



## Publishing in “Corrupt Africa”

by Isaac Phiri

Confession is good for the soul. After an inspiring workshop for publishers in a major African city, I was in a hurry to get to the next training event in Asia. A distinguished local editor and publisher rushed me to the airport. I could see her waving goodbye through the glass walls of the airport as I handed my passport and ticket to the woman at the desk. Then came the shock. The woman said I could not get on the plane without a yellow fever vaccination card. She said there was a clinic somewhere around the airport where I could get help.

I stepped back from the counter. My colleague saw there was a problem. I bulldozed my way through the crowd. Once outside, I briefed her and we took off on a marathon search for the health center.

We found the place and almost broke down the rickety door. A bored nurse sat in the corner. My colleague explained our crisis.

“Come tomorrow; the doctor is gone for the day,” we were told.

I panicked. “Can anyone help?” I asked.

“I could help,” said the nurse, “but it will cost you.”

I pulled out a \$20 bill. The distinguished Christian editor and publisher I was with looked away.

The \$20 energized the nurse. She rumbled through her desk and found a blank yellow fever card. “Name?”, she asked. “Date of birth?” Then she wrote in the date of my vaccination—six months earlier. (Many countries require that your vaccination be at

least six months old). She picked up the official government stamp, backed-dated it, and stamped my card. I could go.

Back at the counter, the woman who had turned me away gave me a broad “I-know-what-you-did” smile and checked me in. I waved to my friend to indicate all was well. She rushed off to finish editing materials on Christian discipleship in Africa.

Welcome to publishers’ lives on the continent. Getting around and getting things done can place you in ethically difficult situations. Many situations demand immediate responses, have major costs, and could significantly impact your work. Publishers in “corrupt” Africa have to think on their feet.

### *Dealing with governments*

The first cluster of challenges African publishers face comes from sources external to the publishing and retail industry. They are the government structures and cultures within which publishers must work. In South Africa, a judge jailed top people in the country for being in “generally corrupt” relationships. More are on trial. In Zambia, a bank manager told a magistrate how he would sneak to the back of the bank building with US\$100,000 in cash, put it in the trunk of the car of a government official who would then speed the cash to the president’s residency. Similar stories are told in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya and elsewhere.

The bottom line is African governments are still suspect.

Corruption in high places may seem far-removed, but in fact hits publishers in day-to-day operations. Publishers need a broad range of government services. Examples are many: licensing for imports and exports; taxes; not-for-profit status; labor procedures; property acquisition or maintenance standards; vehicle importation and registration. Publishers who move product across borders often have to deal with customs—a grueling experience!

Moreover, crime on the continent is so high that government police stations are regular stopovers for many publishers. They often have to stand in line to report traumatic experiences. Vehicle thefts are common. Office and house break-ins are regular. One publisher had her computer stolen from her home office while she slept on the other side of the house. Laptops and cell phones are often snatched, as are briefcases, handbags and wallets. The police may not do much, but their official, stamped reports are necessary for insurance claims. Often police officers take their time completing these forms, and may ask people to come “later” for these procedures.

The choice for publishers needing a government service, whether it is related to day-to-day operations or to a crime, is either to wait in line or to give government

officials an “incentive.” In Zambia you often have to “oil” someone, or ask friends in high positions to help you out. Following established procedures does not get you anywhere—at least not on time.

African publishers also come into contact with their governments when competing for contracts. In most of Africa, governments run the educational systems and thus purchase large amounts of textbooks and supplementary reading materials. If a title is adopted for use in religious education or general interest reading in schools, the impact is enormous. One publisher in Ghana was fortunate to have some of their titles selected by the government. Instead of the usual small print-runs of 2,000 copies, they suddenly needed to print 90,000.

The ethical dilemma comes into play when bidding for these opportunities. Non-Christian publishers may “induce” decision-makers to choose their titles, but Christians often select other strategies. Some befriend the officials, hoping for favorable decisions; other publishers have simply given up on such opportunities; and still others put in their bids and pray for a breakthrough—and once in a while, it happens. But getting government contracts remains an area where Christian publishers feel the impact of operating in generally corrupt societies.

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