



Christian Books in Public Schools

By Lawrence Darmani

Lawrence Darmani is an award-winning author of many books, short stories, plays and magazine articles. He is the managing editor of Step Publishers in Ghana, a newspaper columnist, and a trainer for Media Associates International [http://www.littworld.org/].

Step Publishers [step@ghana.com], in Accra, Ghana, publishes *Step* and *Surprise*, magazines for young people, as well as books for both children and school textbooks.

For close to 14 years since its inception, Step Publishers focused on the production and distribution of quality magazines for young people. Those years of concentrated energies paid off in at least two ways.

First, by providing stories and articles, *Step* magazine (for young adults) and *Surprise* magazine (for children), have endeared themselves to readers—they've written to tell us so!—thus, positioning themselves as tools for evangelism and discipleship.

Second, without our noticing it, the two magazines gradually gave us a launching pad for our ultimate adventure into books—and adventure that began just 6 years ago.

Stepping into books

Magazines generally have a shorter lifespan than books, and it always hurt us that the stories we hunted for, took hours to edit, and groomed for publication should last only a short time. Yet our types of stories—mostly testimonies of the Lord's goodness towards his people—are timeless. Therefore,

we considered extending the lifespan of the stories by anthologizing them into books. We found that we were only a few steps away from expanding into book publishing.

At first we worried that readers might say they had already read the stories in the magazines in previous editions, but learned it was a welcome help to them to have the stories put together in book form.

It Happened to Me, a 24-page booklet, became our first collection of stories from the children's magazine, with the subtitle: "stories written by children for children." This was followed by *Studying At Home*, *Uncle Jojo*, *Waiting for My Birthday Party*, and others. For young adults, we compiled our first 96-page book titled, *The Prodigal Daughter*, followed by *When Mother Left*, *A Girl Says No*, *Led Astray* and several others.

Initially we printed fewer than 2,000 copies each of these titles, selling them mostly through the bookshops over several months. Somehow, the magazines paved a highway for the books through the public and private schools where the magazines were already known, thus strengthening our launching pad for distribution.

The Book-Purchasing Phenomenon

Our accelerated adventure into books came on the wings of what we call "the great invitation" by the Ghana Ministry of Education, Science and Sports [<http://www.edughana.net/>]. We opened the daily newspapers one fine day to read an advertisement placed by the ministry inviting publishers to submit

“supplementary readers” to be considered for large purchases. In Ghana, such readers are basically storybooks, how-to or self-improvement books, and other non-textbooks.

While we considered this a bright new idea, we found out that it was simply part of the ongoing interaction between the Ministry and Ghanaian publishers. Just two years previously, a similar invitation had hit the publishing world. The episode turned out to be a book-purchasing phenomenon. One publisher told me, “We smiled all the way to the bank,” because books worth millions of dollars were purchased from the publishers who took part in the competitive bidding.

In response to the Ministry’s invitation, we submitted the only five titles we had at that time. To our utmost surprise and joy, four of the titles were selected. A total of 17,800 copies were ordered for a single supplier, with payment due upon delivery. That was an eye-opener!

We were amazed that a government organization was in the business of purchasing storybooks in such large quantities. And, we were amazed that they were interested in Christian literature as well. This was an open door for literature evangelism on a larger scale!

But that exercise motivated me in another way. In delivering our books, I noticed that our order was only the tip of an iceberg: while we were happy with the US\$25,000 check we received, some publishers went home with more than US\$1 million dollars each. That knowledge, plus our mandate to extend our Christian literature ministry, urged us to invest what we got into publishing more titles. We did this by simply compiling more anthologies from the magazines, which we then supplied to the schools and the open market—while awaiting more opportunities.

Preparation Pays Off

By reinvesting the proceeds from our first government order of storybooks into developing more titles, we positioned ourselves to rise more significantly to the occasion of future “great invitations.” And they came:

1. Another division of the Ministry asked for storybooks in functional literacy for new readers of local languages. In response, we developed six new titles in English, which we then translated into 10 local languages. We submitted more than 50 titles for consideration, out of which 18 were selected, for a total order of 54,000 copies, almost tripling the first order.

2. Following the orders for local language books was another one for children’s books for primary schools. By this time we had published up to 35 titles in our children’s series, which we submitted in the competitive bidding. The result was an order for 84,000 books, still an improvement over previous orders.

How were these orders financed? First, we footed the printing bill for the first order of four titles from our operating capital. When the capital increased with the prompt payment by the Ministry, it financed the second order. But for a subsequent order, the Ministry made advance payments, which were guaranteed by our bankers. Moreover, offshore printing of some of the titles helped lower printing costs.

Why “Supplementary Readers?”

The buying of textbooks by the government ministry in charge of education is not something new, as successive governments in our country have sought to equip educational institutions with quality tools to aid learning. To this end, various funds have been sought from local as well as international sources to enrich school libraries and students’ bags with relevant books for studies and learning experiences.

This situation is not peculiar to Ghana, for a similar scenario prevails in other parts of Africa and the world. Textbooks are considered *core* and pertinent to education. Other books that are not in the *core category* are called “supplementary readers,” and Ghana’s education ministry is usually not under any obligation to buy these for the schools.

Nevertheless, “supplementary readers” are noted for their ability to help students improve their learning of the English language. In Ghana, English is the official language and the major medium of communication and instruction in all educational institutions. It is the vehicle for acquiring knowledge in other subjects and disciplines.

Therefore, stocking schools with storybooks, and encouraging young people to read them to improve their English-language skills has become very important. Hence, the attention on this type of books for the schools.

A “Mega” Order

For a relatively young book-publishing ministry like ours, perhaps the *mega* order reached us two years ago. At that time, the Ghana Ministry of Education, Science and Sports asked publishers to submit textbooks in competitive bidding. Straight away we wrote off this invitation as “not for us,” since we were not textbook publishers.

But one critical lesson I learned in a college creative writing course was, “Never say, *This can never be done*, or, *We don’t do it this way*.” At Step Publishers we debated the matter for some time and concluded that while we would not deviate from our normal publishing, we would leave the door open to consider such opportunities if any should come to us.

We had hardly made this decision when an author came to us with a manuscript for a textbook on the English language. The first

question we asked was, “Is it okay to publish a book that will help our readers improve their proficiency in English, so they can then read our Christian literature in English?” As you can see, that question was biased to elicit a positive response. Clearly, the answer was a resounding yes.

We accepted the young author’s manuscript, worked assiduously with him in improving its quality, and submitted that sole title (separated into Books 1, 2 and 3) in response to the invitation. When the result was released, our *Complete English for Junior Secondary Schools* was accepted alongside English textbooks from giant publishers like Longman and Macmillan. We knew it was the Lord’s doing!

The Ministry ordered 300,000 copies and provided an advance sufficient for printing costs. That title is recognized and accepted by schools as government selected, so it is welcomed in the schools. Inside our English course books are various kinds of *Step* magazine-style articles and stories used as comprehension exercises.

Slow and Careful Steps

It is significant to note that these increased orders helped with our operational cash flow and publishing capital, thus enabling us to publish additional Christian titles. Yet, we are prudent and economical in ordering print runs for our other markets that move slowly year by year. It is unwise to occupy floor space with stocked books and thereby lock up capital; instead we print on demand [[link to Lawrence’s POD article](#)], requesting fewer than 2,000 copies at a time.

We continue to publish our two magazines on a quarterly basis, and they are distributed in the schools, bookshops and churches. We consider it a double blessing that we can market our stories and articles in two series: first in the magazines, and second, anthologized in books. In addition, we now have a few novels that make the

rounds in the schools more regularly during the first semesters.

What an opportunity God has given us to reach Ghana for Christ! He has opened the

door for us to expand our ministry—and *Step* by step, it has been a wonderful *Surprise!*

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