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Missionary Mobilization in the United Kingdom: GenYers' Perspectives

By Peter C. Farley

After being told that GenYers (sometimes known as "Millennials"; those born between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s) in the United Kingdom (U.K.) make several short-term mission (STM) trips before committing long term, I started wondering why. I was also interested to hear that STM trips are seen as the primary way to engage GenY in long-term mission (LTM) (see also Marston 2007, 241).

In previous generations, people became long-term missionaries without STM trips. Are the life experiences that bring a person into LTM changing? I wondered. What are the significant steps in that process today and where should mission mobilizers focus their efforts?

Mission leaders are keen to understand GenY missionaries (Thornton and Thornton 2008, 204; Marston 2007, 240). However, no published studies have examined GenYers from the U.K., even though it is one of the top ten missionary-sending countries in the world (Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing 2007, 31). So how do GenYers in the U.K. become committed to LTM?

I interviewed and surveyed Gen Y missionaries from the U.K. to see what they consider significant factors. My informants were those accepted by a mission agency or in the final stages of the selection process. The survey covered ninety-four different aspects of the journey up to and including choice of mission agency. I received responses from fifty-six people, of which ninety-three percent were committed for more than five years, and only eleven aspects of the journey were rated “very important” by more than half the respondents. Those who responded were born between July 1975 and August 1985 and represented fifteen mission agencies.

Five words summarize the eleven aspects Gen Yers rank as most important in their becoming committed to LTM: passion, scripture, reflection, experience, and support.

Passion

Gen Yers commit long term because they are passionate about helping people and obeying God. Furthermore, they want to hear that same passion being communicated by the mission agencies with which they work. Their own passion is expressed in different ways, but it is always important. Andrew’s passion is evident in his saying:

I want to be in a place where I’m sold out for God and am seeing Jesus change lives. I don’t want to just hear it, I want to see it. My response is to say to God, “You’ve set me free and I want to work for you. My heart is yours; do with it whatever you want.”

Lucy expresses her passion for helping people when she says:

...the experience of walking with someone as he or she finds out who God is, that he’s real, and that he loves them...it is amazing and it’s also—the closest word I can think of is “addictive”—it’s so magical, amazing, and inspiring that you long for more. On the days when I remember that, I can’t think of anything else I would consider doing. There is nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice to do it, even my happiness.

In selecting a mission agency to work with, more than any other factor, Gen Yers rank an agency’s communication of its desire to see God glorified as most influential in their choice. Five factors tied for second most important: the agency is committed to long-term work; the agency listens to and works with candidates to find the right place for them; the agency has a prayerful support network; the agency is established, experienced, and has a good reputation; and the agency sends missionaries to work in teams whose members care for each other.

Scripture

Reading the Bible is seen, by ninety-five percent of respondents, as at least “important” in their becoming committed to LTM. Furthermore, understanding the metanarrative of scripture is more important than particular verses. Only thirty-six percent of respondents considered particular verses to be “very significant,” whereas eighty-two percent ranked the missionary imperative of the Bible as a whole “very significant” to their LTM commitment. As Christopher says, “It’s not like this verse here says, ‘I’ve got to go.’ It’s more that the Bible makes it clear that we are to spread God’s word.” This suggests that church leaders seeking to encourage LTM should both promote Bible reading and highlight how God’s mission, and our part in it, is evident throughout the Bible.

If the metanarrative is more important to Gen Yers than specific verses, does this affect their view of “call”? Most interviewees (eighty-eight percent) introduced this word into our conversation. However, they use it only because no clear alternative is available. For example, Michelle qualifies her use of the word and hesitates before using it. What she says is, “We’ve had this, [releases breath] um, call, if you want to call it that.” This reluctance is not surprising, given the wide range of opinion as to what constitutes a call (McConnell 2007, 210). However, since they use it, what do Gen Yers mean by it? For Natalie, it is “a series of little steps and after a while you suddenly look back and see how far you have come.” In a similar way, Christopher describes it as “prodding in the right direction.” Lisa says, “Obedience is a big factor.” Andrew describes it as “a passion, a desire in your heart that God puts there that you didn’t have before.” Jennifer, reflecting on a STM trip, describes it as:

...a very natural thing. I’m a Christian, these people are missionaries, and that looks like a good job—I want to do that. So there wasn’t any mysticism at that stage about call. I just thought, “Yeah, okay, it’s there.” So I suppose it was attractive—the job was attractive.

She makes a distinction between a “call” to missionary work and a “call” to a specific place. This secondary emphasis on location is reflected in the survey results. The most important factors in choosing a place to serve were “a good fit for your background, skills, gifts, and past experience” and “the physical, social, and spiritual needs there are greater than in the U.K.”

As Gen Yers use “call”, it is something natural that is informed by the whole of scripture and an understanding of how God has made us, and is rooted in a sense of doing what God wants.

Reflection

Reflection on the needs of the world outside the U.K. and what life is about and what to do with it are perceived by ninety-one percent and ninety-six percent of Gen Yers, respectively, to be at least “important.” Questions about worldview and the purpose of life may be triggered by overseas experiences. Lisa recalled a two-week visit to Latin America, when she was in her early twenties, which turned her world upside down:

“I’d been thinking about buying a new car, and I came back and I couldn’t even buy a CD. My whole values system and a really acute awareness of my materialism had come to light.” However, an overseas experience is not necessary. Daniel described an encounter in the U.K. that prompted reflection upon the purpose of his life:

One of the girls [in a Bible study group] was really into overseas mission. She always used to challenge me and I would say, “It’s not for me.” One time, I was cycling to the study and there was a group of fifteen very well-to-do people coming for a murder mystery party in their Mercedes. I remember thinking at the time, “If I get to that age and that’s all I’ve done, I’ll feel like I’ve wasted my life.” That has informed my decisions.

Charlotte described how her worldview was changed while watching a documentary about street children. Paul related how he participated in a prayer lunch for missionary work during which his plans were challenged:

I felt God was saying to me, “You’re assuming you’re going to have a professional job, a nice house, nice car, and all that. That’s not actually what I’ve got for you. You’ve got to be willing to sacrifice that, and this is what you’ve got to do.”

Interestingly, American college students ranked self-interest and material comforts at the top of a list of obstacles to missionary service (Thornton and Thornton 2008, 208). These observations suggest that in both the U.K. and America, mission mobilizers who offer a perspective on life that challenges cultural norms and encourages Gen Yers to examine their worldview will influence them toward openness to LTM.

Experience

STM experiences (as distinct from exploratory trips undertaken to choose the location for overseas service) are perceived to be important events in the journey toward a commitment to LTM. Asked what was important in his becoming committed to missionary work, Robert says, “I went to [name of country] not because I was thinking about cross-cultural mission work, but once I got there, as a Christian, I couldn’t ignore it.” Charlotte recalls how she:

...took a gap year between school and university and I went to [name of country]. That was my first overseas mission experience and it was a real significant time in my life when I had to really rely upon God. That was the time I remember saying to God, “I want to live for you and do whatever you want me to do.”

Cross-cultural experience per se is valued more highly than the opportunity to spend time with missionaries

on the field. Furthermore, relationships with people of other religions or cultures in the U.K. are not perceived by GenYers to be of the same importance as overseas cross-cultural experiences in their becoming committed to LTM. This is not because missionary candidates fail to form such relationships. Over ninety percent of those responding to the survey had relationships with people of a different ethnicity within the U.K. Some deep relationships were described during the interviews. Rebecca described her sadness at having to stop her weekly visits to a family of another faith in order to attend a residential training college elsewhere in the U.K. Daniel described how, as a university student, he “lived in streets where we were the only white people.” He still has a number of Indian and Pakistani friends.

Since cross-cultural experiences and relationships within the U.K. are not perceived to be a substitute for overseas experience, mission agencies should continue to encourage overseas visits. Such visits should not only focus on interactions with missionaries, but should include experiences that challenge participants’ worldviews and expose them to the needs of people in the area visited.

Support

The survey identified church leaders as “very important” supporters for more than half the respondents. Lisa remembers her pastor being “really helpful, just really encouraging, with the decision to come [to missionary training college].” Nicola’s church leaders are regularly in contact. Paul recalls a church meeting for people who felt “a call to some kind of Christian work,” at which “the vicar came around and prayed for everybody individually.”

Nevertheless, supportive church leaders are indistinguishable in importance from church mission committees, mission agency personnel, and other Christians. There is, therefore, a network of support people across church and mission agency who are considered equally important in enabling GenYers to commit to LTM. For women, this network also includes parents, in-laws, and other family members. For men, it includes current missionaries.

Since supportive relationships are significant to GenYers’ LTM commitments, mission mobilizers might encourage the deliberate formation of support networks at an early stage in the journey. An example is provided by Michelle, who describes how she and her husband, Paul,

...had, at one point, a group of three other couples whom we invited to meet with us, to talk through our hopes and our plans, which was fantastic. They spent quite a lot of time saying “Why haven’t you done this yet?” That’s what we needed.

This group met and prayed together at various intervals over a number of years and provided the impetus for several significant steps in their journey. Paul explains that the other couples were chosen because they were:

a similar age to us, similar life stage, and all people who we knew were wanting to live for God themselves. None of them particularly, as far as I know, feels called to mission, although a couple of them have done short-term trips. But they're very much focused on mission in this country, in terms of reaching out to their peers. They're all fairly mature Christians and people we just get on with really well.

Another couple, Jennifer and Robert, gathered a dedicated support group to pray with them. They chose two couples who had themselves already been involved in missionary work. Their network included others, however, and it was actually their house group who asked, "If you think you're going to Bible college, don't you think it's about time you went?" It is important to establish a network of people who will support and encourage GenYers into the next step of their journey toward LTM.

Two Further Observations

There doesn't appear to be a single factor that will mobilize GenYers into LTM. There is, for example, no evidence that mission mobilizers should focus more on passion than scripture (or vice versa). Existing models of missionary mobilization (Harris 1991, 164; Wood 2004, 14) represent the journey toward commitment to missionary service as a straight line. My study revealed that this is not always the case. Lucy recalls a time when she stopped considering missionary work:

I did some short-term mission work. I did a year and a half, and that was a very mixed time. There were really positive things. It was also a very hard year and I took some time to recover from that experience, yet I think God has still brought me back to the same desire.

Experiences like the one Lucy describes arise from various causes. Nearly one-third of those responding to the survey reported, as at least a "significant" event in their journey, an experience working overseas that left them not wanting to go back, or needing time to recover or work through what to do next. Two-thirds ranked struggling with an awareness of their own failures, inadequacies, imperfections, or weaknesses as at least a "significant" aspect of their journey. As Andrew put it,

I know my internal struggles. I know my failures and my weaknesses, and for me, one of the biggest struggles is to say to God, "Even though you know, and I know, the state I'm in, you can still use me." It's a struggle to constantly maintain that perspective—that God uses people who are not perfect and he wants to use us and can use us.

Rather than a straight line, the journey toward LTM includes twists and turns as a result of experiences that hinder a person from becoming committed long term. Other reasons for twists and turns in the journey

include the need to repay debt (including student loan debt); discouraging experiences (apart from overseas experiences); and family disappointment with, or difficulty understanding, a decision to work overseas. For three-quarters of those responding to the survey, at least one such event was a significant (or very significant) feature of their journey.

Conclusion

Mission mobilizers in the U.K. should give equal attention to passion, scripture, reflection, experience, and support as they seek to encourage commitments to long-term service. A balanced approach to missionary mobilization that recognizes the importance of all these factors and supports people through the twists and turns in the journey is vitally needed.

Endnote

1. All names changed for privacy reasons.

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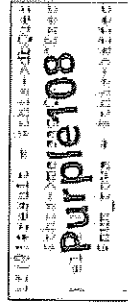
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