

The Power and Pain of a Vision in Publishing

“By grace alone,” says Norwegian Svein Andersen of Bibelforlaget, Hermon Forlag, and Genesis Forlag, “I have become a publisher of the Good News.”

Of course we did not bury our project and forget our vision!

It all started with pain. A quiet, undefined sorrow, buried deep within my heart of hearts. It lingered on for days, weeks and months. I found myself crying while reading the Bible, unable to express the longing that only my Heavenly Father could see.

Ever since I was born again at 17, and then read the English *Living Bible* in 1973, I’d wanted a readable and understandable Norwegian version of the Bible. For 10 years I grew more and more desperate for a Bible that recognized the Sovereign Father God, the Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I wanted a Bible that honored the Almighty Creator through something as simple as using capital letters—when talking about “He” or “Him” or “His”—rather than lower case letters more appropriate for humans made from dust. The only translation available in Norway at that time was a 1932 translation that made no visible difference between Jesus and his human followers. In the third person, they were all “he” in lower case letters.

After five years of international publishing in Hong Kong, my wife Heidi and I returned to Norway. In 1983, we started Hermon Forlag, our own little publishing house. With diligence and prayer we built our list from four titles in the first year to 20 titles per year in the late eighties.

Having spent our savings on missionary work, we were of course fully financed—by the local bank.

Our search for good titles to translate brought us into contact with the esteemed Angus Hudson, in

London, who gave a small publishing house a chance to join in co-editions—making otherwise impossible projects economically feasible. (He also gave us more than reasonable credit, when needed). With Hudson’s help we grew to 30 titles per year; his encouragement and advice brought our publishing house to a higher level of quality, perseverance and long-term thinking.

It was Hudson, as well, who brought my innermost dreams to light. During a visit to our secluded mountain location in 1989, he had the audacity to suggest—out of the blue—that we publish a Bible. “Any serious Christian publisher should have a Bible version on his list,” he said. His undeniably surprising sentence was well thought-out.

Jesus taught us to be sure to have the necessary finance and stamina before setting out (Luke 14:28-30). We took only six months to consider the costs before we got started. By selling our cars (both the Andersen family and our close partner, Jan-Erik Boerrestad, blessedly owned fairly new cars that were nearly paid for); living in tents for our short vacations another couple of years; and cutting other costs to the bone, we could pay for and finish a Bible translation in three years’ time.

Stupid. That is the best description for what we did. I take full responsibility, and all the blame, since my longing to do this clouded my better judgment (my wife’s). We went for it.

I, of course, had no inkling of what we were getting ourselves into! The costs, the amount of work, the seriousness of doing a proper Bible translation—it was all beyond my comprehension.

With permission from Thomas Nelson Publishers, we had the New King James translated. But as soon as

the New Testament was published, our God-fearing friends with knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Norwegian kindly told us that this was just not good enough.

So, what do you do when your vision is known, your money is spent, and you are still not even at the starting line of the race?

Heidi and I had previously served nearly five years in the Far East under the illustrious pioneer missionary printer and publisher, Arnfinn Andaas. Of all we learned from him, one sentence stands out: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" He had ample opportunity to show us that such was his life and service.

Of course we did not bury our project and forget our vision! We wanted a Bible printed in Norwegian that would make our fellow citizens honor and uplift God. Giving up on your dream is never an option.

As in the first days of publishing, we were soon *fully* financed again—or perhaps fully *mortgaged* would be a better description. Our bank accepted very long-term payments on the Bible loan.

Four theologians were employed full-time. We added paid and volunteer proofreaders to the work force. It took us seven years to complete the text.

By the time the first copy of *Bibelen – Guds Ord (The Bible – God's Word)* arrived from the printers, our debt amounted to one million U.S. dollars. In 1997, 24 years after the dream surfaced, it was no longer a dream: It was a costly reality!

Our homes were so heavily mortgaged that we should have charged the national airlines for flying overhead. The personal guarantees we signed could never ever have been paid if the project went bust. All honor is due to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to my wife, who did not desert me at that point in time! I was literally scared to death those days. Directing the publishing house felt exactly like jumping from an airplane at

13,000 feet, tied to a parachute instructor by just four tiny metal clips.

Initial sales were very encouraging, and we sold nearly 10,000 copies of the new Bible during the first year. This allowed us to reduce our loans by 40 percent, leaving "only" 3.8 million NOK (about \$600,000 U.S. dollars) owed to the bank.

During the last two months before printing we employed 15 proofreaders, spent one entire pallet of copy paper, and ruined a copy machine and a laser printer in the process. Therefore, it was a complete shock to learn that 203 typesetting errors were discovered in the Bible's 1,684 pages. None of these were of any theological or historical significance, thank God! But our readers were gracious enough to point these mistakes out. Of 834 emails, letters and telephone calls that our editorial team received the first year, 789 pointed out that one header in the Old Testament contained a misspelling, and another a formatting error. Ow, ow, ouch! The other 45 customers fortunately discovered other typesetting errors.

I seriously wanted to dig a hole in the ground and bury myself in it. The words of Revelation 22:19, "if anyone takes away from the words of the book... God shall take away his part from the Book of Life," had burdened my soul since the birth of this project in 1989. With every error we discovered, the burden increased immeasurably.

It was of no comfort to be told that the Bible Society's translation of 1978 had contained 274 typesetting errors in its first print run. Then Hudson told me: "There has never been a Bible without typesetting errors. Humans make mistakes, regardless of their expertise or devotion to their ministry. The errors will be corrected in the next print run!" Then, I took comfort and scrapped the "hole plan."

Hudson also confided that there really is a demon of typesetting errors, who specializes in discouraging anyone

involved in Bible production anywhere in this world. I do not doubt that for one second.

Today, nine years have gone by since our first Bible was printed, and we are still in debt.

The bank no longer has the stranglehold on our lives and homes that it had in the 12 percent interest period, though we are still five years away from clearing that loan completely.

We survived the initial typesetting earthquake, a Bible printer who went bankrupt (leaving us with 10,000 printed and paid Bibles that had to be scrapped), dry summers, and stormy winters.

How did our business survive these turbulent years? We had to put further expansion plans on hold. For a couple of years after printing, my wife and I cut our own salaries by 50 percent, living very inexpensively. Since at that time we amounted to 40 percent of our full-time workforce—that helped a lot! Also, several of the major translators of the Bible agreed to "invest" their salaries in the company as shareholding capital. Being very careful with all of our expenses, and monitoring all sources of income, we survived financially.

What sustained me in these times of crisis? Without a doubt: mentors like Angus Hudson and Arnfinn Andaas, whose guidance and encouragement were of immeasurable importance; and my wife Heidi, whose faithfulness, support and friendship I treasure. Since all three now enjoy the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in Heaven, what I owe them can never be paid on this earth.

Besides these, friends who tell you the truth when your product is not up to the best you can do for Him, a friendly bank or financier, perseverance, and last, and most important: the Lord's blessing. This truth will forever stand: "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain." (Ps. 127:1)

Give Him your best! ❖