

On Mission 2020

Topic Focus: Mobilization

Melissa Weissenberger - South America Mission Mobilizing Younger Generations

Hi, my name is Melissa Weissenberger, and I'm the Director of Mobilization for South America Mission. I'd like to focus on the intersection of a few areas that greatly impact how the younger generations view ministry, missions and their role in the Great Commission. These areas are the Age of Deconstruction, Current Globalization, Missiology and Social Justice.

At this intersection, I believe there's a need for intentional, holistic, multi-generational discipleship. The next generations, myself included are in great need of intentional discipleship, not just as a platform that markets or inspires actions or holiness, but a true waking to our commitment to the local church, our individual faith journey and our role in global redemption and reconciliation. I also believe these concepts are best communicated through loving, patient and authentic discipleship where they'll take root and be practiced, particularly in a world where we're so accustomed to Googling information in an instant. We need modeled wisdom of a established believers to show us how to make the bigger commitments that were scared of.

What do I mean by "holistic discipleship?" The younger generations need more than a program or more than a series of meetings where we're lead through a singular book of the Bible. We need mentorship that addresses where all of the areas of our reality collide or intersect. Too many young believers have existed in a reality where church life where our spirituality was something we accessed on a Sunday. In a church building. Or in a youth group. And the rest of the week, we existed in the secular world, at school, or part time jobs.

Discipleship that mobilizes the next generations and then ministry looks like mentorship that reaches into every aspect of identity - spiritual, physical, socioeconomic, political relational, and ideological. When we talk about multi-generational efforts, like generations working together in the workplace or intergenerational teams, there's a lot of discouragement that quickly arises. It's often easy to blame the current generational, cultural gaps simply on technology alone and it's not entirely untrue to say that technology plays a part in why younger generations feel a great distance between themselves and older generations. But there are other cultural shifts from the past 50 years that have brought us to where we are today. And where all these elements intersect, is where I believe authentic discipleship is the answer to our future in missions.

When I chat with church leaders today, as I get to know applicants interested in missionary opportunities, my heart sinks when I find out that the main pastor knows almost nothing of the applicant's spiritual development because this young person was in youth group or in young

adult ministry. I'm not saying Senior Pastor shouldn't delegate responsibility. The Senior Pastor can't do everything but when I ask more questions about my applicant's spiritual developing, the church and specifically when I follow up with the youth or young adult pastor, I'm not surprised when they say that the volunteers who helped lead discipleship or Bible studies are young adults or other teams. The majority of applicants under the age of 30, who wanted to start an application with my agency in the past two years had no intentional, ongoing discipleship experience. Either where they were mentored or where they mentored someone else. Furthermore, in the past two years, all younger applicants who did have an intentional discipleship relationship were mentored by someone less than 10 years older than them.

What I lament is that I see at least a 40-year pattern in the church from Millennials - 1980 to 1985 and Gen Z - 1995 to 2012, where the youth are raised by youth, and young adults guided by young adults. This pattern speeds up cultural shifts. When a cultural shift begins, if the older generation is still present and relevant in the lives of the younger generation, that shift will naturally not be as radical or happen as quickly. Whether that's a good or a bad thing. When it comes to why we do missions, how we share our faith, why we need to intentionally share the gospel, if the generation that was raised in the era of Neo-Evangelism is put in charge of mentoring the kids in the 90s who then mentor the kids in the 2000s, the results is believers today. Ages 20 to 40 who are more or less mentored with the perspective of tolerance without understanding the historical and theological imperatives to participate in evangelism today. This is really key concepts of intergenerational and holistic discipleship come together for me. Believers under the age of 40 today are statistically more biblically illiterate. We often struggle with major doctrinal beliefs that stand in conflict with current concepts of love and tolerance. And we have a strong geopolitical opinion that frames missions as neo-colonialist or even an extension of imperialism. The good news, our young people today are desperate to see peace in the world. We watch human suffering with a critical eye to governments and corporate organizations. We're the most globally connected generations of all time. Youth around the world are experiencing similar movements and ideologies. Thanks to unifying technological platforms. We're passionate about sustainability and ethical employment. Essentially, our passions aligned with much of God's heart. God has been at work from the beginning to renew His creation, to draw His people near, and bring true peace to their lives where each individual is an equal standing with Him because of Christ. He wants to tear down the walls of hostility and the systems of oppression that strip the marginalized of their dignity.

For me, the question is, who is guiding us? Who is walking alongside us as we grow and learn, helping to tether our impulsive desire for change with righteous wisdom. The answer isn't a program. Many of our young believers who are interested in missions today participated in a short-term trip before applying to become a missionary, myself included. Or, they're reaching out to do a long-term internship and see if God's calling them into missions. Before a young believer steps on their first plane overseas, we all know they need training. They need to understand the cultural realities of where they're headed. They need to realize there are nine days encounter and not the be all and all of this ministry. God's been at work long before they decide to sign up, He'll use long-term ministry partners to sustain the work after they leave. More

importantly, they need to dig deep and know why they want to go. This is where discipleship makes the difference. Intentional, vulnerable, authentic discipleship within the church is a necessary part of mobilizing the next generation. As they're considering short-term trips, they need someone they can trust to challenge their motivations to begin to prepare them for what they're going to experience and to walk alongside them after they return because they will be a changed person. Ministry changes our hearts and our priorities. This is the perfect sideways into retention. Say a young person does feel called to missions and has some level of discipleship experience that qualifies them to join the missions agency. God provides all their needed funds. They board that first plane. What happens when they lay out? How do they decide to persevere and stay? Young believers who enter ministry or cross-cultural missions are statistically more likely to stay longer than their initial commitment when they have an intentional mentor. Many of our young missionaries are coming from backgrounds where their families are not believers and to assume that they have the support structure necessary to thrive is a grave mistake.

When young missionaries reached the mission field after a long journey of training and fund raising, they're eager to jump in and make a tangible difference in the community. They're often placed in locations where human suffering or need is inescapable and feels overwhelming. It's in this moment that they are in desperate need of kind intentional discipleship, both from an established missionary in their ministry context and from someone back home, who can help them maintain their sense of identity and community which is integral to their mental and emotional health. To sum up, the Word of God, which is eternal and which is always relevant continues to remind us the exact methods by which God uses us to meet the needs of our community and to fulfill His unfolding will. He calls us to live in deep community with one another, to bear each other's burdens, earnestly repenting of the desires of our flesh. We're not called to isolation and the scriptures provide clear mandates for older generations mentoring younger ones just as Christ walked incarnationally and patiently alongside the twelve disciples for three years, before sending them out. When a young person today grows up in the cultural environment that exists in 2020, when they hear the voices of so much suffering in pain, when they experience the rampant anxiety that's prevalent in our generations, when they see a religious culture that seemingly irrelevant to their reality, they're in need of intentional mentorship that walks through all aspects of their life and excites their heart towards God's call for holiness and His commission to go and make disciples. It's not enough for them to study a book of the Bible, one time with someone or to complete a Bible reading program. They need someone with lived experiences to guide them in how to seek justice, love, mercy and walk humbly in their profession, their political opinions, their ecclesiastical preferences and their ultimate commitment to evangelism. It's my privilege to listen to young people tell the story every day of how God has excited their heart to live incarnationally and sacrificially somewhere across the world to demonstrate that love that God has shown them. If we match their excitement with our own passion for the proclamation of truth in the gospel and if we're willing to form deep and meaningful relationships with them, they might just be equipped to pursue that call relentlessly and for longer than six months.