

Vulnerable Mission: the way forward to the Majority World?

By Stephen Skuce

The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) sees vulnerability as a good thing. Being vulnerable to a context helps one to understand it. "What would it be like," the AVM asks itself, "if missionaries from the West to MW (Majority World) countries (such as in Africa, Asia, Latin America) were 'vulnerable':

♦ instead of shoring up their activities using money from back home, what if they relied on locally available resources?

♦ what if they predominately used non-Western languages in their ministries instead of English?"

I have found these questions to be

very challenging for me as I have reflected on my own experience of ministry with the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka where I had worked predominately in English. For many of my church members, English was their first language, but this was a somewhat unique city centre church. Despite the majority of the denomination's members not speaking English, most ministerial training was through English and the Church's annual conference and documents used English virtually exclusively. When significant funds needed to be raised, my default position was to communicate back to my home denomination in Ireland.

Dr Jim Harries has worked with the poor in Africa since 1988. "It often seems as if Westerners are gods," he observes. "Partly this is because the

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way they give is different from the ways in which local Christians give to ministry. The magnitude of their generosity combined with the unpredictability (from the African point of view) of knowing just when Westerners will assist can also make it difficult for Africans to trust them.

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"The international domination of English is a further problem," Jim explains. "Reports received about Africa in England are almost invariably in English. Even the people at the grassroots producing the reports on what is happening are usually required to do so using European languages. In order to be accepted the reports have to be written in a certain way, as a result of which foreignness is removed from them. An outcome is that reports about Africa received in Europe can be more a reflection of what is happening in Europe than of reality in Africa".

Founded in 2007, the AVM argues for improvements in certain Western missionary practices, and changes in the approach to 'development'. It would like to see a closing of the gap between Western workers and MW people, by having more Westerners minister in the MW according to MW conditions. It would like to see a reduction in the creation of dependency on the West. It recognises that to minister effectively in multilingual contexts, in which different languages intermingle, requires use of more than one of the extant languages of a place. It would like to see more Westerners work in such a way that MW people are able to imitate what they are doing without first having to spend years studying English or searching for foreign charitable sponsorship. European languages can be used positively by many as

a 'bridge' language. In Sri Lanka, to speak Sinhala or Tamil was immediately to identify oneself with one community in a context where an ongoing civil war existed between elements of the Tamil minority and the majority Sinhala state. Consequently, the use of an ethnically neutral language has some clear advantages. In other parts of the world European languages are also widely used for trade, education and so on.

The Diaspora of African people to many English speaking nations further increases the prominence of English and of the West in Africa.

An increasing number of connections to the West are these days to link-congregations that may be of MW origin but are now found in Western countries. Unfortunately though, some pragmatically oriented MW churches have become so resigned to accepting the superiority of foreign languages, links and ways that they can conceive of no other option but dependency, be it to western orientated agencies or their own Diaspora.

As a result the key to 'success' for pastors can have more to do with how good they are at cultivating friendships with people living in Europe or North America than any other ministry gifting. Of course, the relationship between British Churches, and their daughter or diaspora Churches in places such as USA can also mirror some of this relationship.

The vulnerable mission theme on language seems to apply wherever European languages may be a minority, but still dominate. I have seen these issues clearly in Sri Lanka. Frank Paul (from Germany) recognises them in his work in Argentina with respect to Spanish, while AVM executive board member, Chris Flanders, notes the parallels to his ministry context in prior years in Thailand.

Many in the AVM consider the promotion of the vulnerable mission message to be vitally important to the future of Christian mission in particular and of development in the Majority World in general. The AVM arranged conferences in the USA, Germany and UK in 2009. Its chairman, Jim Harries, visited a number of colleges and seminaries in various countries in 2010. A major international conference on vulnerable mission is planned for 2012 in Abilene, Texas in the USA, with smaller satellite events in England (Cliff College) and elsewhere in Europe.

See vulnerablemission.org for details of these and other events plus articles and other resources. I hope you will consider joining us for some of the above, so as to help us to further encourage the use of local languages and resources by western missionaries in the MW.

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