THEY TAUGHT ME MORE THAN I EVER TAUGHT THEM

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Missionaries often say that they learned far more than they ever taught - but what are the implications of this?
Category: Observations

At some point, just about anyone who is involved in cross-cultural mission will make a statement like this one and although it might sound like false-modesty, for the most part, it is true. Involvement in mission is a life-affirming, growing experience and exposure to Christians from other backgrounds is immensely beneficial. But so what? People say this sort of thing over and over again, but what are the broader implications of this statement? I'd like to focus in on two.

There are different types of knowledge. In the West (especially in English speaking countries), we have tended to prioritise intellectual knowledge and achievement over and above other forms of learning. In the UK, we see this in the way that universities have flourished while technical and trade training has been minimised. The same thing happens in church life. We prize book culture, theological education and studying doctrine. It's not that these are bad things, but there is more to discipleship and leadership training than this. Christians in other parts of the world might have less theological background than we do (then again, they might not), but an experience of living as a minority, poverty or persecution can give a practical knowledge of the love and care of Christ that no seminary could ever impart.

The church is growing around the world, while it stagnates in most of the West. We need to be prepared to get off our intellectual high horses and learn from people with less theology, but more experience of Jesus than we have. Just because someone doesn't cross all of the theological i's and dot all of the t's that we see as essential, doesn't mean that they don't have something to teach us.

Please note, this is not to say that a knowledge of theology is not important - it is. However, it's not the only important thing. Not only that, by focussing on being "sound" (however we define it), we can cut ourselves off from learning from others who have much to teach us in other areas.

Agencies need to take this seriously. Mission agencies exist at the interface between the church in the West and the church in other parts of the world. They have a key role in helping the West to learn from the experiences of the global church. I think that there are a number of ways in which they can do this.

- Firstly, they need to get their own house in order. That means involving Christians from outside of the West in their ministry and in their leadership at all levels (see my post, from Wednesday). Some agencies do this very well, others less so. This excellent book explores the journey that one major international mission agency took in order to become more truly global.
- Secondly, they can help Christians from around the world to tell their stories. All too often, when agencies tell the stories of *nationals* (horrible term), they do so in order to raise funds or

promote their own work. They should tell the stories simply because people in the West need to hear them - relating the experience of global Christians should be part of an agency's ministry, not its publicity. I explore this more in my report on social media (but you'll have to pay to read it).

- Lastly, agencies need to consider how they can support sending missionaries from what used to be their target countries to the former sending countries - what is sometimes called *reverse mission.* Whether we like it or not, the church in the UK and Europe needs missionaries from the majority world and needs to be challenged by the experiences and spirituality of Christians formed in a very different environment and culture to our own. The question is whether we are prepared to listen - I think that all church leaders in the UK should read this book and consider the implications of it.

I realise that at this point, there are a number of readers who are associated with mission agencies who are jumping up and down and shouting at their screens that they are already doing this stuff. I know. Some agencies have taken these challenges to heart, but others haven't even considered them and all agencies could do better.

I am absolutely convinced that if the evangelical church in the UK is to thrive and grow on into the future, it needs input from Christians from around the globe who will challenge and provoke it. However, receiving this input will require a change in attitudes on our part and that might just be a step too far.