says. "We also like the automation and the high quality it produces. Our press operator is happy, because he doesn't have to manually hang plates for each job, since the DI images them on press."

For Barbour and his team, the most important thing is that they continue to please their customers.

"We take pride in that," he says. "We have been in business for 127 years by focusing on our customers, and we hope to continue doing so. Keeping our technology platform up to date is a big part of being able to do that. And the dedicated and talented team we have in-house does the rest."