

Youth Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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In this article we explore some of the challenges being experienced by young people during the global pandemic and consider the implications for churches and missions. There is clear evidence that youth are experiencing tremendous anxiety and even trauma as they face threats presented by the virus and its devastating social consequences. Support mechanisms are stretched to the limit as the families experience great stress, with institutions outside of the home inaccessible. The effects are wide ranging and research is ongoing, but we touch on some key current issues as well as some of the emerging implications for missions and churches.

The way young people are experiencing this COVID-19 crisis will be hugely impactful on both their future and our future as we all grow older. Not only will the pandemic affect their future but so too the way we older ones and those in power are handling this crisis.

Introduction

As countries are forced to open up again for the sake of their economies, research related to how young people are doing is starting to be released. The data does not cover all regions of the world, but it is indicative of the deep emotional, psychological, spiritual, physical and social impact being felt by young people in most regions. In short, research shows that this current pandemic is posing a threat to the overall well-being of young people everywhere.

Early on in the crisis' lockdown period, the UK Youth's *The Impact Of COVID-19 On Young People & The Youth Sector* report noted this from the Mermaids charity,

We are so worried for our young people. They are already a very marginalised and isolated group and now that has intensified greatly. Many exist in unhappy homes with little chance for escape or support. With the whole nation now being told to stay at home these young people are left trapped with the people they are desperate to escape from and even less able to be who they are.¹

Effects like this will have huge implications for the church and also on the missions community within a decade. We need to understand what is happening now. As described in 1 Chronicles 12:32, people of influence in churches and missions need to understand the times and know how the People of God should respond to them. Understanding leads to action. What will emerge from our young people's experience of the adult

response to the crisis? Will they have hope for a better tomorrow in the way we are responding today? In what ways should we strive to shape the 'new normal' in such a way that it inspires them to rise to the challenges of building a better world?

1. THREATS

Economic

The financial effects of the pandemic are already emerging, with unemployment or reduced work hours rising rapidly in the formal sector and income generation restricted in informal economies. This has a particularly harsh impact on working aged young people². Global markets experienced a sharp economic contraction with supply chains hindered and demands dropping. Although the full economic hit may not be felt until 2021, families are already facing the consequences of extreme poverty due to COVID-19. In the Global North, governments have attempted to encounter this with stimulus packages and welfare assistance, but many still fall through the safety net. The devastation is exponentially higher on people living in impoverished conditions and informal economies in nations with higher populations and less capacity to assist.

Very few industries have experienced the growth of the digital sector. This could bode well for young 'digital natives' who have access to and interest in and growing with this sector. Digital and tech skills will continue to be in high demand as the future is thought to be 'low touch' yet highly connected.



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We must not forget that there still exists a gaping digital divide in the world between those who can afford access to digital technology (and connectivity) and those who cannot—in every nation. Young people without access are significantly disadvantaged and marginalised.

Social

The social strain of the crisis is already apparent, although damage to societies in the world news is currently dominated by only a few examples of racial divides. Ethnic unrest is merely one expression of the social chaos caused by crises. Another industry that experiences growth in crises is the business of human exploitation, which rips communities apart, and young people are particularly vulnerable. As families in impoverished situations pursue hope of an income and a better future, they too easily fall prey to the false promises of deceitful people. In addition to young people being forced into hard labour situations, there comes sharp rise in sexual exploitation of children and youth, many of whom are trafficked, never to be seen again. Those who remain at home can be seen as a burden on the family's resources, many are likely to experience increased domestic violence. Further stress is placed on parents to assist with remote schooling with COVID-19 causing many school closures. Young people of families trapped by poverty have little support, ability or incentive to continue with formal education and this will have accelerated negative effects on their future prospects.

Political

Politics also affect young people as they experience their communities protest civil liberty restrictions and disparities of various kinds. This raises the anxiety level of everyone in a society and creates a pervasive sense of collective trauma. At the end of July 2020 S&P Global were warning that,

National and international fragmentation could intensify as low-income populations are suffering disproportionately, exacerbating inequalities and social tensions, while the disruption of critical supply chains revives economic nationalism.³

Thoughts of survival eclipse more generous ideals of sharing. Groups of people tend to withdraw to an 'us versus them' mentality, withholding what they have and resisting the thought that others might take it away from them. This mechanism is being leveraged for political gain. The easiest way to rally a population is to create a supposed enemy and use fear to gain control. The world today, however, is not clearly differentiated and migration has created such a mix within nations that increased nationalism amongst the majority will

marginalise and demonise minorities. Young people have grown within the context of high globalisation and are likely to have friends from many different backgrounds. Political manoeuvring to drive wedges between people of different ethnicities and economic status, undermining trust in relationships, will be transformative for young people—to the detriment of the wellbeing of multi-ethnic societies and the world as a whole.

2. EFFECTS

Emotional

It should be obvious that all of these threats, and more, are trauma inducing. Young people are at huge emotional risk. Unless they are unusually well protected, all young people are struggling to cope with a lack of a sense of safety. Concerns for the mental health of young people continue to grow. In addition to economic restrictions and social unrest, increased loneliness and isolation accentuates the potential for depression. A lack of hope and purpose, and counselling to help them endure the hardships and confusion youth suicide is expected to rise.⁴ For example, in the United States the mental health situation is driving some clinics to collapse. The Washington Post reported that,

A study of the Great Recession that began in late 2007 found that for every percentage point increase in the unemployment rate, there was about a 1.6 percent increase in the suicide rate.⁵

In 2019 the US unemployment rate was 3.7% it rose to 14.7% in April but recovered in July to 11.1%, still 7.4% higher than 2019—indicating a 12% increase in suicides.

Physical

Not being able to mingle with like-minded people has increased online engagement for those with access to it, which is a blessing and a curse at the same time. While it can provide a degree of social connection, it is also a source of distraction from 'real life' and, in the form of gaming and binge watching, can become an unhealthy addictive escape. It is fuelled by a loss of routine, self-guided home schooling, and lower coping mechanisms. Compulsion to be online, with a global online community can result in disrupted sleep which further affects the wellbeing of young people who require a lot of sleep to develop well. Tiredness and sedentary screen engagement also lead to weight gain and other negative health effects.

Educational

Integrating the current youth generation back into school systems and universities will provide a major

challenge.⁶ There is pressure on performing, on catching-up, more safety regulations and a sense of uncertainty. Furthermore, if you were a young person, why would you bother to learn if you thought your future looked bleak?⁷ To help motivate young people to study and upskill, we need to provide them with some clarity around what is happening and what to expect from the crisis. Adults in general and influencers especially need to cast a vision for the better future that can emerge from it. There are many articles already published on the possible outcomes of COVID-19 and how to navigate stormy seas or a possible economic 'ice age' to come. For inspiration and evaluation, I can recommend following various futuristic thinkers like German Matthias Horx⁸ or the Christian and church-related perspectives of Carey Nieuwhof⁹.

3. MINISTRY

Some youth ministries have had to very quickly change their way of doing things and have made many resources available and for free. One of them is Youthscape, which has a designated resource page¹⁰. I did a small European survey among 38 youth leaders (60% local leaders, 21% national leaders elsewhere in Europe) and most of them were able to engage and deliver from the first week of lockdown¹¹. What they are struggling with now, among many other things, is the online fatigue of the young people they are caring for. Just three weeks ago, one of my youth leader friends said, "if we do not visit everyone now in their homes or outside somewhere, we will have lost this current generation in church". There is a sense of despair and hopelessness among those who work with youth, yet a willingness to find ways to resolve the problem at the same time. We will need to be creative. To innovate and iterate, to try, test, tweak, reapply and experiment more to win them. The way our young people engage now and what will come out of it, will have huge implications for churches and missions. Let me just highlight some which could be disruptive for our systems.

Leadership

Leadership is being re-evaluated by society. In some areas, where leadership was much more hierarchical, through online media etc. decision-making power is being highly democratised. The power now rests more with the people. There is not just one type of voice, but many diverse voices influencing change. The Black Lives Matter related protests are one example of this power (re)distribution. Opportunities are opening up for young people to join protests and call authorities to account. We saw this prior to COVID-19 with climate change

activism and we expect this sense of engagement to continue once interpersonal social interaction resumes.

Young people have all too few good role models in media at the moment. Crisis instability can draw out the worst in leaders' public profiles. Nevertheless, those with eyes to see can watch leadership shift toward a greater sense of vulnerability, empathy and inclusion (openness, care and concern for all), personalised engagement and presence (living in the 'trenches' and in the moment), humility (acknowledging errors when new information proves them wrong), agility (to keep pace with speed of change), and values-based (as strategies and plans dissolve and visions morph, values carry us forward in times of uncertainty).

Spirituality

With the loss of interconnectedness and fellowship face to face, many young people struggle with their continued relationship with God. Youth workers in many places have been very innovative, but it seems to only have had a superficial impact. Discipleship or mentoring has a limited effect via distance communication.

Like reports of online or distant engagement of many things (including church) during the 'honeymoon' period early on in the crisis, it can be great at the start, but when I asked youth leaders if they were able to engage and integrate anyone new into their work after March 2020, only 39% of the youth leaders said they were able to. Too many young people I am connected with shared that over the past months not once did any of the spiritual leaders in their churches reach out to them beyond offering an online worship service on a Sunday. Even then, no one cared if they had watched it or not. No one asked how they are doing, or if they needed anything.

Youthscape, a large youth ministry in the UK, has launched a survey in July among Christian teenagers in cooperation with Tearfund UK¹². They anticipate thousands to respond. We need to know on the ground what is happening and whether the experience of young people I am connected with is common elsewhere. If so, it does not bode well for the Church or for missions.

I hosted an online event early in July with Lausanne's younger leaders globally. 80 people from 50+ nations joined the call, including mentors participating in the small groups. One of the questions I asked in a poll was, 'what do you need right now that will encourage you?' The idea most voted on was sharing and praying with one another. This is what we need to do continuously. It is not enough to go online to explore ideas and discuss strategies. We need to create and nurture spiritual community.

Missions

With expatriate missionaries restricted from (re)entering foreign lands, missions leaders are anticipating that the spread of the gospel and creation of new churches will become much more locally defined as an indigenous (or near-culture) responsibility. Local ministry and missions leaders will need to accept ownership of this and look for resources from within their spheres of influence. A key asset in many of the nations closest to those with least access to the gospel are the emerging adults, many of them prepared in student groups and looking for opportunities to serve.

COVID-19 has forever fused together aspects of missions that have often been polarised. Take for example, Mukesh A. from North India, at 35 he is a younger leader within the Lausanne network. He has been so moved by this crisis, that he and his family have decided to skip a meal a day and use the money saved to help the neediest in the slums of Delhi. In addition, he fundraises from within India and outside, enabling him to distribute 230,000 meals in three cities over the past 96 days (as at 6th July 2020). In the coming weeks he aims to have provided one million meals in the slums. He is a young leader, moved to a kind of missions activity that takes into account the whole of life—integral missions. This kind of approach needs to be multiplied. Younger leaders like Mukesh are an inspiration to young people who are deeply concerned about a holistic approach to our Christian witness in the world, and critical when they do not see it.

4. FUTURE

With regard to the future of missions (and church), here is a summary in brief as we are faced with an urgency to understand the times and discern how the People of God should respond to them:

- Appreciate the trauma and emotional struggle young people are facing right now. Listen to them with an aim to understand their perspective. What you will learn will help you foresee coming missions trends.
- Establish forums where young people can discuss their experiences and help them to explore roles they can play in helping to change the future of the world (or at least part of it) for good—allow their vision of the future to direct the discussion, not your preconceived ideas.
- Integrate the voices of young people in decision-making processes at all levels in your organisation (whether church or missions).
- Be willing to innovate and experiment with new ways of doing missions that young people might suggest. Also, be willing to let go of ways of conducting missions that have been important to you and your organisation.
- Break down silos and generously cooperate with other people and organisations for the common good and for the generations to come.
- Pray with young people, encourage them from Scripture, assure them of God's love and control of history, teach them the pathway to spiritual maturity as you walk it with them.

There is no going back to what was and we cannot be satisfied with simply maintaining what is. We need to prophetically speak and creatively work out the future with those who will inherit it. It is our future together—into eternity.

The shift from global to local that was noted above can also have a negative effect. Young people faced with increased nationalism, financial constraints, and limited ability to travel could develop a diminished concern for the world outside of their daily experience. Local churches and missions need to do everything we can to help young people not forget about global needs, particularly the need of the whole-of-life gospel in many parts of the world without a viable Christian witness. Theological and personal connections need to be made to show young people (and not-so young people) the plight of people without Christ who are suffering around the world. Pathways for practical and relational engagement need to be built and missions are well placed to help achieve that.

AEM (the German Evangelical Mission Association) recently convened a think tank on the future of missions and the implications for mission agencies. It was creatively hosted and engaging. Each of the mission partners was asked to bring another younger leader with them into the online discussion. It worked! The young people engaged, they felt heard, they probably felt an increased sense of purpose. The crucial thing is, we need to proactively invite young people into these forums, to genuinely ask for their opinions, and encourage them to engage in the discussions—even if it means missions leaders need to spend more time helping them understand and answering their questions. They are the ones that will have to live with the decisions we make today.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UK-Youth-Covid-19-Impact-Report-External-Final-08.04.20.pdf>
2. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/news/2020/05/covid-19/>
3. <https://www.spglobal.com/ratings/en/research/articles/200204-coronavirus-impact-key-takeaways-from-our-articles-11337257>
4. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/diagnosis-human/202006/new-study-highlights-covid-19-suicide-risk>
5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/05/04/mental-health-coronavirus/>
6. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/covid-19-and-children/>
7. More information on the effects of COVID-19 on youth and their education has been provided by the UN and is accessible here: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19 Preparedness and Response - UNEPA Interim Technical Briefs Adolescents and Young People 23 March 2020.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19%20Preparedness%20and%20Response%20-%20UNEPA%20Interim%20Technical%20Briefs%20Adolescents%20and%20Young%20People%2023%20March%202020.pdf)
8. <https://www.horx.com/en/48-the-post-corona-world/>
9. <https://careynieuwhof.com/the-original-2020-is-history-7-new-disruptive-church-trends-every-church-leader-should-watch/>
10. <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/services/covid-19-resource-hub>
11. <https://evirodemann.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Survey-report-youth-leaders-Europe-June-2020.pdf>
12. <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/youthsurvey>