Christian Schooling—
Going Global

by Philip M. Renicks

Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare.

—Psalm 40:5, NIV

Background

When you think about Christian schooling, how far does your mind stretch? Can it stretch far enough to embrace a global family of Christian schools that God is using to fulfill the Great Commission? Your school is part of a global family of Christian schools—an international organization that has accepted the challenge to fully embrace the Great Commission. Jesus instructed us to make disciples and teach them to observe all that He had commanded, even to the end of the age.

Today, ACSI member schools are found in more than 100 countries. The fastest growth of Christian schooling on the planet today is in what has been termed the global south. The global south encompasses Africa, Southeast Asia, India, Latin America, and Oceania. Christianity is flourishing in these areas of the world. As a result of the growth of the church in the developing world, there is corresponding growth in the number of Christian schools—schools that reflect the essence of the Great Commission—in countries of the world that are considered closed to the gospel and in countries that allow only limited access.

Even in the face of oppression and persecution, many parents see Christian schools as not just an option but as a critical component in preparing their children to face the growing hostility of the secular non-Christian world. Many of these parents live in the developing world and face incredible poverty, but they have hearts that long for Christ-centered education because they recognize that a Christian education is the most important gift they can give their children. They know that education breaks the cycle of poverty—they are struggling to break free.

ACSI responds to the needs of Christian schools around the world because of the foresight of its founding members. In 1978, when ACSI was formed, its founders believed that this new and fledgling Christian school association should be an international body, and by the Spirit of God, they had the vision to see the future. By 1985, the board of ACSI approved an office of international ministries to begin providing services to this growing number of Christian schools around the world. Little did the founders know the strategic importance of their decision.

The Global South: Latin America

In the area of the global south known as Latin America, the labor of early missionaries has borne rich fruit. As early as the late nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, missionaries saw the need for education, and they used Christian schooling as an effective tool for evangelism. Christian schooling was a means of raising up the next generation of church leaders. These early schools still exist today across Latin America. In Guatemala, the Amigos Christian School just celebrated its 100th anniversary. Established by early missionaries, it is a shining example of a Christian school that has remained faithful to its mission.

The national leaders who came out of those early mission schools caught the vision, and they were burdened by God to start additional schools. Leaders such as Virgil and Bea Zapata in Guatemala and Jose Bongarra in Argentina started schools in the mid-1900s, and those schools are flourishing today. These men and women traversed the continent as early pioneers, preaching the gospel of Christ-centered education, inspiring and training others to follow in their footsteps.
As revival began to sweep across the continent, along with it came a proliferation of Christian schools. They were in major cities, rural villages, and deep in the Amazon rain forest. This rapid growth was accompanied by a growing group of Christian teachers. By 1990, ACSI had opened its first office outside North America—in Guatemala City—to provide support to schools: resources, consultation, training, and encouragement for Christian teachers and administrators.

Stuart Salazar, the regional director for ACSI Latin America, reports that out of an estimated 3,000 Christian schools in the region today, more than 75 percent have been established in the past 25 years. These schools have graduated students who have gone on to hold positions of influence in government. Others have served as missionaries, pastors, church leaders, teachers, leaders of parachurch organizations, and leaders of multinational corporations. The Christian school movement continues to gain strength and influence as it provides for the intellectual development and spiritual formation of its students.

**The Global South: Asia**

As the world looked in on the 29th Olympiad in Beijing, we were wowed with the glitz, the glamour, and the glory of all that China could muster to impress the watching world. Yet behind all the show and what appeared to be openness to the world, China remains closed to the outside world of Christian influence. The church continues to be persecuted, Christian schools as we know them are illegal, and house-church pastors are jailed. By government decree, those pastors were forced to suspend all activities during the Olympics and for three months leading up to the Olympics (Cole 2008).

ACSI regional director for Asia, Dr. Janet Nason, reports that God is at work in China, where different paradigms exist for schools both above and below the government radar screen. Some are private schools in which all the teachers, administrators, and board members are believers. While they do not have the freedom to share Christ openly, they function as a model for the future.

Others are underground schools that consist primarily of cell groups of homeschoolers. These schools, which meet in homes or perhaps in industrial buildings, are sometimes affiliated with specific house churches or are made up of children from several house churches. Like the underground church, these schools are illegal.

The Voice of the Martyrs reported that by the age of 11, Anna, a young Chinese girl, had already experienced persecution for her faith. She had been kicked out of her home and out of school. She was taken in by a house-church pastor who ran a small orphanage in his home. The pastor and the orphans were evicted from their home. Each time they found a new place, the local authorities evicted them. Now Anna and the other orphans live in hiding. They attend an underground Christian school where they live during the week, and they return to the pastor’s home on the weekend. Anna, like many persecuted Christians in China, remains strong in her faith. She recently told the Voice of the Martyrs, “I think God must really love me. He has taken such good care of me” (Voice of the Martyrs 2008; World-NetDaily 2008).

At a time when China holds a tight rein on Christian schooling, Christian schools are flourishing in the Philippines and South Korea. ACSI opened its first Asia office in the Philippines in 1998 to unite the Christian school movement and assist in raising the standard of Christian schooling in the country. By 2001, an ACSI office had opened in Indonesia—the largest Muslim country in the world.

Because Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia, Christian schools are facing some serious challenges. During the twentieth century, there was a large influx of new Protestant evangelical missionary groups. Each of these groups concentrated on establishing churches and Christian schools. Today, the evangelical Protestant church and Christian schools are under attack from the government because of radical Islamic elements in the parliament. This attack has resulted in the burning or the closing of hundreds of churches and Christian schools. It is the desire of ACSI to strengthen Christian teachers and schools so that they can effectively prepare students who will boldly defend their faith in a Muslim-dominated society.

**The Global South: Africa**

The educational picture for African children is dismal. Historically, the church played a significant role in schooling from preschool through grade 12. However, during the last half of the twentieth century, the church abdicated its responsibility for education, relying on the government to provide education for all children. In the developing countries of Africa, that government system has failed, leaving an educational vacuum across the continent.

ACSI is endeavoring to address this vacuum. In March of 2007, ACSI convened an Africa Roundtable to summon church leaders, Christian educators, mission leaders, pastors, and Christian business leaders to a higher level of commitment and accountability in their collective role of educating the lost, future generations of Africa. Samson Makhado, ACSI’s regional director for Africa, reports that the Africa Roundtable provided the momentum necessary to energize the evangelical church of Africa to develop strategic plans for propelling the education agenda to the forefront of their church ministry and community development. Those who attended were summoned to find African solutions for an African problem.
Along with the church in Latin America and Asia, the church in Africa is experiencing explosive growth. At the turn of the twentieth century, Christianity in Africa was virtually nonexistent. Today, places such as Congo, Angola, and Swaziland are around 90 percent Christian. According to the Web series Glimpses of Christian History, “The spread of the faith in Africa represents perhaps the most dramatic advance in all Christian history, and yet the names and stories of the persons chiefly responsible are largely unknown” (Christianity Today International 2007).

Although Christian schools dot the landscape of Africa, they are too few and too expensive to meet the needs of the millions of vulnerable children who deserve the gift of an education that will break the cycle of poverty and prepare them to take their rightful place as productive citizens in society. The only hope for these children is to receive a Christ-centered education, an education that will give them a future and a hope.

South Africa has often been dubbed the country where the first world and third world meet. This is certainly true of Christian schooling. Some of the finest Christian schools anywhere in the world exist in South Africa. They have beautiful campuses, and these schools are flourishing because parents with means can afford to send their children to them. However, on the flip side, some of the most disadvantaged schools in the world are also in South Africa, and ACSI is working hard to serve both groups from a regional office established in South Africa in 2001.

Anna-Marie Russell, ACSI’s regional director for South Africa, reports that a critical shortage of teachers—the current shortage is 60,000—is making an impact on both the public schools and the Christian schools. Not only is it difficult to find qualified teachers, but it is extremely difficult to find qualified Christian teachers. In areas of the country where schools are disadvantaged, class sizes swell to 40 or more.

The challenge for Africa today is to embrace a new era in which Christian schooling will play an increasingly dynamic role in the church and in the broader community to strategically address the immense educational problems facing the continent. These needs will be met only as those in the Christian community form strategic partnerships and work synergistically to advance continental change through Christ-centered schooling.

Europe

The work of ACSI in Europe began shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and focused primarily on the countries of eastern Europe. Less than a month after the fall of Romania, the Macedonian call came from a Baptist pastor, the late Petru Dugulescu, who begged for assistance in start-
By August of 1991, the mighty Soviet Union had fallen, and the doors had opened wide for the influence of the gospel. To my knowledge, not one Christian school existed in this vast empire of 11 time zones. The idea of a Christian school was a foreign concept, and there were no Christian teachers to even begin Christian schools because Christians had been denied training in the field of education. Under the leadership of Raymond and Cindy Le Clair, ACSI developed a strategy to begin working with pastors and with a new group of teachers who had recently come to Christ.

The work in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has been a difficult struggle from the beginning, but significant breakthroughs have taken place. Christian teachers in the CIS have participated in continuing education programs for Christian teachers through four-week intensive workshops. The CIS has also seen teacher conferences, leadership conferences for directors of schools, and pastor conferences. A teacher who attended one of the conferences wrote, “This was the first time I took part in such a conference. It was very exciting to meet other Christian teachers and to learn more about ACSI and about the existing Christian schools in the CIS. Finally, I received an answer to my question, What is a Christian school?”

The translation of books on Christian education themes and of resources for in-service training has been a high priority because literature written in Russian on Christian schooling was nonexistent before the opening of the ACSI office for the CIS in 1993. To date, 16 major foundational works have been translated and published.

One of the nagging issues for Christian schools in the region is that the government does not recognize them. After numerous meetings with government officials, roundtable discussions, and press conferences, it appears that the minister of education and the prime minister of Ukraine, along with a member of the parliament, are lending their support to a bill that would give legal status to Christian schools and thus finally give those schools the legal right to exist.

The challenges in this region are real, and they are compounded by corruption and by government interference in the affairs of churches and Christian schools. Raymond Le Clair has relayed the struggles of one such situation in Kaluga, Russia, where ACSI regional staff held a 2006 March ACSI teacher conference. For the last 2 years, a church and a school have been literally under attack by dishonest businessmen and city officials who want to take over the church property in order to complete a shopping mall that is going up adjacent to the church property. The church and the school have faced threats, have been labeled a cult, have had their computers confiscated and their electricity cut, and are accused of brainwashing children. Now the ministry of education has told the school that it can no longer hold classes in the church building. This is just one in a series of difficult struggles that Christian schools face in the former Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Even though there are many victories to celebrate in the development of Christian schools in the global context, there are also an equal number of challenges that require us to be vigilant. In every region of the world, Christian schools are facing threats to their existence because of the spiritual battle they are waging for the hearts and the minds of youth. We must keep the Great Commission always before us, and we must remember that the revival of the church and the revival of Christian schooling are closely related—and that both require people of passion, courage, and zeal.

References


Philip M. Renicks, EdD, retired from ACSI as the vice president of International Ministries in July 2007, following a career of 22 years. He lives in Franklin, Tennessee, and serves as an associate with Graybeal and Associates, which specializes in school effectiveness, leadership training, board governance, spiritual formation audits, and school administration. You can contact him at philrenicks@graybeal.org.