

## More on South African libraries

**Colin Steele is just back from addressing the SAILIS conference and visiting tertiary libraries**

As South Africa is 'reopened up', there are more opportunities for South African and Australian libraries and librarians to extend contacts. Our countries have had much in common in their geography and development, until apartheid led to a disastrous wrong turn in South Africa after the Second World War. Traditionally South African librarians have looked to Europe for overseas contact, but in the light of network and IT developments contacts with Australia and the United States are just as relevant.

The *IFLA Report* mentioned by Dr Rochester (*inCite* 11, p 11) is now available from IFLA as the *1993 Report of the IFLA mission to South Africa* by Gboyega Banjo, a Nigerian expert.

An insight into the issues being faced in South Africa was provided at the opening ceremony of the SAILIS (South African Institute for Library and Information Science) conference in Grahamstown in September. Archdeacon Ezra Tisani deviated from his scripture reading and prayer to announce to the 650 delegates that libraries were 'foreign entities' in South Africa and outdated symbols of authority; in certain instances they should be burnt down. Tisani argued that libraries, as presently structured in South Africa, 'were afraid to make deviations from the norm', and were 'geared to serve white interests'. They preserved the historical tradition of South Africa which was not relevant to the new multi-racial Africa.

Such an explicit attack on libraries and hence on librarians led to a stunned silence. Professional decorum prevailed, however, and the Chairperson of the Organising Committee, Christine Malan, indicated that at least in her part of South Africa libraries were representative of and relevant to today's multi-racial society. The President of SAILIS, Arnold Lubbe, acknowledged the nature of the 'uncertain times' and vowed that SAILIS would work with the other library groups on national

library and information initiatives. In his discussion on the future, where he saw 'unity in diversity', he cited the importance of the *IFLA 1993 Report*.

One of the great issues in South Africa is the opening up of the higher education system to those who may not be adequately qualified to enter it. The *IFLA Report* certainly encourages libraries to recruit professionals from disadvantaged groups on the basis of their potential rather than strictly on their educational and professional qualifications. Many black librarians are not qualified to enter the more technical and professional jobs due to their lack of training.

All library and information groups in South Africa realise the awesome social and economic tasks that are required to provide educational access to previously deprived sectors of the community under apartheid.

The SAILIS conference also reflected the historical division into Afrikaans and English-speaking cultures. This can lead on occasion in the Conference setting to a perhaps less widespread fertilisation of ideas than might be the case in other countries. In the longer term, while recognising the concerns of the Afrikaner community, it is clear that in their library and information work the majority of the black community will speak English, the 'lingua franca' of the international library world. The primarily Afrikaans-speaking universities such as Rand Afrikaans and Stellenbosch acknowledge that English will be increasingly used within their institutions.

Looking at school libraries in just one area, Kwazulu, 76% of all schools in 1990 were without libraries. Across the country, eight million children are reported to be without schooling and 34% of all books published in 1991 were in Afrikaans. There is clearly a great need for the establishment of more libraries, with material available in African languages and relevant to newly-literate adults.



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The universities themselves are signing an agreement on resource sharing through the Inter-University Library Committee (IULC), but this has taken a number of years to bring to fruition. Inter-library loans are generally free between universities in South Africa, but the agreement allows any imbalances in inter-library loan transactions to be rectified.

Library resource-sharing in South Africa also relies on input into SABINET (South African Bibliographic and Information Network), an on-line database of 1.6 million records plus numerous other data sets. South Africa is a little behind countries like Australia and the UK in development of networking, although rapid strides have been made in 1993 in the setting up of campus-wide information systems. While electronic networking will be increasingly used there will be a gap in the access by those who missed education altogether, are semi-literate or have limited telecommunication facilities. Many groups in South Africa have no access to telephones or electricity.

And many would see a crucial role for community/public/school libraries, with adequate audiovisual and media technologies and teacher librarians, that can build on the indigenous oral traditions of South Africa as well as on the European traditions. ■