

Mobilizing the Next Generation of Missionaries:

Gen Z and the Local Church

Sarah Joyner

Recently I gathered with twelve college students to discuss possible Journeyman opportunities and next steps for missionary service. These American students have been serving with us in South Asia all summer. They have battled sickness, endured monsoon season, and had countless cups of chai and gospel conversations over the past few months. Reflecting on this next generation of missionaries, I am hopeful and expectant. I am also acutely aware of the generational differences and challenges to mobilizing the next generation of missionaries.

A careful examination of Gen Z and its impact on missions reveals a clear need for the local church to adapt its missionary mobilization efforts for this generation. The purpose of this article is to explore how local churches can effectively mobilize Gen Z as the next generation of missionaries. As this newest generation of missionaries prepares to be sent out, our sending churches need to understand how Gen Z's unique characteristics affect the development of these new missionaries.

So, what is a missionary? The International Mission Board defines a missionary as “a disciple of Jesus set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent out from the church, and affirmed by the IMB to cross geographic, cultural, and/or linguistic barriers as part of a missionary team focused on making disciples

and multiplying churches among unreached peoples and place.”¹ There is still a need for intentional missions efforts to cross these barriers and take the gospel to the unreached.

With this understanding of missions in mind, what does it mean to mobilize for missions? To mobilize simply means to set something in motion. Erlacher and White’s definition of a mobilizer is helpful for understanding mobilization: “in a mission’s context, a mobilizer is someone who makes movement toward the purposes of God possible in someone else’s life. A mobilizer prepares and positions others to actively take hold of the purpose God has for them.”² This points to the local church as a mobilizer. The local church has a leading role in helping Gen Z take hold of the purpose God has for them!

Who is Generation Z?

A quick glance at today’s mission force shows that it mostly comprises Generation X (born 1965 to 1980) and Millennials (born 1981 to 1995).³ The next generation of missionaries will be sent from Generation Z. Many of these future missionaries are already participating in short-term opportunities. Gen Z includes those born between 1997 and 2012.⁴ This generation is unique in so many ways. For example, the iPhone was launched in 2007 when the oldest Gen Z were just ten. They have grown up with technology at their fingertips and witnessed significant social, educational, and technological

¹ International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: IMB, 2018), 45.

² Jolene Erlacher and Katy White, *Mobilizing Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions* (Littleton: William Carey Publishing, 2022), 84.

³ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin, 2024). 5.

⁴ Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins.” Pew Research Center. January 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

shifts in their lifetime.⁵ These shifts have impacted Gen Z significantly. Millennials adapted to technology as it rolled out, but for Gen Z, it has always been a part of their story. It is safe to say we are still learning how technology and constant connectivity affect us today.

There are certainly unique and significant challenges to mobilizing Gen Z compared to previous generations. Churches must get to know Gen Z if they are to help them follow God's calling to the nations. Churches should know what Gen Z-ers value, what their worldview is, and what motivates them. While it would be unwise to stereotype everyone in this generation, key principles will be helpful to understand when seeking to know Gen Z and recognize how best to mobilize this next generation of missionaries.

Values

Happiness in life is of high value for Gen Z.⁶ In addition to happiness, they also value safety and security in their lives. They have been encouraged by their parents their entire lives to avoid dangerous things or taking risks. They have been protected from failure or the opportunity to make mistakes.⁷ The anxiety of older adults surrounding them their entire lives makes them cautious in life decisions and far more aware of risk. Another contributing factor to their caution is that they seem to have fewer real-life experiences than previous generations at the same age. This has left them lacking the self-confidence to take risks and try new things.⁸

In the workplace, they value individuality and the ability to use their specific skills or interests. Gen Z has grown up in a world that has targeted their individual preferences and interests from both a marketing and educa-

⁵ Jolene Erlacher and Katy White, *Mobilizing Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Age of Missions* (Littleton: William Carey Publishing, 2022), 84.

⁶ Erlacher and White, *Mobilizing Gen Z*, 56-57.

⁷ Robin Paggi and Kat Clowes, *Managing Generation Z* (Fresno: Linden Publishing, 2021), 17.

⁸ Erlacher and White, *Mobilizing Gen Z*, 47-50, 58.

tional perspective. Every experience is tailored directly to them, creating an internal desire for individualism.⁹ Not only are they individualistic, but they also want to be authentic and be accepted. They expect their leaders to be genuine and authentic. This generation is entrepreneurial, which seems contradictory to the fact that they are risk-averse. This entrepreneurial bent likely comes from their desire to be in charge of their own schedules and use their skills to impact the world around them.¹⁰

Worldview

The USA has shifted to a post-Christian and post-modern culture which ultimately holds the idea that there is no absolute truth.¹¹ In addition, there has been a clear rise of the “nones” or those who have no religious affiliation in America.¹² Gen Z has been shaped by this shift in beliefs and worldviews. A postmodern society emphasizes that truth is relative to the individual or the culture, which means this generation is lacking the foundational understanding that there are absolute truths grounded in the very nature of God and his Word. Even believers in this generation struggle to understand their identity in Christ due to the culture around them. While this is partly due to the overall shift as a society, it is also due to the lack of discipleship and participation in church. People keep busy schedules and hectic pace of life, making attending church or Bible studies as often as previous generations even more difficult.

In addition, this generation is truly global. They are connected through technology and ease of travel like no previous generation, giving them a

⁹ Paggi and Clowes, *Managing Generation Z*, 31-32.

¹⁰ Mark C. Perna, “Why Gen Z Is Thriving in the Entrepreneur Life.” *Forbes*. June 18, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2024/06/18/gen-z-thriving-entrepreneurship/>.

¹¹ Erlacher and White, *Mobilizing Gen Z*, 4.

¹² James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 21.

unique perspective on the world.¹³ This relates to another unique factor in missions today, the growing global church. As America is experiencing a cultural shift, there is a growing mission shift in the harvest force worldwide. The mission workforce from nontraditional sending countries is greater today than in the past.¹⁴ Countries that have traditionally received missionaries are now sending to the nations.¹⁵ As this shift happens, missionary teams are becoming more diverse. Ideas, experiences, and worldviews can span the oceans and bring common ground for Gen Z globally due to globalization and technology.¹⁶ The local church in the U.S. must recognize the unique opportunity presented by GenZ's connectedness to partner with the global church to finish the task. Indeed, the local church's role in discipling the next generation of missionaries is crucial.

Motivations

Local churches need to understand what motivates Gen Z as they seek to mobilize more missionaries. Previous generations wanted to be invited into something greater than themselves and purposeful. Gen Z is driven by success, flexibility in their schedules, and stability. Millennials longed to make an impact on this world. In contrast, Gen Z seems to view work as a means to financial stability or individual fulfillment in life.¹⁷ This does not mean that Gen Z is afraid of hard work. They will work hard toward success

¹³ UNiDAYS. 2020. "The Most Defining Gen Z Traits." www.genzinsights.com. December 16, 2020. <https://www.genzinsights.com/these-are-generation-zs-most-defining-traits>.

¹⁴ Bruce Koch, "The Surging Non-Western Mission Force." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009). 370.

¹⁵ Philip Lutterodt Lee, Joabe G. Cavalcanti, and Loun Ling, "Perspectives from Global South Christianity," Lausanne Movement, January 3, 2023. <https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2023-01/perspectives-from-global-south-christianity>.

¹⁶ Erlacher and White, *Mobilizing Gen Z*, 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 56.

when they understand the value, or they see the reasons behind it.¹⁸ They do, however, want to use their individuality and specific interests or skills in the workplace.¹⁹ It may seem like a minor shift, but understanding this will help Gen Z as they look for opportunities to make individual contributions as missionaries.

Mobilizing Gen Z

With these realities, how does the local church mobilize Gen Z? Here are five practical ways the local church can effectively mobilize this next generation of missionaries.

Personal Engagement

There is a feeling of disdain for missions of the past, which not only pushed the expansion of the gospel but was tainted by colonialism. Gen Z doesn't want anything to do with this thinking.²⁰ They need space to process, untangle, and realize that there is more to missions than past stereotypes.²¹ With Gen Z's strong desire to meet needs and fight injustice, local churches need to prayerfully engage with them about methods of missions rather than simply tell them, "This is how it is done." We can define the core missionary task and describe how we do this work, but we need to help Gen Z see this approach in Scripture.²² As the local church casts vision for missions, it is important to engage with these future missionaries' questions about evangelism and

¹⁸ Ibid, 59.

¹⁹ Paggi and Clowes, *Managing Generation Z*, 30.

²⁰ Barna Group and International Mission Board, *The Future of Missions: 10 Questions about Global Ministry the Church Must Answer with the Next Generation* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2020), 11.

²¹ Erlacher and White, *Mobilizing Gen Z*, 24.

²² International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 9.

missions strategies.²³ This means that vision casting and mission education must come not only from sermons, studies, and conferences, but also from personal relationships and conversations with mentors, church leaders, and missionaries.

Attention to Wellness

Mental health and wellness are things local churches must also consider as they mobilize Gen Z. In previous generations, new missionaries were not expected to be perfect, but they were expected to show they were healthy and ready to head to the field. Conversations about mental health have even been considered taboo for previous generations. While we still want to accurately assess the readiness to head to the field, we must also begin to understand the realities of Gen Z. This generation has made words like “anxiety” and “depression” daily vocabulary. They are not afraid to share their struggles or talk about the fact that they need help. In the same vein, this generation is paralyzed by fear. These are ongoing realities we cannot ignore in our mobilization efforts.

Sending churches and sending organizations must figure out how to talk with Gen Z about mental health. They need to know how to come alongside missionary candidates and help them find ways to go to the field with the tools and resources they need should they face mental health struggles. It is also important to help them see that moving forward in action can also bring clarity in making decisions. Local churches are thus poised well to help future missionaries walk forward in faithful obedience on the journey to the field.

²³ Barna Group, *The Future of Missions*, 33-35.

Consideration of Parents

As churches consider mobilizing Gen Z, they must consider their parents as well. Gen Z's parents' goals are to keep their children safe and see them be successful, which often hinders their support in sending their children to the nations.²⁴ This is true not only for non-Christians but, unfortunately, also for Christian families. According to Barna, almost half of parents agree with the statement, "I'd rather my child get a well-paying job than be a career missionary."²⁵ The support of a parent or lack thereof can have major implications on young people taking steps forward in their calling toward the nations. Local churches discipling and encouraging parents of Gen Z will have major implications on sending.

Discipleship

In fact, we have already seen in this article that discipleship in the local church is a major element for mobilizing this generation. As Gen Z is disciplined, they will begin to see God's heart for the nations and hear his call to join in that work. They may not be ready to move overseas today, but ongoing discipleship efforts can help prepare them. The local church helps these future missionaries understand God's word and learn how to walk with him in faithfulness. The church should model obedience and hold Gen Z believers accountable for their walk.

Another key area for the church to help Gen Z is evangelism. America's current views on tolerance have shaped Gen Z's views on evangelism. Many do not embrace gospel sharing even in their current context. So, they will need to be challenged and equipped to share. Local churches must help

²⁴ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation For... Failure* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 168-169.

²⁵ Barna Group, *The Future of Missions*, 89.

them understand the why and how of evangelism.²⁶ If things like Bible study, obedience, and evangelism are not addressed early, they will only be magnified in the face of culture shock and the stress of living in a new place—and this could lead to short-lived missionary careers.

Short-term opportunities

Along with discipleship, there is a need for short-term mission trip opportunities. This can include opportunities at home or abroad. These missions immersion experiences can be an impactful piece of discipleship and a powerful way to do missions education. Well-planned trips are strategic for missionary teams to reach their people. Simultaneously, much learning takes place in the lives of volunteers. Volunteer teams come back home changed, and they often become interested in missions in new ways.

Learning from experience is important to Gen Z, and the local church can help provide these opportunities as they partner with missionaries to send volunteer teams. Whether sending long-term or short-term workers, the local church can help by focusing its options and partnering deeply with missionary field teams. Gen Z wants to know they can trust the teams and team leaders they are joining. They need to see how they, as individuals, can impact the world around them. Describing the global need for lostness is a key element in recruiting; however, this is not enough with Gen Z. It is also important to help them see how they fit into those global efforts and how their unique skills and experiences will serve those missionary teams. Serving in short-term opportunities can help them see how their unique skills and background can fit into the vision and strategy as a long-term worker.

²⁶ Ibid, 36.

Conclusion

To summarize, the goal of this article (or of the local church) is not to focus on Gen Z's negative traits or all the challenges of mobilizing them to the nations. The reality is that they have much potential. Gen Z is driven. They are uniquely skilled. They are creative and resourceful, innovative, and ready to push past barriers today's missionaries are facing. Gen Z has great potential to impact lostness and a role to play in fulfilling the Great Commission for their generation.

The main idea is that the local church is essential in helping this next generation of missionaries walk in all that God has called them to do and be. While the message or the task does not change, we must be willing to adapt how we mobilize so we do not lose an entire generation of missionaries. The unreached peoples and places around the world are counting on it.

Sarah Joyner has served with the IMB for 12 years in South Asia. Currently, she serves as the affinity pathways strategist, helping to mobilize and onboard new missionaries to South Asia. She has an MDiv from SEBTS and is pursuing her Ed.D. from SEBTS. Before serving overseas, she served on church staff in Florida, working with students and NextGen ministries.