



BULGARIA

Publishing at God's Speed

ANIM Foundation, a Bulgarian Sunday school publisher, reports God's blessings in six months of rapid change.

Deci Iotova, ANIM Foundation's Bulgaria-based staffer and Peggy Laney, her U.S.-based counterpart, still marvel at how much God enabled them to achieve during a six-month marathon that started in May and ended November 2002.

During this period, the two implemented many changes in the operations of ANIM, a not-for-profit publishing house whose name is a Hebrew word for fountain. The changes led to better resources for child ministry and more effective training events. They also allowed ANIM to enter new distribution channels.

"The increase happened so smoothly and naturally," says Iotova, "that it could only have come from our Source of ideas, knowledge and inspiration."

ANIM Foundation, Laney's brain-child, began organizing Sunday school teachers conferences in Bulgaria in 1996. "The main purpose of our work," explains Iotova, who teamed up with Laney in the ministry, "is

to fill the gap and produce Christian books, manuals and training aids needed in ministry to children."

ANIM fulfills its vision through a three-prong strategy. First, quality curriculum is essential for successful Sunday school programs, so ANIM brings together teams of writers and Sunday school teachers to create curriculum churches can use. Second, teachers must be taught how to effectively teach and minister to the children, so ANIM offers training conferences. Third, to strengthen the Bulgarian church, leaders must be able to train upcoming teachers, so ANIM reaches out to church leaders through training and handbooks focused on instructing leaders on how to disciple teachers.

The marathon

The marathon began May 2002 when Iotova and Laney roomed together for two weeks during a Cook publishing institute in Colorado Springs. The institute was focused on effective pub-

lishing and distribution of materials for children. The training sessions forced the team to critically evaluate how their organization works. They were not pleased with what they saw. Things had to change.

Areas needing to be overhauled were identified and an action plan emerged. What the two did not realize was that this was the beginning of a six-month non-stop marathon that would transform ANIM's operations forever.

Editing standards

The first target was the editing process. "Until then, we had a group of authors write the lessons and then some of them would gather and read the already written lessons and edit them as a team," recalls Iotova. This led to editorial inconsistencies. To change this, one editor would be hired and trained to uphold professional standards in editing the lessons.

"We devised a plan of action," says Laney. First, Laney and Iotova would edit a series of lessons to

the required standard. Then they would hire and train an editor "to see problems in the lessons and make necessary adjustments."

Then the marathon began. After the institute, the two flew to Laney's home in Wilmington, North Carolina, and began to work on their curriculum.

"I wish I could say it was easy, but it was not," confesses Iotova. "We had to read the lessons over and over again."

Laney says the Cook training helped fuel this part of the marathon. "Before the training, this would have been overwhelming; the institute gave us the confidence to rewrite the lessons with professionalism," she says.

The next leg of the marathon was to find an editor who would maintain the new professional standards. Bulgaria-based Iotova led the hunt and targeted a professional preschool teacher who also taught Sunday school in her home church. After consultation with Laney, she was hired and trained.



Peggy Laney and Deci Iotova at the International Christian Publishing Institute held May 2002 at Cook in Colorado Springs, CO U.S.A.

An editor was in place, but Laney and Iotova were not about to relax. While in Colorado Springs, the pair had vowed to “change the way we use color and art in our products.” A closer look at the artwork in a visual aids manual they wanted to publish showed that, in Iotova’s words, “it was not age appropriate.” They had to kill it. “We learned about killing a project and we did,” adds Laney.

Iotova and Laney’s art-killing spree spread to all of their Sunday school materials. “We checked preschool art to make sure it was scriptural,” says Laney. Artwork that was not appropriate or accurate was axed. “We had to have some of our preschool pictures redrawn before we could go to print.”

Chasing after sales

With the editing and artwork aspect of the

business in order, Laney and Iotova’s marathon took them to the sales and marketing side of the enterprise. “We will change the way we sell our products,” Iotova had written while in Colorado Springs. “Our book distribution will be better,” Laney had promised.

It was time to act. “We hunted for Christian bookstores in Bulgaria,” says Laney. Results of the hunt were disappointing. “We only found two—the third was out of business,” says Laney.

The two women did not hesitate to present their products to the two stores. “Now they sell our books and curriculum, and distribute samples of our newspaper,” reports Iotova.

With the short-lived bookstore hunt over, they turned to other Christian organizations. Child Evangelism Fellowship was a natural. “They now have our books,” says

Laney, “and we arranged to have another evangelist who travels around Bulgaria carry them.” This is a promising partnership. “Maybe they will include our books in their catalog,” adds Iotova.

Laney and Iotova also decided to change how they approach teacher training conferences. Since 1996 they had held one major national conference attended by teachers from around the country, but last October Laney flew into Bulgaria with a different mission. “Peggy came to Bulgaria, not for a national conference but to do something absolutely different,” says Iotova. ANIM staff had lined up visits to six churches where Laney would team teach with experienced local Sunday school teachers.

“During these visits,” reports Iotova, “[ANIM staff] had the opportunity to minister personally to people and to make new

contacts for the ministry.” Iotova is pleased that the workshops were also a sales opportunity. “We sold plenty of our books.”

Toward the end of last year, Iotova and Laney stopped for a moment to review the results of their six-month marathon. “We discussed via e-mail what had happened in the last six months,” says Iotova.

This time their self-evaluation was not like the one they conducted during their Colorado Springs discussions in May. “It was a joy to see how much we progressed in the areas we wanted to grow in,” testifies Laney.

For Iotova, their six-month marathon has taught her a life lesson about God and time. “Six months seems to me a short period of time to achieve something, but for our mighty God it was long enough to change and do a lot of things.” ❖