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A few years ago the founder of our training program said, “We have a lot of people who come to us with a desire to serve God internationally, but not all end up overseas. How can we help people get to the mission field? What things are helpful? What things hinder? How can we help address these issues?” These simple questions led to a search for how to appropriately steward the gifts and resources of people God has called and support them all the way into long-term missions. Out of these simple questions, the LAUNCH Survey was born.

There is no question that retention of missionaries once they reach the field is an essential issue when considering stewardship of missions mobilization. Thanks to the work of others, the missions community has studies on how to effectively retain missionaries on the field (Blocher 2005).

However, little has been published to understand the factors that help and hinder those who aspire to become long-term missionaries in the first place. The LAUNCH Survey aimed to investigate factors long-term missionaries attribute as being helpful or hindering to beginning their journey of working alongside Christ to fulfill the Great Commission.

Additionally, the survey considered whether or not generational differences exist about which
factors were most helpful and which were not. The results include the most frequent positive factors leading to service, interesting generational differences that can impact future mobilization, and more questions than answers for which hindrances most get in the way of reaching the field.

**Design**

The LAUNCH Survey was created following a preliminary open-ended survey of twenty respondents. From the qualitative answers of the preliminary survey, potential factors were identified for inclusion in the final survey as Likert scale questions.

The LAUNCH Survey was available for two months on an online survey platform. Participants completed demographic and historical information about their journey into missions. They rated twenty potential obstacles and sixteen positive factors on the participant’s journey into missions on a Likert scale from “Did not help” to “Helped a little” to “Helped some” to “Helpful” to “Very Helpful” with the option of “Not Applicable” on certain questions.

**Participants**

Participants were invited by email through various missions associations in the United States, as well as through online missions networks. The number of responses were encouraging, totaling 466 responses. Of these, 299 responses were included in the analyses with demographics of 53% male, 85% United States passport holders, and 77% currently living overseas (with the other 23% being former missionaries who had served two years or longer).

Participants traveled to all regions of the world, with Western Europe (18%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (17%) being most represented. In order to adequately investigate the question of whether or not generational differences exist, respondents were categorized into four cohorts, including Builders (70+ years old), Boomers (51-69 years old), Generation Xers (38-50 years old), and Millennials (20-37 years old).

Due to a low response rate from the Builder generation, meaningful analyses of that subset were not possible and their responses were not included in the final analysis. The margin of error for this sample size of 299 is 5.7%.

**Data Analysis**

Responses were analyzed using simple statistics. Participants marked each presented factor by their perception of its influence on their journey into overseas work. They were not required to rank order factors. Each positive factor was analyzed by totaling the number of responses marked as “Helpful” or “Very Helpful” and calculating the percentage of this subtotal from the total participants.

Data was further analyzed by comparing generational groups and noting any differences in answer pattern. Each hindering factor was analyzed in a similar manner with the top two answers “Concern” and “Strong Concerns” indicating a significant hindrance and this was calculated as a percentage.

Here are the main factors we discovered:

**Relationships Matter**

Relationships with God and with others were rated as important to participants in their journey to the mission field. Guidance or call from God was the top factor overall, with 98% of participants indicating this was helpful for their journey. A desire to share the good news (91%), supportive friends (80%), and supportive spouses (68%) were also significant in the journey.
The next most influential factor was surprising to most recruiters who have reviewed the results of this survey. A supportive agency, leader, or team (69%) influenced participants more than many other factors, including short-term mission trips (51%). Personal interaction with long-term workers impacted 64% of respondents significantly, with 57% of respondents having a personal connection with long-term workers prior to launching.

Supportive parents (61%) and mentors (51%) were also credited as significant to participants’ journeys. Unfortunately, only 47% who joined an agency when they first launched indicated that a mobilizer or recruiter was helpful.

Responses about hindering factors were less conclusive, with the biggest obstacle—raising financial support—selected by only 36% of respondents. Significant as the second most common concern was being far away from family and friends (24%). Clearly, relational aspects most impact the decision and journey into long-term missions.

**Millennials Are Different**

As shared for many years by the media and research alike, Millennials are different than generations before. This survey found this to be true for those who went into missions as well. While 91% of all participants indicated that a desire to share the good news propelled them forward into long-term service, 83% of Millennials also indicated that a desire for practical service to the underserved positively influenced their journey versus only 54% of Generation Xers and 58% of Boomers.

Millennials also more strongly affirmed the role of supportive parents and mentors than other generations. Of the Millennials, 75% indicated that supportive parents were helpful in their journey while only 64% of Generation Xers and 54% of Boomers reported this. Mentors were indicated to be helpful for 70% of Millennials, 37% of Generation Xers, and 50% of Boomers. Millennials also differed from older generations in their concerns about moving overseas. They were more concerned about raising financial support (Millennials 44%, Generation Xers 32%, Boomers 34%). They were also more concerned about being far away from family and friends (Millennials 32%, Generation Xers 17%, Boomers 23%). Finally, although only 5% of respondents were concerned about the potential of burnout, Millennials appear more concerned than other generations. Sixteen percent of Millennials were concerned about potential burnout while only 3% of Generation Xers and 2% of Boomers reported concern about this.

**Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood are Sensitive Periods**

As part of the demographic information, participants were asked to indicate which stage(s) of life were most significant to making the decision to go overseas long term. Participants could mark as many stages as they chose from the life stages of childhood, teenage years, undergraduate, grad school, postgraduate training (e.g. medical residency), career, zero to two years before launching, or retirement.

On average, participants chose 1.9 different stages as significant. Emerging adulthood and adolescence were most prominent. Fifty-six percent of participants indicated that their undergraduate
years were significant, while 42% indicated that teenage years were significant.

Other stages of life such as career (32%), childhood (27%), graduate school (15%), and zero to two years before launching (14%) were impactful to respondents. Postgraduate training and retirement were only significant for 4% and 2% of participants, respectively.

It Is All about Relationships…But Maybe Not the Ones You Think

Clearly, relationships are key in journeying toward lifelong service in the Kingdom of God overseas. Nearly all of the respondents indicated that God’s guidance and call were essential to their successful pursuit of overseas work. Additionally, having a good support network, including friends and family, a mentor, long-term workers, and a good agency, team, or leader were remembered to be helpful in the process.

This is congruent with studies completed in recent years (Matenga and Gold 2016). A 2013 qualitative study with missionaries from Australia found that 100% of the interviewees were influenced by other missionaries prior to launch (Hibbert, Hibbert, and Silberman 2015).

Additionally, surveys completed by the Christian Community Health Fellowship found that 80% of students who did a rotation early in their training with a Christian physician who was practicing quality faith-based medicine, as well as attending a healthcare missions conference, chose a path to serve the poor through missional medicine (CCHF Follow-Up Survey).

Given the impact of relationships on successful launching, mobilizers would be wise to focus recruitment strategies less on wide-reaching impersonal communication focused on reaching many people and instead focus on more personal, deep connections with potential workers. Additionally, as Millennials clearly value relationships, this should be a top priority for recruiters of younger generations.

The generational differences provide a potential roadblock as many recruiters are Boomers and may have different values than Millennials. Having Millennials as recruiters may not be the answer either, as they may not be well equipped to serve as mentors to peers.

Recruiters can consider how to focus on relationship, increasing connections between themselves and prospects as well as connecting current long-term missionaries with potential long-term workers. Missionaries on home assignment may serve as more effective mobilizers than stateside-based recruiters. Short-term trips can be maximized as a recruiting tool by providing good small group or one-on-one times of connection with long-term missionaries and those willing to explore long-term work.

After a long-term missionary and aspiring long-term worker connect during a mission trip, a long-distance mentoring relationship may begin. This could happen organically or become a systematized process within a sending agency.

Mentoring and coaching should follow the mentee’s agenda rather than the mentor’s or agency’s agenda. A good match between mentor and mentee is essential and a natural exit from a poor match would be a helpful option. Practical topics as well as ‘heart issues’ can be discussed with one’s mentor. Creative intensive options might provide opportunities for short-term mentoring or coaching as well.
A real-life example of this creativity is The Journey Deepens, a retreat for those considering long-term service. Each weekend consists of worship, teaching sessions, small-group discussions, one-on-one appointments, mission agency interaction with prospective missionaries, and prayer times.

The attendance at each retreat is intentionally limited to allow personal interaction between individuals, coaches, and fellow sojourners with the Holy Spirit’s guidance. An example of coaching is the website askamissionary.com, which allows aspiring missionaries to ask questions and receive answers from long-term workers. Over 175 past questions with 600 answers are also available.

**Recruitment Is a Marathon, Not a Sprint**

Participants in the survey indicated that they were significantly impacted during more than one life stages in making the decision to serve overseas. The process of developing recruits to long-term service is lengthy and should be conceptualized as a marathon rather than a sprint. God uses longings, desires, passions, and experiences throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood to lead people into missions. Mobilizers are wise to anticipate long-term relationships with applicants and engage in deep interactions often, no matter the age of the potential long-termer.

**More Research Is Needed to Identify Hindrances**

It became clear as answers were analyzed that missionaries were not the best group to identify significant hindrances because all had already overcome obstacles to long-term service. Rather, it is necessary to survey those who have not gone yet and learn what they see as obstacles. Identifying these hindrances may lead to more effective mobilization of long-term workers who will join in fulfilling the Great Commission.

**Limitations**

As with any study or survey, this one had a number of limitations that should be considered along with the above findings. One significant limitation of this survey is the confounding variable of recall bias. Not only may it be difficult to remember information, thoughts, and feelings from years ago, but participants may not remember the hindrances or helpful aspects of launching accurately.

Additionally, missionaries to restricted-access countries were under-represented, perhaps because they did not want to risk being identified with the survey, and this resulted in a less well-rounded sample. Finally, most respondents were middle-class North Americans with university education. Therefore, corresponding factors may be more individualistic than group-oriented (e.g., decision making, support raising) and the results may not be generalizable to workers from other cultures and educational backgrounds.

**Conclusion**

This survey provides insight into what factors influenced 299 long-term missionaries in reaching the field. Relational aspects such as clear calling and guidance from God, encouragement from friends and family, and supportive relationships with an agency, team, or long-term missionary are essential in the long developmental journey that often precedes overseas service. The recruitment process is a marathon, not a sprint. Mobilizers are wise to creatively interact with and mentor potential long-term workers at each life stage.

Finally, a follow-up survey considering hindrances that keep people from long-term service is
planned to learn what gets in the way of successful launching into missions. Ultimately, it is clear that God will fulfill his work in the world despite hindrances. He invites us to join in the work and asks us to encourage aspiring missionaries in the process. Together, we press toward the goal of fulfilling the Great Commission, so that all may know the name of Jesus and his saving grace.

References


“CCHF Follow-Up Survey.” 2015. By personal email correspondence with Steve Noblett, Executive Director of Christian Community Health Fellowship on November 9, 2015.


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