MILLENNIALS AND MISSION: THE MISSIONARY

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Category: Observations

Iâ€™m responding to Eddieâ€™s challenge here. I donâ€™t speak for all millennials because â€“ well, no-one does! It wouldnâ€™t be very millennial to pretend to do so either. I was born in 1984, so you can decide whether Iâ€™m a millennial or part of Generation X. But I am in my 30s! And I do recognise in myself some of the things people talk about when they talk about millennials. So here goes...

A significant part of my missions journey happened outside of traditional mission structures. I went to South Sudan in 2004, 2010 and again in 2011 (twice) without an agency, though I had been on a short-term mission trip with AIM in 2003. I sought advice and guidance from my local church in 2010, and was â€œsentâ€ by that church. Sending in that case meant blessing and consecration, lots of prayer support, follow-up and lots of opportunities to present on return, but not financial support.

I then made the choice to engage with traditional mission structures and agencies â€“ why? Well, I married into Latin Link! I felt I should upskill and do some training at All Nations, and I met my wife Hannah there, who had been in Brazil with Latin Link. And God led us to understand that His plan for us involved working in *both* Brazil and South Sudan â€“ being based in Brazil but continuing to travel to South Sudan annually. This was a deal-breaker for us, and to our pleasant surprise both Latin Link Britain & Ireland and International not only tolerated but embraced this calling quickly. But I had already been looking at mission agencies, and we could have tried to â€œgo it aloneâ€ , so it wouldnâ€™t be right to say that marriage was the only reason why I joined an agency.

So why join an agency? For me, the biggest reason was to be accountable. I felt that the local church wasnâ€™t equipped to keep me accountable on a continual rather than an occasional basis. I was also keen to be part of a bigger network. Postmodernism â€“ certainly an influence on millennials â€“ is unhelpful if it encourages us to think that truth is subjective but helpful if it encourages us to recognise that none of us can possibly grasp it all (we all â€œsee in partâ€), and that we need each other. There was also a bit of realism in the decision, recognising that the credibility and name recognition a mission agency brings helps in wooing supporting churches and raising financial support.

Thatâ€™s not to say I donâ€™t have issues with traditional mission structures and agencies. Too often agencies play a gatekeeping role rather than being catalysts. Institutional power is distributed unevenly within our structures, with the â€œtraditionalâ€ sending country teams and offices having the most resources and power. In Latin Link, every country team is equal. Every team is encouraged to both send and receive members. Every member is sent by a team and received by a team. In theory, every team has an equal voice. No country team is above the other. Every team

answers to the International Team Leader and the Core Team, who are distinct from the Britain and Ireland office in Reading. But B&I has far more full-time staff and a greater budget for promotional materials than anyone else, so ends up being the team presenting the face of the organisation to others.

The parts of our organisation with the most power are often also the least horizontal and participatory. So in my receiving team, our Team Leader and officers are elected by and from sent members. But the new Team Leader of the Britain and Ireland Team was appointed by Latin Link UKâ€™s board. Like all teams, the Britain and Ireland Team face unique constraints â€“ UK charity law, for example. But could we be more imaginative, more horizontal, more participatory â€“ dare I say more millennial â€“ in these processes? I like what I have seen from our new B&I Team Leader so far and I am confident that God was involved in the process and that we ended up with the right person. But I would love the process to be more inclusive in future, to seek membersâ€™ input over what kind of person weâ€™re looking for in key appointments.

Every team is different and has a distinct identity. But I would love, over time (Iâ€™m calling for evolution not revolution here), to see our traditional sending teams and offices to become more like our newer sending teams â€“ more member led, less dependent on full-time staff, some roles taken on or shared by members who are sent to Britain and Ireland from Latin America, etc. Iâ€™d also like to see some elements of comms de-professionalised and shared across country teams. My receiving team practices mutual accountability. We visit each other and evaluate each othersâ€™ ministries despite the distances involved. Accountability within my sending team feels a bit more hierarchical. The sense that Iâ€™m checking boxes makes the exercise feel a bit more oppositional. How could we practice mutual accountability between senders and receivers as well as between our sent members?

I feel optimistic about Latin Linkâ€™s future. The International Core Team has made an outstanding effort to involve (especially younger) members from across country teams in working groups. These groups involve members in decision-making, strategy and implementation and enable members to take on responsibilities without committing to a formal role, avoiding the â€˜all or nothingâ€™ mentality which is anathema to many millennials. They also help strengthen a wider Latin Link identity, mitigating the danger that comes with having country teams that our identity is formed by national borders. The working group which Iâ€™m a part of (mobilisation and development) has been forward thinking (eg not just working on things that should be obvious like sending from everywhere to everywhere, but also starting to think about how cross-cultural mission can be furthered through migrants like students and workers who donâ€™t necessarily see themselves as missionaries, and how Latin Link might be involved in that). I think the group is having real impact on the wider organisation. I and others have had opportunities to produce materials that are promoted

and used more widely than my country team.

Eddie said in his blogpost that if we start with structures weâ€™ll inevitably come to the wrong answer, and that we might need to start by talking about justice. Yet Iâ€™ve written mainly about structures! Justice issues are central to my ministry in both Brazil and South Sudan, and if Latin Link prioritised say, evangelism in a narrow sense, over justice issues, rather than seeing both as essential and interlinked, I probably wouldnâ€™t have joined Latin Link. Justice is a given; perhaps thatâ€™s why I havenâ€™t written about it here. But in another sense, I have written about it. Justice is not just an external aim; it needs to characterise our relationships and structures. When we decolonise our mission agencies, dismantling the unequal power structures that exist between country teams, between generations, between members on the basis of race, gender, class, length of service, etc., we will practice justice rather than just talk about it.

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Editor's note: Tim cleared this article with the leadership of Latin Link who are to be applauded for allowing such a public discussion of their internal workings.