



## Out of Africa | BY BONNIE DWYER

Jules Lumbo has a dream. As the publishing director for the Eastern Central African Division, he realizes that just occupying an office with a title on the door that says publishing director does not make him a publisher. But a publisher is what he wants to be, so his dream is to cultivate Adventist African writers—African books for African people.

He first convinced his division president of the viability of his dream, and then he took the next step in Adventism to making it happen. He called a meeting and invited writers from across the division. To his delight, more than one hundred sixty people responded by showing up to participate in workshops and discussions at the division headquarters in March. Russ Holt and Nancy Van Pelt came from Pacific Press to offer workshops.

Happening upon the meeting as a visitor traveling through Nairobi was a delightful experience for me. How exciting to see all these people gathered together to support each other in the lonely work of writing. On the day I attended, Russ Holt got things off to a great start with a presentation on excellence in writing and editing.

It did not take long, however, for the challenges to Lumbo's dream to surface. Representatives from the Rwandan Union share Lumbo's dream—they want materials in native languages—but could a sufficient number of books in a given language be sold to make it a viable commercial project? "Who will publish these books?" was the question posed by a Nigerian author who has translated *Steps to Christ* into the Kikuyuian language, noting his experience of having manuscripts languish at Adventist publishing houses. Recently, he has gone to a New York publisher who has shown interest in his writings.

Listening to the discussion brought to my mind the various problems of marketing and distribution that exist within Adventist publishing, with its roots still firmly tied to the nineteenth century, when Adventist publishing had

its heyday. In this history, literature evangelists have led the distribution system for reaching the outside world, and their numbers in African Adventism remain strong. But are they strong enough—and is this method effective enough—to be the foundation for making this dream of African books for African readers a reality?

In one presentation, a long compilation of Ellen G. White quotes on the importance of writing was invoked to prompt writers to reach out and finish the work. Yet are the books published and sold within Adventism mainly just that—books bought by an Adventist audience? The disconnect between audience and message remains the strongest challenge to Adventist publishing.

As I sat and listened, I wondered, is the "message" the same for Adventists and non-Adventists? Do we talk differently about Christ and our spiritual lives when we talk to "others"? Do we have anything to say to people inside the Church? Is conversion the only aim that a book can have? If we write only to convert, but sell to people who are converted, have we killed the industry from the start?

Jules Lumbo has a dream. At the meeting that he called, he suggested that every Adventist college and university in Africa form a chapter of local writers. "Next year," he said, "we want to bring people to your writing groups to work with them. We have to promote local writing and help members appreciate the Christian writing ministry."

So Jules Lumbo is now one of my heroes—for developing the local story and writers in Africa, and for appreciating "the writing ministry."

May he bring serious attention to the real challenges of writing and publishing in the global market of the twenty-first century. ■

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