

# AFRICAN PARADIGM SHIFTS

Bible Engagement and Discipleship in Africa:  
Are we on the right track?

Questions and Ideas from 30 Years  
of Work in Africa



## ARTICLE 4

**THE POWER OF  
BUSINESS IS THE  
ONLY WAY TO MEET  
OVERWHELMING  
MEGA-NEEDS**

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– Matthew Elliott, PhD

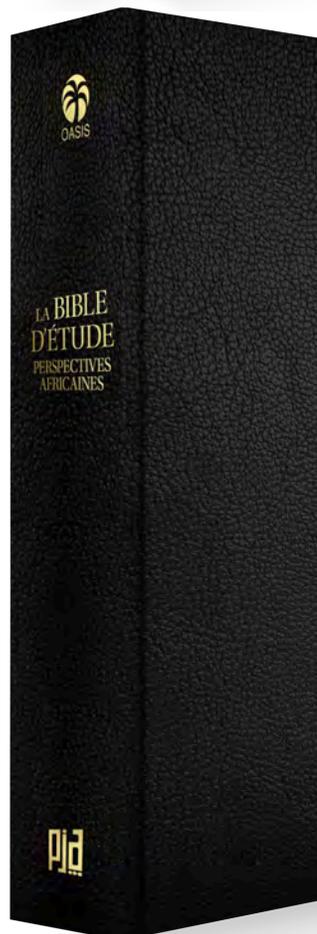
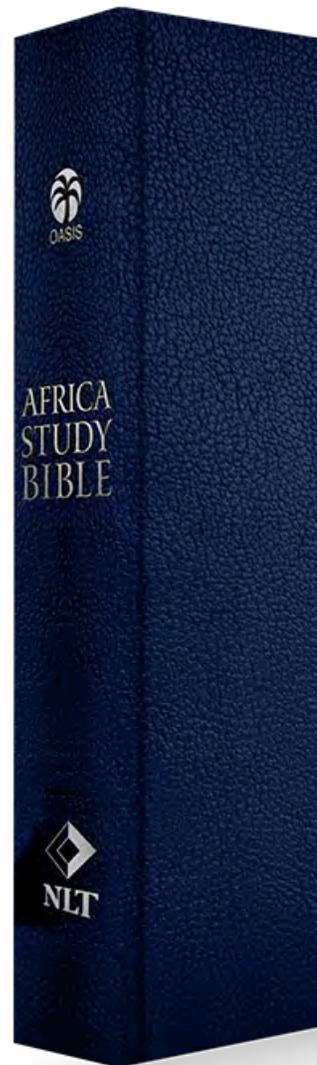


## THE POWER OF BUSINESS IS THE ONLY WAY TO MEET OVERWHELMING MEGA-NEEDS

The impact investment revolution has arrived in Christian charity! And it is a good thing. Oasis has been an innovator and advocate for impact investment in Christian publishing and discipleship since Edward Elliott founded the organization in 1978. In his travels around the world, he discovered that Christian books and Bibles were most plentiful in countries where Christians had learned to make a living in publishing.

In over forty-five years since our founding, many healthy local Christian publishing industries have risen around the world. I have had a front-row seat to the dawn of these industries, and I know the leaders and ministries that made them happen. Great examples of this are in Brazil, Eastern Europe, and the Philippines.

In contrast, a healthy, vibrant, local Christian publishing industry has not arisen in Africa that meets the needs. Instead, Christians in Africa suffer a Bible famine. Hundreds of millions of devoted Christians lack Bibles, and millions of Christian leaders lack the resources to teach God's Word.



After several decades of working in Africa and much thought, I will draw some conclusions about why African Christian publishing hasn't taken the same course as some other places in the world.

With a few key unique principles, the Oasis model might have the power to work to help end this Bible famine.

Africa presents some unique problems. For one, Africa lacks a language barrier to entering local publishing. English, French, and Portuguese are Africa's dominant languages of education, and all these languages already have major Christian publishers. Normally, local Christian publishing industries are focused on smaller language groups and don't face this level of competition.

Therefore, Africa must leap a uniquely difficult hurdle to develop a publishing industry. African publishers trying to write transformative locally focused content must compete with massive publishers like Harper Collins and Random House. But at the same time,

books for African audiences are not profitable enough for major publishers to make them a priority.

Secondly, Africa faces the worst economic poverty and the smallest middle class of any continent with a market for books. To earn money in Africa, the large publishers cater to the top ten percent of Africans that can afford \$20 books originally aimed at North American and European markets. For the other 90 percent of Africans, these books that are too expensive to buy might as well not exist.

Thirdly, many smaller nations just do not have the economic scale to support healthy publishing on their own, and the book-selling infrastructure is poorly developed across the entire continent. Books from a start-up publisher hardly get 100 miles from the economic hub, let alone across borders to other nations. Sustainability can only be achieved if you work on a pan-African level. That is exceedingly complex and difficult.



Oasis author Dr. Levina Mulandi, author of *The Sisterhood Secret*



Oasis author Ernest Wamboyei, author of *Baesics*

Finally, Africa's poverty has led to an abundance of toxic charity, even in Bible distribution. When Western nonprofits flood the market with free Bibles, African publishers and bookstores can't sell Bibles that could support a healthy, long-term publishing industry. Much of the time, distributing free Bibles in Africa destroys markets, harms local entrepreneurs, and makes Bibles less available for Africans in the long term.

We are all for giving Bibles to people who can't afford them! But Bibles must be given away wisely and intentionally, according to very specific needs in the local context.

For more examples of how toxic charity damages communities, read *When Helping Hurts*, published by the Chalmers Center, an Oasis publishing partner. (<https://chalmers.org/books/when-helping-hurts/>)

## OASIS KEYS TO SUCCESS IN AFRICA

Building the systems that will end Africa's Bible poverty will be complex, demanding, and capital-intensive. Oasis's vision presents the most powerful, innovative, and impactful solution to date to help end Bible poverty and the discipleship resourcing crisis.

First, to compete with the largest publishers in the world, and bring prices to affordability, the African Christian publishing industry must reach an economic scale. To meet the economic realities of Africa, and to cover needed editorial costs, it must be pan-African and work across borders to sell print-run quantities large enough

to lower prices. For Oasis, reaching that size requires working in the three dominant languages of education in Africa.

In addition, it is key to publish both Christian books and Bibles. Bibles give the scale and momentum needed to effectively distribute books that meet Africa's specific cultural needs. Customers often need hundreds or thousands of Bibles for every 50 or 100 books. To make warehousing, shipping, and staffing sustainable, Africa-based publishing must focus on both. This method resembles the methods of the global Christian publishing industry, Bibles provide the critical mass for the largest Christian publishers, giving them the time and editorial expenses to publish books that meet specific needs.

Next, reaching scale requires intense capital investment. There is no full Bible printing industry in Africa. Therefore, supply lines to Africa from the world's Bible printers are long; the paper supply needs pre-planning and often pre-payment. Bibles for Africa must be printed in large quantities to achieve low prices.



Oasis has worked for years to bring these strategies to life. We have invested heavily in systems that work across borders, innovative multinational warehousing and shipping systems, and international banking that allows us to serve customers in Africa's major currencies.

This combined expertise and investment has allowed Oasis to efficiently serve up to 40 countries in Africa from six hub warehouses. No other single organization can match our systems in delivering 100 or 10,000 books and Bibles from Uganda to Cameroon and from South Sudan to Zimbabwe.

In short, our business model enables a unique quadruple bottom line.

### **1. Discipleship Impact: Invests directly in discipleship.**

- Hundreds of churches, child sponsorship agencies, and schools currently, buy Bibles and books for Christian discipleship in Africa.
- Oasis publishes African voices that empower contextually appropriate discipleship designed to have maximum impact on African needs.

### **2. Scale and Financial Sustainability: Sales of materials and Bibles create a self-sustaining flywheel that multiplies impact.**

- The only way to solve the discipleship resourcing crisis is with sustainable investment in the products Africans want.

### **3. Economic Development: The economic impact is in Africa!**

- African-owned businesses warehouse and distribute books, making income. Proceeds from sales provide for reprints, support local sales and editorial teams, and support African-led organizations and ministries.

### **4. Impact Investment: ROI creates further impact.**

## **CONCLUSION**

When a church grows from 10 million members to over 700 million in about a century, nobody has enough money to meet the enormous need for Bibles and discipleship resources by giving away Bibles for free. The only way to grow books and Bible distribution that will meet Africa's needs is by using the

same method that has worked around the world – building successful Christian publishers that grow sustainably. And the only way to do that with the complexities of modern Africa outlined above, is to pioneer new pan-African methods for publishing and distribution.



[oasisinternational.com](http://oasisinternational.com)

Interested in becoming a partner in the growth that's already happening in Africa? **[Equip a local pastor here.](#)**

This is a free resource courtesy of Oasis International. Oasis is devoted to satisfying Africa's thirst for God's Word.