

# FIVE DECADES, FIVE GENERATIONS

## Can unreached 'Zoomers' be mobilised for missions?

BY JEFF FOUNTAIN

Five decades and five generations after emerging in Europe, youth missions now face the challenge of recruiting from the 'Zoomers', the unchurched and unreached Generation Z. How have these generations helped shape youth missions? What are the prospects for missions in general with a shrinking resource pool of future missionaries?

### 20th century youth mission movement

George Verwer (Operation Mobilisation, OM) and Loren Cunningham (Youth With A Mission, YWAM) pioneered youth missions in Europe half a century ago. Both Verwer and Cunningham are North Americans from the so-called Silent Generation (born 1928-1945). Their first 'mission' recruits were westerners (North Americans, Western Europeans and Australasians) from the post-Second World War Baby Boomer generation. Youth missions thus emerged in Europe in the early 1970s, riding the wave of the Jesus Revolution and (for YWAM) the Charismatic movement.

An unprecedented one thousand young people from around the world joined YWAM's first Olympic

Games Outreach in Munich in 1972, with many continuing on into longer-term missions. Of the fifty Dutch participants, for example, thirty continued into long-term Christian ministry.[1] While traditionalists initially considered the mission deployment of untrained young people to be irresponsible and unprofessional, other mission organisations and denominations followed over time with their own versions of youth movements and short-term mission opportunities. Youth missions were here to stay.

### Tracing generational shifts in mission

The widely accepted (albeit imprecise) theory of generations is premised on the idea that whole cohorts or generations are significantly shaped by major events and shared experiences.[2] Each generation has its popular name tag – Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials and now Gen Zers- or Zoomers.

Boomers were generally described as being self-assured, optimistic achievers, ready to grasp the opportunities of post-war prosperity and reconstruction. They were also ready and keen to travel. Jumbo jets and cheaper tickets made it possible for young people to fly to foreign destinations for short-term mission engagements, evangelising and

offering practical support to local churches and long-term missionaries. International communication, however, was still clumsy, via telex (teleprinter machines), and expensive, through pre-digital telephones.

Having lived through an ongoing technological revolution and pioneered a network of mission training and mobilisation centres across western, and since 1990, eastern Europe, most Boomers in YWAM have now reached retirement age. Their successors, the Gen Xers (born 1965-1980), have moved into the vacated senior mission leadership roles. Gen Xers are sometimes called



the 'sandwich' generation, squeezed in between the larger Baby Boomer and Millennial generations. Coming from more single-parent households, divorced parents and dual-income families than the Boomers, they aspired to maintain a better work-life balance than they observed in their parents' generation. Growing up as digital technology began to permeate western life, their generation transitioned missions from the analogue into the digital era.

The new millennium dawned just as the oldest of Gen Yers or Millennials (born 1981-1996) were entering adulthood. Now aged between 26 and 41, they form the bulk of the two thousand full-time YWAM staff serving across Europe. More accepting of ethnic diversity than previous generations, Millennials were a great match for missions 'from everywhere to everywhere', which by now characterised global missions. The centre of gravity of the world-wide church was no longer in the North and West, but in the majority world of the South and the East. Greying and shrinking western churches had become totally outnumbered by the youthful and multiplying majority world churches in both church attendance and number of congregations.

Millennials grew up with the internet, virtual reality and artificial intelligence, and have an intuitive knowledge of technology. They connect digitally and identify with their peers across geographical borders via social media. They value collaboration, teamwork, innovation and creativity. YWAM's offer of entrance into missions through collective, multi-ethnic experiences such as youth-led schools and team outreaches with specialist focus including the arts, music, sports, justice and the environment has proven attractive to Millennials.

Their demand for authenticity (being 'true to yourself') and tolerance (celebrating diversity) bring challenges along with the opportunities. The desire to identify with one's own 'tribe' can encourage a 'bubble' mentality, making engagement with the larger world

sometimes an extra hurdle. 'Authenticity' can balk at evangelistic 'sorties' out of the mission base, or 'hit-and-run' evangelism tactics. This forces a healthy re-evaluation of how relational our missional engagement is.

'Tolerance' is yet another challenge for this generation, the prevailing concept of the word implying acceptance and celebration of diversity. However, it is intolerant of the original meaning which made room for ideas and practices one may not agree with. Millennials, however, have been schooled in post-truth thinking which rejects absolutes. Sharing the 'good news' about Jesus as the *only* way to the Father makes relationship-based mentoring, teaching on biblical worldview and theological understanding vital for the Millennial generation.

### **The Zoomers and mission: A YWAM analysis**

Enter the Gen Zers or Zoomers (born 1997-2012), now the primary focus for missions recruiters. YWAM colleagues more engaged with Gen Zers than myself have helped formulate the following analysis. While Zoomers share the same or even greater concern for authenticity and 'tolerance of diversity' as Millennials, they do not share the altruistic 'chase your dreams' optimism of Millennials.

Zoomers have grown up in a 'dangerous, scary world' in recession, with parents anxious about coping with life. They give priority to safety and security. Brexit, Trump, Black Lives Matter, the rise of illiberalism, unemployment, COVID and climate change have conspired to make them look at life through dark, pessimistic glasses. They follow dystopian film sagas featuring poverty, hunger and oppressive governments, like *The Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner* and *World War Z* (Z for zombie). They have only known a polarised society with global suffering streamed 24/7 via the internet, smart phones and other devices.

They feel that previous generations have stolen their future. Like Millennials, Zoomers are heavily suspicious of institutions and organisations they feel have failed them. They are the Greta Thunberg generation who are fearfully aware that an ecological timebomb is ticking. They are an activist, strike-back, self-starting generation wanting to get their message across to the whole world. They are also the least churched and least reached with the Gospel western generation for centuries. They have been raised by non-Christian parents, are biblically illiterate and do not know the gospel story. They are not militant atheists, secularists, nor hostile antagonists, yet many young believers among them can feel isolated, ridiculed and even ostracised for their faith.

Gen Zers have been raised in a 'post-many-things' era: post-modern, post-Christian, post-science, post-truth, post-absolutes... Left with nothing to define their identity but their own emotions, they are forced to build their own identity, choosing between a thousand options. If I am not created in the image of God, what and who am I then? This identity struggle causes loneliness and mental health problems, heightened by screen-obsession and lack of eye-to-eye social contact. While being the most individualistic generational cohort ever, they long for family.

They are sexually fluid, and view labels like 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' as repressive. As part of being 'authentic', they expect to be free to follow their desires, moment by moment, unrestricted by sexual convention. Gender is something they need to figure out themselves. Am I a boy or a girl? Or something else?

### **The challenge for mission**

Zoomers are effectively an unreached people group (UPG). Missions agencies and training institutions need to approach them as they would any other UPG. Their spiritual situation demands immediate attention from church and mission leaders. They require a radical departure from our business-as-usual training programmes based on the needs of past generations.

We must learn their language. We must try to understand their customs and rituals. We must study their films and

literature (i.e. social media posts). We must translate the gospel into language and concepts they understand. We must look for communication bridges into their culture. We must listen to and engage Zoomers, developing participatory learning environments rather than simply delivering information from the front of the class.

We must demonstrate that the gospel is good news for every area of life impacted by sin, including the environment, gender, race, poverty, migration and justice. Zoomers demand a much more holistic approach to missions and evangelism, a broader *missio Dei*, including creation care, for example. They will not be satisfied by pat answers and shallow responses to deep issues. We have not been convincing in the past about these dimensions of the gospel. Yet we do have some real answers to their questions.

In short, this means **WAKING UP TO THE NEXT BIG CHALLENGE IN MISSIONS!** It means designing new training programmes, commissioning new research papers and launching new efforts at educating church and mission leaders. Christian Gen Zers don't want dogmas. They want to experience God. How then can mission movements encourage healthy and sound experiences of God that can open teaching moments about a real God who is absolute, who created the world with a purpose, with boundaries and love?

The reality is that mission organisations cannot rely on churches any more to provide many recruits. Mission communities such as YWAM centres will need to recruit directly from mission outreaches. They will need to embed themselves more in local communities, engaging directly in community needs, building authentic relationships of trust and offering friendship and 'family' to lonely Zoomers. Short-term

mission engagements, even for those still journeying towards faith, can offer the participation, experience and relationship through which Zoomers best learn.

Half a century ago, a new wave of mission leaders in Europe came off the streets through the Jesus Revolution – former hippies, world travellers and social drop-outs – to reinvent missions as it was then known. Youth missions was born.

Why could not the Spirit of God, with the support of young members of a dynamically-growing global church, once again harness the passions and giftings of youth, this time Gen Z, to make a difference, to think outside the box, to tap into their global virtual network to mobilise, to find creative solutions for the big issues of our day and to discover the true meaning of freedom: not 'to do what you want', but 'to do what you ought'?

### End Notes

- [1] Fountain, R. (2013) *Avontuur met God, de geboorte van jeugdzending in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Ark Boeken, p.13.
- [2] Proposed as early as 1928 by Karl Mannheim.

'Generations' diagram taken from Wikipedia:  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation>.

