



# The Future Engagement of Youth in Mission

**BY DANIELLE FACE**

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the engagement of young people (under the age of 30) with missions, both in the UK and overseas. During the last decade, young people have been subjected to an unprecedented global pandemic that has disrupted

their educational plans and their opportunities to socialise beyond the world of online interaction.[1] It is therefore unsurprising that a world of increasing uncertainty, both politically and economically, has influenced attitudes among young people and their willingness

to engage people and their willingness to engage in an often misunderstood concept of overseas mission. Yet even now, God is moving and calling young people to participate with His mission. So how can the mobilisation of young people in God's intergenerational mission be increased?



## Recent Shifts in Mission Trends

### Creation Care

In 2019, young people's passion for justice was publicly displayed during the global warming demonstrations initiated by Greta Thunberg in over 125 countries, when millions of young people left school and marched through the streets demanding government action to secure the future of their planet.[2] Young people are also supporting Greta Thunberg's popularisation of 'flight shaming', meaning they are increasingly hesitant to utilise high emission short haul flights for mission trips. [3] It was strikingly evident that young people are willing to engage in social action: this is not an apathetic generation.

For mission agencies, one of the interesting conversations that is growing in prominence, in line with the 5 Marks of Mission (see *Missional Focus* Vol.1 Issue 2), is the need for sustainable missions.[4] There is a need to consider an evaluated response that incorporates the passion of young people for creation care. There are many ways to do this, such as advertising trips that minimise unnecessary layovers, or utilising alternative modes of transport like intercontinental trains. Placements could also be extended during summer holidays to reduce short haul flights. However, these beneficial enhancements of mission practice need to be expressed in a way that young people will engage with, by promoting them on relevant social media platforms. Mission agencies should not rely on the unspoken assumption that people will somehow stumble across their websites.

### Internships

Another benefit of extending placement options is the additional experience and training opportunities they provide, which is especially advantageous for young people looking to acquire new skills. Covid-19 disrupted international travel, school exams and onward university education. This meant that during and immediately following the pandemic, there was a reduction in young people signing up for Gap Year opportunities as they wanted to 'make up' the lost time. Since then, young people have been re-evaluating their career choices and the opportunity of global remote working has increased. However, there is starting to be an increase in young people seeking opportunities that are more comparable to a tailored internship that contributes towards their CV and enhancement of skills and experience, as opposed to a traditional gap year 'break' from studies.



It is not a huge shift, but significant enough that mission agencies would do well to reconsider whether their programmes of engagement suit the contemporary needs of young people. This would benefit young people and their mission agency by allowing both parties to be more specific about the skills that are required or that could be developed during the placement.

### Long-Term Factors

There has been a gradual decline in viewing jobs as a 'career for life', which has been affecting missionary attrition rates since the 1980s, with significantly fewer long-term missionaries being sent from the Global North.[5] It is important to acknowledge that asking young people to sign up for 'long-term' mission with no specific end date, or a minimum 3-5 year obligation can be a daunting prospect. This apprehension amongst young people is heightened when the British Cost of Living Crisis is taken into consideration. In 2018, house prices were over 4 times higher than the average salary earned by 90% of people under 30.[6] This has only worsened since the pandemic. This difficulty, for potentially over 90% of young people, to get onto the property ladder, or to move out of their parental home, means that long-term mission is considered a colossal next step.

Missional engagement therefore needs to be made more accessible for younger people. For young people with limited independent living experience, opportunities could be promoted with accommodation included on a



missions base alongside other people. Mission agencies could offer a shorter duration of service, for 1-2 years, to give young people an experience of missions before signing up for longer placements. This helps to make moving overseas appear more manageable.

Another important aspect that needs further consideration is resilience.[7] Since Covid-19, there has been a sharp increase in mental health concerns amongst young people.[8] This will inevitably affect many of the young people applying to serve abroad. Mission agencies need to be aware of this during the selection, preparation and training process alongside exploring appropriate avenues for member care that address this area of concern.

### Future Engagement of Young People

There are young adults who are excited, passionate and want to get involved in mission. However, when asked which aspects of missions they would like to get involved in, many

struggle to answer. The answer is often just "mission," with limited understanding of what that is. During the selection process, when young people are considering serving overseas, ask them to explain their understanding of the Gospel and how they would share it with others. This provides an opportunity to discover whether they have a comprehensive understanding of the Gospel and how that influences the work that they could engage in.

Young people need to be provided with ample opportunities to discover the holistic Gospel. This ensures they can present the Gospel through both social action and proclamation, and that when presented with opportunities to share the Gospel they are aware of how to do so, both through explanation and invitation to ongoing discipleship, as helpfully articulated by Bill Hull.[9]

### Business as Mission

With a clearer understanding of what mission and the Gospel are, the next step is to provide young people with

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ample opportunities to engage with God's mission. One of the most prominent ways that has emerged since Covid-19 is the ability to work remotely. This can dramatically decrease the dependency on fundraising, as young people can be encouraged to find financially sustainable remote working options, and provides opportunities for them to build relationships in their new location. Another possibility is studying overseas, which also increases visa availability and potential connections amongst unreached people groups. For mission agencies, this may mean greater flexibility is needed to facilitate part-time placements allowing young people to work or study whilst also engaging in missional opportunities in their new location.

### **Intercultural Mission**

Young people are wary of promoting forms of mission that replicate historic colonial structures, so the shift away from Western prominence towards a healthier intercultural understanding of mission provides young people with opportunities for international mission partnerships. [10] Yet there needs to be a clear articulation of this shift to help young people appreciate the importance of embracing intercultural theology and humility.

This is an approach to mission that cannot be assumed but must be intentionally explored during the selection and training process. For young people, mission practitioners need to be wary of using 'adventure' language that promotes heroic tendencies. Instead, mission agencies should advocate the importance of going to learn, serve and support the ministry of local leadership, even when it looks different to Western ecclesial models.

Mission agencies should also consider how they, and the young people serving with them, communicate their activities on social media and newsletters. It is important that young people are made aware of the dangers of so-called 'poverty porn' that could

increase their social standing online but undermines the dignity of those they are serving. [11] Mission agencies need to be aware of the pressures young people encounter through social media and advocate ways of reporting that show humility and respect, as characterised by Radi-Aid's social media guide. [12]

### **Partnership and 'Reverse Mission'**

Another way to promote intercultural understandings of mission is for agencies to create opportunities for young people to engage in so-called 'reverse mission', by hosting young people of other nationalities to serve and learn together within their own context. [13] This creates intentional moments of collaboration across cultural divides, demonstrating missions 'from everywhere to everywhere.' [14] Partnership and collaboration consequently highlight the issue of healthy teamwork and the relational dynamics that exist within a team setting, especially a multicultural team. Appropriate training for conflict management, self-awareness and team management needs to be in place, together with appropriate member care.

### **Sending Church Culture**

A young person's involvement with international missions should not begin with their first experiences overseas. Instead, mission agencies should partner with local churches to promote engaging with *missio Dei* in different aspects of a young person's life. There is a need for mission agencies to provide resources that youth leaders can use with young people. Missionaries should be invited to share their stories, to inspire and provide a safe environment for young people to ask questions. Missionary mentors could be provided for young people interested in overseas mission. Young people should be encouraged to engage with prayer opportunities for missionaries, the global church and unreached people groups. Local churches and mission agencies need to collaborate on behalf of young people to promote opportunities that embrace partnering with God's global mission and church.

### **Conclusion**

Young people have often been an

underutilised resource for engaging with God's mission. The faith and passion of young people has much to offer those who have been in church for a long time and perhaps lost some of their initial passion and expectancy for God to move in power. Releasing young people in mission means those with more experience may need to step back to allow others to grow, even if young people make mistakes in the process. Those with experience should consider a mentoring role. Additionally, mission agencies cannot assume young people will just apply, as in a world of social media there are so many voices competing for their attention. A strategy needs to be developed to engage young people and invite their greater involvement in *missio Dei*. Younger people will continue to shape the future of mission if they are provided with the right opportunities to get involved.

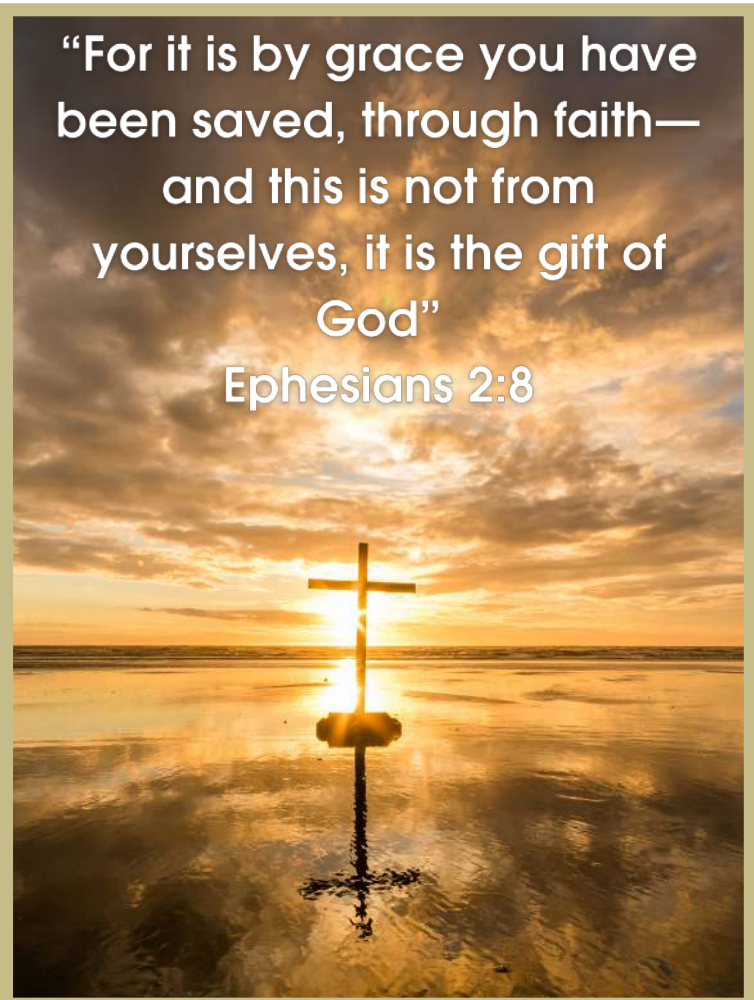
### **End Notes**

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...End Notes continued

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