



A young generation chosen by God to make a difference

BY EVI RODEMANN

Introduction

What do you think are common questions for young people across Europe? Your answer might depend on your context and when you last engaged with young people. Their questions might perhaps include: Who loves me? Who cares about global warming? Who helps me when I'm anxious? What can I do to help those discriminated against? Who takes my voice seriously? Who sees the real me? Does politics care about me? What will my future look like? Is there any future?

In their latest research, Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin came up with three significant questions asked by teenagers in the USA, having interviewed 1200 of them.[1] I have used these three questions in training meetings for youth leaders and found that Europeans are echoing these same questions. They are:

- Who am I?
- Where do I belong?
- What difference can I make?

These questions sound so simple but are deeply profound. Does our church teaching help to answer these questions today?

We need parents, youth leaders and mentors to help young people understand that they are enough in Jesus. That Jesus loves them first for who they are. That they are

made in the image of God. We need to welcome them into our spaces. Theologically they are as much part of God's people as us older ones. How do we make space for them without expecting them to become like the churchgoers of older generations? This question is especially important as this young generation is tired of institutions. Secondly, how do we integrate them well, so they feel they belong and can raise their own voices? And thirdly, what opportunities can churches and mission organisations provide where young people can actually make a difference?

God is inviting young people to take part in His greatest mission ever and that goes beyond individual churches and organisations. It is writing history together as the global church, the family of God. This goes further than anyone could even imagine. Global mission is so immense that it requires everyone to contribute. Young people are drawn to something bigger than themselves. The question arises: do we let them contribute to global missions and how? Andy Stanley said in a 2022 podcast, "Don't be married to a model but to missions." That is a draw for young people.

1 Peter 2:9 provides an answer to the three questions asked by this young generation: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His

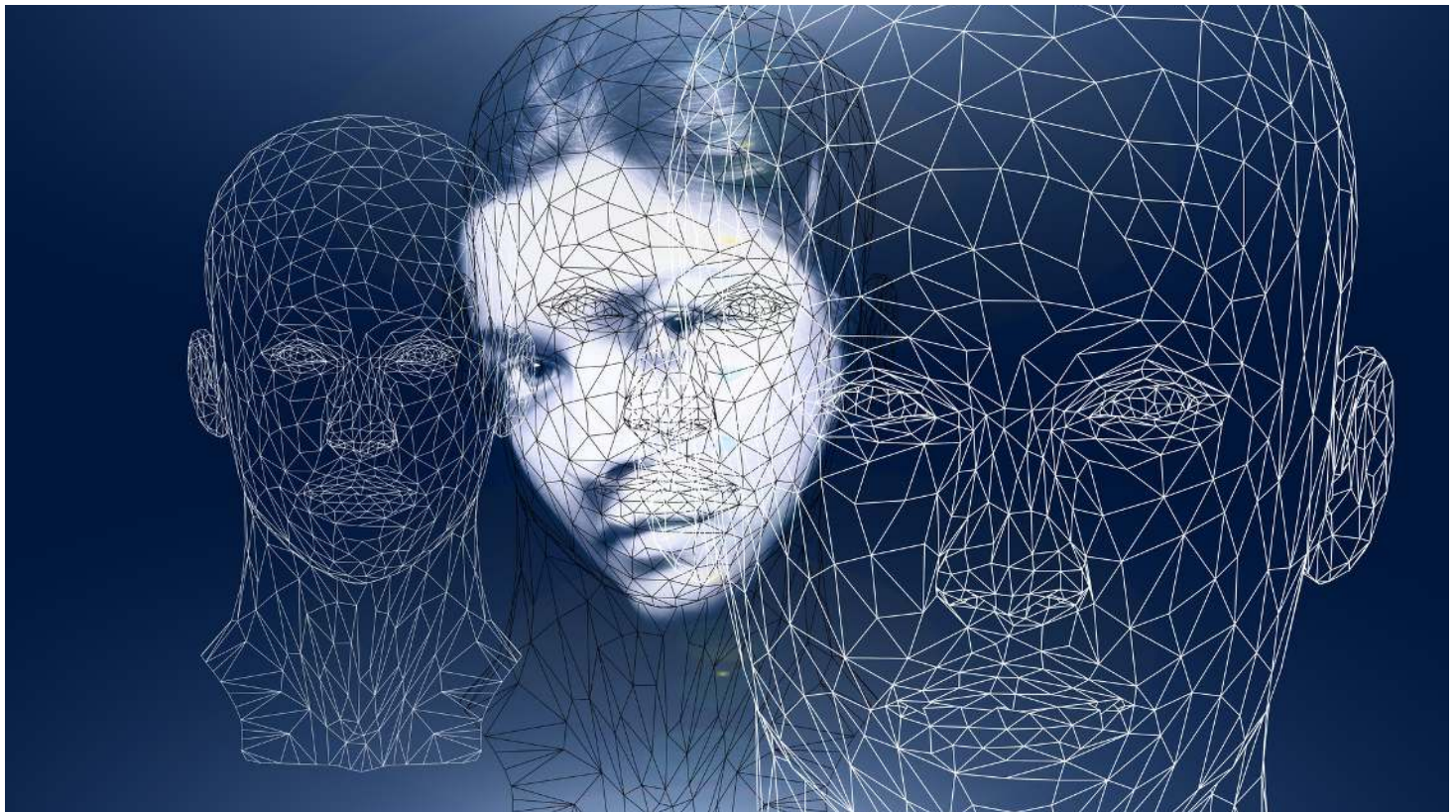
marvellous light." Right here we find identity, belonging and purpose. This is our foundation of engaging, supporting and cheering on a young "chosen generation."

From your point of view, what is the answer to these young people's questions? How do churches and mission agencies respond to them in your context? Below, I will describe some encouragements and offer some ideas in response to these questions.

Move from identity to missions

For the first time in 2022, we held a younger leaders' weekend under the umbrella of the Lausanne Movement, welcoming ten Christian influencers from Germany, among others. These were influencers who have thousands of people following them. They are incredible! They are gifted and they are so honest about their own stories and pain. That's why they are loved and followed. They are real about life and pain, which they often do not find the case in other Christian settings. And in some ways, these influencers are extremely lonely.

A few of us have now come alongside them to mentor them and cheer them on. Firstly, it is about their identity and staying close to Jesus even when experiencing a social media disaster or being publicly degraded. This is difficult for anyone to bear but when you are in the limelight, it is even worse.



How do we help young Christians discover who they are and from there move into action, sharing the Gospel in word and deed? What do we influence them to? In some cases, it feels like we pamper the young generation in Europe, trying to fulfil their needs but investing far too little into their identities. The result of this is that many leaders crash in their 30s and 40s, leave leadership and even lose their faith.

As I walk with hundreds of young leaders globally, it always comes down to issues related to identity. I cannot overemphasize this enough. A healthy identity will lead to being involved in God's mission. As God's word says, "Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

Listen before giving your opinion

"You are the first people who visit us just to hang out and listen to our stories and experiences," said Sajmir from Lushnjë in Albania. "Normally everyone just visits the capital, so we hardly ever get a visit. And if it is a visit, it is about ministry and seldom about us."

We, a team of 7 younger and older

leaders visited younger leaders like church planters Sajmir and his wife Irma on our European Encouragement Tour in July 2022. For 18 days we travelled 7000km in a minivan, visiting 16 nations with a focus on the Balkan region, wanting to encourage young leaders like them. We could also have called this a "listening tour" because it was all about them: listening to their hearts for their region, their faith stories, their struggles as a tiny minority among other faiths or atheism, struggling to serve God in the midst of financial challenges. As we drove home it hit me like never before how powerful listening can be. It can bring healing to a person feeling listened to and understood but also helps the listener be less hasty, jumping to conclusions before knowing all the facts.

Savage writes, "How rare it is to be fully heard by another, to have the freedom to articulate what is good, bad and ugly in our lives. To be listened to this generously is an experience quite indistinguishable from the experience of being loved. Fresh expressions have the potential to offer an intersubjective experience that connects people with God." [2]

The young generation wants to be heard and understood. In their language. So we have to make the effort to understand what they are saying. It requires our learning their language.

Provide a compass, not a GPS

Don't tell young mission leaders how to do things but rather guide them with care and empathy. Let them come to their own conclusions while you read the Word of God with them, engaging around critical ethical questions and talking about global concerns. Help them to find better answers than they could find just on their own. A few years ago, a young North Macedonian missionary called Gale left for Serbia with only 50€ in his pocket, as God had called him to serve there. For the next year he lived on 50€ a month, given to him by another missionary. Gale stayed faithful and God started to provide. Gale planted a church and as he wanted to reach more people, he started to go online in 2021. When I met him in December 2022 he had more than 60,000 followers following his daily Bible message. In the Serbian Evangelical churches, some say there are "only 5000" believers.

Gale reaches many more with his faithfulness! He is motivated by his mission of reaching Serbia with the Gospel.

No one told him what to do, but instead cheered him on to explore what it might mean to share the Gospel in his context. He has two mentors walking alongside him. They act like a compass by asking critical questions about his life and ministry and are there to support him, but they don't act like a GPS telling him left or right, right or wrong. And they are willing to walk alongside him even when they might not agree with all of his decisions as a young leader.

Belonging means shaping

When a young person feels they belong, they want to contribute with their ideas. They don't necessarily do it the way you have done it, nor might they care how things were done in the past. ECM UK director Kent Anderson said in a meeting with younger leaders a few years ago: "We cannot expect young people to enter our wardrobes and put on our dresses. Like a missionary has retired in Africa and we are looking for a young successor to go there and simply continue the mission station. Instead we need to provide clothes hangers for them where they can come with their own dresses and join our

mission organisations." They don't have to fit into our sizes and styles, they contribute with their own.

As we slowly come out of the pandemic, not only have our churches and youth groups lost members but also mission organisations have seen a huge decline in numbers applying to go on mission trips or committing to a gap year. Now is a unique opportunity to re-evaluate and experiment. What will work for the younger generation of today? Can we learn, for example, from the rise of monastic-style communities across Europe who are sharing life and ministering together?

Chris Curtis, CEO of Youthscape said in a recent conversation, "our problem is not that we don't know what the problems of our young people are. Most of us know, we are just stuck in them and need people to provide us with three first steps to get moving."

Coming back to the crucial questions of young people: "Who am I? Where do I belong? What difference can I make?", I pray you sit down with young people and ask them how they would answer these questions. It might not only lead to more conversations and mutual understanding but also to new opportunities. For Powell and Griffin, it meant writing another book, this

time addressed at teenagers themselves: "3 Big Questions That Shape Your Future" was released in December 2022.[3] What might it mean for you? To reach the world for Christ and reach the impossible, it needs all of us!

End Notes

[1] Powell, K. and Griffin, B. (2021) *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

[2] Savage, S. (2008) "Fresh expressions: the psychological gains and risks," in Nelstrop, L. and Percy, M., *Evaluating fresh expressions: Explorations in emerging church responses to the changing face of ecclesiology in the Church of England*. Norwich: Canterbury Press.

[3] Powell, K. et al. (2022) *3 Big Questions That Shape Your Future: A 60-Day Exploration of Who You Were Made to Be*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.



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