MILLENNIALS AND MISSION: THE SOCIAL WORKER

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I think the key is a flexible approach from mission agencies, with a new focus in working with churches to ensure that cross-cultural mission does not get ignored completely in favour of local mission. Mission agencies need to be able to adapt, not only to the context of millennial missionaries, but also to new trends in the church.

Category: Observations

I have always used a traditional mission structure, but maybe not in a very traditional way. Other than a two-week mission trip to South Africa with my church, my first encounter with a mission agency was the Latin Link Stride program. Similarly to Tim, (in his article here) my sending church wasnâ€™t equipped to prepare me, provide the level of expert support and keep me accountable. I also wanted a community, so went the agency route. I didnâ€™t do much mission agency hunting, when I was applying. It was Tearfund or Latin Link. Tearfund were only just starting their program for young professionals, and as I felt that my calling was for Latin America, I decided to go with the agency with more experience there (and who answered my e-mails faster). Now that I have heard of other agencies, met people sent from different organisations and chatted to friends sent in different ways, I wouldnâ€™t change. Why not? Because the agency I chose has met my needs on the field, some of which, perhaps, are to do with being a millennial.

So, here are a few thoughts, based completely on personal experience.

We need to be supported by churches and agencies alike who recognise that God wants to use us to spread the gospel by being who He made us and using our gifts. Yes, that might be by being pastor, or Bible teacher or theology lecturer. But it also might be social worker, nurse, lawyer or doctor. I identify strongly (rightly or wrongly) with my profession. And I think many millennials do. So advertising professional placements or creating programmes for career break opportunities or even work exchanges is key, I think. Why canâ€™t exchange study programmes for university students also be supported by the church? In Guatemala we regularly receive medical elective students, who are not only sent by their universities, but also by their church. They normally only come for about eight weeks, so yes, itâ€™s quite a lot of admin for a short placement. But so worth it; it can inspire a career in medical missions. But why just medical students? I have supervised social work student placements in Guatemala, sent from Christian universities in the US. We could see similar placement opportunities through Erasmus exchanges in Europe, for example.

There is also a misnomer floating around, that in order to be a missionary, you need to be a professional theologian. So many millennials, I believe, are not engaging with the idea of cross-cultural mission, because they donâ€™t think they can. Because they donâ€™t feel qualified. I didnâ€™t go to Bible college or missions college or a seminary before I went to Guatemala. This is not dumbing down; it is as important as ever to be well equipped on the mission field â€“ wherever that may be. I went out to Guatemala to serve as a social worker in a Christian NGO. With what qualifications? A masterâ€™s degree in social work, some cross-cultural training and being filled with the Holy Spirit. Relevant training is vital. I know that, and so do my mission agency. So two years after arriving in Guatemala, I did a diploma in Christian leadership alongside Guatemalan pastors. Waiting a few years and doing this training on the field made it so much more valuable and

contextualised. Letâ€™s no disqualify people, before looking at the possibilities and opportunities.

We need flexible programmes. Itâ€™s not hard to find short term mission opportunities these days, but there is a lot of criticism around short term mission opportunities. Much of it, valid (a conversation for a different blog or blogger) and much of that debate is reaching millennials. But one of the clear benefits of short term missions is to create a pathway to longer term missions. I applied to Latin Linkâ€™s Stride programme for a year. It was the gap year I never took in my early twenties, and I decided to take it in my late twenties; a pause between jobs â€“ and to be honest, a CV boost. Over five years later, I am still in Guatemala. Critics would argue that millennials arenâ€™t prepared to commit, that they need instant solutions and get-out clauses. Aged 28, I was not sufficiently prepared nor bold nor confident enough in my calling to commit for more than a year at a time. I would have said no, and then missed five (and counting) of the richest, for challenging but also most rewarding years of my life. Fortunately, my mission agency allowed me to say yes to my calling a year at a time.

Two years ago, I married a Guatemalan. Soon after, he joined Latin Link. Not as a member from the Guatemala Mexico team, but sent from the Britain and Ireland team like me. And to be honest, I was surprised how easy that was. He had the same interview process as anyone else would have done, but the interview was carried out in Guatemala and in Spanish (some of the Britain and Ireland team were over for a conference). Had it not been so easy, we might have started to look elsewhere or gone independent. Thinking about retention of team members in a rapidly changing world is really important. Not just for those who enter cross-cultural marriages, but for all sorts of different situations: time out to further education, temporary moves, family needs. Rigid rules and regulations will not attract younger generations.

It is very important, as Eddie has done, to debunk the assumption that involvement in world mission means involvement in a mission agency. I love what Pipe says about mission being a lifestyle in his blog. We can live missionally and never leave our hometown. And to be honest, I think that message is loud and clear for millennials. They can see the needs in their local community; that there are people from Africa, Asia and the Americas living down their street; that the gospel is being spread exponentially over the internet. So why contribute to climate change and get on a plane at all? I can also see that reflected in my sending church. Itâ€™s a large church, with over a thousand members. Currently, there are only four members of the church who are cross cultural mission partners. My husband and I are two of those. There are people of all ages in our church, but there are a lot of millennials.

So where does that leave me, and those like me? Iâ€™m not going to ignore the call that God has

put on my life (or at least this part of my life) to serve Him in Guatemala, because mission in the local community is now more fashionable. Our sending church is great, and whenever we return to the UK, we are given a sharing slot and are prayed out again, and do presentations, and lunches with supportersâ€¦ all the normal things. Yet there is still a sense, that I am a millennial (my husband just falls the other side of the age bracket!), sent from a substantially millennial church and what I am doing feels outdated. It is definitely not, of course. Godâ€™s call for us to accompany Him in bringing His kingdom to earth extends to the ends of the earth. It always has done, and it always will do. And in Guatemala, in the context of child protection and justice for child victims of sexual violence, we are still a way off seeing that fulfilled. There is still a lot of work to be done; my call has not gone away.

So, what now? I think the key is a flexible approach from mission agencies, with a new focus in working with churches to ensure that cross-cultural mission does not get ignored completely in favour of local mission. Mission agencies need to be able to adapt, not only to the context of millennial missionaries, but also to new trends in the church. At the same time, they shouldnâ€™t adapt too far- itâ€™s a balance. Mission agencies still have to be relevant for all ages. I once participated in a workshop thinking about the future of mission, and on my table was an older woman who insisted in only thinking about ways to attract the â€˜recently retiredâ€™ market. I think she felt threatened and scared that she would no longer be relevant. So, whilst we do need to seriously think about millennials in mission, we must recognise that they are not the only missionaries.

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