



It Only Takes a Spark:

Report on the Africa Roundtable

by Philip M. Renicks

During the week of March 25–29, 2007, a spark was ignited in the hearts of 140 Christian leaders from 32 countries across Africa and around the world as they were challenged to consider the plight of the lost and future generations of Africa’s children. Although only a few months have passed since the gathering in Johannesburg, South Africa, the participating African leaders have returned home and have fanned that spark into a flame among Christian leaders who have a passion for reaching the children of Africa through Christ-centered schooling.

Vincent Masaka, a delegate to the Africa Roundtable from Uganda, writes, “On our return from the Roundtable, we never sat back and relaxed but we were on fire, and [the

fire] is burning.” Delegates participated daily in roundtable discussions that ultimately formed the Africa Roundtable Declaration. As the delegations arrived home, they began looking for as many practical ways as possible to implement the declaration. According to Mr. Masaka, the schools are so excited that they are coming together in a spirit of unity and they will hold a Ugandan Roundtable in January 2008.

Nigeria, the most populous country in all of Africa, was well represented by both school and church leaders. These Nigerian participants added a dynamic to the conference through their strong enthusiasm and dedication to both Christian schooling and the advancement of the gospel in a land that has seen religious conflict between the Muslim north and the Christian

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south. On the last day of the Africa Roundtable, the Nigerian delegates came together in a spirit of unity, breaking down the old barriers of denominationalism in search for a way forward—a new initiative in Christian schooling in Nigeria. They accepted the Roundtable Declaration as a mandate given by God to the churches of Africa and agreed that it should be communicated to all the church leaders in Nigeria. The Nigerian delegates returned to Lagos, and by July 13 they held the first Africa Roundtable initiative for their country. A press conference took place at the Lagos Airport Hotel in Ikeja, and three of the delegates served as spokespersons.

At the press conference, the spokespersons reported, “Today we speak to the Nigerian Christian Alliance, irrespective of our various denominations, a summary of God’s redemptive plan for reaching the lost and future generations of Africa (the children of Africa) as revealed to His Church through the leaders of the Africa Roundtable. It is important to note that the success of early Christian missionaries to Africa ascribed the use of Christian education as a tool for evangelism.” The leadership of the press conference issued a strong call to church leaders, Christian educators, and Christian business leaders in the form of statements that were modified from the Roundtable Declaration. The statements call the churches of Africa to

- champion the extensive planting of new, effective, sustainable Christian schools while working for the improvement of existing Christian schools;
- share responsibility for the education of African children with the family, the church, and the school;
- promote unity and communication in the Body of Christ by supporting the establishment of a unified Christian educational association to propel the establishment, advancement, and upholding of the Africa Roundtable initiative in Nigeria.

The vision for the extensive planting of new, effective, sustainable Christian schools across Africa was sparked in part by the address given by Dr. Daniel Shayesteh, a converted Iranian Muslim who spoke forcefully on the topic

“Engaging in the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of Africa’s Children: Christianity or Islam.” Dr. Shayesteh shared deeply of his own experience growing up in Iran. He warned of the current advance of Islam on the continent of Africa, a reality that all the delegates have experienced in their countries and their local communities.

Dr. Shayesteh challenged delegates to consider seriously the agenda of the Muslims in their rapid advance to build Islamic schools and mosques across Africa. He encouraged delegates to fan into flame their intentionality both to reach out to Africa’s children with the true gospel of Christ and to prevent those children from being deceived by a false religion—from getting caught up in the movement of Islamic jihad. That movement is vying for the minds and hearts of youth, not only in Africa but also around the world.

Dr. John Scholtz spoke to the delegates regarding his concern for the Church across Africa and the responsibility it bears for the education of Africa’s youth. He said that by and large the Church has not gotten involved in schooling because it has failed to understand the relevance of Christian schooling—most pastors just don’t get it. He stated, “I carry a deep passion in my heart for Christian schooling. I don’t mean schooling that is Christian in

name or a school that employs teachers who profess to be Christians and then teach the same old secular curricula in the same way everyone else does. I’m talking about the Church finding its redemptive purpose in Christ when it comes to getting children born into the Kingdom of God and then establishing those children in the cause of the King and His Kingdom so that they may live victorious lives that bring God glory.”

Dr. Scholtz went on to state that those living outside the African continent see only desperation, hopelessness, and poverty and that they frequently voice their deep sense of pessimism regarding the future of the continent. As Dr. Scholtz explained, some people would say that Africa is cursed, but the truth is that the continent is bountifully blessed! Africa has most of the world’s known resources of minerals. It has some of the world’s largest rivers and has the potential to produce 40 percent of the

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world's known hydroelectric power. As the second largest continent, Africa boasts 22 percent of the world's total land mass yet only 13 percent of the world's population, so in comparison with the rest of the world it is certainly not overpopulated. It has some of the finest agricultural land and hence has tremendous agricultural potential. In fact, it has been estimated that if just three countries—namely, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—were to realize their full agricultural potential, they alone would currently be able to feed the whole continent. Therefore, Dr. Scholtz asked, “Why is there a failure not only [by] Africa as a whole, but why has the Church failed to make a difference?”

As a pastor, Dr. Scholtz maintains that the answer to that question lies firmly in the area of the current worldview held by the bulk of the peoples of Africa. He believes that a shift in worldview is also at the heart of what the Church needs to address in redefining its role in reaching Africa's children. Dr. Scholtz asserts that changing how Africa's people see life and therefore live it is the Church's responsibility. To accomplish this worldview change most effectively, the Church must establish Christian schools that hold and teach a biblical worldview.

The delegates at the Africa Roundtable spoke French and English at the conference. Nearly one-third of the delegates came from the Francophone, or French-speaking, countries of central and west Africa: Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Congo, Rwanda, Central African Republic, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, Togo, and Mauritania. Daniel Neuhaus, the ACSI country coordinator for the French-speaking countries of Europe, gave leadership to the French-speaking delegation and provided much of the simultaneous interpretation for our French-speaking brothers and sisters, who have experienced many of the atrocities of war, tribal conflict, and genocide. Delegates who came from the DRC experienced delays in their arrival to the conference because of renewed political violence that closed the airport.

Nearly 6,000 Christian schools shine like tiny sparks of light across the DRC. When I think of them, I am reminded of an old camp song that I used to sing as a kid. I believe the title is “Pass It On.” The lyrics go something like this: “It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around will warm up to its glowing.” All across

French-speaking Africa, people are making commitments and are getting involved in a groundswell that will result in the Francophone Roundtable in Kinshasa, DRC, on November 11–15, 2007. They are warming to the fact that Christian schooling must play a unique and significant role all across Africa if the immense educational problems facing the continent are going to be solved.

As the organizers of the Francophone Roundtable have worked synergistically to advance continental change through Christ-centered schooling, they have identified four major themes:

- the role of a biblical worldview in Christian schooling
- the essential elements of a true Christian school
- how to teach Christianly
- the role of the Church in schooling that is Christ-centered

ACSI has a commitment to stand arm in arm, in unity, with its brothers and sisters across the continent of Africa and to assist them through strategic partnerships and working relationships. Bishop Idore Nyamuke from the DRC challenged delegates to consider not only that the unity of God's people serves as a powerful testimony to make known the Lord Jesus Christ in the world but also that unity should be the passionate desire of all who are in fellowship with the Lord. Bishop Nyamuke said that this unity must be present, or incarnated, in every Christian and every denomination in order that the world may believe. It is this demonstration of unity that will fan the spark into a flame for Christian schools—a flame that will burn brightly across the continent of Africa.

Philip M. Renicks, EdD, recently retired from ACSI as the vice president of International Ministries. In 1985, Dr. Renicks and his wife, Joyce, were appointed to begin ACSI's Office of International Ministries. God has blessed that ministry, which now has a staff of 85 to serve the needs of 1,300 schools that are educating 311,250 students in 105 countries.

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