

Expectations in Mission

New wine poses a challenge to the wineskins



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Many mission leaders have asked me if, having written and spoken extensively about Generation X, I have anything helpful to say about the millennial generation. Many are struggling to understand the mindset of new missionaries/applicants. They seem familiar and yet foreign - seeming to speak something like the same language but look different. I guess they have that slightly incongruous feeling that I had the first time I saw the Bisto® gravy advert where you hear a broad Yorkshire accent and then see a Sikh in a turban.

Given these kinds of feelings being so widespread amongst mission leaders, personnel managers and recruiters, we have wanted to respond constructively to these issues in *Encounters* for some time. The advent of a new year at Redcliffe finally gave us the opportunity. With 28 nationalities in the student body, it seemed we had a reasonable sample on which to explore these issues. However, there was always the issue that once they had been at Redcliffe we could be accused of having shaped their responses. This new year with 56 students starting, we had a big enough sample of new students to counter that bias. In their first few weeks at Redcliffe we conducted a survey across the entire student body. We wanted to explore what expectations they had of mission; what it would be like, how it might affect them and what their future ministry would look like. These results are representative of that group: namely people who are serious enough about mission to seek training.

The results were very surprising, really encouraging and slightly scary. Surprising because they painted a picture of a generation (perhaps cohort is a better word as their ages range from 18 - 51) that is seriously committed to long-term mission and this is different from the impression many mission agencies have. Encouraging because they show themselves to have a pragmatic, flexible approach that will find a way now, and probably continue to find a way as circumstances change and obstacles come, of fulfilling that call to mission. However, and there is a very clear 'however', the future is scary because they do present different needs, perhaps than the previous generation, certainly than many sending agencies (and arguably sending churches) have catered for to date.

A massive proportion of them will work part-time in paid employment if that is what it takes to do mission. You see the pragmatism that is so encouraging, and I would argue so appropriate, to the fast changing unpredictable world of 2006, means that if the organisations are not there to help them fulfil their calling, they will find a way to do it without them! Do not mistake this as some rampant individualism and entrepreneurial spirit that led to so many new agencies being created in the 60's and 70's, when boomer generation missionaries, frustrated with the staid and cautious 'old' missions, started new movements like YWAM and OM. This generation does not have the same gung-ho approach of the 60's. It is writ through with self-doubt and, if not an anti-hero movement, at least a strong desire to avoid a pedestal. It is a generation that would much prefer to go with others, to go with an organisation if they can, rather than re-invent the wheel, or - God forbid - make something in their own image.

And yet, uncertain as they are about their own abilities, they are not fearful - security and fear for their safety and that of their family ranked very low. They did have fears but these were more the fear of letting others down: their supporters, their colleagues and their churches.

Their greatest fear of all, I would suggest, was the fear of letting God down. They fear not measuring up to their own expectations or God's call on their life.

So what might this mean for the future of mission? Each of the six articles unpacks a specific area, but I would like to suggest a few key things:

1. We need to resolve the gap between what mission is really like in the twenty-first century and the nineteenth century image most churches and supporters still have of it. This generation cannot live long-term with that inconsistency.
2. Training institutions need to ensure they have a model that is seeking to prepare and shape broken people seeking to minister to a broken world and who need their skills and gifts drawn out and confidence built up, rather than taking perfect people and preparing them for heroic roles.
3. Agencies need to return to loyalty based not on an agency-centred model but a God-centred one, where they can constructively be the pragmatic partner for a leg of the journey. So that they can travel together for a time, wish each other well if the roads fork, but part on terms that mean should the paths converge again, a mutually supportive journey can re-commence.
4. Individuals (and I include here the individuals that make up the staff of organisations: churches and agencies alike) need to find ways of mutually supporting each other in fulfilling their call. That support needs to share fears, but it also needs to challenge. To say 'you do have talents, skills and gifts' - even perhaps leadership potential - 'I recognise that in you and think God wants you to use it.' That kind of support values the person, values the present, but calls the individual to step out and be courageous, even when something is scary.

This new cohort of missionaries does present to churches and mission agencies - the traditional senders, new challenges that demand a response. However, unlike the impression created by many that the end of mission (at least in the West and from the West) is nigh, perhaps we need to realise that it is not dead at all, it just looks different. It is not that mission is dead, just that we failed to recognise its new 21st century shape!

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