Motivating the Next Generation in the U.S. to Missions

MARCUS DEAN

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Rev. Dr. Marcus Dean *is professor of Intercultural Studies and Missions at Houghton University, Houghton New York.*

Introduction

While motivating the next generation to engage in global missions, is not really a new concern (every generation has had its challenges); the context we find ourselves in today in the U.S. has various unique aspects that are new compared to the past. As a college professor of missions, I have seen shifts in the attitudes of students towards missions who are attending college and even for those taking missions classes. This is heightened with the awareness that I am also seeing far less interest in studying missions than 20 years ago.

This context could be called a New Frontier that has to be explored to understand the challenges that are faced in current and future efforts to motivate today's younger generation towards missions, and the factors that demotivate them towards missions' engagement. An important part of this New Frontier, are the changes in demographics of those being recruited, as the younger generation in the US is increasingly diverse in ethnicity and culture.

An incident a few years ago, opened my eyes to just how different the younger generations are. In a class focusing on intercultural competencies, I had frequently used an episode from an older edition of *Star Trek* to help explore cultural differences such as honor. A comment from a student led me to shift directions. The student made the statement that the action was too slow. Essentially it was boring. But check your stereotypes, this was a female student.

While various authors have addressed the question of motivation and engagement in global missions amongst today's youth from different perspectives, this is an attempt to organize the variety of challenges that are being faced; as well as recognizing that there are potential positives to be found in the younger generations. Rather than throwing our collective hands up in despair, we are called to understand this "New Frontier" in which we are educating and recruiting for missions. Thus, the focal

question of this article is "What challenges and opportunities are present in motivating younger generations to career service in global cross-cultural missions?"

Obstacles and Challenges

Attitudes Towards Missions

Gen Z—those born in and since 1997 (Dimock 2019) —is growing up in a world that is notably different than that of previous generations. While the idea that the U.S. is now a post-Christian nation is commonly discussed, many of the differences faced in mobilizing for global missions in the future are unique to Gen Z members.

Gen Z's disinterest in missions engagement

While all generations in mission are influenced by aspects of post-modernism and tolerance, the cultural influences on youth today go far beyond those factors. Gen Z is described as being global in terms of connections through technology (Erlacher and White 2022, 43), having grown up in "relativism and pluralism" (46), having been over-protected by parents (48), being extremely individualistic (56), seeking happiness as "the meaning of life" (57), and being risk averse (58). None of these attitudes seem particularly conducive to responding to a call to missions.

Missions is colonialism

An attitude that sprouted among many millennials, but has grown excessively among Gen Z is the perspective that missions is tied to a negative colonial past. As one millennial summarizes "Missions, so it goes, is the old handmaiden of colonialism" (Bush and Wason 2017, 2).[1] In part this reflects the common view of many anthropologists that Christianity leads to "a 'loss' of indigenous culture" (Bush and Wason 2017, 3). In essence, Gen Zers are asking: What right does anyone in our world have to impose their perspective on others? When Gen Zers reflect on the past, it seems self-evident to them that there has been much, and often more, wrong done by missionaries than good. This outlook persists in spite of significant discussion that the good from Protestant missions far outweighs the negative. One significant work on this is Robert Woodberry's argument that democracy has been spurred by the work of Protestant Mission (2012). Yet it is possible that those who hold this position would argue that democracy is an imposition. After all, if one assumes that "missions is, in fact, an 'imposition' of a certain worldview and conformity to that view, isn't Western

[1] *Millennials and the Mission of God* is a conversation between a Boomer, Andrew Bush, and a Millennial, Carolyn Wason. Quotes are attributed to each author as appropriate.

missions just a sneaky from of neocolonialism?" (Bush and Wason 2017, 3). Fortunately, this is not a call to cease missions totally; Millennial Carolyn Wason, goes on to say, "Millennials are not sure that Western missions is a path towards changing the world for the better. As a millennial, I think missions needs to change. But as a Christian who believes in the important of missions, I am not sure what such a change might be" (Bush and Wason 2017, 4). The danger for Gen Z seems to be that many have moved a step further and seem to have fully accepted the "perception of missions being enmeshed with oppression and injustice" (Erlacher and White 2022, 21).

In response to Wason, Andrew Bush, a Boomer, suggests that Western missions can reconfigure itself to alleviate the problems of the past (Bush and Wason 2017, 6-7). He also indicates that there needs to be a broader recognition of the impact of globalization. Bush points out that "Western commerce, entertainment, sports, internet technology, and education reach into the most remote corners of the world" (Bush and Wason 2017, 7). As he discusses this broader reality, he observes that in comparison "Western missions as a colonial threat seems almost quaint" (Bush and Wason 2017, 7). Bush's call does challenge the missions' community to continue its focus on contextualization and encouraging the global church to not be Western by default (Bush and Wason 2017, 7-8).

Given this negative attitude towards past global missions, we have to ask how widely this impacts those in the church. Steve Richardson (2022) reports that in a survey of individuals who are engaged in missions in some way, of 120 respondents, 47 percent indicated "that the perception that missions harms cultures 'somewhat' or 'very much' influences believers" (131). Furthermore, 37 percent "rated this idea as 'quite common' or 'almost universal' with the North American Church" (131). It would appear that this is indeed a common attitude in the church that could impact missions recruiting.

This perspective may be connected with the common U.S. cultural trend to embrace tolerance. As Richardson (2022, 137) indicates, this persuasion to tolerance may be based "on the assumption that all cultures are inherently good." While recognizing that harm has been done by missionaries (though less than other aspects of globalization and governments), the challenge that Richardson (149) gives us is to "distinguish between the core task of global missions and the faulty and ethnocentric ways it has sometimes been carried out."

Everything is missions

The moniker "everything is missions" that is frequently used in many churches, at first, does not appear to be against missions. That this attitude is likely a barrier to global

missions engagement seems clearer as there has been a shift over time away from using the terms missions and missionaries exclusively for sharing "the gospel in a long-term, full-time, cross-cultural capacity, usually overseas" (Richardson 2022, 58).These terms now are used to basically include "any activity of the church, including ministering within local congregations, serving the poor, and fighting injustice" (58). Richardson (2022, 60) also notes that of the 120 individuals surveyed, 73 percent indicated that they "included 'everything is missions' in their top three choices" as to what keeps people from being involved in global missions. While this may seem like a semantic argument, the church has to figure out how to keep cross-cultural missions alive as we face this trend.

Every Christian is a missionary

Denny Spitters (2017) in one of his chapters, addresses the question *Is every Christian a missionary?* He starts the chapter with mentioning the common exit sign seen in churches "You are now entering the mission field" (Spitters and Ellison, 2017, 65). Likewise, it is logical that if everything we do is missions, then whenever we leave the church, we are in fact entering the mission field. Surprisingly, this is not new as Spitters quotes Count Ludwig Von Zinzendorf as saying "Missions, is simply this: every heart with Christ is a missionary, every heart without Christ a mission field" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 67). While we may not figure out a perfect answer to the question, simply answering that every Christian is a missionary certainly makes it harder to keep global and cross-cultural outreach as a central component of the local church's engagement.

Missions confusion

Another dynamic in the barriers to global missions engagement is a growing uncertainty in the church about what its global role should look like. This stems from a genuine effort by the church to answer the question *What is our Mission?* How we answer this question depends on how we understand four key words "Mission, Missions, Missional, and the Missio Dei" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 33), words whose distinctions we often muddy and overlap. I imagine that most of us have been in multiple discussions that have endeavored to determine the difference between *Mission* and *Missions*, for example. The gist of Spitters' discussion is that the failure to carefully differentiate these terms can lead to a loss of focus on global missions, particularly in discipling the nations. He calls us to be "committed to walking the path of God's redemptive mission, culminating in the collective worship of the Lamb by all nations, peoples, tribes, and tongues" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 48). No matter which term we use, the church has to find a way to keep in front of its people the on-going reality of the need for the ethnic nations to hear, no matter where they may be located.

U.S. Demographics and Missions

Simple demographic data in regard to age trends and ethnic diversity tell us that the U.S. is changing, which adds to the new frontier in which missions recruitment takes place.

The aging of Evangelicals

First, in relation to age trends: the U.S. population from ages 18-29 in 2023 was only 15.7 percent (Marketing Charts 2024) and was 17 percent of Evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2024a). While this reflects that this group is consistent in size in the church it is a much smaller portion in comparison to those who are from ages 30-49 which comprises 33% of Evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2024a). Both in the U.S. population and in the Evangelical Church there are fewer younger adults to recruit for missions.

Evangelicals are increasingly less white

Second, missions recruiting also has to focus on the overall demographic changes in ethnicity in the U.S. As the U.S. continues to become less white—it is projected Whites will be a minority (less than 50% of US population) by 2045 (Blake 2023)—both the church and global missions recruitment will need to work within this new reality. We noted above that when all ethnic groups are considered together, 15.7 percent of the U.S. population is in the 18-29 age range. However, it is noteworthy that among Hispanic Evangelicals, 26 percent are in the 18-29 age category (Pew Research Center 2024b). This is a considerable difference and is significant for the future of missions as young evangelical Hispanics are a larger part of their evangelical group than are young whites.

The lack of ethnic diversity in missions

While these numbers reflect that the times are changing, there is, however, a lag in relation to ethnic diversity within missions engagement. 2021 data from Missio Nexus tells us that 76 percent of missions organization staffing is White/Caucasian but only 56.7 percent of the U.S. population fits that category. At a greater difference, the Hispanic population is at 18.7 percent of the U.S. population but only 6 percent of mission organization staffing is Hispanic. Slightly better is that Blacks are at 12.1 percent of the population and 7% of mission organization staffing. The most positive ethnic engagement is that of Asian/Pacific Islanders who together compose 5.9 percent of the U.S. population yet represent 8 percent of mission organization staffing. Together, the minority population groups, which compose 42.2 percent of 2021

U.S. population, represents only 21 percent of mission staffing. It is important to note that this data does not indicate age groups. Further, for those who are involved in strictly sending organizations the number of those engaged in going skews more towards white Caucasians (Mission Nexus 2021).

That recruiting for missions has to focus more on minority populations of color is even more evident when looking at the even younger minorities as a percent of population. U.S. public schools census data shows that in 2021 White students were 45.2 percent, Hispanic students were 28.4 percent, Black students were 14.9%, Asian and Pacific Islanders were 5.8%, and 5.6 percent were American Indian and others (Statista 2024). In our schools Whites are already a minority.

Black Churches and Missions

Black Churches and Black Christians have a long history in the United States, but much of that history is marred by slavery and the ensuing struggles for freedom and civil rights. While the early history of Blacks in missions has recently come increasingly to light, it is important to understand the current dynamics of the Black Church's engagement, or lack of, with global missions.

Blacks mostly do not engage in global missions

In a 2004 article, James Sutherland (2004, 500) estimated that there were 300-500 Black missionaries from the U.S. At the time, that estimate represented only 1 percent of the U.S. missionary force (500-501). Sutherland goes on to identify various causes for this low number when, in 2004, Blacks made up 13 percent of the U.S. population (501). If Blacks had been proportionally represented in missions, they should have numbered over 5,500 missionaries given that there were 43,000 U.S. missionaries at the time. There has not been a significant change in this reality. Michele Raven (2017, 163) notes, "the black church is not participating in sending in numbers proportionate to the number of African Americans in the church." Raven (174) notes that in 2012, Blacks represented only ".024 percent of the missionary force sent from the United States.

Changes of Blacks engaged in missions organizations

While this low level of engagement reflects the current status of global missions engagement, it has not always been the case. Earlier in U.S. missions history, there were frequently black missionaries who left the United States (Raven 2017; Saunders 2022). The decline of Blacks in global missions is attributed at least, in part, to an outcome of white missionary leaders excluding Blacks "after reconstruction because they feared negative responses by colonial government to freed African Americans and mixing

races among missionaries" (Raven 2017, 173). In response Black churches formed their own missions groups and went out independently. In time the number of Black missions groups largely diminished once Jim Crow became "the law of the land" (Raven 173).

Black Churches focus on their own marginalized people

Today the Black church's limited engagement in global missions is often considered to stem from Blacks being preoccupied with "helping African Americans survive slavery and racism" (Sutherland 2004, 501). Along with the colonial attitudes and practices that hindered Blacks from being allowed to serve (501-502), Sutherland indicates that there were limited educational opportunities for Blacks—particularly in Southern States where they predominantly have lived (502).

Current attitudes within the Black church continue to limit recruiting. It appears that many within Black churches reflect the need to help in their own neighborhoods to the point of criticizing Blacks who engage elsewhere (Sutherland 2004, 504-505). Likewise, giving to missions is minimal (505). Sutherland also indicates that many Black churches lean towards more liberal theology that is not motivated towards "global missions, particularly in the face of desperate needs in the Black community" (505-506). As recently as 2003, Sutherland reports that only 4 participants showed up to a seminar on recruiting African Americans at an evangelical missions conference attended by 140 participants; there were 3 other seminars offered in that same time slot (502).

In a more recent study, Linda Saunders interviewed 3 black pastors about global missions engagement. In relation to the idea that the Black church is focused on its own needs she summarized the pastors' perspectives by stating that "Every pastor agreed that the Black church is still in survival mode, trying to overcome centuries of systematic injustices endured in the United States, which makes it nearly impossible to focus on global evangelization" (Saunders 2022, 139). This does not mean they do not care or are not interested in reaching the unreached. Saunders notes that "When a Black pastor thinks about unreached people groups, he or she imagines those who live in environmentally, socially, and economically impoverished communities who are forgotten by most churches—unfortunately most White churches" (Saunders, 140). In other words, Black churches do not focus on a global mission field, but endeavor to be "a missionary church to her own people" (Saunders, 141).

A further obstacle to engaging the Black church in global missions is the dynamic expressed by the Black pastors that "the modern missionary movement is still soaked

with the stench of colonialism and imperialism" (Saunders, 143). Overall, the pastors are not opposed to global missions, and agree with the urgency to win the world for Christ, it is just that they are too focused on "surviving the realities of life in the United States" (Saunders, 147).

All of these factors present a challenge to engaging the Black Church more fully in Global and cross-cultural missions. Raven states that this would require changes in attitudes including "a clear understanding of the scriptural basis for capacity building, awareness programs, collaboration with others, and the support of the pastor" (Raven 2017, 176-177). This is possible, but it requires a complete and engaged process. Saunders, herself a missionary, has identified that the need stems from "a lack of teaching, discipleship, training, and education regarding local missions within the African American church" (2017, 193).

Another concern expressed by Black pastors is the lack of finances (Saunders 2017). However, Saunders (2017, 198) demonstrates that the problem may not be finances but a lack of priority in how funds are used. Perhaps, this is as much a problem in the United States church community as any one segment. U.S. giving to global missions has recently been estimated at merely 6 percent of total church budgets (Wright 2023, para. 4).

Hispanic Churches and Missions

Before it can be more fully engaged in mission, the Hispanic church in the U.S. has to deal with questions of its identity. This is largely along the lines of first and second-generation preferences.

Focus on Spanish language and cultural preservation

Within the Hispanic church in the U.S. there are two realities: immigrants who are primarily Spanish speaking and the majority of Hispanics who were born in the U.S. As of 2023 "68 percent [of all Hispanics in the U.S.] were native-born" (Migration Policy Institute 2023). Further, an earlier study from 2005 indicated that "61 percent of all native-born Latinos were English dominant, 3 percent bilingual, while only 4 percent indicated they were Spanish dominant" (Rodriguez 2010, 433). This creates a dilemma when it is recognized that "the overwhelming majority of Hispanic ministries in the U.S. rely almost exclusively on Spanish" (433). The result of this is that the larger majority of English speaking Hispanics may be outside of church ministries. This was reflected in a study that I carried out regarding language preference in worship. In a Hispanic church in upstate New York, while there were efforts at being bilingual, different youth

reflected negative attitudes, particularly when the church expressed cultural aspects that were out of sync with the U.S. born Hispanics (Dean 2016). Further complicating reaching this group in general, is that English ministries are not connecting well with Hispanics, resulting in English dominant Hispanic youth feeling left out and often marginalized (Rodriguez 2010, 437).

Second, along with this language situation, for the majority of those who are Spanish-speaking immigrants, it appears that their objective in ministry is focused on "preserving their language and culture heritage" (Rodriguez 2010, 437). Various factors seem to shape this tendency including fears that English only services will lead to a loss of heritage, a loss of family connections, and open the door to decadence from the U. S. English speaking culture (Rodriguez 2010, 439). Thus, many Hispanic churches continue with Spanish or bilingual services which create their own set of problems, such as the younger bilingual generation struggling to focus on the intent of a sermon as they debate in their heads about the accuracy of the live translation (Dean 2016). In summation, it appears that the overarching model of Hispanic ministry reflects "the preferences of the immigrant generation" (Rodriguez 2017, 216).

Hispanic missions is often to Back Home

In spite of being in a new place, Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. are able to "preserve the values, traditions, and language of their countries of origin" (Rodriguez 2017, 217). This in itself does not mean that the Hispanic church is ignoring outreach and transnational work. However, its first focus tends to be back to the immigrants' home country (Rodriguez 2017, 218). From here it looks to move into other Latin American settings. These actions tend to reinforce maintaining culture and language, once again leaving the U.S. born generations outside of involvement in church and, thus, in missions. The challenge for the Hispanic church is to see that no nation is an embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Rather, we are always living as "a colony of resident aliens" (226). Doing this, the Hispanic church will more likely be able to teach kingdom values and hopefully missions (227).

Asian American Churches and Missions

Even though the Asian American Community is diverse, the Korean church is the main group of focus for missions engagement.

Korean Churches are missions focused

While Korean American churches share a commonality with Hispanic churches in that there are Korean immigrant churches in the U.S. and churches of U.S. born Koreans, one

significant difference is that many of the Korean immigrants originated in globally-focused Protestant churches in Korea (Kim 2020). This group has strongly focused on outreach to other Korean immigrants from other religious backgrounds and have successfully started many churches in the U.S. As of 2018, it was reported that there was one Korean church "for every 323 Korean Americans" (Kim 2020, 175). The end result is that "70 percent of Korean Americans identify themselves religiously as Protestant" (175).

Likewise, the Korean American church has been able to focus on global missions, thus, continuing the "passion and practice of overseas missions from Korea" (Kim 2020, 176). Additionally, the reality they face as immigrants has "strengthened their calling to be faithful Christians, which extends to their missionary zeal for engagement in multicultural experiences and international missionary networks" (Kim 2020, 176). In contrast to the Black American experience of exclusion by mission agencies, mission organizations from Korea and the U.S. "have expected to work with Korean Americans" (176).

Second generation Koreans are more Asian American than Korean

The Korean American churches also face second generation challenges similar to the Hispanic churches. While it appears that more efforts have been made to bridge the language and cultural differences, many second-generation Koreans still leave the immigrant churches. Of the many who maintain faith, they either join with other Asian Christians—and assume an Asian American identity against a Korean American identity—or start new independent second-generation Korean Churches. This leads to challenges with leadership and maintaining a focus on missions (Kim 2020, 178).

Korean and other Asian American Christians face their own set of unique cultural barriers to becoming involved in global missions. Broadly, these cover a variety of cultural factors including the high expectations of Asian parents on their children, to struggles with a loss of family connections, to asking for support from within a shame based and indirect culture (Narita 2018, 20). While some issues faced by Asian American missionaries are similar to Caucasian American missionaries, such as educating children, David Narita emphasizes that mobilizing Asian Americans needs to focus on what is unique to them as individuals rather than to the larger groups (22). As the statistics indicate, there does seem to be more openness among Korean and Asian Americans to engage in global missions.

Religious Reluctance: The Nones

While most of us are aware of the group who are described as "nones," people who are largely not in the church, they are a part of the phenomenon that impacts the future of Global Missions and the church in the West.

A growing group disconnected from the Church

As of January 2024, Pew Research indicates that the religiously unaffiliated group in the U.S., more commonly known as nones, accounts for 28 percent of the U.S. population. Of this group 17 percent are Atheist or Agnostic, the remaining 63 percent being self-labeled as Nothing in Particular. Interestingly, the research also shows that this group is less civically engaged (Pew Research Center 2024c).

While this group may seem like they are outside of the focus of this research, the Pew report indicates that "most 'nones' say they were raised in a religion, usually Christianity" (Pew Research Center 2024c). Furthermore, of this group 13 percent believe in God as described in the Bible and 56 percent in some higher power" (Pew Research Center 2024c). In essence this is a group that has moved out of the influence of the Church and outside of engagement in global missions. For this reason, they have also been called *dones* (Seversen 2019, 75). Interestingly, this group does not have to remain outside of the influence of the church. A proposal by Beth Seversen (2019) suggests that they can be reached again by the church, but through the process of "belonging and behaving before believing" (92). In practicing this model, they are allowed to ask questions and participate in "enactments of the faith such as prayer, worship, Bible study, and church participation" before believing (92). Perhaps this needs to be explored in connecting with missions. While this may seem impossible, Pew research also indicates that among nones regarding religion "14% say it does more good than harm; 41% say religion does equal amounts of good and harm" (Pew Research Center 2024c). In other words, many still see good in religion.

Educational Debt

An often discussed barrier to young adults responding to a call to missions is educational debt. This is a difficult topic to parse out as it is complicated, but a few details help to show that it is an aspect that has to be addressed. One indicator that it can limit missions engagement is that "the average student takes about 16-19 years to get out from under debt" (Money 2024). And this is just for a bachelor degree, not considering that many missions candidates have further education. Figuring out how to engage young people with mounting educational debt, will continue to be a challenge

that has to be addressed in order to call Gen Z to global engagement. Perhaps a movement towards encouraging young adults to engage in missions through their vocations is an answer to their debt. Promoting a pathway to missions akin to the early success of the Eastern Church lay merchants who were engaged in spreading Christianity along the Silk Road may be a viable option (Ott 2021, 51).

Conclusion

The goal of exploring this recruitment challenge is to sketch out a realistic understanding of the U.S. context in which the future of recruiting for global missions engagement will take place. Admittedly, there is much that is bleak. It would be easy to sit back and let missions engagement diminish within the U.S. Evangelical Church. This is what is likely to happen, if the Evangelical Church does not expand its understanding of its current context. If the church limits itself to the white status quo, the number of U.S. missionaries sent will likely continue to go down.

Along with the perceived negativity stemming from White colonialization that has to be addressed; other issues that have to be addressed include Gen Z's level of anxiety, wrapping missions in more wholistic terms, and self-critical terms that recognize the problems in the US church as well as global needs, and not ignoring our own back yard (Farrah 2024, 13). Rather than throwing their hands up in despair about Gen Z, Jolene Erlacher and Katy White, in *Mobilizing Gen Z* (2022, 74)) are helpful in pointing out that there may not be an abundance of workers from this generation, but those who do stand up for Christ and engage in missions will be "the few who desire to follow Christ faithfully." They recognize that mobilizing will be different but can be done. More positively, there are also opportunities for growth, as long as the challenge of recruiting from among Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans is explored and accepted.

The challenge to keep the U.S. engaged in global missions is real. Unless the realities of our context are addressed, the global missions engagement in the U.S. church will likely continue to decrease.

Rev. Dr. Marcus Dean *is professor of Intercultural Studies and Missions at Houghton University, Houghton New York. Before Houghton he and his family served for 15 years in theological education with the Wesleyan Church in Colombia and Puerto Rico. An essential part of their ministry was relationship building with church leaders. His Ph.D. is from Trinity International University.*

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