

Publishing National Authors

by D. Steven Dixon



For three days in March 2005, a large gathering of evangelical church leaders in France discussed what forms of evangelism are best suited to the French culture. Almost half of the speakers and small group discussion leaders have been published by Editions Farel, our company. This would not have been so five years ago.

Translations... or national authors?

Currently, 90 percent of publishing in our small evangelical French market consists of translated materials. This has not always been the case. France is traditionally a country of would-be authors, and early evangelical publishing reflected this. A shift occurred in the 1980s as Christian self-help material and charismatic titles began to sell.

Buying foreign rights rather than developing French authors has become the norm. It is easier and requires less work for a small staff. While the Anglo-Saxon approach to life tends to be pragmatic, if not formulaic, it fills a need in our analytical and theoretical French culture. A couple struggling to preserve their marriage needs a sensible approach based on true-life experiences rather than a detailed psychological study. Translated material does have its place.

Farel is a small publishing house with a catalogue of 200 titles and publishes 20 new releases each year. In the 1990s, our company had only one active French author. All other titles were translated. Sales were good, so why did we change?

Our analysis of the evangelical church in France showed us a subculture developing, one similar to the U.S. evangelical culture. Publishers contributed to this by importing titles without doing enough to adapt them to the French context. This, in turn, created a wide gap between how evangelicals expressed their faith and how their non-believing neighbors understood it. French evangelicals were becoming strangers in their own country, unable to communicate the Gospel in a culturally relevant form.

In the year 2000 we set a goal that by 2005, half of Farel's new titles should come from national authors. We hope to show our market that it is possible to express one's faith in terms that do not feel foreign to the French culture. What we

need most are new and innovative voices to present a vision of what the Church in France can become to impact our society. We also made it our policy that as far as possible, every title Farel publishes should be understandable to anyone outside the evangelical subculture.

How did we proceed?

A learn-as-you-go experience

We started paying closer attention to the opportunities around us. What unsolicited manuscripts could be "salvaged"? What conference speakers, article writers and specialists were available? We needed to network. We approached people and asked them to consider writing for us. Often they did not have the time to write—and if they did, what they produced required more follow up than we could provide.

Eventually the decision was made to hire an editor. This was a real step of faith, as labor in France is very expensive. We were increasing our payroll by a significant amount, yet we could not make the shift we wanted without staff to concentrate on developing local authors. It was not a matter of simply checking the spelling of a French manuscript. Rather, because the writers we wanted were not authors, we needed to "grow" them. A first project with a new writer can easily take a full month's time, spread out over six months to a year.

Training was a necessary investment. The kind of "aggressive" editing that we needed in our context is not taught in France. We could not hire someone with experience, so we hired someone with potential, provided materials, and sent him to overseas training—including Cook's International Christian Publishing Institute.

We knew it would take time to recruit new authors in sufficient amounts to make an editor's pay worthwhile. We had to absorb this cost until the results could kick in.

As French manuscripts came in we had to reorganize our workflow. Working directly with authors rather than with translated materials adds complexity to the work. There are a number of extra steps that cannot be overlooked. Last minute changes to the text are always possible, along with the risk of added mistakes. Authors have specific ideas about title and book designs and need to feel included in certain choices. The

process takes longer.

We found that some projects never make it to press. We usually initiate twice the number of projects we hope to publish. Sometimes the author gives up or finds she really does not have the time. Sometimes the final text is not what we asked for, and the author is not willing to rework it. Often a project is delayed, requiring a certain amount of juggling with our upcoming titles list.

The transition took longer than anticipated, but has been well worth it. We now have more than 18 French authors in our catalogue; they represent 30 percent of our total list. Last year we reached our goal: over 50 percent of our new titles came from original manuscripts.

We have done a good job in publishing nationals and it is now much easier to recruit new local authors. To emphasize this, at a national leader's convention last November we gathered as many of our authors as possible. We thanked them for their work and took them out to dinner. We invited representatives of the Christian press. The occasion pleased authors and brought Farel good media attention.

What books did we publish?

We identified areas, such as the relationship between the Gospel and the French culture, where translated books cannot fill our needs. *Dire Dieu (Speaking God)* and *Une église pour aujourd'hui (A Church for Today)* were two of our first titles, written, respectively, by journalist Eric Denimal and pastor David Brown. They were released at a time when churches in France were quite open to new thoughts. Having tried every possible imported method of church growth, and often failed, readers welcomed the culturally relevant ideas in our books. Brown wrote a second book, *Passerelles (Bridges)*, and then produced a film, a curriculum and two manuals to help Christians cross cultural bridges with their neighbors and to give seekers a post-modern approach to the Faith.

In the area of Christian living, our authors are able to refer frequently to French culture as they address an issue. Pastor and social worker Jonathan Hanley wrote a book on the need for grace in French churches, then developed a series of booklets, "Pocket Pastors," providing down-to-earth help with common pastoral issues. One booklet spoke of the responsibility of congregations in parenting all children in the church, especially those in single parent homes. There are huge differences between the French and U.S. cultures in regard to dealing with other people's children. We could never have published an American author on this topic.

French authors have a great advantage over foreign authors. Our national authors are our best marketing tool. They often have a good network that can help promote their titles; they are available to write articles for magazines; they can more easily be invited locally to speak and sell their titles,



and they even recruit new authors for us. We hope one day to sell rights to some of our titles in other languages, but that is a daunting task at this point.

Growth in sales of national authors has been slow. It takes time for an unknown writer to gain prominence. A stable base, with some bestsellers, is necessary to bring in enough profits. Another strategy is to partner with local missions or Christian agencies interested in books on specific topics. Then, it is possible to pre-sell copies to them and cover most costs, safeguarding your cash flow. We have done this with Groupes Bibliques Universitaires, the French InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. They provide short manuscripts that we publish and pre-sell three times a year, bringing us a whole new group of national authors.

I believe that each culture has some unique way of reflecting the Gospel. By encouraging original thought from authors of every nation, we contribute to enriching the global message of Christ and His Church. Perhaps one day, publishing houses everywhere will publish their own national authors as well as good translations. Then, as these authors get translated into many languages, all of us will profit from the best each culture has to offer. ❖

D. Steven Dixon is publisher of Editions Farel (www.editionsfarel.com) in Marne-La-Vallée, near Paris, France. This article expands on a March 2006 presentation at Marketsquare Europe organized courtesy of ChristianTrade Association International (www.CTAIntl.com).

Caption goes in this box.