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It's Sweet at Zondervan!

*2005 Best Christian Places to Work Finalist
Fosters a Culture of Innovation*

By Emily Odegard

IN 2005, ZONDERVAN, Grand Rapids, Mich., achieved its 8th consecutive year of record profits, gained recognition from *Christianity Today* as one of America's "40 Best Christian Places to Work," and was named one of West Michigan's "101 Best and Brightest Companies to Work For" by the Michigan Business and Professional Association. So how does Zondervan so successfully carry out its mission?

Zondervan endeavors "to be the leading Christian communications company meeting the needs of people with resources that glorify Jesus Christ and promote biblical principles." And this mission is not just a pipedream.

Zondervan publishes approximately 400 new titles each year, employs over 420 people worldwide, and distributes numerous best-sellers, including *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, with over 23 million copies sold.

Innovation across the organization is a foundational practice, undergirding Zondervan's mission, according to Zondervan CEO **Bruce Ryskamp**.

"In fact, one of our shared values is to seek out new possibilities in every area and embrace ground-breaking change that adds value," says Ryskamp.

His statement begs the question: How does such a dynamic group decide which innovative risks will be taken?

According to **Mark Rice**, vice president of corporate communications, "The process we use to determine what innovation makes sense for Zondervan is a combination of holding each idea up to our company mission, our marketing mission, and our financial model. First and foremost is our mission. Any product idea, however creative, must meet our mission. If it doesn't, it does not get published."

Zondervan's Marketing Resource Center website (MRC), a component of Zbusiness, is a recent example of innovation in action. The first of its kind, the MRC allows retailers to view, customize, download and print marketing materials and promotional tools on one site, free of charge.

In 2000, Zondervan also became the first Christian communications company to publish an eBook, producing both Philip Yancey's book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, and Leonard Sweet's book, *The Dawn Mistaken for Dusk: If God So Loved the World, Why Can't We?*

Both the development of the MRC and the release of eBooks demonstrate Zondervan's active commitment to best serve their customers and supporters as they continue to strive to be leaders in new technology, valuing both content and form.

“Innovation is, in part, the future of Zondervan as a frontrunner in Christian communications companies,” says Ryskamp. “Innovation instills fresh thinking into our company and results in new ways to reach both our existing consumers and attract new consumers to Zondervan products.”

The development of the *Italian Duo-Tone™ Bible* represents yet another innovative risk taken by Zondervan. The idea for the Bible, and its unique covers, came from Zondervan’s production people. The team had researched fashion trends in purses and leather bags on overseas trips.

The attractive Bible cover designs of Zondervan’s *2005 Spring Collection* bear style names such as “Striking,” “Splash” and “Sweet.” The Bibles carry over the latest trends in fashion accessories. Since their initial introduction in 2003, Zondervan’s Duo-Tone leathers have added significant incremental sales growth, generating over one million additional units sold in their Bible line. The fruit of such sweet innovation is evident in the further spread of the gospel.

While innovation is, in part, the future of Zondervan, the heart and soul driving Zondervan’s mission is in their 420 worldwide employees, says Rice. He emphasizes that innovation “starts with our commitment to our employees and our consumers.

“We are committed to creating an environment that encourages our employees to thrive. Employees thrive when they are respected, and when they are encouraged to look for and share ideas that will help Zondervan better achieve its mission.”

Zondervan encourages and rewards idea sharing in their product development teams. The teams include representatives from production, marketing, sales, editorial and other departments. Their extensive research purposes to generate and modify product ideas, with the unified goal to identify, understand, engage, and motivate customers. Zondervan also brings the customer’s voice into their product development.

Strategic innovation coupled with high esteem for customers and employees has made Zondervan among the best.

Ryskamp’s response to Zondervan’s being recognized as a Best Christian Place to Work company was gracious. “It is always humbling to win an award like this, one in which you are evaluated by your own employee base. Our employees are our greatest asset, and it is important to us that we foster an environment where our employees feel valued, richly rewarded and cared for. It is because of them that we are able to grow and succeed.”

Zondervan, an international Christian communications and publishing company, was founded in 1931. The company is most noted for their widely published *New International Version* (NIV) translation of the Bible. Zondervan is a division of Harper Collins Publishers. Visit them online at zondervan.com.

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