YOU SHOULDN'T SAY THAT

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As the world church grows ever more diverse, we need to learn to listen to others who have different experiences to us. The first step in this process is to avoid putting people in boxes.
Category: Observations

Last week, I attended the Global Connections' Conference entitled From Where I'm Sitting. Well, I say attending, but it would be more accurate to say that I was helping to run the event. For the last six months a lot of my energy has gone into planning and pulling together the programme. I was rather nervous as the event kicked off, but by the end, I was very pleased with how it had gone.

The thing about mission conferences is that they tend to be dominated by people like me; male, white and middle-aged (or male, pale and stale). Now, there is nothing wrong with being any of these things, but the world church is a fascinating, vibrant mix of nationalities, predominantly young, and at least fifty percent female. So, at the Global Connections' Conference we decided to mix things around a bit. We got together three groups; a group of women leaders, a group of young people and a group of missionaries to the UK and asked them to answer one simple question - what is mission? We also had some videos from mission movement leaders from around the world answering the same question.

To be honest, I had no idea what the result would be. Would a group of women say something different to a group of men? The only way to find out was to ask them! I have to admit that I was a little bit nervous.

I had no need for nerves. The various contributions were all excellent; challenging, thought provoking and encouraging. I hope that the presentations will be available online at some point and I'll link to them when they are.Â However, what I want to concentrate on in this post is some of the reaction to the various presentations.

As I chatted to people after the presentations, it was clear that a number of people were surprised by what they had heard. It isn't that they disagreed with what had been said, it was more that they did not expect the people who made the presentations to address the things that they did. The impression is that there are a range of subjects that women, say, or young people should address and that there is something surprising if they don't stick to the script. But why should women stick to talking about "women's issues" any more than men stick to "men's questions"?

There were some people who a different tack; I was told by a couple of peopleÂ that some of the groups didn't approach the issues in the right way. I wasn't convinced! Each group was given free reign to address the question in the way that they wanted to and that's exactly what they did. The fact that their approachÂ didn't fit the stereotypes that other people held about them is neither here nor there.

There is something important here. As the world church grows ever more diverse, we need to learn to listen to others who have different experiences to us. The first step in this process is to avoid putting people in boxes. We shouldn't expect African Christians just to speak about "African Issues"; they have as wide a range of interests and concerns as anyone else. Equally, we shouldn't listen with preconceived ideas of the wayÂ "African Christians" are going to address issuesÂ and then stop listening when they don't fit our picture.

Christians from other backgrounds to us may see things very differently to us, but they may also see them in exactly the same way; we'll never know until we ask them and then listen with open ears.