GETTING TO KNOW THE WORLD CHURCH: 1

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Category: Observations

In the last couple of weeks, I've had a number of people on Twitter ask me for recommendations for reading about the world church, so I thought that I'd try and address the question here. Though any answer I give will be superficial at best. In this post, I'm going to make some overall comments and a follow-up post later this week or early next will actually look at some resources.

You can't actually get to know the world church. The church around the globe is too diverse and too big for anyone ever to claim to have a handle on it. We need to expand our horizons and get a better picture of what God is doing in the world, but we won't ever see the whole thing.

The world church is not a monolith. It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that there is the church in our part of the world and then there is the "*majority world church*". The thing is, the church in Asia is as different from the church in Africa as the church in Africa is from the church in the UK. We have to avoid falling into the trap of seeing everyone else as "other"; they have their own identities.

Don't stay in your comfort zone. When you ask for suggestions for reading by people from outside of the UK, people will generally default to saying that you should read someone who fits in with their churchmanship. Can I respectfully say, that while there is value in reading people from other places who cross the same 'i's and dot the same 't's as you do, you will hardly be stretching yourself or expanding your knowledge? If your reading is not challenging some of your presuppositions and making you feel slightly (or even very) uncomfortable, you are missing out.

Who controls access? There are a limited number of people in the UK who get asked to speak at conferences and who are encouraged to write books. Sometimes (at the risk of sounding cynical) this is because of their image and their contacts, rather than for the contribution they can make. This principle also applies when we look at resources available from writers and speakers from outside of the UK. Conference organisers and publishers are the ones who control what is available to us and their influence may not always be helpful.

Be prepared to think. Partly because of the last point, much of the material which is available from writers from the *world church* is highly academic. A number of publishers (notably Langham and Regnum in the UK) do a great job printing academic work by scholars from around the world. There is much to be learned here and it is important to hammer home the message that the world church is capable of producing good, thought through theology. However, this stuff isn't always accessible to a wider audience. There are limited openings for popular works by authors from outside of the UK and those that do exist tend to be from people who fall into distinct UK camps (see my third point).

Get off your bum. If you are in a large city (or even a medium-sized town) in the UK, there will be a number of churches from various parts of the world meeting close to you. Korean, Chinese, Congolese, Ghanaian and Nigerian churches flourish in the UK along with numerous other nationalities. If you really want to know about the world church, find out who the pastor of your local congregation is and make friends with them. They probably don't do things the way you do and they may say things that make you feel uncomfortable, but rather than judging, why not listen and try to understand? That was the whole point of this exercise, wasn't it? The thing is, in my experience, many British Christians are very happy with the idea of the *world church* as long as it stays outside of the UK or on the pages of a book, but we are less keen on it when it comes to our neighbourhood.