Study 1: Why listen to the World Church?

Bible verses to consider: Philippians 2: 1-6; Luke 15: 11-32

“We have nothing to learn” is a sentiment that almost always precedes failure. Pride, as the Bible and popular parable tell us, comes before a fall. And while there may be some voices within our denomination and the broader Church who feel that British Christianity has all the answers, most of us, I think, would recognise that we do not. Quite the opposite, perhaps. As the Church ages and shrinks and we seem powerless to stop the decline, many of us are admitting that the old programmes don’t work. And as Christianity loses its privileged place in western society in favour of the twin forces of secularism and multiculturalism, many of us, in our more honest moments, realise that our churches are ill-equipped for the post-Christendom world. We know that, with the world now on our doorstep and unprecedented access to the world ‘out there’ through agencies like BMS World Mission, we can use all the help we can get.

And that is where the World Church comes in. Our sisters and brothers in Christ have been travelling with the same Holy Spirit we have, reading the same scriptures. They have been facing the same core issues: how to live, how to ‘do’ church, how best to love our neighbours and share God’s good news. And they can help us. Because learning from the World Church is not, primarily, a moral issue or an altruistic act. It is in our interest, as the Church in the West, to learn from them, draw from them, and be enriched and empowered by what they have to teach. In order to do that, we will have to learn humility and let go of some cherished and unreasonable assumptions (more about that in Study 2!) – but that is the how. Many of us are still struggling with the why. Does the Church ‘out there’, that we sometimes arrogantly like to think of as “a mile wide and an inch deep“, really have something to offer us?

The fact we have to ask proves that they do. But there are other facts that are relevant.

Like the fact that if we only learn theology from western sources, we are limiting ourselves to sharing in the wisdom of only ten per cent of the wisdom God has given to the Body of Christ. The Church worldwide is changing. Its balance has shifted, and we would be foolish not to recognise that. It is only logical, in these times of unprecedented challenges, to draw on more of our collective wisdom than we’ve done before.
After all, Majority World Christians have deep and long experience of living as members of a minority faith in their communities. They have learned the lessons that will be vital to Christians in western Europe if our shrinking churches are to thrive and grow. They can teach us how to live comfortably without a position of privilege. They can help us to learn which approaches to living out our faith in the public square work, and which do not. They have for centuries lived among other religious communities and have much to teach us about navigating these relationships.

They can teach us much about the multiculturalism with which our Church is struggling. Majority World Christians grew up and nurtured their faiths in the midst of religious pluralism, and the global cities that they call their homes presented new and unprecedented opportunities for rediscovering the Bible in the context of religious pluralism. From these brothers and sisters, western Christians can learn to be good neighbours to the Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu people around us. And we can learn the communal, rather than purely individualistic dimension of Christian life – a dimension that their culture and context has given them easy access to.

And apart from all that, the World Church might help us gain our confidence again – not a triumphalist or privileged confidence (for Christians living in oppressive or pluralist contexts have little chance of attitudes of privilege) but a confidence that somehow we have lost. And they will challenge us, perhaps, to rediscover orthodoxies that we’ve sacrificed in order to feel relevant. And their experience of relevance in contexts hostile to the gospel (or indifferent to it) could be invaluable to our own outreach.

That is, if we feel we have anything to learn.
Discussion

Considering the passage from Philippians, discuss what having humility and the mind of Christ will look like in terms of our own preconceived theologies.

Considering the passage from Luke, try imagining the growth in the World Church as the prodigal son returning – how will that challenge us in the West to participate in the sharing of the inheritance God has in store?

Discuss the Church in the West in the terms you might have heard applied to the World Church. Could we legitimately be accused of being shallow and syncretistic, for instance?

In what ways could a global perspective energise and inspire your church in your outreach?

What connections does your fellowship have with people from the Majority World or diaspora communities, and how could that be brought into the life of your church?

Is there space for repentance and lamentation for the way in which we, corporately and individually, have undervalued the contribution of people who do not look like ourselves? Could you create such an opportunity?

What Bible stories most inspire you to value people from other tribes, tongues and nations and what they can do for the work of God? What practical lessons can they teach us?

Delve deeper

Listen to Bible messages online from church sermons from Asia and Africa.

Use them as a basis for Bible studies and discuss them.

When possible, always ask non-western members of the church for different interpretations of the Bible whenever dominant voices tend to be primarily western.

If yours is a fellowship with a rich diversity of culture and ethnicity, could you consider how to extend your sphere of interest and influence beyond the areas of the world from which you usually hear? There are very few churches that could not benefit from a broader perspective and a deeper engagement with the parts of the World Church we have historically not listened to.

Worship, teaching, discipleship and leadership should reflect the diversity of the Body of Christ today, even for monocultural local communities. We should ask what we are doing
to be part of the glorious thing God is doing in the Global Church, rather than the ‘white man’s religion’ of the past. This could be done through quarterly or bimonthly international services, wherein African, Asian, Latin American people are invited to preach and to bring songs and prayers from the World Church, and are celebrated to enrich the church. BMS workers can also be invited to speak at local churches and to share about issues being faced by the World Church.

Our churches could, in the longer term, intentionally appoint non-British people with world experience and non-western qualifications to positions of leadership. They could bring valuable global insights and perspectives that could complement, and help bring a vitally fresh perspective to, the leadership of the Church.

Kang-San Tan, General Director, BMS World Mission