

# DR. DANIEL BOURDANNÉ

## KEYNOTE

*Daniel Bourdagné was born in Chad. He is currently based in Oxford, UK where he serves as General Secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Daniel studied in Chad, Cameroon, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and France and has a PhD from the University of Abidjan in animal ecology. He has been involved in student ministry for more than 20 years, having been on staff with IFES in Francophone Africa as regional secretary, responsible for overseeing IFES ministry across the region's 20 countries, before being appointed to his current global leadership role.*

### Africa speaks (1 Samuel 17:1-18.4)

There is no better way to begin than by thanking the organizers of this "Africa speaks" consultation. I would like to thank you, dear Brother Edward and the organizing team, for inviting me to give this opening statement. When brother Edwards came to visit in Oxford, I quickly realized that he was heavily pregnant, pregnant with a vision to make room for actors in Africa's book industry. God has surely used his experience in the publishing industry, his findings from research on leadership in Africa, his proximity to Africa during the development of the Africa Study Bible and his love for the old continent to impregnate him with the vision which is now coming to fruition. This is hardly surprising for me, because when you climb a mountain, it is only once you get to the top that you get to see how high you have climbed, and only then do you catch a glimpse of all the other higher but even more beautiful hills you must climb on the horizon.

I accepted the invitation because I share this vision to help Christian publishing in Africa grow. I fully and passionately believe in the need to be active and intentional about helping Africa's Christian publishing industry blossom and flourish. Though we face real and daunting challenges, I can't wait to see such a vision fulfilled. Which is why we need to share such a vision with all the current and future players of Africa's Christian publishing industry. I'm sure all the players present here today would like to share in such a vision.

Still, I was wondering why a consultation on Africa would be held in North America? And what's more, as a native of the Sahelian region, I'm not used to freezing temperatures. I know my brother Edward will tell me I have been living in the United Kingdom for many years. True! But there's an African saying that no matter how long a log of wood stays in a river it will never become a crocodile! Therefore, I would rather deal with the African heat and never-ending summers. I would rather we were in this Africa where we live to the rhythm of opportunities, *KAIROS* and are not ruled by the *Clock*. In Africa, we have time on our hands, we take time to do things unlike the West which has watches but people don't have time to talk, to hang out. I say this to acknowledge my African brothers who have braved the cold to come up here and spend time with each other. Because I am sure that just like me, you would rather have

met in Africa to talk more freely about Africa, your own Africa. I also say this to stress my view that this meeting ought not follow anyone else's agenda but Africa's. That is why I would like to acknowledge the generosity of my African brothers and friends of Africa in braving the cold to come to North America to talk about Africa, our Africas.

I was barely 10 years old when I lost my dad. But even at that tender age, I noticed that my father would always withdraw when he needed to make tough decisions. He had his corner in the woods where he would withdraw to pray and ponder serious issues. I would therefore like to think of this Chicago consultation as the corner of actors in Africa's Christian publishing industry: a corner to withdraw and take a step back from Africa, from life's many worries which threaten to engulf us, from the myriad demands on our attention and interruptions which may jam up the frequency of our fellowship with God and with each other: terrorist attacks like the ones in Burkina Faso, demonstrations repressed by DRC police and military, trade union strikes in Chad, girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria, mismanaged elections in Kenya, the resignation of Ethiopia's Prime Minister sending the country into a state of emergency; or more importantly in your daily lives, where you may sometimes be interrupted when called upon to rush a woman in labor in your neighborhood to the hospital for lack of an ambulance, or an interruption from a friend, a relative who has dropped by your office or home to visit. I hope this corner of ours in Chicago will afford us some quiet, or better still, time to step back and listen to God, do some rethinking about Africa, to describe it better to ourselves and others, to feed our vivid imagination. There never was a straightforward answer to Africa's challenges. External attempts have often failed. We don't want to hold yet another fruitless meeting. That is why we want to speak frankly, deeply, listening to God and to each other.

This brings me to the theme of our consultation: "Africa speaks". I have always loved this quote by the French poet René Char (this may not sound familiar to English-speaking people), from *Chants de la Balandrane* which goes: "The words which come up will know things about us that we don't know about them". Isn't it paradoxical that we should be gathered at the bedside of Africa's publishing industry with such a theme as "Africa Speaks!"? It would have been made more sense to have a theme like "Africa writes" or "African publishing". Those who view printing on demand as a magic solution for Africa may have liked it even better if the theme of the conference were "print on demand: a revolution for African publishing!". But none of the above were chosen. We have settled for "Africa Speaks! ". It suggests that we are here to talk, to listen to God and to each other. The theme takes us away from the pressure of pragmatism and magic solutions. It gives us a relaxed perspective, which by the way is very useful in stimulating creativity and inspiration. You don't create well finished products under pressure. The theme also reminded me of how speaking is experienced in Africa, an oral tradition going back over a thousand years. This oral tradition is embodied and anchored in the life of the West African griots. "The griots belong to a separate caste; in addition to being the artists of a community, they preserve and guard its oral, musical and poetic traditions, for it is thanks to them that poetry, music and history are passed down from generation to generation. Griots are wordsmiths,

wielding words imbued with a power of persuasion that goes beyond the art of saying".

Griots are master of the word and by the same token, masters of the spoken word. Do the Holy Scriptures not tell us that in the beginning was the Word, the Word was the Spoken Word of God? The word is the source of creation, creativity and life. Yes indeed! Talking doesn't mean you're doing nothing.

Though Africa is an Africa of oral traditions which are embodied in the griots, the absence of writing is, nevertheless, not synonymous with ignorance. Knowledge is not always found in writing just as age does not always equate with wisdom. In 1962, the UNESCO Executive Council witnessed a heated exchange between the US Senator Benson who was representing the United States and Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ of Mali, a newly elected member of the Executive Council. During the Council session, Senator Benson had arrogantly and disdainfully described Africans as ungrateful, illiterate and ignorant people. Hampaté Bâ curtly replied and I quote: "I admit that we are illiterate, but I certainly do not agree that we are ignorant. [...] And I would have you know that in my country, when old man dies, it is a library burning". What he actually meant was this: "In Africa, when an old traditionalist dies, it is an untapped library burning". Elderly traditionalists had a wealth of knowledge which they passed down to future generations through their holistic school. While African culture is still predominantly based on oral tradition, with the majority of the population illiterate, it is only fair that Amadou Hampaté Bâ should remind us that orality does not necessarily mean ignorance. Those of us gathered here are therefore neither ignorant people nor empty vessels. We bring our experience and knowledge together to discuss and jointly explore ways of developing Africa's book industry, as the continent transitions from oral to written tradition. We are speaking to each other because we know there is no easy or cheap solution. There is a need to reinvent one.

What's more, it would be injurious reductionism to define Africa merely by orality. Some Africans themselves may think that Africa's knowledge was confined to oral tradition. Which is why Cheikh Anta Diop, the Senegalese scholar was right in addressing such people when he wrote: "The Negro has no idea that his ancestors who adapted to the climatic conditions of the Nile valley, were mankind's earliest guide on the path to civilization". Many Africans remain unaware of Africa's contribution to various areas of culture and knowledge. On Sunday 18 February, I preached in an African Church in London. I asked them who coined the concept of the Trinity. Very few were aware that it was invented by an African. Cheik Anta Diop's lesson could also enlighten others, non-Africans, who may still be mistakenly reducing Africa to an oral Africa, an ignorant Africa, and relying on an often reductionist and sometimes erroneous understanding of the African culture and way of life. Africa is dense, opaque: who can understand her on first contact? Who can fully describe her? Africa is disturbing because she refuses time and again to fit any mold we may try to make for her. And this is the Africa which will never cease to amaze us because just when we think she is completely broken, she straightens up like a reed. She often straightens up unexpectedly, usually when she is backed in a corner. What a resistance strategy?! How

resilient she is! I love Africa, deeply. But I know that Jesus loves her even more deeply. Indeed, He knows exactly why he created Africa.

We know that orality was not the only means by which Africans transmitted knowledge and memories. Griots were not the only actors. In fact, the first thing to note is this, it is Africa that provided writing to mankind. The invention of writing is thought to date as far back as the fourth millennium B.C. in Upper Egypt, Nubia. I was quite intrigued to note that the "Medou Neter," a hieroglyphic writing used in -3400 B.C. in Black Africa literally means "word of God".

Secondly, from ancient times, there have been various forms of indigenous writing in Africa. Besides, in several major African languages, including mine, the Mundang language, a minority language spoken in southwestern Chad and northeastern Cameroon, there is a clear distinction between the words "read" and "write".

For instance:

In Swahili, to read = kusoma; to write = kwandika

In Lingala, to read = kotanga; to write = kokoma

In Bambara, to read = Kalan; to write = sèbè

In Peul, to read = djangongol; to write = windogol

In Hausa, to read = karatou; to write = rouboutou

These words are free of any European or Arabic influence. Furthermore, we now know that there were other forms of writing such as the Bamoun writing in Cameroon, the Mende writing in Sierra Leone with its 212 characters, the Bété writing in Ivory Coast, the Guez writing in Ethiopia which is still alive and in use today, just to name a few. There is also increasing evidence that Arabic influence led to the establishment of centers such as Timbuktu, a treasure trove of ancient manuscripts which were masterpieces of knowledge. Some of them only recently began to be translated. A French publisher, *Actes Sud* has offered translations of a few texts. There is surely more to come, so long as efforts to classify and preserve the manuscripts can continue, especially in the face of ongoing threats from terrorist groups active in the region.

During this consultation, we will be called upon to speak. In other words, Africa is invited to share, to share her story, to recount her story to one another. We must not feel shy or intimidated in doing so. Instead we must be passionate about it because ours is an important mission and we are living in a historic and special time which calls for our contribution. I understand that we are meeting in a pragmatic America which has learned and developed problem-solving reflexes. American pragmatism would have us come up with quick fixes for our problems. Some players in the publishing industry would expect us to tackle problems by adopting pre-made and readymade solutions which can be replicated and extended limitlessly, much like a cloning mechanism. We must avoid such pitfalls. We all know that all the readymade solutions that have been poured into Africa, in good faith and with good hearts, including billions of dollars invested have so far failed to help Africa out of its troubles.

We are here to speak because speech is the creating word. It is life. The word sets free. We are therefore invited to speak. And it's Africa that's doing the talking. If only Africa were given the chance to speak more often, as is being done here today. If only Africa could talk about herself. Even if she looks ugly, let us give her room to talk about her ugliness. And if only we listened carefully, in order to understand better. We are accustomed to hearing others tell us about Africa and tell themselves about Africa, interpret her. Maybe Africa is used to hearing others often speaking and writing for her. At times it is done quite subtly, and Africa ends up being a puppet, speaking words that have been pre-recorded and fed to her to say. She therefore parrots others or acts as an Africa that speaks but whose words, being pre-recorded, are not truly hers. You are no doubt familiar with these matters.

A Malian proverb says: "When a goat is present, one must not bleat in its place". I therefore welcome this initiative to let Africa speak. For speaking is not doing nothing because speaking creates and is life. Speaking is strength and action. Speaking is inspiration and imagination. Let us therefore speak frankly, openly, to encourage each other but also and more importantly to stimulate our imaginations. Without imagination, there is no creativity. When I read the Bible, I let my mind run free because I'm reading a book that feeds the imagination, a healthy hope-filled imagination.

Let me now touch briefly on a dimension of this consultation which gives me more motivation and hope. This dimension is the following. I see and consider this consultation not only as the Africa that speaks, but especially as a stance taken by Christian publishing Africa, presenting herself to God to hear his message in order to speak the Word of God. In order to present oneself before God, one must first be present for oneself, listening of oneself, recognizing one's identity for what it is. For I do not present myself to a personal God as an object but as a person. By presenting ourselves before God as persons, as believers living in an Africa created by God for his purposes, we can hear God clearly as He speaks to us. That is why, during this consultation, Africa's words will only have full meaning, power and impetus if they are genuine and deep God-given and hence divinely inspired words. Our speaking must involve speaking-and-listening.

I will now take the liberty, in the spirit of mutual encouragement, to commend the current actors of Africa's publishing industry. It is my indeed my view that the actors of Christian publishing in Africa, are unsung heroes. They deserve to be commended.

The words that come to mind when describing the current actors of Africa's publishing are: resilience, perseverance, courage, sacrifice. I was once a small player on Africa's book publishing scene. To some extent, I am a little representation of the region's transition from orality to writing and of our firm determination to serve through publishing. I was born in a village. I grew up listening to tales, proverbs, oral and initiatory tradition. I had no books to read outside of oral tradition. The elderly people were my library. In that village universe, libraries were fully accessible, no money needed, no financial transactions involved. The libraries were open and available

throughout the community. They involved all the members of the community. The only requirement, the only transaction, was respect for the elderly and a desire to learn the near-initiatory discipline of listening, observing and obeying. The elderly were walking libraries and reading was an ongoing, open activity: at the table, around a fire on cold nights, under palaver trees on hot days, in the field, when hunting, at the river, etc. in the universe of African oral tradition, as Peul language scholar, Ahmadou Hampaté Bah, said, an old man who dies is a library burning. And then all of a sudden, I was exposed to a different tradition, the tradition of books. My mother and father, as first generation Christians, were taught to read and write by missionaries. It was my mother who first taught me the alphabet in my mother tongue, before I started going to school. As primary school pupils in the white man's school, we read the books listed in the curriculum which were given to us for free. We spent all our days in school, within the four walls of the classroom. And thus, the importance of the oral tradition school in my life began to wane. It was after the age of 10 that I was finally able to read a book by personal choice. I would walk more than two kilometers to a small library owned by a missionary who had a small collection of books. And there I could read for free. It was in high school that I got to buy my first book. It was specifically at the university that I began to actually spend money building my personal Christian library. In my journey and the journeys of several brothers and sisters here, we have been direct actors in this transition from orality to writing. The transition is still in progress. It will take a little more time to complete due to several factors. For example, this reading is done in foreign languages, often in the colonizer's language. These languages are still perceived in our subconscious as the language of might. Though we use them, in our subconscious, it feels as though we were still cloaked in our past defeats. Books are usually not available, accessible and affordable. Even for those who want to read, it is often hard to find books locally. We must therefore avoid shortcuts, quick and reductionist conclusions, or often harsh judgments which do nothing to encourage but rather discourage those who are pioneering the Christian publishing industry. There is a need to pursue efforts to promote widespread reading and writing to win the challenge of establishing a reading culture.

I grew up to be a reader of the French language, and later became a low-key writer, editor, publisher and founder of a Christian magazine. I helped manage a Christian publishing house and also served as a manager of a company specialized in Bible production and distribution. I am therefore well acquainted with the challenges of publishing in Africa. Which is why I would like to acknowledge and extend special congratulations to these actors of Christian publishing. They work under very trying conditions. Let me illustrate some of the challenges. A few years ago, a book industry player in the Democratic Republic of the Congo told me they had to review and change the price tags on books every single day because of inflation and currency fluctuations. Imagine the workload and investment involved. They had no computer. Everything had to be done manually. Things are a little better now but there are still a lot of hoops to jump through. There was a time when I personally printed 50,000 copies of the Gospel to use in university evangelism. I intended to distribute them in 18 countries across French-speaking Africa, starting from Abidjan. It took me several months to get the books to the different countries. I had to rely on travelers, slipping a few books into

their luggage, with no guarantees that the books would make it to destination. They were also at mercy of corrupt customs officials, etc. Even where the law provides for duty-free treatment of books, the corrupt customs officers skillfully circumvent the law and extort payments. I once found books from our publishing company on sale on the black market. A little investigation revealed that the printer had had our books printed privately. He knew the book would sell well. While you could easily sue such a printing press in the U.S. or in Europe, you would have a hard time doing so in most of our African countries. Your quest for justice would be futile, especially if you were up against a State-owned printing press. They are far more powerful than you. I should mention in passing that I also witnessed the looting of our books in bookstores, during the civil war.

Because of uncertainty, difficulties in recovering sales revenue, a European book industry executive operating in Africa, with whom I regularly do business, told me, “We no longer supply inventory on credit to Africans. They must pay upfront before delivery. We were having a hard time recovering the money from inventory supplied to African booksellers and incurring huge losses in the process”.

There are also logistic constraints. I still clearly remember how hard it was for the CPE Director to find a good printer. And what can I say about the scarcity of good writers, or the challenges of working with authors? Meeting deadlines is no easy task, unlike what obtains in the West.

It is therefore easy to see why those who continue working in Publishing are heroes who deserve to be congratulated and encouraged. And in contexts like French, Portuguese and Arabic-speaking Africa, Christian publishing remains a daunting challenge. The shortage of evangelical Christian literature, in any form, continues to cause severe famine. The evangelical Christian population is generally small, which means the market is narrow. Since mainstream Christianity is English-speaking, these communities cannot enjoy the wealth of resources in the English-speaking countries.

Most of Africa is still illiterate. Furthermore, raising financial capital locally is a challenge. Here in the West, when you have a good project, you can get a bank to back you. But in Africa, it doesn't usually work that way. Notwithstanding all these challenges, there is reason to hope.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons that makes the case for this meeting in my view is the fact that it provides a forum for us to encourage each other. When you are working in challenging circumstances, mutual encouragement is a step on the path to success. We are not in the same position as the Western countries which have a long-standing tradition to build on: a tradition of entrepreneurship, a business culture, a culture of competition, etc. One of the gifts God has given us, in my view, is this opportunity we have to talk to each other.

We will certainly differ in the way we tackle logistic issues. God has called us or better put, invited us to this gathering because he wants to encourage us, individually and more importantly, collectively. God's encouragements will surely overwhelm us. This

will sharpen our vision for the development of Africa's book industry. We do not determine the agenda of this meeting. It is God's agenda we will be following. It's all about the players of the book industry, it's all about Africa wanting to share what God has said to her.

Today, I sense God telling us that the time is right. The time is right for us to work to help Africa's Christian publishing industry blossom. How? What are the visible signs that the time has come for us to act?

- The extraordinary numeric growth of Christianity in Africa. Africa's Christian demographic growth is picking up momentum. Christianity's center of gravity has shifted. There is a need to publish, popularize, and water Christian Africa with high quality biblical thought. We must prevent a famine for Christian books from taking root in Africa.
- Missions are now polycentric, working on all fronts. African biblical thought must be shared, lavishly displayed before the world as Africa's contribution to God's mission worldwide. If meaningful theology is the kind that is developed where the majority of Christians are found, then the Christian publishing industry needs to prosper in order to support the spread of African biblical thought.
- Technological progress, the vibrant creativity of Africa's youth offers potential for the viability of the publishing industry: The Internet, optical fibers which are currently circling Africa, the availability of money transfer services, cloud technology that allows text exchanges, print on demand technology, virtual currencies, new global partnership opportunities, etc.
- A growing trend of entrepreneurship among youths. This spirit of entrepreneurship means the publishing industry could be regarded as a genuinely conducive birthplace for profitable businesses, where writers can reap great rewards from their work, where financial actors can risk venture capital, etc. Educators will see the need to invest in publishing-related training because it would be lucrative for them. And even though it may not yield immediate profits, partners will see the need for strategic investments and take a chance on us by investing part of their profits with a view to medium and long-term profitability.
- Africa's burgeoning population. In the near future, Africa's population will reach one billion. A growing number of people can read. A potential market will materialize.
- An increasingly holistic approach to Christian publishing. There is increasing awareness of the need to avoid ghettoizing Christian publishing. There is a need to explore non-Christian market penetration. The Gospel is not meant only for Christians. Such an understanding of publishing would extend the market's exposure beyond Christian circles.

Many may view the task of developing the Christian publishing industry as a battle of the Israelites against the giant Goliath. And that can feel like a hopeless endeavor. As I was preparing my text, God led me precisely to a passage set in the Old Testament. 1 Samuel 17 begins by painting a picture of despair and helplessness. Such were the

circumstances of the Israelite people as they faced the Philistines. The technical difficulties, unstable political environments, lack of control of the industry, the issue of lack of capital, very high illiteracy rates, are all issues which seem to me like Goliath and the Philistines. Are we fighting a losing battle? Are we hopeless? I have given up a few times before: a few years ago, in Kenya, some book industry players in French-speaking Africa came together with the proposal that it would be best to team up. I was encouraged to coordinate the effort. However, the initiative was short-lived. We were paralyzed, just like the people of Israel. Sometimes we would get stuck, caught up in our numerous activities, transfixed by the difficulty and exorbitant cost of transport fare needed to come together.

Yet as I prayed and thought about this meeting, I still got the sense that God wants to remind us that He is able to provide a solution. In fact, my idea is that we should look at the victory God enabled David to achieve through a change in viewpoint and in perspective. I would like to argue that what actually changed was the perspective, what some would call a paradigm shift that David was able to introduce. Up till then, the prevailing military paradigm held that to win wars, you needed mighty warriors, exemplified by Goliath: in terms of his height (a giant), outfit, armor, war strategy and experience. Everyone believed in that paradigm, beginning with the Philistines themselves. The Israelites had no giant in their ranks to face Goliath.

David was young. He didn't stand as tall as Goliath. He didn't have Goliath's armor. And even if someone were to loan him such armor, it would be too heavy for him to wear. His new paradigm, was a sling fight. He picked 8 stones he did not need because just one proved to be enough.

### **Are Christian books mere commodities for sale?**

Amid the industrial revolution and the emerging economy, Adam Smith, the father of classical economics identified 2 factors of production: capital and labor. However, in my humble opinion, the explosion of the book industry does not begin in a factory, which is defined only by capital and labor. Neither does it depend simply on technological or technical knowledge, like printing, production or marketing techniques. I am rather of the view that the success of Africa's book industry does not begin or lie outside of Africa or the outside of oneself. If I may paraphrase Jesus in Mark 7:14, it is not what comes from the outside that contaminates. What contaminates, comes from the inside out, Jesus said. A book is more than just a commodity for sale, it is first and foremost an inner passion. I humbly submit that the spark that will ignite a revolution in the book industry in Africa, will not be technological skill, or easy transportation, or a stable currency. These things will certainly be useful tools, if they are well understood and harnessed strategically for the book industry. The decisive factor, will be the inner movement which is a passion for books. Passion for books, is what prompts people to read, write and dream up books in different forms and formats. It is this passion on the inside which can contaminate Africa. Indeed, we can go elsewhere in search of capital, or technology. We can borrow those. We can copy them. As they do in China, we can even steal them.

When I started restructuring the PBA, I had no capital. But something drove me on. It was a passion for books. I deeply believed in books as agents of change, training, encounters with people, dialogue, gateways to life, a sure path to transformation. I went into debt to produce my first book. Thankfully I was able to repay the debt in a short time even with little experience and no training in publishing. To produce my first magazine, I enlisted the help of 4 other friends. I was able to convince them all to put some of their money into it. We scraped together some contributions to run the first issue of the magazine. The magazine survived, debt-free, until the group broke up as people began moving elsewhere. I double-hatted as the administrator and I left the money collected in the magazine's account when we closed it. When problems arose, we were ready to re-invest. We never depended on external aid. Only once did we receive an 80-dollar gift from some missionaries.

What we African publishing players need to do, first and foremost, in my view, is grow the passion for books in us. If I were to name this passion, I would describe it as a calling. The word "calling" is pregnant with meaning. It refers to something that dwells deep within and drives us, such that we keep pressing ahead even in the face of difficulty. There is no denying that the meaning of the word "calling" tends to wane and shrink as the Christian arena becomes increasingly professionalized. However, the fact remains that as players of Africa's book industry, we need to have a calling.

Be they in written or oral form, electronic or any other format, whether produced using print on demand technology or through more conventional methods, we must love books and nurture the love of books. This passion and love of books must give rise to a hymn to the joy of reading, writing, explaining the art of storytelling, reflecting. Africa will not have its book publishing revolution until we win the battle of loving books, of reconciling orality and writing.

Africa is made up of community people who want to meet each other. Here we are, talking in order to meet each other. We ought to read in order to meet each other. Written or oral accounts of curious events work better. They work better, not necessarily because they are better written, or because they are literary masterpieces, but because people get connected through their stories. So, we meet to share these stories. And we spread them by word of mouth. What do people do with their mobile phones? They share interesting tidbits, things said on YouTube.

I personally own three physical libraries which each contain hundreds and sometimes thousands of books. There is one library in my home, one in my office at work and one back in Ivory Coast. I hope you get that I love books. That's what I'm trying to convey. I love flipping through them in search of small or big pleasures, or curious facts, or surprises. I love seeing books neatly packed on shelves. I try to manage my space in England where spaces are quite small. At times I try to exercise some self-restraint by going to the bookstore with no credit card or money. Even with this precautionary measure, my place is piled with books. Someone once asked me what I will do with my books when I return to Africa or when I move. But for me, even given the space issue, any suggestion to discard my books would be insulting. I am still curious about everything. Living in England, I have even learned the art of old book treasure hunting.

I am one of those people who still love to gaze at books. I love the smell of paper and ink and the feel of a book cover. I don't like books with high gloss covers because they feel cold to the touch. I never torture a book. The books in my library are in generally good condition, so to speak. It pains me deeply to see someone open a book and fold it in two.

### **But why such a great love for books?**

The Frenchman, Jacques Chancel, loved to say: "Let there be no doubt about it, it is books that beam the small lights that are able to inform the world, that light candles which serve as benchmarks, markers, that give warning to tyrants and weak people...". Does this quotation from Jacques Chancel not take us as Christians back to Psalms 119.105 "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path."? For Christians, books are life because the word is eternal life. Christianity is the religion of the book. We are people of the book. The book is transformation. Books shift centers of power to the fringes. They lessen the dangers of ignorance.

Those who come into publishing: writers, publishers, producers, printers must come chiefly motivated by this inner passion for books as a means of transforming Africa. It is this passion that motivates, inspires, equips people with grit, resilience, creativity.

But I would like to suggest that the success of Africa publishing's industry must be the fruit of collective effort.

### **The publishing industry is a collective effort**

It is an effort that involves typographers, illustrators, hawkers, binders, donors, writers, readers. And in this 21st century it also involves IT professionals: programmers, database, artificial intelligence, etc. A friend of mine works at Oxford University Press. He regularly updates me on digital developments in publishing. He is a project manager and works with partners who write code, the programming part of his work. He is currently working to ensure that the writers themselves are provided with some minimum code that allows them to submit their manuscripts in formats that are easy to handle and cost effective for the publishing house. However, there are increasingly huge databases to manage, etc. in the future, book formatting will be part of an even closer partnership between authors and publishers. The publisher's trade will likely entail some formatting, an overview of basic HTML code or new programming languages. And things are evolving very fast.

While the book industry is the work of a family, this family, even in Christian circles, is not always a holy family. In practice, it can prove to be a fiercely competitive community marked by underhanded tactics. African publishers know this only too well, having faced some form of it in their dealings with each other and with Western Christian book executives, who produce books for Africa. Western publishers are generally more affluent, more experienced, have larger networks and sometimes more clout than African Christian publishers. They wield influence over African hawkers,

booksellers and distributors who are only concerned with making sales, over distribution channels and networks, over capital, translation and adaptation rights. An African editor would be hard pressed to produce a bible, for instance, because the rights are held by Western Publishers with long-standing and established businesses. For instance, with the exception of South Africa, few African publishers have the resources to invest in an edition of the Bible, or develop study tools, or even conduct solid and costly research to develop a new product. Such is the challenge facing African publishers as publishing increasingly goes digital. It takes huge investments which very few African publishers can afford. Sometimes I get very blunt with some Western Christian book executives and tell them they are not helping Africa develop its indigenous book industry. Telling them so obviously conveys the fact that even I cannot compete with them. We operate in a free market where there is room for everyone. On the other hand, however, I took their challenge as a call to strive for more excellence, to work harder because after all, I had one advantage over them. I am more familiar with the terrain and I need to think long-term. I will catch up long term.

In any case, while this family may not always be holy, at least it makes us aware of the key fact that a book industry cannot be built on segregated groups, in the ghettos of our isolated groups, as is often the case in Africa. We need to be a family, build partnerships, create networks. We must strive to work together, including by daring to bridge language barriers through translation and co-publishing arrangements. I suggest that the local church be deeply involved in such a partnership. I find it regrettable that the local church is often not a medium that instills passion for books in people in Africa. When missionaries were in charge, their local churches were somewhat more involved in publishing. The first publishing houses in Africa were mostly missionary inventions. We therefore want to get churches in Africa interested in publishing. There may be a need to rethink the publishing paradigm, much like the paradigm David successfully developed against Goliath. It is all about thinking outside of the box, coming up with new and fresh ideas. In more technical terms, we would say re-engineering the Christian book industry in Africa and for Africa. It may be helpful to find ways which sufficiently incorporate oral tradition, audio books, comic strips, in local languages too. The aim is to make every effort to win a few.

Finally, we must also offer partnerships to the African society in general, because while the book is the way of life, it is not confined to those who are "born again". We must evolve into an open, holistic Christian book industry which allows us to serve the African society as a whole. Christian publishers have a duty to help authors write texts which are not mere "moralizing sermons " streaked with Bible verses. For instance, I think there is a shortage of academic publishing in Africa, especially in French-speaking Africa. As a former researcher myself, I noticed a severe lack of publications such as articles in universities. I recall that my best scientific publications were published in scientific journals outside of Africa. My own university relied entirely on me to procure excerpts of my scientific articles. Researchers were compelled to go elsewhere to find journals to publish their work. When I think of publishing, I have often felt that this could be a small niche worth exploring as part of missions when targeting our African universities. What's more, Christian private universities are mushrooming across

Africa. Is that not a niche that could potentially help develop this book industry whose prosperity we are all wholeheartedly rooting for? I rest my case on this issue.

### **And where does the writer fit in?**

And this "patient man who gathers up the strands of wool clinging to barbed wire and makes you a sheep"? The writer's job is a labor of patience. It is the lifeblood of the publishing industry. There's no way you can develop the Christian publishing sector without writers. Good writers take nurturing, care and cherishing by good publishers. Finding and encouraging them is an ongoing effort. While translation is important, growing local writers is critical. Because their writing resonates more with their local context. We must face this challenge head-on, by investing in training writers as well as training publishers to support and mentor them. And our industries should be able to treat writers with dignity and motivate them by enabling them to make a living from their work. If they get well paid for their work, they will strive to produce quality, and they will rub off on others and thereby give rise to new callings.

### **Technology, an opportunity for Africa's publishing industry?**

It would be tempting to think that the technological revolution provides a golden opportunity to revolutionize the publishing industry. First, let's look at information and communication technology. When mobile phone companies began exploring the African market, they could dream of succeeding in Africa. They assumed that because Africans were poor, they would not be able to turn a profit given the massive investments needed to acquire licenses and build infrastructure. But they were mistaken because mobile phone and smartphone technology has fundamentally changed the way people communicate in Africa. Today, this technology has revolutionized communication in Africa.

These technologies offer solutions with benefits that could make things easier for the publishing industry. Smartphones and tablets could help promote reading and distribution. They can help drive down book prices by making them more affordable for a predominantly poor African population. If you asked me to choose between buying a book and a cassava root, I would go with the cassava because it is a matter of survival. However, if technology could make books affordable in formats that are attractive to Africans, as is the case with mobile phones, there could be profits to be made.

Electronic payment solutions, the use of virtual currency (bitcoins) are all avenues worth exploring, and we must stay on top of these new developments in order not to miss any opportunities. However, the question remains as to whether these benefits can spark an immediate revolution in Africa's publishing industry. What do we make of POD (Print on Demand) technology? It is being touted as the catalyst of a revolution on the publishing scene. In fact, POD technology reverses the conventional chain of events in publishing which is: edit, print and sell. In the conventional chain, the publisher may end up with a large inventory on his hands which will require huge

investments to manage, thus ramping up the book's production cost. Every publisher knows that quick inventory rotation is key because inventory means money tied down and vulnerable to the risk of inflation, and in a volatile environment like Africa, it is exposed to further risk of looting and destruction during armed conflict. In the POD model, the chain is reversed in the following order: sell and then print. You print only as required. The ability to save texts in the "cloud" means printing can be done from any location in the world, as long as you have an Internet connection and printing infrastructure is available locally. This technique would help to solve, at least in part, import and transportation issues which remain an issue for African publishers. Perhaps these promising technologies can help to revolutionize the Christian publishing industry in Africa. However, as a former African publisher, I don't want to be naive. POD technology, promising though it is, does not address the key problem of the recurring difficulty in transferring technology. Often the problem does not lie with the availability of technology but rather its successful transfer. The technology may be available elsewhere because it was designed for another context and market. But transferring it can be challenging. And with specific reference to print on demand technology, some will succeed and others less so, depending on people's different abilities to successfully transfer technology. To illustrate this point, one Tanzanian publisher who was one of the first people to purchase the POD technology, just after the large Alexandria library and South Africa had bought theirs, tells his story. He had a keen interest in POD technology, so he bought it. But he said: as part of the purchase contract, he was required to hire an engineer from the United States of America, New York to travel to Dar es Salaam and train their local operator. Of course, that included the engineer's accommodation costs during his stay which they covered. Because of frequent blackouts, which were not a problem in the U.S., they had to buy a power stabilizer. Which he did. That was an added expense. Despite all these precautions, because of an earthing problem, the photocopier's motherboard got fried and needed to be replaced. Which is what they did. But since the machine was not calibrated by the engineer who had delivered it to them, it took several hours and many long days of remote assistance on Skype to get the machine up and running again. They also had to deal with issues in procuring toners, paper and other material. Locally manufactured supplies were not of the required quality. And sometimes, when the local operator couldn't figure things out with the machine, the engineer or sales manager would berate them for being incompetent, or not knowing their stuff, etc., which inevitably creates serious issues in the company's dynamics.

In short, the issue is not the availability of the technology but how to transfer it to Africa. An informed publisher will be aware of the challenges technology transfer entails. Just like David in the analogy of the battle of the Philistines against the Israelites, under certain circumstances, using technology that works well for Goliath does not always ensure success. I have never personally experimented with POD technology. I only mentioned this example from Tanzania to illustrate the challenges of transferring technology to bring attention to this reality which we must face and not adopt apparently easy but costly solutions.

### **Christian publishing in Africa, the quest for excellence**

First, we must consider the publishing industry both as a mission and a business. As a mission, we have an important message to convey: the message of salvation. We have ethical principles to impart to the world, a worldview to share. Our message is the best there is, because it is life-giving and life-changing. We know how important books are. They provide knowledge. We need to strive again and again to provide high-quality messages, which means top quality and accessible books. Quality and accessibility belong together. It is sometimes tempting to favor accessibility over quality. But if we do so, in a society that is transitioning from orality to writing, we will lose out in the medium and the long term. Because poor quality quenches the desire to read. A book with sub-par content and an unflattering appearance is unappealing to readers. I personally do not share the view that quality should be neglected. The real issue is finding a way to cut production costs without sacrificing quality. This is usually a tough nut to crack, which is why publishers tend to sacrifice quality in order to make the product accessible at the very least.

But in order to be sustainable, publishing must also be a business, in the commercial sense of the term, a profit-making business. In Christian circles, people easily understand and embrace the idea of publishing as a mission. But publishing must also be seen as a business. As a business, you need to ensure continuity, sustainability of the precious mission. As in any serious business, this demands a sense of calling, an enterprising spirit, creativity, perpetual innovation, maintaining high levels of rigor and discipline in managing and controlling finances and in strategic planning. As a business, you need to be aware that publishing is not very lucrative. A publisher who makes 5% in net profits per year, in the French-speaking world, is a successful publisher. The English-speaking world may have a different reality. My point is that succeeding and achieving long term sustainability in an industry with low margins, requires rigor and high standards in financial management. In general, distributors fare better financially than the publishers themselves. Given the low profits, disbursing large amounts of start-up capital is often a challenge. It would therefore be a good idea to come together and invest jointly in areas such as training, promotion, distribution, in order to share heavy investment costs.

The Western book industry is changing radically. The digital shift has made large bookstores fold right before my eyes. Large groups tend to buy out small publishers because the digital transition requires large investments. IVP UK, a publishing house of the GBU, and hence close to me, was absorbed by SPCK, as it was no longer able to stay afloat. Only the big publishers are able to survive because they can afford to invest.

I personally see this period as a window of opportunity for African publishing. It is an opportunity, as long as book industry players are intentional and ready to reinvent themselves.

But they must build a culture of excellence. Strive for excellence at all levels. It is possible to excel even in simplicity. By developing simple, light and low-maintenance structures, and a strong work ethic that must be spread throughout the chain, primarily to the writers they work with, to printers who will be compelled to listen if

they want to get hired, to their readers who will be increasingly satisfied with the products.

However, this will require a change in our mindsets and a firm commitment on our part to work together, with no hypocrisy, without taking advantage of and deceiving each other. And we also need our non-African partners to join us in the *Ubuntu dance*. A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, in a spirit of true humanity and brotherhood, a spirit which instills the belief that he is part of something greater than himself.

### **In conclusion**

I would like to end by sharing about my recent trip to Ethiopia from 21 to 24 February. I strolled in the streets of Addis Ababa. I was struck by its youthful population. Youths everywhere, milling about the streets. They were idle. As I looked in these youths' eyes, I could hear their voices calling out to us, the book industry players. The way I see it, we need give them tools to spark a transformation. I also travelled to Kenya last year and visited Kibera, one of the country's largest slums, considered as Nairobi's open wound. In the streets of Kibera, I saw children playing ball using old socks, as we did in my childhood. Those youths reminded me of my own childhood. I felt like stopping to play with them. Later on, I went to a classroom with tin walls reddened by rust, a room which served as a place of church worship on Sundays and as a classroom on weekdays. I thought to myself that one of these young people could be the future President of the Republic, of a powerful Kenya, the inventor something powerful that will save Kenya. I thought, Africa's book industry is meant to serve them, these children who live in Kibera and the slums of Africa. And I also thought of those pastors who exploit and manipulate ignorant faithfuls, these women who though illiterate, are feeding Africa, keeping Africa alive. To me, the publishing industry, the Christian publishing revolution is meant chiefly for these people, these youths, these women, these churches members who are being manipulated.

But I also think of the rest of the world. I live in the West and when I go to bookstores, I don't find many books by African authors. I know that the West needs to hear Africa's message. The West does not need our money which we do not have. The West does not need our immigrants who are deported or left to drown. What do our writings have to offer to the West? At least they can make the West smile again and perhaps restore what Amadou Hampaté Bâ called "a human dimension which is being eroded by modern technology" With respect to theology and acquiring Biblical values, through its writings, Africa can offer the West an understanding of the practical meaning and real life testimonies of certain Christian values and virtues such as suffering, perseverance, resilience, which were especially needed during the first centuries of Christianity; virtues that are a vital part of an authentic Christian life and which Apostle Paul describes as prerequisites to being a soldier of Christ.

Thank you for your attention and God bless you.