

On Publishing from Everywhere to Everywhere

An interview with Pieter Kwant



Pieter Kwant is International Programme Director for Langham Literature and also runs the publishing and agency company, Piquant. Interview by Tim Davy, co-editor of Encounters.

Pieter, have books and mission always been part of your life?

For the last 33 years, I have been involved in books in one way or another. I started just after my conversion, in South Africa, in a theological book store, where I learned theology by listening to discussions between theologians who visited the shop. It was my task to know not only the current debates, but to be one step ahead so that I could sell them the books that they would want to read next. Working with a friend who had a degree in theology, and being initially responsible for unpacking books, you have no idea how much I learned about theology as we discussed the books we unpacked and I often took books home to read, returning them a few days after. I worked there for four years, selling books in around seven languages from a selection of 100,000 theological books. This gave me a grounding in book selling and theology as well as a deep love for books. The new media have never erased this deep attachment as books remain for me the most user-friendly means of communication that I know.

One thing that had a significant impact on my life before my employment in this book store was that, after having been converted for a year, I was disciplined by a farmer in Natal, in South Africa, who showed me his library. One morning, I took out my first book, which was *Evangelicalism in England* by Poole-Connor. I read it immediately and proceeded to read another - the biography of George Whitfield by Pollock, and then started reading *The Millennium* by Boettner, which I finished. That same week I started reading *The Dust of Death* by Os Guinness. Being a Dutchman, my English was not quite adequate for the challenge of reading this and I read it with a dictionary in one hand and the book in the other. I had to read the first chapter five times. Within the next few weeks, I had read the complete works available of Frances Schaeffer and HRR Rookmaaker. To me it was almost like a baptismal experience.

My interest in L'Abri led me, my wife and our budding family to Switzerland and the Netherlands to join L'Abri, as I felt very strongly that I wanted to go back to Europe. One of the desires that grew there was to be able to do something in the Kingdom of God for Africa, and possibly the wider world. As it turned out, the door opened for me with employment with Inter-Varsity Press after a year at L'Abri and subsequently I worked with STL and Paternoster Press. Since the year 2000 I have been involved in running my own company, Piquant Agency and Piquant Editions - a small publisher - as well as being involved with Langham Partnership International.

You are currently responsible for Langham Literature; can you tell us a bit about the programme and what your role involves?

Langham Partnership International run three programmes, one related to providing scholarships to Majority World students who want to do a PhD; the second providing preaching seminars in various countries; and I myself am responsible for the literature ministry of Langham Literature, which falls in two parts. We are involved in the distribution of evangelical books to some 1200 theological colleges in 96 countries and we work in five major languages - English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. We do this through grants of books being made available as well as through subsidizing books. We deal, through the colleges, with their scholars and teaching staff, their students and their alumni in ministry. Secondly, we are involved in the creation of indigenous materials in many languages and we actively encourage local authors to write and local publishers to publish - particularly books that are useful for pastors in their preaching ministries. We concentrate on

large projects, like the *Africa Bible Commentary*, the *Contemporary Arab Commentary* and now also the *South Asian Bible Commentary* and the *Latin American Bible Commentary*, all of which are one-volume commentaries which hopefully will be able to have a long term use in these areas. All of these have indigenous writers and are developed locally. My task is merely to act as a catalyst and a 'dynamo' as I was affectionately called the other day.

What role have books played in mission? Do they still have a part to play?

One of the large projects with which I am involved is *Operation World*, which has been a large part of my life for many years. I believe this book has had an enormous effect on mission, both in its giving much-needed information as well as in encouraging prayer for mission. Our own publication, *Operation China*, was used by local Chinese missionaries to evangelise some of the many people groups described in it.

Books play a key role in enthusing, encouraging and mobilizing people - individuals and churches - for mission. However, new technologies are changing the way we communicate, think and learn. Large mission books in particular have a very small readership now. New methods are called for because the task is not yet complete, and I am sure that books will continue to play a role, small but significant, in future.

How has the movement of mission from 'From the West to the Rest' to 'From Everywhere to Everywhere' been reflected in your work?

Ten years ago, most of the books provided through what was then Evangelical Lit Trust were produced in the West and written by western authors and given to the Majority World. Virtually all Majority World publications were translations of Western works. Our vision now is to - wherever markets have matured - encourage a reversal of this trend by resourcing local authors to write in their own languages for their own people.

Within the *Global Christian Library* series, we are encouraging the development of a major dogmatic series in 12 volumes, written by Majority World, as well as Western authors to enable the dialogue to take place on an equal basis, from everywhere to everywhere. The various approaches enriched by the cultural background from which they are written often gives the others a perspective that is enriching.

You oversaw the production of the *Africa Bible Commentary*. What were some of the challenges and joys of such an immense project?

On Wednesday, this week, we delivered the finished and typeset manuscript of the French edition of the *Africa Bible Commentary*, completing the production of the whole project. The project was conceived some eight years ago and a team was put together that pulled together the expertise of 70 African theologians to write this one-volume commentary on every book of the Bible, as well as 70 articles addressing some of the realities of Africa. I was asked to be the Technical Partner, looking after all the publishing aspects - editorial, production and marketing - as well as being its Agent. 25% of the commentary was commissioned in French and 75% in English; 25% female and 75% male; it was written and produced over five years and the first edition has sold over 65,000 copies and has enjoyed a very positive reception. The French edition will come out in November and other translations - Amharic, Kiswahili, Portuguese and Hausa - are in the pipeline. The great joy in this project was the tremendous fellowship and friendship that developed between us over the years as editors, production and technical staff. To see it now in the hands of so many and being used and studied makes one very thankful to God for the privilege of being involved - and believe me a privilege it is. The challenge has really been trying to keep it all on track, keeping everyone encouraged and enthused when things were difficult and fielding thousands upon thousands of emails in order to coordinate our editors in Africa, our editor in

Canada, our office in Carlisle, our typesetter in New Zealand, our printer in China and our publishers in Kenya, Nigeria and America. It has been a challenge!

In what ways can writing and research in the Majority World be encouraged?

I think that on a local level, wherever one finds oneself, it is important to recognise the gifts of the Spirit within the church that could or should be shared with the national church or further a field. Especially in some Majority World countries what comes from the West is perceived as best, reinforced by the West. I can honestly say I have learned a lot from Majority World Christians and theologians that I could not have learnt in my local setting. The moment you look at the Scriptures from within another cultural setting, it challenges the presuppositions and often un-Biblical attitudes that go unchallenged in our own culture. I would encourage the church in the Majority World to be far more positive about their contributions, within their own context as well as world-wide.

What are some of the projects you are working on at the moment? Which ones do you see as particularly strategic or exciting?

Within my own publishing venture, Piquant Editions, we are working on a 20-odd volume history of the church in China. It attempts to tell the story province by province, including the House Churches, the missionary churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Three Self Church, from AD650 up to the present day. We have published the first summary volume: *China's Book of Martyrs*. The volume we are working on now is on Henan Province.

As an Agent in the Piquant Agency, I am working on the new *Operation World*, as well as on a *Visual Operation World* that is being developed by Patrick Johnstone. The latter is a full-colour book and CD interpreting and extrapolating the data from *Operation World*.

Within Langham Literature, I am working hard on the three commentary projects I mentioned - the Arabic, South Asian and Latin American commentaries. We are also supporting an indigenous commentary project in Vanuatu, streamlining the distribution network on the South American continent and increasing our distribution in the Middle East.

As well as on mission, you also publish on the arts. Do you see much interaction between the two?

Traditionally not, but recently we have found that an increasing number of pastors, youth workers and evangelists have an arts background. There is great interest in how to use 'creative' ways to promote the gospel. Similarly there are several growing networks of artists with a missionary or outreach vision and even traditional mission sending organizations like OM and YWAM have growing departments specializing in the arts, and not just in music but visual and performing arts and filmmaking. No doubt, it is a result of the huge role the (advertising) media play in our culture - it is easy for Christians to perceive 'evangelism' as 'marketing the gospel'. That is something we try to address with our publications. So, yes many of our artists are extremely mission-minded. Fewer of our mission writers are interested in the arts. My own view is that whatever God has given us to do, we should do under the Lordship of Christ and for his glory.

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