

Listening globally: New ways of being the church

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

It is instructive and ultimately very encouraging for an American churchperson to get a glimpse of the global Christian enterprise. I had a chance to do so recently at a pastors consultation sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. The alliance is a loose affiliation of 216 Reformed and Presbyterian denominations.

As different pastors talked about their ministries, amazing stories emerged. Gideon Khabela of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa described his ministry in a rural church composed of 27 different local congregations. Khabela preaches in each every few months; the rest of the time congregational elders are in charge of the preaching, teaching and pastoral care. Zsigmond György Vad described the resilience of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Debrecen under communism and its rebirth with multiple Sunday worship services, hundreds of baptisms and an impressive array of outreach programs.

Peter McEnhill told us about growing ministries with young adults and families in Kilmacolm Old Kirk, near Glasgow. Jang Bin Chang of the Dong Kwang Presbyterian Church in Seoul recounted his weekly schedule, which includes, besides preaching on Sundays, preaching every morning at multiple prayer and praise services attended by thousands. When the Americans asked when he had a day off, Jang Bin Chang did not seem to comprehend the question (though his wife did).

Héctor Méndez reported on the energy and growing numbers in the Primera Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada in Havana, a thriving congregation in the old city which kept its doors open and its ministry alive during very difficult days and now is experiencing new life and accompanying growing pains. We heard other stories from Brazil, Jamaica, India, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Canada.

As we Americans told our stories we did so with a renewed sense of how privileged we are in terms of our abundance of resources and our freedom, but also with the

sense that there is much to learn from brothers and sisters who know how to be the church in very different and sometimes very demanding contexts.

We visited the WARC offices in the Ecumenical Center, headquarters of the World Council of Churches, and had a meeting with Samuel Kobia, WCC general secretary, a Kenyan; Setri Nyomi, WARC general secretary, from Ghana; and Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, from Zimbabwe. Not many years ago the people holding those three posts would certainly have been white North Americans or Europeans. This was a visible reminder of the shift in church energy, leadership and numbers from North to South, from developed nations to developing nations.

Noko told a story about visiting a mission project in a remote area of sub-Saharan Africa. He had been traveling all day and it was late at night. His driver was a Muslim. The road was bumpy, narrow and dark. Suddenly the driver slowed down and stopped. Noko couldn't help worrying about his safety. Then the driver got out, spread a rug on the bare ground and began to pray in Arabic. Noko said it was an illustration for him of the new world in which we find ourselves, one that calls us to find new ways of being the church and relating to others.