# Factors weighing on individual decisions to serve long-term

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What makes a person want to serve as a long-term missionary (that is, more than a few months to a year or two) in a cross-cultural setting? That question is an important topic for mobilizers and recruiters in various settings.

I surveyed 248 long-term workers and asked them to rank 13 different factors on a scale of 1 to 9, where '1' meant the factor was unimportant to their decision to serve long-term, and '9' meant it was absolutely critical. Broadly, the results of this survey can be charted as the following:
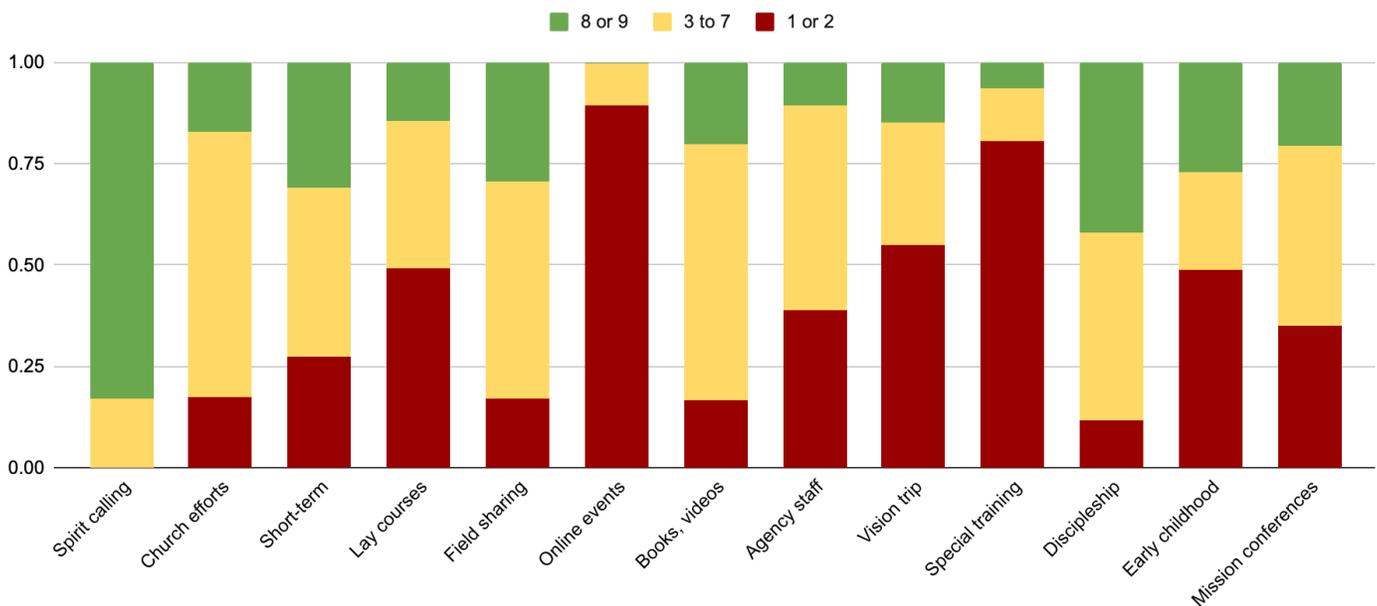
I also asked them to identify factors I hadn't included, and comment on which factors were especially important. While I didn't ask for specific demographics (this was a more informal survey), I did ask for length of service on the field. I did not ask for the name of the agency they served with, or anything about their field, on the assumption this would be sensitive data that would prevent them from responding further to the survey. It is almost certain all or nearly all respondees were long-term workers within the Protestant mission agency world, given where I advertised the survey.
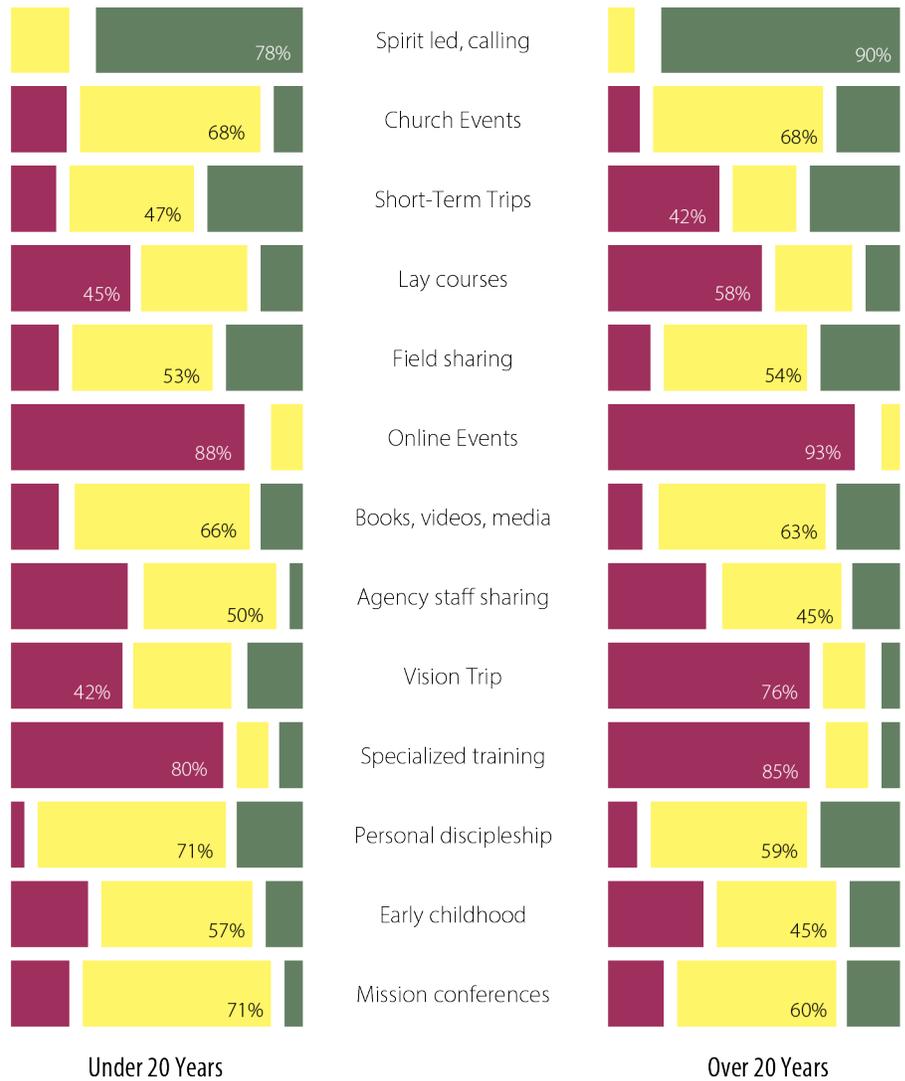
Of the nearly 250 respondents, 76 indicated they had served less than 10 years. This is not surprising. While we know from other research and anecdotal data that it is more likely, in the missions community as a whole, for people to return from the field before the 10 year mark than after (e.g. most people don't last ten years), most of the people who filled the survey out were people who were still on the field. The data therefore suggests the responses are not a representative sample of everyone who had served or were serving on the field. While I initially had reservations about this, one could consider this data set as representative of people who have successfully served long-term in missions. That is, perhaps, a more valuable lens, but more research may be required.

Overall, 129 had served less than 20 years, and 97 had served more than 20 years—not quite an even mix. I do not have a hypothesis for the reason for the dichotomy, and hesitate to speculate. It could simply be an artifact of the data collected: people who have served more than 20 years on the field might be less likely to see the survey where I advertised it. On the other hand, it's equally likely people just don't typically make it more than 20 years on the field. Only a more rigorous and comprehensive survey could say.

II. UNIMPORTANT VS CRITICAL FACTORS

Each person surveyed ranked 13 factors from 1 to 9. The charts highlight a mix of three categories: those who ranked a factor as 'unimportant' (either a 1 or 2), those who ranked it as 'absolutely critical' (an 8 or a 9), and those in the middle (who ranked it from 3 to 7). The factors ranked include the following:

1. 'Spirit leading' – some sense of God's calling.
2. 'Church efforts' – a church's mobilization effort, including sermons and mission events.
3. 'Short-term trips' – a trip taken *before* a commitment to long-term service (that is, not a 'vision trip' to explore a particular field).
4. 'Lay courses' – various lay missions courses like Perspectives, Kairos, etc.
5. 'Field sharing' – any instance where a field missionary shared their calling.
6. 'Online events' – like my own agency's "online DMM Nuggets" and "World Updates."
7. Books, videos, missionary biographies, etc.
8. Agency staff sharing – an agency leader or a recruiter (as opposed to a field worker)
9. A vision trip to a particular field (in the process of deciding whether to go to that field or not).
10. 'Specialized training' – in mission skills, like LaunchGlobal, Forefront, Cafe1040, No Place Left, etc.
11. 'Discipleship' – personal discipleship, mentoring, Bible study, etc.
12. 'Early Childhood' – anything a person's parents or family did to expose them to other cultures or mission work
13. 'Mission conferences' – the most notable in comments being Urbana.

Factor	Under 20 Years	Over 20 Years
Spirit led, calling	78%	90%
Church Events	68%	68%
Short-Term Trips	47%	42%
Lay courses	45%	58%
Field sharing	53%	54%
Online Events	88%	93%
Books, videos, media	66%	63%
Agency staff sharing	50%	45%
Vision Trip	42%	76%
Specialized training	80%	85%
Personal discipleship	71%	59%
Early childhood	57%	45%
Mission conferences	71%	60%

Any or all of these factors could be ranked anywhere from as *9* (critical) or *1* (unimportant). An individual could have, for example, six *1s*, four *9s*, and three *5s*. I was not shocked the 'Spirit's leading' (a 'sense of calling') was highly ranked. Still, many items were marked as 'unimportant.' Initially, I found these results disturbing. Were online events completely useless? Were the efforts of agency staff, or the groups like LaunchGlobal and Forefront? And what about that Perspectives line?

As I dug into the data, what became quickly evident was a significant difference in how people who had been on the field *longer* answered the survey. Those who went to the field 20 or 30 years ago did not have access to online webinars, or specialized missionary training efforts, and so marked those as '1'—unimportant to their calling.

III. THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCE

In the chart above, I identify the percentage of people 'under 20' (years of service) and 'over 20' years of service who ranked a given category as an '8' or '9' (critical). Some more revealing trends are shown:

- the significant dip in the importance of a sense of some form of supernatural calling (beyond simple obedience to Biblical commands).

- The decrease in the role of churches in the decision. While the same percentage said churches were of 'middle importance' in the calling process, more young people said churches were 'unimportant' in their decision than olders did. Is this because fewer churches are mobilizing for mission, or because their efforts are less effective?
- The increase in short-term trips and vision trips on the younger generation reflects the massive increase in short-term trips in recent years, driven in part by the increase in the ease of travel.
- Both generations found Perspectives and field testimonies to be about equally important. (This percentage view of those who marked it as 'important' eliminates those who didn't have access to Perspectives.)
- Online events are not 'important' for most respondents yet. This is to be expected, since for most who answered the survey, online events were widely available during their calling period.
- Books and videos are of about the same importance to both generations.
- Agency staff are apparently somewhat less impactful to the newer generation.
- Specialized training programs are only barely registering on the scale, but where they do, they are more impactful to the newer generation.
- There is a small dip in 'discipleship as a formative force'—probably because so many other factors are now weighing in.
- Family lifestyles are equally important to both generations, yet still a small factor, probably because most families don't have a missions influence.
- Another sharp difference between the generations is the impact of mission conferences. Many of the 'over-20 years of service' reported the strong impact of Urbana on their lives, but mission conferences are rarely marked by younger people as impactful at all.

One issue with the data: we can somewhat speculate about why people mark events as 'unimportant.' As noted in generational differences, '_x_ was unimportant in my decision' could be because '_x_ was unavailable when I was making my decision,' or it could be that '_x_ was ineffective in impacting my decision.' Obviously, 'unavailable' applies when considering 'online events' for people who were called 20 years ago. But, equally, some of the 'unimportant' factors for Under-20s could represent 'unavailable' options. It would behoove us mobilizers to look carefully at the things that people mark as 'important,' but for the big 'unimportant' items we might ask if there are ways we could make candidates more aware of those resources.

The areas that I am personally thinking a lot about: (1) helping people discern a personal sense of calling, (2) the importance of effective short-term trips that are not detrimental to the field, (3) helping field workers share about their regions efficiently and effectively, (4) the role of the vision trip when people are further along in the process, and (5) calling in the context of personal discipleship.