A Vision with a Task

Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship

Edited by
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and
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With contributions from
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Steven C. Vryhof
Preface

This book is the result of a year of research sponsored by the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship. To ensure that our study would be informed from the outset by people in the field, we chose to begin our work in the summer of 1991 with a conference of teachers, principals, board members, and parents. We invited eighteen of these conferees to address the question, "What one issue or aspect of Christian schooling is causing serious concern in your community today?"

Some of the issues they presented related to the mission of Christian schools: What is Christian education? What makes a Christian school distinctive? How can we define our identity in the context of the current discussions in education? Are we still able to provide Christian education when the cost is seemingly prohibitive?

Other topics related to curriculum: How can we organize and articulate curriculum in ways that are in keeping with our vision? Who designs and implements curricula in the Christian school? How can curricular and extracurricular programs help students develop an understanding of the need for justice in our society?

Some of the participants presented staff needs: Is the leadership we presently have adequate to the needs of a Christian school? What kind of leadership is needed? What keeps leadership from being as effective as it might be? What kinds of staff development will help us teach in ways appropriate to our vision of schooling?

Others pointed out that Christian schools should be places of community and caring: How can we help students learn to celebrate diversity in the schools we presently serve? What kind of school structure is needed for a climate of discipleship?

They brought to our attention the role of parents in Christian schooling: How can we help parents be an important part of their child's learning? When family structures have changed so much, is it still possible to speak of the church, the home, and the school working together to provide the education our children need?

Those who addressed these questions were Vern Boerman, Elaine Brouwer, Art De Jong, Tim Hoeksema, Mary Kooy, Rick Geertsma, Coni Huisman, Thelma Meyer, David Mulder, Harriet Potoka, Hilda Roukema, Tena Siebenga, Agnes Struik, Leo Van Arragon, Benita VanAndel, Judy Vos, Sheryl Wiers, and Bert Witvoet. After listening to the presentations and discussions that followed we felt ready to begin our work.

There were four full-time scholars on the team: Doug Blomberg, Peter DeBoer, Robert Koole, and Gloria Goris Stronks. The two adjunct scholars, Harro VanBrummelen and Steve Vryhof, were actively involved in all aspects of the project through their frequent visits and the intricacies of electronic mail.

Calvin College provided the team with offices that had a beautiful view of the campus, excellent computers, and a ready access to a superb library. The Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship granted funds that enabled us to visit more than fifty Christian schools in different parts of North America.

It was not easy for us to separate our study of Christian schools from the fact that each of us has given our professional lives to the service of those schools. How does one objectively examine what one loves, supports, and grieves over? We were helped to work through our biases by our school visits and the frankness with which teachers, principals, parents, board members, and students spoke to us.

Were the schools we visited communities of learning that reflected a unique vision? Many certainly were. In some schools the air was alive with learning and support teachers and students were actively engaged together in learning and leading each other to further learning. Other schools, however, were places where the actions of the teachers clearly implied they perceived their task to be little more than to deposit information in the heads of the students. Students who accumulated the most facts were the winners of the academic competition. Success was a matter of striving to win at different kinds of competition, whether social, athletic, musical, or academic, at the expense of a caring climate.

Most of the schools we visited fell somewhere between those two extremes. The people who spoke to us believe their own schools should continue to exist but wish they would be better, more distinctively Christian. Some expressed the concern that as a school grows older and more mature, energies go into maintaining the status quo and providing safe, comfortable environments for those who teach there. They recognized that Christian schools should be on guard against that tendency, but they weren't certain what changes were needed or how to get those changes to take place.

We also were helped to get a clear picture of Christian schools by interviews with numerous teachers, students, principals, parents, and board members. Among these were Laura Bartleson, Wayne Drost, Ron Grassmid, Adrian Guildemond, Juanita Harkema, Dirk Hart, Randell Hieres, Arthur Hill, Thomas Hoeksema, Lee Hollaar, Corrine Kass, Pieter Katerberg, Henry Kooy, Mary Kooy, Myra Kraker, Jan Lucas, Luis and Cathy Lugo, John Monsma, David M. Mulder, Rod Oosterhouse, Larry Plaisier, Jack Postma, Harriet Potoka, Richard Ravenhorst, Daniel Ribera, Jim Stapert, Joan Stob, Barry TerBeek, Steve Timmermans, Dan Vander Ark, John VanderHoek, Bob VanWieren, Harley VerBeek, Judy Vos, David Wyngarden, and Henry Zuiderveen. There may be names we have omitted, but we trust that the ideas were remembered. Other people who provided insights, both in personal conversation and in writing, preferred to remain anonymous. All of these contributed significantly to our project.

We solicited advice from people we thought could contribute uniquely to our work. Among these were Anthony Fortosis, formerly with The Association of Christian Schools International, Sheri Haan of Christian Schools International, and Nicholas...
Wolterstorff of Yale University. We met and had lively conversations with the education faculties of Dordt College, Calvin College, The Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto), The King's College (Edmonton), Redeemer College, and Trinity Christian College.

Those who read and responded to our manuscript were Norma Boehm, Albert E. Greene, Joan Stob, Dan VanderArk, and Judy Vos. Their comments were valuable and helped us make our manuscript more accessible to readers. Few projects are so indebted to other people and we are enormously grateful.

Kate Miller and Donna Romanowski greatly aided our work in the Center by recording interviews, organizing the bibliography, compiling the index, arranging meetings, and helping us with our computer problems, remaining cheerful all the while. We are thankful for the support provided by the CCCS director, Ron Wells, and by the Calvin Center Governing Board, chaired at that time by Ken Konyndyk of Calvin College's Philosophy Department. The director and board allowed us the freedom to work at our project in the way that seemed best to us. We gave the task of editing the book to Doug Blomberg and we sincerely appreciate all of his work, both during and following our period of residence. Doug in turn would like to acknowledge the assistance of Linda Triemstra at Baker Book House in bringing the book to its final form.

We tried to write a book that was informed by the realities facing Christian school communities in the 1990s. We live in a time when some school reformers are saying students in elementary and secondary schools need longer hours and more days in schools so they can do more of what they presently are doing. People who restructure schools tell us that schools need to be different because what has been done in the past has not been effective.

Because we believe Christian schools are places where teachers and students should live and learn to live as responsive disciples of Jesus Christ, Christian schools must be unique. The vision that drives these schools must affect the structure of the school, the length of the school year, the planning of the program, designing of units, instruction, and all other aspects of the school. We have attempted to describe these aspects of schools in which students will learn responsive discipleship.

This book was written primarily for teachers, but it discusses many matters that also concern parents and board members. While it specifically addresses Christian schools, we believe the ideas are important for Christians teaching in community schools. It is our hope that readers will discuss the book, challenge each other with the ideas, and come to a deeper understanding of how to make their own school the kind of school God wants it to be.

The six members of the team believe that Christian students and teachers should be engaged in collaborative endeavors creating a space for learning that allows them to share each other's joys and burdens in coming to know. Our experience with the collaboration of this study has taught us much about the personal learning that occurs when trying to clarify ideas and concepts for other team members. It took time and effort for us to understand that coming to consensus means discussing and reshaping our ideas rather than arguing and trying to force our beliefs, on each other. We began the study eagerly for the sake of Christian schools. We ended it with a new regard for the importance of collaborative endeavors in learning and the importance of being responsive disciples in our own academic work.

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