

CZECH PUBLISHER SURPRISED BY SUCCESS

Jan Bída, director of Samuel Bible Work for Children, in Prague, Czech Republic, began at a critical time to meet the needs of a country emerging from totalitarian rule.

Jan Bída still finds it hard to believe how far Samuel Publishing, the company he started in his parent's apartment, has come.

"Ten years ago I couldn't even dream of where I am now," says Bída. His non-denominational company publishes over 30 titles and distributes 300 books for children, parents and Sunday school teachers. "Such success for a Christian publisher is not expected in our country," he adds.

Bída has good reasons to be surprised by Samuel's relative success. The Czech Republic is a Central European country with a strong Protestant heritage—including the great reformer John Hus and the Moravians. However, contemporary Czech society is mostly atheistic. "Sadly, in several studies, our country has been found to be the second most atheistic country in the world," says Bída. Less than one percent of the country's 10 million people are evangelical Christians. "Because of that, the Christian market is very limited," observes Bída.

Preparation for ministry

Bída is one of the few people in his country to have been born in a Christian family. At 15 he started helping teach children in Sunday

school. But it was not until he was 20 that he sincerely professed Jesus as his Lord and Savior. "That gave my life a whole new dimension," says Bída, who then began to seek God's direction for his life and career. "I wanted him to lead my decisions."

In 1989, the Iron Curtain was broken and a new era began for Central and Eastern European countries. Having been a Sunday school teacher for more than eight years, Bída felt a great need for good Christian literature for children, teachers and parents. "Our country was free from 40 years of communist oppression but the resources were few," recalls Bída.

After praying about the situation, Bída sensed God was leading him to start a publishing house to produce materials for children.

The beginning

"I had no experience in publishing, very little money, and a room in my parents' apartment served as the 'office.'"

Samuel's first products were a gospel tract and a brochure for children. Coloring books followed soon after. "Little by little, I began to publish larger titles," says Bída. However, Samuel's publishing had

to be put on hold after Bída got married. He and his bride spent a year in Bible school in the United States.

The break was good for the business. "We had enough time to get refreshed spiritually," he says. "God also enlarged our vision for the publishing work."

When they came back home, more books were published and Bída started to see a need for more structure. "I hired freelance people to do translation and editing. I also hired a full time employee for distribution." Now, Samuel seems ready for even more growth. "We are working on 12 new titles to be published soon," reports Bída.

Exhortation

Bída's experience with Samuel Publishing has taught him to trust God despite the circumstances.

"In almost every country there are some circumstances that limit our possibilities as Christian publishers," says Bída. "The market might be limited because of the low number of Christians, or due to a very poor economical situation, or illiteracy.

"We must accept such limitations as a given," he adds. "But at the same time, we should not get

discouraged because our God's power is not limited. Even when the resources are few we still can strive for excellence."

Advice for new publishers

When asked what he has learned about starting a publishing house, Bíca shared 12 principles:

1. Receive God's calling. "I could easily get discouraged," says Bíca, "but, I know Samuel Publishing is God's work and that he has called me to do this. God is my boss and the owner of the company; acknowledging him helps me to be responsible in my decisions. I pray to him to give me wisdom and guidance so his work can grow."

2. Grow step by step. "God helped me to understand it is good to have a big vision, but that I also need to be patient and not be too hasty." Bíca encourages others to stay balanced. "Take care in making decisions, but if God leads you to do so, take a step of faith," he says.

3. Lean on God, not on people. Bíca is thankful for the many different brothers and sisters in Christ who have helped him with prayer, counsel or finances. On the other hand, some who were excited about Samuel Publishing and even promised major financial help never contacted Bíca again. Lean on God's promises, not human ones.

4. Do not underestimate your experiences. "I felt my life was kind of fragmented," says Bíca. "First, I worked as a graphic artist, then as an assistant pastor. In publishing, all the pieces came together. My studies and experiences from my first job helped me in the design, layout and production of books. My work as an assistant pastor taught me to communicate well with people of different ages, especially with children, and to understand their needs. That experience helps me now in choosing right titles and in selling our products. God can use everything you have learned in the past for his glory."

5. Stay focused. Samuel Publishing has an editorial plan and a clear focus. This means Samuel stands out from its competitors. Cus-

tomers know what kind of literature to expect from the company. For many Czechs, Samuel Publishing has become a synonym for "good Christian books for kids, parents and teachers."

6. Seek support from your family. "My parents and my wife encouraged me to overcome difficulties," says Bíca. "It is very important for me that my family believes in what I am doing." He adds, "I need to listen to my wife's advice, and to seek unity with her in making any major decision." Bíca's wife, Rachel, edits books for Samuel.



Bíca, a young husband and father of two, adds it is crucial that publishers not neglect their families. "God is more interested in the quality of our marriage and in the way we raise our children," he says, "than in the number of books we publish."

7. Choose your coworkers carefully. "The wrong people can completely destroy your work," says Bíca, "but the right ones can bring it to a level you never would have been able to achieve just by yourself."

8. Support the work of other publishers. "God showed me I should not see other Christian publishers as my competition," says Bíca. "That does not mean I will share my editorial plan with them, but I can be happy for their successes, pray for them and bless them in their work. We have the same goal," continues Bíca, "to reach our nation for Christ. I am thankful for every good Christian book published no matter who publishes it."

9. Learn from others. Bíca started Samuel without any training in business or financial support. "I did not really know how to lead a publishing organization," he says, "I learned a lot from my mistakes."

Now Bíca says friendships with

other publishers enable him to share his struggles. "I got some training in Christian management principles that really helped me," he adds, "and I met brothers and sisters from publishing houses from other countries who inspire and encourage me in my work."

10. Keep your word. In the Czech Republic, companies commonly do not pay their bills on time. Unfortunately, this is true for many Christians as well. Bíca strongly believes God wants Christian publishers to keep their word. "By showing integrity, paying on time and being fair to our business partners," he argues, "we can bring His light into this world and give a good testimony."

Keeping commitments extends to customer relationships as well. "Our customers get the books they ordered as soon as possible," says Bíca. "If we make a mistake, we apologize." Samuel even offers a money-back guarantee. "If customers find out they do not like a book they ordered because they misunderstood the information in the catalog, they can get their money back," says Bíca. "You might think we lose money this way, but in fact we win our customers' trust. They will not only order again, but will recommend our services to others."

11. Be open to others. "One of the main characteristics of our work," says Bíca, "is openness toward Christians from different denominations. God helped us gain trust from Catholics, evangelicals, and charismatics. At the same time, we are clear about where we stand theologically. Our openness makes our customers more open to new ideas, because they know they can trust us. This in turn motivates us to carefully choose the right titles."

12. Be persistent. "Publishing touches large numbers of people," says Bíca. "Because of this, the enemy tries to hinder us from reaching the goal. We need to be persistent and not only pray, but ask others to intercede for us. With God's help," he adds, "we can overcome the obstacles." ❖