



Hope in the Next Generation

Evangelist Miriam Swaffield explains why she has hope for her contemporaries, the 18–30 year olds of the 'millennial generation'.



Miriam Swaffield

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The world we live in

It's going to take courage this one. To live a life that is hope-full.

Let me introduce you to the playground we're growing up in. We're in a time when there is no absolute way, truth or life. You can't be sure of anything and you certainly can't stake the meaning of your existence and the way you eye-ball death on a distrusted concept called 'faith'. Everyone has the right to believe but nobody has the right belief. It's nice if we were brought up by our parents to go to church, it's also nice if we weren't. We're all just fine and the world is what it is, and we make the best of what's in front of us and we hope it will all work out in the end if we try and be 'good' people.

We aren't sure how to access this 'Father God' we hear of because we are the society of absent fathers. And being invited into the family of God is going to take a radically different example lived-out for us because when it comes to the family unit, our biology has broken down and our understanding is fractured and painful. The spiritual exists we reckon, but don't mention the Church because that is a controlling organisation on a power trip and we aren't going to fall for it. We're aiming for the property ladder, career ladder, 2.4 kids, car and life-partner ladder, knowing that if it's tangible, we can put our arms around it and draw comfort from the feeling of holding onto something.

We are fragile. Secretly we are all one phone call from our knees; when the hospital rings and mum has cancer, when the diagnosis is depression, when the headlines

explode with declarations that nowhere is safe anymore. In the midst of the fog and the noise, all we actually want to know is, am I loved? Am I alone? And, does my life count? But we don't know where to turn for the answers so we follow the status quo and hope it will all be alright in the end. Along we go, bombarded by the voices of the world, selling its brands of hope in an ever-growing market place of communication platforms. And with a little more of this, a little less of that, a little higher up that chain and a little deeper into our debt, we hope we will find security, comfort, love, enough ... we just keep hoping.

Sounds like a gloomy story for your kids doesn't it?

The God-gift of hope

I am 25 and this is a glimpse of the context I have grown up in here in the UK. I have known and followed Jesus for as long as I can remember and so have been carrying around the presence of God, the Jesus-hope that is deposited in us, for as long as I can remember too.

We know that, as people God has scooped us up from drowning and turned our lives upside down, the hope we are called to should look remarkably different. But what does this God-gift of hope actually look like? And does it even exist in the 18–30s we come across, assuming we come across them at all?

Let me offer you my answer to this question. Let me offer you some tangible, happening-right-now hope ... because, I've actually seen them. I've caught a glimpse of this rare breed, this next generation of Jesus followers. I guess I am one too. One of those normal radicals who

found the way and lost our lives to save them, brimming with the expectancy of certainty that what we see in front of us isn't the end of the story.

I've met the students, the twenty-somethings living against the tide, looking up and living up to the message breathed-out across the skies; that there is a King, that he will see his Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, and that this King calls us his friends, his family, and invites us home to celebrate with him. And this changes the way we walk.

So what is hope for us?

Hope is when a 19-year-old lad turns up to university and on his first visit to a new church in York, brings four of his housemates along with him. It didn't take him until second year to realise that his days living in campus community are a gift for sharing the love of God with those he has been placed around.

Hope is the girl who hung out in the Loughborough student's union toilets on the big club nights, and helped the girls who were being sick and in a state. Through holding back hair, dabbing the tears of make-up-stained faces, and offering care to people at their most vulnerable, this girl inadvertently began what is now Club Mission – an official weekly nightclub ministry.

Hope is the student who changed her plans to study abroad because her heart had been so broken for the students and community of Leeds, that suddenly the perspective of where God's mission was happening was way closer to home than Africa, and way too exciting to leave her church family for.

Hope is when local churches open their doors in the small hours and get out on the streets to meet people where they are at. Like a bunch of students in Portsmouth who ended up telling some of their friends about Jesus as they handed out bottles of water, and saw people give their lives to following him there and then on the pavement.

Hope is recognising that those who are present, are more likely to be all in, no fence-sitting. Less than one percent of students can be accounted for who actively follow Jesus, and the 'millennial generation' is known as 'the missing generation' from our churches. Yes, we are a minority, but that means that those who stand up and follow the way of Jesus, against the tide of the majority, really have to know what they're living for. We can't do cultural Christianity because it's not in our culture anymore and we can't just go along with it because our friends are, because they aren't. I wonder if there isn't a gift in it being hard and costly to be a Christian in my generation, because maybe those of us who are, know the reality of what we have signed up to for life?

I work for Fusion, an organisation that seeks to connect students and churches together and equip local churches to be phenomenal at loving our universities all over the UK. The reason I decided to throw everything I've got into seeing students meet Jesus is because of the hope I have that God isn't finished with us yet. If students are

the leaders of tomorrow, in business, media, medicine, science, the arts, education, family, church and politics, then it is surely vital for us all to give them every opportunity and invitation to meet Jesus today. And I have hope that it can be done.

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Against all odds

This year just gone, everywhere I travelled to speak to students about mission, I told the story of Gideon from the book of Judges. It turns out that from the angel turning up in the wine press where Gideon is hiding in chapter 6, through to Gideon leading the people of God in the defeat of their enemies and establishing peace in their generation in chapter 8, this story is one of God using a minority. The minority wins and God's Kingdom breaks through. But crucially, in this account it becomes very clear that the miraculous victory had very little to do with Gideon and the people, and everything to do with God and his power.

Judges 7 has become a particular source of hope for me when it comes to the state of my generation. From city to city the stats have seemed bleak, with churches unable to account for more than 1 or 2 per cent of their student population engaged with church community. How can we see 65,000 students introduced to Jesus in Birmingham with maybe 650 students carrying the good news around and plugged in to the rest of the body? What about the 50,000 students in Bristol or the 100,000 in Manchester? Is there any hope against such odds?

But then we see something extraordinary in Judges 7. Gideon gathers his army for God, 32,000 men in total, all led by the little guy we met in hiding just a chapter earlier. God takes one look at this army and says to Gideon, 'You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, "My own strength has saved me".' So upon orders, Gideon lets 22,000 men go home. But God doesn't stop there. God tells Gideon that once again 'there are still too many men' and helps him thin out his forces even further in a rather creative fashion. God tells Gideon to go to the river and let the men have a drink, and then only keep those who drink from the river like a dog, lapping the water with their tongues! Bizarrely, out of 10,000 men, only 300 drank like dogs and so Gideon is commanded to send everyone else home apart from this little motley crew of 300 soldiers.

At this point, having 32,000 men reduced to 300 dog-drinkers, surely Gideon had a look at his situation, the odds clearly stacked against him, and wondered if there was any hope. And yet, we see God actually choose to make a minority of his people against the prevailing forces, so that when God then moved in power, bringing

victory and saving his people, no one would think themselves mighty and great. All would know the Lord had won the battle. All glory to God.

'Gideon returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand." And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars. And he said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the

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trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'"

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled.' (Judg 7:15–21)

God asked Gideon to lead 300 men against the thousands of the invading soldiers, armies that had spent years ravaging the Promised Land, stealing the crops and leaving the people of God down on their knees. Gideon and his 300 took back all that had been taken, the minority changed the story for the majority and against all the odds God's people triumphed. God did not look at the statistics and lose hope.

Hope for the 'millennial generation'

This is why I have hope for my generation – because more often than not, we can only see a few hundred of us standing up for Jesus in amongst tens of thousands: that one Christian in a drama school year, navigating controversial scripts and exercises; that one winger on the rugby team who invites his team mates at the end of the match to make an evening service with him; that one trainee nurse who prays for his patients when he goes home at the end of a shift; that one girl who loves the big nights out but remains stone cold sober and red hot faithful throughout; the ones and twos standing up, surrounded by hundreds and thousands who live a different way, for a different god.

I have decided to be positively encouraged and excited by the gatherings of 50 students I meet from city to city. When God moves in power through us, and campuses across the country wake up to the reality of Jesus, we certainly can't think it was because we were strong and

numerous enough to make an impact. We will know who to worship.

As I finish writing this, it is the morning of my twenty-fifth birthday and I am more filled with hope than I have ever been before. Yesterday I was serving alongside a local church in London who were doing everything they could to be out on campus during freshers week. Rain and shine, the church team turned up to talk and look-out for the new, the lost and the lonely students as they settled in to our capital. So many people have been prayed for, have got to ask questions about God, and continue conversations over coffee as friendships begin. Yesterday afternoon I sat with a guy who had just moved onto campus for his Master's degree, and an hour later after listening and sharing our life-stories, hopes and fears, he gave his whole life, just as he is, to Jesus. Happy birthday.

This generation is not missing, inaccessible or too far gone. We are alive and we are bringing our friends home with us in the ones and twos as we walk. And we need you. We need to be encouraged, parented and prayed for as we go. We are a generation who have big dreams of changing the world, high expectations of who we are and what we can do, and we need your help. We need to be disciplined through the cost of following Jesus, we need to be taught the words of life that will keep us rooted, we need all the wisdom that you are learning about as you navigate this messed-up, blessed up world to inform us how we follow after you. Yes, there's stuff in our culture that makes us a bit of a nightmare, it takes effort to invest in us and see past some of our blind-spots. But please take the time to teach us how to fly straight, release us to give things a go even whilst we haven't got it all worked-out. It will be messy doing life as family with us 18s–30s, 'Gen Y' as we're known, but it will be an adventure you'll not forget or regret and my hope and prayer is you see something of Jesus in us too.

Hope is on the rise. In my friends and I, we are choosing to expect more from God in our generation, and as we step out with Jesus, we are getting the first glimmers of hope breaking in and breaking out. Stay awake to the student world, things are bubbling up. Keep an eye out for us and invite us round for dinner and into your lives too. And let's pray together, from one generation to another, that this good news will show up all over the place, embodied in the Jesus followers in schools, universities, the work-place and our communities so that the story of our kids in years to come, is one where the hope of Jesus changed the shape of their future because we were faithful today.