

Up from the Ashes in Côte d'Ivoire: Bookstore Goes from Bankruptcy to Success 10/1/2008

At MAI's writer and bookseller workshop in Mali last spring, 50 writers and booksellers from French-speaking West Africa honed their skills with trainers Tony Collins and Lawrence Darmani. Here's the story of one bookseller by Lawrence Darmani.



Ghislain Canteih Yao ran a successful business importing and exporting mangos, papayas and other tropical fruit across French-speaking West Africa. But, he longed to engage in full-time ministry and was praying for God's direction. When Yao heard of a Christian bookstore that was about to collapse in downtown Abidjan, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, his vision crystallized.

"I saw the Lord opening a door for me to put my desire for missions into effect through the bookshop," he says.

The bookstore owner, Adbo Rene, and his wife, were set to declare bankruptcy and emigrate to Canada. Rene's chain of six stores had almost all been looted and razed during the country's six-year civil war. Aleph Librairie, the last store in the capital, was a shell of its vibrant past. The aisles were empty, old books lined the shelves and unpaid bills piled high.

Yao offered to help Rene and his wife revamp the bookstore. Despite the couple's plans, they dreaded the business' closure and its impact on their witness. Born and raised a Muslim, Rene had practiced Islam among the local Lebanese community until his wife, an evangelical, led him to Christ. As a result, family and friends shunned him completely. If Rene's last Christian bookstore flopped, it would fuel their scorn forever.

The couple offered Yao six months to revive the shop, despite their skepticism.

A Strategic Mission

"It was the biggest challenge of my life," Yao says. With his young wife, he left the fruit business and they dove in. They prayed, moved, consulted and took multiple risks. And to the amazement of Rene and his wife, the bookstore began to turn.

"Where there is a will, there is a way," Yao believes. He knocked on door after door, seeking customers at schools, government offices, non-profits and even in residential neighborhoods. He stocked popular products like textbooks and stationery and offered discounts to school principals. He spoke on the importance of reading at meetings of Parent-Teacher Associations. For every potential customer who declined Yao's offers, several others accepted.

The U-Turn

In six months, the turnaround was visible and Rene's debt had diminished. Parents and school staff began adding Christian books to their purchases. Yao built relationships with many parents who now number among some 200 shoppers a day who visit Aleph Librairie in the city's main business center.

Customers buy CDs and DVDs, calendars, gift items and stationery. Yao says these "bait products" draw people to the Bibles and Christian literature.

"I praise the Lord that parents are noticing the role Christian books play in the lives of children and youth," he says. But his hunt for literature written by Africans has confronted him with the stark reality of their scarcity. As a result, he hopes to help produce and promote locally-authored Christian books soon. "That's one reason I'm in this workshop," he says.

Lawrence Darmani is MAI's Africa Regional Trainer.