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Three Surveys of Aspiring Missionaries: Draws and Concerns in Deciding to Become a Long-term Missionary
Megan R. Brown and John W. McVay

What are the major obstacles to becoming a long-term missionary? In 2016, we reported on the LAUNCH Survey of 299 long-term missionaries, which provided insight into the factors that helped and hindered journeys into full-time overseas ministry (Brown & McVay, 2016). The survey was useful in identifying factors that helped participants make it to the mission field, such as the centrality of relationships in completing the marathon of preparation for long-term service. However, the biggest hindrances to launching into long-term ministry were not clear, possibly because the long-term missionaries who completed the survey had overcome the obstacles and did not remember their earlier challenges well. A follow-up survey of those who have not yet relocated for the gospel was recommended and completed. This now provides additional insights for missions mobilizers who are journeying with women and men as they actively pursue God’s guidance in their lives.

The Design

The Relocating for the Gospel survey was developed with the use of an initial qualitative survey of open-ended questions that was completed by 42 individuals who had attended a missions conference. The gathered qualitative data was then reviewed and synthesized. The resulting survey was further tested by 14 respondents, edited, and finalized. The final survey was sent by email to potential participants with a link to the online survey. It included participants who had not previously relocated for the gospel (defined as having moved somewhere for one or more years that was not for education or a round trip). Participants answered questions about how far they were willing to relocate for the gospel (defined as having moved somewhere for one or more years that was not for education or a round trip) and how long they were willing to relocate. They then rated 15 factors that were potential draws to relocating for the gospel on a scale of Not a Draw, Some Draw, or Strong Draw, followed by rating 18 potential hindrances as Not a Concern, Some Concern, or Strong Concern. This survey also included questions regarding the ways in which respondents would prefer to learn about opportunities to relocate for the gospel. Demographic information was also collected.
The Participants

Participants were recruited with the offer of a free missions e-book from two large email lists geared toward missions-minded people: ShortTermMissions.com and MissionNext.org. Over 20,000 email addresses were included on these lists, but the vast majority of the emails were unopened. In the end, 563 individuals opted to take the survey. Some of these had already relocated for the gospel (as defined above) and did not complete the full survey. Others were not analyzed due to not meeting inclusion criteria, such as age and being from outside North America (those from other countries have different launch challenges). In total, 114 responses were included in final data analysis. Baby Boomers (52-70 years old as of 2016) made up 47% of the respondents, Generation X (36-51 years old) were 30% of the sample, and Millennials (21-35 years old) were 23% of the respondents. Interestingly, the Baby Boomers differed from the other groups in two ways. First, the Baby Boomer respondents were all gathered from a different email list than the Generation X and Millennial respondents. Second, more male Baby Boomers (65% of Boomer respondents) responded as opposed to the other groups in which more females responded (73% of Millennials & 65% of Generation X were female).

Data Analysis

Answers were analyzed using simple statistics. Participants ranked each draw and hindrance as “Not a Draw or Concern,” “Some Draw or Concern,” and “Strong Draw or Concern.” Percentage of response for each level of draw or concern was calculated and used to rank order draws and concerns. The data was further analyzed by generational groups, similarly ranking draws and concerns, that were most frequently endorsed.

The margin of error for the sample was 4.8% for the ShortTermMissions respondents (Millennials, Gen-Xers) and 7.8% for MissionNext participants (Boomers). A limitation of the survey was that all respondents had previous missions interest and were already subscribers to a missions newsletter. In addition, those who did not think they could consider relocating (e.g. spouse objections) were likely to not complete the survey.

The Findings

Practical concerns were some of the overall most concerning factors for participants (see table 1). Note: the numbers total more than 100% because respondents could and did select multiple concerns.

| TABLE 1: Strong Concerns of Aspiring Missionaries Sorted by Total Sample |
|:-------------|:-----|:-----|:-----|
| Having to raise financial support | 42%  | 35%  | 53%  | 38%  |
| If I would have to learn a new language | 29%  | 19%  | 35%  | 29%  |
| Objections from my spouse/fiancée/potential spouse | 25%  | 6%   | 29%  | 30%  |
| Difficult to find where my talents make a difference | 22%  | 27%  | 21%  | 21%  |
The most endorsed concern across all participants was “Having to Raise Financial Support.” Of the overall sample, 42% of respondents endorsed this as a Strong Concern (35% of Millennials, 53% of Generation X, 38% of Baby Boomers). The second most endorsed concern was not quite as prominent with 29% of participants endorsing learning a new language as a strong concern (19% of Millennials, 35% of Generation X, 29% of Baby Boomers). Other top concerns included Objections from My Spouse or Future Spouse (25% overall, 6% of Millennials, 29% of Generation X, 30% of Baby Boomers) and Difficult to Find a Place Where My Talents Make a Difference (22% overall, 27% of Millennials, 21% of Generation X, 21% of Baby Boomers).

In addition to concerns, the positive factors that lead someone to consider missions were also elicited (see table 2). Note: the numbers total more than 100% because respondents could and did select multiple draws.

### TABLE 2:
**Strong Draws for Aspiring Missionaries Sorted by Total Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Draw</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Gen Xers</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God’s guidance through prayer</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s guidance through Scripture</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s guidance through circumstances</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to provide practical service to those in need</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share Christ with a specific unreached group or city or country</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to share Christ (but no specific group or city or country)</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When considering relocating for the sake of the gospel, respondents clearly rely on God’s guidance through various means. God’s Guidance through Prayer was the top endorsed draw with 87% of respondents indicating this as a Strong Draw to relocating for the sake of the gospel (85% of Millennials, 79% of Generation X, 94% of Baby Boomers). God’s Guidance through Scripture was also a Strong Draw overall for 84% of respondents (81% of Millennials, 71% of Generation X, 96% of Baby Boomers). Finally, God’s Guidance through Circumstances was a Strong Draw for 81% of respondents (100% of Millennials, 50% of Generation X, 83% of Baby Boomers). In addition to God’s guidance, a Desire to Provide Practical Service to Those in Need was a Strong Draw for 81% of the respondents (73% of Millennials, 85% of Generation X, 81% of Baby Boomers). Interestingly, this was the most endorsed Draw for Generation X respondents, even ranked above God’s guidance.

For all generations the top three ways to connect were Short-Term Visit, Personal Interaction with Someone Already Serving There, and E-mail. Web browsing and social media ranked much lower. The strength of e-mail in these findings may be due to the survey invitations sent by email to those already subscribed to an email newsletter.

The website www.launchsurvey.wordpress.com has full PowerPoint reports on the surveys with additional data including which experiences most significantly impacted their willingness to explore full-time (short-term trips, their local church). That website, which
also has the blank surveys not included here, can be a resource for future surveys which could be done every ten years to give recruiters up-to-date recommendations.

Discussion

Although it may be unsurprising, this survey’s finding that practical concerns about the obstacles of raising financial support and language learning is a good reminder to missions mobilizers. These are not issues to sidestep when exploring opportunities and callings with potential overseas workers. The experience of mobilizers with many other individuals and families who have faced these challenges and seen God move mightily can provide much needed encouragement for potential missionaries.

When considering generational differences in responses, Generation X showed a higher percentage of concern about support raising than Millennials. It is possible that Generation X may have traditional support raising models in mind while Millennials may think social media fundraising will be easy and work well.

Personal stories of support raising and language learning can bridge the gap and bring hope that the challenges can be overcome. Relationships with missions mobilizers and missionaries who have raised support and learned a new language may buffer these concerns and keep them from becoming hindrances to committing to relocation for the gospel. A key online resource is www.askamissionary.com with over 600 answers to 200 questions including a number of answers specifically about support raising and language learning.

Another significant concern and potential hindrance for respondents was that it might be difficult to find a place where their talents would make a difference. Upon hearing a report on this survey, a veteran mobilizer noted that people respond most often when a missions job posting matches their own gifts and skills. All of this fits with the survey result that 100% of Millennials consider God’s Guidance through Circumstances as a strong draw.

As mobilizers talk with potential missionaries, creativity and flexibility will be important characteristics. If an individual or family has gifts and talents that are not a good fit for your staffing priorities, continue to encourage them and help them with the next step in their journey in discerning God’s will and connecting somewhere that may be a better fit. While mobilizers are not responsible for every step of every potential missionary’s journey, words of encouragement can go a long way to help them find the right fit. Keep in mind that we are all on the same team and reframe your role as a helper along the journey, no matter where people end up.

The respondents clearly indicated that guidance from God through prayer, Scripture, and circumstances are strong draws that would lead people to relocate for the sake of the gospel. Mission mobilizers should emphasize discipleship and encourage aspiring missionaries to continue to build a firm foundation in their intimacy with God as they consider, and potentially prepare for, relocating for the sake of the gospel.

Being part of a typical short-term mission team is not generally effective at drawing people into long-term missions. What does work is a well-designed short-term vision trip so individuals can seek God and His will through that experience. Through such a trip, potential missionaries have the opportunity to see what God is already doing in that place and interact with others who have relocated for the gospel. These interactions can speak to potential concerns, such as support raising and language learning, and provide encouragement. A group from our organization organized a short-term trip that included...
medical relief work during the day alongside team training and mentoring during the evenings for participants to consider God’s long-term call and discuss practical and theological issues related to missions.

The impact of relationships raises an interesting comparison to the earlier LAUNCH Survey findings and responses from long-term missionaries (Brown & McVay, 2016). The LAUNCH Survey concluded that relationships were perceived as essential to helping long-term missionaries launch into full-time service. Respondents remembered retrospectively that a strong relationship with God and a strong support network of friends, family, mentors, and sending agencies were important for their obedience to God’s call. However, in the current survey, respondents placed far less emphasis on social support. In fact, the four lowest endorsed Strong Draws are all relational in nature, ranging from 11 – 28% of the sample. These include relocating to be with someone you know and encouragement from friends, siblings, or parents.

Jay Matenga and Malcolm Gold (2016) detail the importance of relationships in missions mobilization in far more detail in their book Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization. They conclude that interpersonal relationships, particularly relationships in which a “mission-interested individual who comes alongside” a potential missionary, are prominent in themes of those who have gone as missionaries (p. 171). Respondents of the Relocating for the Gospel survey did not endorse a strong felt need for supportive relationships, however, it seems clear from the aforementioned research that relationships are essential for launching individuals and families into long-term ministry. At its core, missions mobilization must remain relational with frequent “high touch” communication. Missionaries who have returned from the field, missions mobilizers, and missions-minded churches would do well to focus on the investment of time and relational resources into the lives of individuals and families exploring God’s potential call to full-time ministry. These individuals and families may not fully understand the importance of connecting with missions-minded people as they prepare, but the LAUNCH Survey and Matenga & Gold’s (2016) findings indicate that, in hindsight, they will credit those relationships for getting them to the mission field. What people think they need and what they actually need are not the same; what people think are obstacles and what are actually obstacles are not the same.

It is through relationship that practical barriers such as concern about language learning and concern about raising financial support will be adequately addressed. It is through relationship that discipleship occurs so that people grow in intimacy with God and will be sensitive to His leading and guiding through prayer, Scripture, and circumstances. It is through relationship that people come into relationship with Jesus, and it is through relationship that we will mobilize workers for the harvest.

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