The Perceptions of a Missional Lifestyle amongst European Generation Y Christians

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the paradigm of mission today is changing. Mission takes place ‘from everywhere to everywhere’ (Escobar, 2003, p14), and Europe itself has become the focus of missionary effort for Christians from the Global South (Cueva, n.d., p3). Many larger churches send missionaries without reference to mission agencies, and the length of time people spend ‘on the field’ is shorter than before, with anything more than two years being perceived as long term (Miles, 2000, p9).

This research was inspired by attending a meeting of mission mobilisers where the topic under consideration was ‘inspiring 18-30 year olds to live a missional lifestyle’. As I drove home that afternoon, several thoughts struck me:

• If mission agencies are promoting a ‘missional lifestyle’ in order to attract 18-30 year olds (also known as Generation Y) to their agency, or to become involved in overseas mission, what will happen if Generation Y think a missional lifestyle is something different?

• Depending on their theological point of view, each person may have had a different perception of the meaning of ‘missional’.

• Most of the people in the room were over 30 and so not Generation Y. Differences in perceptions of a missional lifestyle may be due not only to theological perspectives, but generational differences.

I felt it was time to hear from Generation Y themselves in order to understand their perceptions of a missional lifestyle.

Generational theory and Generation Y

Generational theory assumes that people born at a particular time belong to a particular generational cohort, which differs in values and attitudes to those coming before or after it; an idea popularised by Strauss and Howe (1992) in their book Generations: The History of America’s Future.

Strauss and Howe build on the theories of Mannheim in his classic essay, The Problem of Generations (1952, p300). Generation Y are defined as those born between 1979 and 2002 (Tolbize, 2008, p8). A wide range of literature is available outlining their characteristics, however while empirical research on the topic offers ‘the most powerful evidence’ these kind of articles are ‘the fewest in number’ (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010, p227). A danger with generational literature is a reliance on popular press articles written for non-experts, and popular literature written for organisations with a vested interest in knowing about Generation Y as well as empirical research. In addition, most of the literature is based on research amongst American college students, who are not necessarily representative of this age
group world-wide. Where possible, I have referenced literature referring directly to European 18-30 year olds.

A missional lifestyle?
Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011, p3-4) helpfully identify the following commonalities in the ‘missional’ literature:

• God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world
• God’s mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God
• The missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context
• The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission.

There is the acknowledgement that ‘missional is a way of living, not an affiliation or activity’ (McNeal, 2009, pxiv), and not a model, a standardized programme or a strategy that can be applied to churches with a predetermined result … the key is for ordinary church members to develop their capacity to listen to God’s word in community, to listen to the Spirit, and to listen to their neighbours in love. (Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011, p165)

However, even with a proliferation of books, blogs and sermons on the subject how this translates into everyday life is not well understood by most Christians (Hirsch, 2008).

The research
I chose to conduct my research at Mission-Net, a pan-European conference for young people held over New Year 2012 in Erfurt, Germany. It aimed to attract 16–30-year-old Europeans who are willing to consider living a Christian missional lifestyle which allies spiritual expressions of faith with practical contributions to the common good of society. (www.mission-net.org, 2011)

As they were likely to be familiar with the idea of a missional lifestyle, if their perceptions differed from those of mission agencies or churches we could assume an even bigger gap in perception between mission agencies and young people who are in the church and not engaged in thinking about mission – or those outside the church altogether.

I gathered data through two small-scale online surveys. The first survey, conducted during and immediately after the conference, asked questions about perceptions of a missional lifestyle, and what influenced the respondents to live this way. The second questionnaire, sent to respondents about a month afterwards, looked at how they practiced a missional lifestyle, and what stopped them doing so.

Perceptions of a missional lifestyle
Overall, the answers to the two questionnaires reflected many of the themes identified in the ‘missional’ literature. This is not surprising, given that they identify books and well-known Christian speakers as influences on their thinking, as well as conferences where these ideas will be promoted from the platform. To take Mission-Net as an example, seminar streams included ‘Transform the World by Justice’, ‘Transform through Mission’ and ‘Transform to a Missional Lifestyle’ (Mission-Net, 2011, p22).
Generation Y’s perceptions of a missional lifestyle are discussed below.

1. Living missionally happens anywhere

One of the biggest tensions I perceived as I began this dissertation was the relationship between ‘mission’ and ‘missional’. From conversations with various mission leaders, they were concerned that the emphasis on ‘missional living right here’ would stop young people being interested in mission ‘over there’. This emphasis is reflected in some of the missional literature. For example, Frost (2006) uses the metaphor of ‘exiles’ who need to engage missionally with their host culture – but he assumes this is post-Christian Western culture.

From the surveys, while a missional lifestyle might require extra effort (for example, leaving your comfort zone) many respondents did associate the idea of missional with everyday life rather than going somewhere else:

- Meeting people where they are, understanding them first and sharing the everyday life with them. (26, Denmark)
- Being a missionary with words and deeds even when doing ‘non-Christian’ activities. (31, Germany)

As well as the location of a missional lifestyle being every day, missional living is perceived as an everyday activity. The majority of the respondents’ missional heroes (those who were the best examples of a missional lifestyle) were people they knew personally. Many of these – although not the majority – were missionaries working in cross-cultural contexts, such as Thailand, Tanzania or Burma. But when asked why they were ‘the best example of a missional lifestyle’, the reasons given were very similar to the missional heroes who lived locally or were a family member.

For example, a 21-year-old German TCK talked about her mother as a good example of a missional lifestyle because:

- They were on the mission field for quite a while, but that's not what I want to refer to here. What I really admire about my mother is that she is willing to reach out to ANYBODY. She always has an open home and invites people. She is constantly looking for opportunities to help people, show them kindness and to tell them about Jesus. And she isn't afraid of reaching out to the 'untouchables' in our society. It is important to her, what God wants her to do. She prays a lot. Her priorities are centred around Jesus. Of course she makes mistakes, but she lives out of God's grace.

While most respondents saw missional living as taking place in their own context, for a minority the concept of missional did include the idea of going elsewhere, for example:

- Having a calling from God to serve and live amongst a people group or nation he sends you to. Giving up things/worldly pleasures to go there loving the people and seeing it as your goal. It's for the people you are there for and not for your own purpose – God's purpose. (21, German, born in Sri Lanka)
- Start wherever you are. Follow God to whatever place he might lead you. (24, Switzerland)

This is in spite of three-quarters of the young people having experienced some form of cross-cultural mission in another country through short-term mission.

So, should mission leaders be concerned that the emphasis on a missional lifestyle in their own context will detract from a willingness to go elsewhere? While the sample was drawn from attendees at a mission-focused conference, who are more likely to be considering cross-cultural mission, the majority of those who completed the second questionnaire...
indicated they were either open to, or seriously considering, some form of long-term cross-cultural work. For example:

*I have a calling from God and long-term mission is my goal ... At the moment I’m studying environmental engineering in university and I feel that that profession can open doors to so-called closed countries.* (19, Finland)

*Depends on where God leads but am more than willing to serve him abroad or stay serving him in my own country.* (27, UK)

While cross-cultural mission today is perceived from ‘everywhere to everywhere’ (Escobar, 2003, p14) rather than from the ‘West to the rest’, for those wanting to live a missional lifestyle being involved in ‘mission’ can happen anywhere. Being a long-term missionary (although still perceived as a ‘professional’ job by some) may or may not be part of it. Even when it does, the emphasis is on everyday activities – such as loving and serving people. The perception of these activities as part of a missional lifestyle is discussed below.

2. **Living missionally involves loving and serving others**

A 22-year-old from the UK, currently working with OM Hungary, considered a missional lifestyle to be ‘trusting God; putting others first; honouring God’s word; embracing others; loving those you are called to’.

A 17-year-old from Switzerland also saw a missional lifestyle as ‘Love, give and forgive persons around us.’ For her, the best example of this was an Asian missionary working in Switzerland because ‘they love and care so much for people around them’.

Serving people was the most frequently given reason why people were identified as missional heroes:

*There is a man in the Swiss Alps who started by simply serving people through, for example, mowing their lawn for free. Eventually their neighbours asked why he did that.* (24, Switzerland)

In the second questionnaire, I tried to discover what ‘serving people’ meant in the respondents’ contexts. A wide variety of answers gave an insight into their different contexts:

*I’ve tried to spend my time with people that have few friends, giving advice and help in organizing things.*

*Refugee counselling.*

*I listen to people.*

*At home, helping my parents and siblings with the dishes or banal things like that. By picking up trash from the street that people dropped there. Not a big deal, but a little service and possibly an example.*

And so, while serving people can mean being involved in specific ministries, there is the understanding that it also includes simple, even ‘banal’, actions like cleaning a bathroom.

But while the concept of focusing on meeting the needs of others ties in with missional theology (Zscheile, 2012, p25), it is countercultural for Generation Y, despite their need for relationship and community. They tend to have fewer siblings than previous generations, and parental attention is lavished on them. According to Myers and Sadaghiani (2010, p225) this has led to a generation who are ‘high in self-efficacy and ... unusually self-assured’. When combined with marketing that is engineered around the individual (George, 2008, cited in Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010, p232), young people can become used to having their needs prioritised and met, rather than looking to meet the needs of others. Eventually, ‘everything

This is reflected in a comment from a 19-year-old from Finland. When asked what made it difficult to serve others, he said:

It’s easy to forget that this life isn’t all about me.

And a 22-year-old from Denmark added:

Difficult to put myself aside and see other people and what they need. I always focus on clearing my own back/minding my own business before being able to see the people around me.

Other obstacles to serving others that were not mentioned so much included lack of time and pride:

pride – it looks so pitiful to actually go on your knees and wipe up the mess someone else made. (18, Austria)

time/capacity. (27, UK)

And so the challenge to help Generation Y to move beyond themselves to help others, remains. One major resource for missional living identified by the respondents was a deep relationship with God.

3. Living missionally requires a strong relationship with God

An 18-year-old from Austria saw missionaries like Hudson Taylor, Gladys Aylward and Jim Elliot as her missional heroes – in part due to their

ever-ending love for their Lord and Saviour – a heart for people – prayer – knowing the Bible

whereas a 22-year-old from Austria admired her sister because,

At first, she spends a lot of time with God. He is like a friend, just next to her. It’s really natural to be together with God for her. And then it’s just so natural for her to be among people, asking and listening to them and telling them how she experiences God.

Gibbs (2009, p43) identifies a growing awareness of the importance of a deep relationship with God within those churches that are becoming more missional. Within the Generation Y community, Decker (2007) observes that ‘the convergence of the three streams of worship, spiritual formation and mission are clearly a hallmark of this generation’, despite many mission leaders being uncomfortable with the swing towards ‘exposure of “woundedness” and … adoption of spiritual practices that were not common in the Baptist church they grew up in’.

Spivey (2011) found that combining spiritual formation with missional outreach was more effective in helping his congregation grow ‘missionally’, than focusing solely on one or the other. Zscheile (2012, p24) argues that missional spiritual formation must be where ‘action and reflection, service and contemplation, individual and community are deeply integrated into a seamless rhythm’. The respondents reflect this sense of integration – but where Zscheile’s focus is on making the spiritual disciplines more missional, this group of young people perceive a deep relationship with God as the source of the ability to reach out missionally.

4. Jesus is the example of a missional lifestyle
The young people surveyed aspired to ‘live what Jesus did on earth’ (19-year-old, Germany) or ‘walk in Jesus’ footsteps’ (23-year-old, Denmark) as an essential element of a missional lifestyle.

‘Living like Jesus’ is a key part of missional theology. This particularly centres around the idea of being incarnational (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2010, p235) where Jesus is the supreme example of incarnation – ‘the Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood’ (Jn 1:14, The Message).

In order to discover exactly what the respondents meant by ‘living like Jesus’, in the second questionnaire I asked them to describe how they attempted this.

Answers included praying for people and loving them, including those you find difficult to like, being intentional – ‘thinking about what to do before I actually say something’ (18, Austria) – and, for a 19-year-old from Finland, ‘being connected to the church, in other words to other believers, spending time with God’.

As with serving others, a sense of self-centredness and pride make ‘living like Jesus’ difficult:

My own pride and laziness. Negative thoughts about people. (20, Germany)

It is still tough to meek and humble as Jesus is. (22, Denmark)

Distraction by prioritising other things in this world. (31, Germany)

Therefore, while the numbers of respondents are too small to be representative, it is Jesus’ people-focus and the relationship with God that is particularly attractive to this group. The idea of being ‘incarnational’ is not very evident – although it could be argued that elements of the incarnational approach are seen in other perceptions of a missional lifestyle, such as serving others and living missionally in everyday life.

5. Living missionally means sharing the gospel

For this group, living a missional lifestyle also has a strong gospel emphasis. A 20-year-old from Germany considered ‘missional’ to mean ‘being open about one’s faith in Jesus and ready to share it any time’, while a 17-year-old from Switzerland saw it as ‘Not be shy to share the gospel and stand firm.’

Sharing the gospel was also a reason given as why people were missional heroes. A 21-year-old from Germany admired his sister and some friends because they were ‘on fire for Jesus, can’t stop talking about him’.

And a 19-year-old from Finland talked about missionaries in Thailand who run a café and seek to build relationships with local people, saying that ‘they focus [on] the main thing, sharing the message of Christ’.

In order to find out what sharing the gospel looked like in practice for the respondents themselves, I used the second questionnaire to ask how they had brought the gospel to people in the couple of months since Mission-Net.

For several, bringing the gospel is about church-related activities, such as a regular children’s outreach or inviting classmates to a special event in their youth group. Involvement in a ‘bible group’ was also mentioned.

For others it happens in the context of everyday life through ‘sharing my testimony, listening to people and learning what they think’ (23, Finland) or ‘answering the questions my classmates have patiently and kindly’ (18, Austria).

A 31-year-old from Germany said a missional lifestyle was ‘living according to God’s ideas in all kinds of situations; being ready and looking out for opportunities to tell others about Jesus
in ordinary daily life situations’. In the two months since Mission-Net, she had ‘bought Gospel of John booklets and distributed them to people I met in daily life’.

While the concept of ‘bringing the Gospel to people’ appears in practice to be words based, actions are also involved, as a 22-year-old from Denmark commented,

To tell about Jesus in the way we act and by talking with people. Wherever you are there is an opportunity.

Learning how to effectively contextualise and communicate the gospel to secular Europeans through words and actions is one of the biggest challenges this generation of Christians face, and the biggest hurdle identified by respondents was fear, for example

I'm afraid of what people would think about me. (17, Switzerland)

This is coupled with a lack of confidence and not being sure of how to share the gospel, as a 19-year-old from Finland stated:

Maybe the fear of what other people think about me. I'm not really good at sharing about Jesus with my friends although I have prayed about it.

Others echoed this feeling:

I do not really know how to do or how to reach people in my town. (28, Germany)

A 27-year-old from the UK also mentioned 'western culture', and a 19-year-old from Denmark said,

When people just accept that I'm a Christian it is tough to actually stir them...

These responses hint at the Western postmodern mindset that all truth is relative, and your truth (that is, being a Christian) is as valid my truth (a different belief). Many of the contemporaries of Generation Y Christians will buy into the 'happy midi-narrative' described by Savage and Mayo-Collins (2006, p37) – where there is no overarching 'big story' explaining why the world is as it is. It is enough for them to be 'happy' and there are 'enough resources within the individual and his or her family and friends to enable “happiness to prevail”'. Some of these people may identify themselves as Christian because they belong through infant baptism, despite not believing or attending church, but they are ignorant of the truth claims of the gospel, including basic concepts such as sin (James, 2008, p9).

From a generational perspective, traditional apologetics may be too confrontational for a generation who prefer consensus and teamwork to conflict (Curtin et al., 2011, p13). And so, as this survey suggests, it is difficult for young people to feel confident in taking a stand for their faith. David James, a missionary working with young people in Austria, comments that sharing your testimony is one of the most effective tools for sharing the gospel in Europe:

In a broken world where patchwork families are the norm and alcohol is an escape, our personal testimony has great effect. Sharing our stories, in particular the hope and purpose we have found in Jesus, is far more effective than neat arguments at this stage. (2008, p9)

He also advocates building relationships, authenticity and living out the gospel message, as well as being patient – not giving up even if results do not come quickly. And therein lies another challenge for a generation who are conditioned to having immediate answers to their problems (Newman, 2008, p15).

6. Social action and justice issues are not a high priority

Alongside ‘calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship’, proclaiming the gospel is widely interpreted as ‘compassionate care for the needy, and to
demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God’s creation’ (Lausanne, 2010).

Perhaps surprisingly then, only one person mentioned ‘social justice’ as an essential element of a missional lifestyle:

*Being authentic – to live like the Bible teaches us to do in all parts – social justice.*

(28, Germany)

One other mentioned the desire ‘to take care for peoples need everywhere in the world’ (24-year-old, Netherlands), while only one person mentioned the environment in terms of ‘love for God and his creation’ (18-year-old, Austria).

Neither social justice or creation care were mentioned as part of an authentic missional lifestyle, or even an aspect of the word ‘missional’.

It could be argued that this is partly due to the respondents’ church background – possibly because they belong to churches that emphasise gospel proclamation over social action.

Alternatively, it could be that the frequently mentioned idea of serving people encompassed that of social action, although only one of the responses about what serving people meant in practice was about refugee counselling – the others were much more within the respondents’ immediate context.

According to much of the literature, Generation Y are socially aware and have a passion for community and helping others (Burns et al., 2008, p103). However, while 93% of Americans ‘believe it is important to promote volunteerism, especially among youth’ (Kelton Research, 2007), less than half are personally involved. The others would prefer to read, watch TV or visit family during their free time, and perceive a ‘lack of time’ as the biggest barrier to volunteering. The numbers drop for younger generations – a Pew report found that in 2009, just over one-fifth of Generation Y Americans were involved in serving their community in some way (Volunteering in America, 2009, p1).

In a UK context, Moore (2011, p30) researched attitudes to corporate social responsibility (CSR), discovering that while his sample had:

widespread sympathy and willingness to contribute to CSR efforts, the extent of commitment is actually very limited. The sample of [Generation Y] that has been surveyed appears to prefer a distant, somewhat passive relationship with CSR.

The latest Eurobarometer figures show much lower levels of community involvement or volunteering among European young people than those quoted above for the United States. Just over 10% were involved in an organisation aimed at improving the local community, and, of those, around half (5% of the total) had volunteered with organisations promoting ‘human rights or global development’, with 3% focusing on the environment. Figures for North Western European countries are slightly higher than average – for example, 8% of German and 11% of Danish young people promote human rights or global development (Eurobarometer, 2011, p5,9).

In a longitudinal study comparing American college students between 1979 and 2009, Konrath et al (2011, p187) found that levels of empathy towards others were much lower in present students than those of previous generations. The authors note a finding by Twenge et al (2008) that over the same period of time narcissism has risen in this population. These findings infer an increasingly self-centred generation who find it difficult to look beyond their own concerns to the needs of others.

7. **A missional lifestyle is different from an authentic Christian lifestyle**
The majority saw a missional lifestyle as ‘different from’ or ‘something more than’ living as an authentic Christian, as a 21-year-old TCK living in Germany states:

*I believe essential elements of a missional lifestyle includes the essential elements of an authentic Christian lifestyle, but a missional lifestyle includes more obedience and trust.*

This comment reflects a perception that something extra, in this case, more obedience and trust, is required in order to live missionally. For some, that ‘extra’ is a sense of self-sacrifice, such as moving out of your comfort zone, working hard or having courage.

Missionaries in Thailand who worked in the villages, a 22-year-old’s host parents and a Finnish media mission agency leader were identified as ‘courageous’, due to their commitment to live under persecution, endure hardship or live as Christians in a secular society.

The sense of self-sacrifice is reflected by a 27-year-old from Portugal, who saw a missional lifestyle as ‘faith, commitment and being able to leave our own comfort and safety in order to accomplish our mission’.

A 21-year-old from Germany sums up the idea of a missional lifestyle being perceived as more ‘radical’:

*Well I think an authentic Christian lifestyle SHOULD BE a missional lifestyle … But we forget that too often and separate both. So only the ‘radical Christians’ live the missional lifestyle while the ‘normal Christians’ live the ‘normal’ Christian lifestyle.*

These ideas can be reinforced by books and autobiographies of people who are living radically. Shane Claiborne, for example, was mentioned as an influence on perceptions of a missional lifestyle. He, along with Mother Theresa, was cited as a ‘missional hero’ by a 28-year-old from Germany, because they had ‘left their comfort zone and decided to serve people in simple and great ways as well’.

The kind of activities Shane Claiborne engaged in include community living, as well as occupying a church where homeless people lived to stop it being demolished and setting up a joint fund to pay for each other’s medical bills, rather than taking out medical insurance (Claiborne, 2006). If these activities are taken as normative for a missional lifestyle – or even what people should aspire to – then it is no wonder that it is seen as different from living as an ‘ordinary Christian’.

**Living a missional lifestyle**

Almost in exact parallel to my researching and writing this dissertation, my elder daughter, Ruth, took part in a church-based gap year programme, which was intentionally ‘missional’. She relished being involved in youth work and serving in the church, an enjoyed a short-term mission trip to North Africa. But one of her biggest struggles was trying to reconcile the desire to live a life of radical discipleship with wanting to have nice clothes and comfortable house. Could she be a radical disciple and middle class? Halfway through the year she felt called to spend time with God, deepening her relationship with him, rather than take on an extra job for two days a week. This meant she had only enough money for essentials. ‘I expected God to reward my faith by miraculous provision, like money dropping through the door in an envelope,’ she said. ‘This didn’t happen. Instead I had to live on very little and it was really hard.’

I began my dissertation assuming that most mission agencies thought a missional lifestyle was ‘what you do over there’, while Generation Y considered it to be ‘who you are, right here’. I discovered that for Generation Y, a missional lifestyle is ‘who you are, wherever you are’. But Ruth’s experience highlights some of the issues Generation Y face. They want to
live radically, but today’s culture of materialism, consumption and living for ‘here and now’ get in the way.

Not that this is a new problem. In Luke 9, a man wanted to follow Jesus wherever he went, and Jesus told him what this would cost: ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Lk 9:58). Jesus challenged two others to a life of discipleship. For these would-be disciples, family commitments got in the way of ‘service in the kingdom of God’. Perhaps it is easy for us to dismiss these sayings as hyperbole; Jesus is obviously trying to make a point by overstating the case – isn’t he?

A missional lifestyle, at least for the young people who took part in this research, is about making a difference for God through loving and serving others wherever you are, sharing the gospel, living like Jesus and, for some, personal involvement in social justice. But is this enough? Is it possible to do these things the way Jesus wants you to, and live a comfortable life? Earlier in Luke 9:23, 24, Jesus tells his disciples:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever wants to lose his life for me will save it.”

The implication is that sacrifice is part of the deal. The irony for a generation who have been so indulged and pampered may be that, while in theory, living a missional lifestyle could happen in everyday life wherever they are, for them to be able to make it happen they may have to be completely countercultural – as otherwise the pull to compromise is too strong.

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References


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