The biggest challenge facing our Christian schools is, I believe, the lack of vision—or, more specifically, the lack of a biblical vision. I regularly consult with Christian schools as they seek to develop strategic plans. Often, after spending time with these schools, I am forced to ask them the question, “Why do you exist?” They have impressive mission statements, vision statements, or both; statements of purpose; and lists of goals. But when it gets down to it, they do not have a biblical vision that is driving them.

To understand what I mean, we need to take a few moments to explore vision. Like so many other good and valid ideas and concepts, often vision statements, mission statements, and strategic plans are misunderstood and misused. They are seen as the solution to problems, and having them has lulled organizations into a false sense of security and into the belief that what they are doing is right.

Simply stated, a vision is a mental picture of what we are striving for. As Christians we experience biblical vision on three levels. The first of these is the personal level. On that level, a vision for our own lives directs us, and this vision includes how we see God working in and through us.

The second level of vision is the corporate or organizational vision. This is the level at which we find school visions. All of us belong to more than one organization. For example, we may be part of a school, a church, and a service organization. To be successful, each of these organizations needs a clearly defined vision. As individuals we need to ensure that we understand and are part of the vision of each organization we belong to and that the vision for our personal lives is in harmony with these visions.

For a Christian school to have a vision statement is not enough. In order to be truly effective, a school needs to move from having a vision statement to being vision driven. Does the vision really influence and direct what takes place in our schools? Is it merely something that looks good on our letterhead, or is it something that makes an impact on every person and program in our schools?

When our schools are not having the impact they should, we wonder why. We look for reasons, blaming it on poor facilities, on a lack of resources, or on unsupportive homes. After all, we have a clear mission or vision statement posted in solid-bronze letters on the wall of the school foyer, and our board and staff have spent hours developing a strategic plan, all 300 pages of which can be found under S in the principal’s filing cabinet.

At other times, schools do have vision statements and strategic plans that they diligently seek to implement. Why, then, do those schools fall short? The answer is that the vision they are working towards achieving is not a biblical vision. They have not incorporated the third and most important element necessary for a biblical vision—a global vision.

We need to understand that what we are doing in our Christian schools is very important but that it is only part of what God is doing around the world. God is a global God. He cares about and is at work in all areas of the world. When we as educators understand this truth, share it with our students, and allow them to experience it, we are developing global Christians. A global Christian is not somebody who travels, serves, or works around the world, but one who, if called to work in a local area, understands he or she is part of what God is doing globally. There are unfortunately Christian individuals and organizations who do travel the world but whose vision has stopped at the corporate level. They do not see or understand that they are part of God’s global vision and global work.

To achieve the goals that flow out of a biblical vision requires our Christian schools to become involved globally. To understand a Christian worldview necessitates the understanding of the whole world, not just the city or the country in which we live. To develop the skills necessary to...
live out a Christian worldview requires our young people to test and stretch the boundaries of their world, to move outside of their comfort zone, and to think and act beyond the self-centred level at which their human nature wants them to operate.

So much for why we need to be involved worldwide; now let’s look at the impact that worldwide involvement can have on our Christian school communities. We could look at hundreds of examples of how Christian schools have gained from worldwide involvement, but for simplicity’s sake I will restrict myself to two schools with which I continue to be closely involved—Pacific Academy and Kibaale Community Schools.

Pacific Academy is a Christian day school situated in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia, Canada. The school serves 1,500 students in junior kindergarten through grade 12. I have had the privilege of serving at Pacific Academy for over 22 years. When I came to Pacific Academy, I had spent a portion of my life living and teaching in Africa. I was very conscious of the detachment that existed between the day-to-day lives of North American students, teachers, and parents and the lives of people in developing countries. In the early years of Pacific Academy, we spent a great deal of time, as a staff, identifying our core goals and developing a strategy for discipling global Christians. Our basis for globalization was Acts 1:8: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (NIV).

We developed a program that included the students from kindergarten through grade 12. The program focused on building awareness of needs and of service opportunities in the classrooms, the school, the community, and the world. Activities included bringing in speakers, selecting relevant reading materials, having prayer times, and creating classroom displays. At every grade level, the program included “doing” activities. These ranged from serving other classes in the school, to serving in the community, to serving on outreach teams internationally.

To this day, the same model is in place—starting locally “in Jerusalem,” expanding to the surrounding areas of “Judea and Samaria,” and then spreading to “the ends of the earth.” Today, all 1,500 students are involved in going out of their comfort zone, they become, out of necessity, more dependent on God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. There are hundreds of stories of how God answered global prayer requests that have come out of this outreach program.

In Pacific Academy’s outreach trips. The teams have visited 34 countries. They have raised over $750,000, which has been invested in schools, clinics, churches, housing, water projects, and agricultural projects.

Having a global vision has led to involvement in other projects and the establishment of a separate society, the Pacific Academy Outreach Society (PAOS). Two of the early projects provided the funding for model Christian schools in Mexico and Haiti. Both of these model schools are now independent and well established. Over the past 15 years, PAOS has undertaken nearly 100 projects, some of which raised over $8,000 to over $700,000 this current year. In addition, one million dollars has been raised for the development of the Timothy Centre.

In late 1992, PAOS agreed to partner with a Vancouver church that cared for AIDS orphans in Uganda. This partnership to provide schooling was the start of what are now the Kibaale Community Centre and the Kibaale Community Schools. Today, Kibaale Community Schools provide education for 800 students from nursery through four years of secondary school. A child sponsorship program established by PAOS sponsors 95 percent of the children in the Kibaale Community Schools. The Kibaale Community Centre provides medical services for 1,700 patients a month through a new facility opened in August 2008. This centre is the base for a number of agricultural, health, and community development programs.

The latest development flowing out of the Kibaale project is the Timothy Centre. This centre will provide teacher and leadership training programs, a senior high school for capable but socially disadvantaged boys and girls, support for small rural Christian schools in East Africa, and model agricultural and entrepreneurial programs.

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The annual PAOS budget—not including the money for the outreach teams—has grown from $8,000 in 1989 to over $700,000 this current year. In addition, one million dollars has been raised for the development of the Timothy Centre.

What has Pacific Academy gained from worldwide involvement? It is clear that thousands of students and hundreds of teachers have seen the needs out there and, more important, have seen that they can make a difference. They have learnt to appreciate what they have back home. When removed from their comfort zone, they become, out of necessity, more dependent on God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. There are hundreds of stories of how God answered
prayer or moved miraculously in the lives of outreach team participants. By nurturing these changes, we hope they will become permanent in the lives of students and of teachers.

The series of chapel services that take place after students return from outreach trips are the most powerful of the school year. Students hear and see their peers moved and changed by the outreach experiences.

The second example, although very different, again shows the impact that a global vision has on a Christian school. Kibaale Community Schools were started to meet the needs of children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. The schools are located in a remote rural area of southern Uganda. War and more recently AIDS have devastated this poor area. After PAOS began the partnership to become involved, PAOS supported two Canadian teachers who moved to Uganda to facilitate the work. The school and the work have grown, and now more than 800 students receive their education through the four schools that make up the Kibaale Community Schools: a nursery school, an elementary school, a secondary school, and a vocational school.

From day one of the establishment of the schools, we determined to make outreach an integral part of the school program. We wanted to prevent the students from developing a handout mentality, and we wanted to show them that there is always somebody worse off than they are and that they can reach out and help.

Keep in mind that the vast majority of the children at Kibaale had never traveled more than 15 miles from their homes, had never watched television, had never read a newspaper, and had never heard a radio. In a culturally sensitive way, we began broadening the experience of the Ugandan teachers and students, gradually expanding their world and their interaction with it. As in any Christian school, the opportunity was present to have students from different grade levels interact. We started a program in which teachers traveled to other schools to observe, learn, and, most important, share. As the Kibaale teachers saw that the conditions elsewhere were worse than their own, they were encouraged to develop ways in which they and their students could help.

One of the first activities for the Kibaale children was a cleanup day in the village of Kibaale. Kibaale is a small trading centre that has one main dirt road. The children moved through the village, picking up garbage. The response of the locals was to question the children about why they were doing something that nobody had ever done before. The response the children gave was “because we live here and we care.” The excitement and sense of satisfaction in the children when they returned was palpable. Today, 15 years later, the Kibaale Schools have made an impact not only on the lives of the children and families who have attended but also on the community, the country, and countries beyond Uganda.

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The Kibaale teachers train Christian school teachers in Uganda and in Rwanda and anticipate involvement in some other countries of east Africa in the near future. They have attended and have participated in conferences and round-tables in east and southern Africa.

The children have traveled widely in Uganda, ministering, for example, in schools, prisons, and churches. They build houses for needy families in the community. The vocational students make the doors, the windows, the shutters, and the roof trusses. The elementary students, under the supervision of adults, collect the appropriate sticks for the framework and mix, by foot, the mud for plastering.

The first house the children built was a one-room, eight-by-six-foot home for a crippled man in the village. He had been sleeping under trees or in doorways, and he had been dragging himself around wherever he needed to go. The local headman agreed to provide a small plot of land for the house, and in this way the community became involved. The crippled man was so touched that the next Sunday he dragged himself over a mile to church, where he gave his life to Christ. The children were so excited that their actions had made a difference that they could not wait to start the next project.

The globalization of the minds of the children of Kibaale Community Schools has made an impact on the children’s own homes. The relatives looking after them report that the children work harder on chores at home and work more diligently in their studies. Many of the graduates of Kibaale Community Secondary School have gone on to further studies. Their choice of careers is overwhelmingly service oriented—teachers, medical workers, and agricultural officers. Their intention is to give back to the community. Well over a dozen now serve at the Kibaale Community Centre, and others work throughout the country to make a difference.

These examples illustrate clearly the benefits of worldwide involvement. Schools that have become involved around the world have a driving vision in their schools. When a school becomes involved globally, those in the school community gain an understanding of their calling as Christians, and they experience the resulting excitement of being part of God’s plan.

I used Kibaale Community Schools as an example because all too often I hear Christian schools saying, “We can't afford to ‘do missions.’ ” You don’t need funds to pick up garbage, to find out how you can support missionaries, or to discover and become part of what God is doing through His people worldwide.

Christian school boards are often afraid that fund-raising for outreach projects will take away from fund-raising for school projects. All the evidence we have seen shows that this is not the case. In 1989, the Pacific Academy Board a little hesitantly allocated $5,000 to outreach. This past year, board members personally donated over $100,000 to outreach—in the midst of a fund-raiser for a new school gymnasium.

What is to be gained, you ask? The whole world is to be gained!

Ray Sutton, MEd, serves as the headmaster emeritus of Pacific Academy, the executive director of Pacific Academy Outreach Society, and the chairman of the board of Dunamis Education Society. He has served on the ACSI board, and he is currently on the ACSI Western Canada board. He has spoken at conferences worldwide.

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