

Why the American Way of Doing Church May Be Wrong

The tires of my bike bumped along the dirt path that wound through the Tanzanian countryside. I was only 20 years old, and this was my first time overseas. I'd been spending the past two weeks with a missionary team serving in the East African nation. On this day, a pastor zipped ahead of me as we rode to rural church for a service. God taught me a lot over the course of that trip, but this particular day stands out in my memory as when God expanded my view of his church.

As a young Christian from the suburbs of Dallas, my understanding of the church had always been limited to what I experienced growing up. I was used to singing familiar worship songs, sitting in a pew and hearing an easy-to-follow sermon. Nothing ever challenged my idea of what the church should look like—as far as I could tell, all church was done the same way. If I thought about the global church—all of God's people from around the world—I pictured people who needed my help or who were too different from me. But when I went to Africa, I realized my understanding of the global church was wrong.

The pastor and I arrived in the village and parked our bikes. People were gathered under a couple of large trees, waiting for the service to start. The pastor greeted everyone and began to preach. In the shade of the trees and neighboring huts, eager ears caught every word he said. Though I couldn't understand his language, the pastor's enthusiasm for the Bible and the people around him radiated as he taught. I marveled at his passion for God and prayed for God to ignite the same love in me.

As we ate lunch under the same trees where we worshipped, it dawned on me how different my day had been from a typical Sunday morning in the States. Brown dirt subbed for pews,

unfamiliar songs rang from our lips and the sermon never made it past the language barrier. Even so, we all worshipped the same God and read the same Bible. We had more in common than I expected. And instead of being the one to offer them help, their faith informed my own. I had something to learn from them.

On that day, I realized I mistakenly thought the American way of doing church was the “right” way. In my mind, the global church was something I could help fix, not learn from. But watching the Tanzanian church leaders minister to their people grew my relationship with God in ways I’d never experienced stateside. On the long bike ride back into town, it became clear to me: I was wrong about the global church.

Ever since my time in Tanzania, God has been reshaping my thinking to see the global church as essential to my personal discipleship, as well as the growth of the church both in North America and the entire world. We have a lot to learn from our brothers and sisters from across the globe. The way they approach discipleship can shape our growth as Christians. And since we live in the digital age, it’s easier than ever before to connect with the global Church.

We can look to the church in places like India for lessons on discipleship. Christianity is spreading like wildfire there—it’s estimated that Christians could make up 10% of the population. Their leaders are passionate about the gospel and reaching the entire nation of India for Christ. I’ve had the privilege of interacting with pastor Anand Mahadevan, author of *Grace of God and Flaws of Men*. In the video series that accompanies the book, Anand says, “God is telling the world that he is the God of transformation.” His words ring true as God is doing his transformative work in India through these leaders and the Christians they disciple.

It’s exciting to think about all the potential for the church today. Not only is the church exploding around the world, but

we also live in the most connected age in history. With a couple taps on a smartphone, we can chat with people in Beijing, Cape Town or Buenos Aires. Podcasts and YouTube videos can transport us to another continent—and all we have to do is hit play. We're perfectly poised to learn from our brothers and sisters. It's just a matter of taking advantage of the technology God's given us.

When I think back to 20-year-old me in Africa, I see that God used the people I met to transform the way I think about his people. I can point to many Christians from around the world who have contributed to my personal discipleship and who encourage me to persevere in my faith. I'm grateful for the technology that connects me to them. My hope is to see the global church listening to each other, learning from each other and leaning on each other as we make disciples of all nations. {eoa}

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