

Jim's Journal. February 2013.

By Jim Harries

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Discovering Another World

As you read the above title, think of incredible amazing things that blow the mind and are so fascinating and intriguing as to cause yourself to constantly reflect as if looking at an exotic landscape. Imagine the same as seeing a beautiful bride who is longing for fulfilment through acquiring a husband. That can help you begin to get an idea of the task of the Christian matchmaking; bringing Christ the husband to the African bride.

Who am I ... what is my role?

It has recently been difficult to know just how to explain to people exactly what my role is these days here in East Africa. On trying to consider this question at depth I came up with the following:

Number 1, I guess I am a small-time apostle. An apostle is someone who is *sent*. So I am sent. Hence I visit communities of believers of various denominational persuasions. I do not by saying this claim to have some great apostolic authority! This role in East Africa is mostly an oral role. There are no written means to perform this role. The languages I use in this role are mostly Luo and Swahili.

Number 2, I am doing some more formal teaching, e.g. for the Coptic Church and for the Mennonite Church.

Number 3, I am a small-time professor doing missionary training! That is to say that I am a small part of the spearheading of new movement(s) in missions and development practice. This role is one I engage in writing almost entirely in English. Those I engage with are primarily Brits, Americans, Germans and to a growing extent Egyptians. I am involved in numerous discussions on theology as well as mission theory and practice.

Number 4, I am a (stand-in) father to over 20 orphan children. Some of those children still live in my home. Others have left and are working / married. I fill this role as best I can.

How to Share

While aware that this issue is contentious, I thought it is also good to be honest and share something that I find to happen out of experience.

I am frequently drawn upon to share words of encouragement and guidance from the Scriptures. I like to be prepared when this happens. This raises the question of how best to prepare.

It is often my experience, that pouring over commentaries on Scriptural passages is a poor way to prepare if one wants to speak to the hearts of the people. Biblical commentaries of all sorts may be an excellent way of acquiring background. It's like they provide the tapestry, but they can't provide detail. In order to share a spiritual message that may reach the hearts of people, one has to distance oneself from Biblical scholarship, and merely meditate in the words of Scripture itself. Times when I acquire insights from others and want to pass them on, especially if those insights come from non-Africans, I find that my message often falls flat.

I find that deriving a message that can reach the hearts of people is always beyond me. I never manage to do it. Such a message does not and cannot come from my scholarship. It cannot come from me! When I find that the Lord has given me an inspiring message to share, it comes from behind words. The content comes from a spiritual realm. This is often frustrating humanly speaking, as one would want to be able to plan a

message 'properly'. Instead, such a message comes as a mystery, almost like a thief in the night: unexpected, unpredictable, engaging with one's heart, as air might suddenly bubble to the surface from the bottom of a pond.

Have a Friend

Helping each other is a part of friendship. Helping people who can't help you back can limit friendship. This is a difficult area to discuss in Africa with well-meaning Westerners. The whole area of 'helping people' is fraught with difficulties when it is always the better-off Westerner helping the 'poor' Africans. Having people who one helps is good for the ego. 'Helping people' brings a good feeling. Having people who are dependent on one's help can be a way of guaranteeing that one has a set of friends in a foreign and sometimes hostile or uncomfortable culture.

The 'problem' of having guaranteed friends is less often considered. Obligated friendships can easily have concealed tensions. The 'befriended' party endeavours to please at all costs. Such friendship may be maintained only with focused effort. It can be a friendship of which someone is told - 'do not stop being so-and-so's friend lest they stop giving to us ...'.

Obligated and what one might call non-obligated friendships are not always clearly distinct categories. Married people find themselves in obligated friendships after all! I am talking of a particular variety of obligated friendship: that of being obligated to a person whose culture is very foreign to one's own, as an outcome of largely uni-directional charity.

Conversations in this area can certainly be convoluted. "Don't help people" I tell a Westerner ...! In my heart if I say this then it is because I am longing for depth in relationship and an overcoming of massive historical bias regarding the superiority of White people in Africa. I long for my Western colleague to be able to share in friendships with African people that are not rooted in and biased by unequal notions of superiority. My colleague might be wondering what I am on about because he considers to 'help the poor' by giving things to them to be paramount at all costs. (Are the 'poor' being helped when they are always being made inferior?)

It is hard to know what to add. In due course, Westerners need a break from friendships with inferior people who are always receiving. Those are not the type of friends with whom one wants to be on holiday together. They are friendships of strained-fellowship. Yet ... hmmm.

A Fearful Step

Western people are so accustomed to relating to African people on the basis of their superior resources, that the prospect of doing otherwise can be quite frightening. The prospect can appear to be a little like falling into a fearful abyss. Their superior resources are the main thing holding Westerners from this abyss.

I do not say this mockingly. Many aspects of African life are far from attractive or desirable to Westerners. Even the prospect of being a passenger in an African bus can be frightening.

The above does uncover an alternative-justification for aid and development help. Usually we justify it as being for 'their sake'. In this sense it is also for 'our sake' as Westerners; it gives 'us' an excuse to set ourselves apart. We have to live in such Western ways even in Africa; because this is what we are teaching the Africans to do. Take that away and the question of just how the Western missionary or aid worker should interact with Africans looms ever larger. Few if any would accept to live and work on African terms...

The Truth?

I guess many of us can at times find it tempting to compromise on the truth. I certainly find myself facing the same temptation. But, I tell myself, once I begin to compromise on the truth, I may be on an endlessly slippery slope...

The question of truth is for me especially sharp. This is because it is almost impossible to find other Westerner(s) in my position. Even to find a Westerner who uses an African language in their domestic life is difficult enough ... My way of life privileges me to see and hear things that other Westerners remain unaware of.

I write some of these privileged insights in my articles and books. Sometimes my insights do not go along with the most prevalent view. Even some missionary colleagues and fellow academics do not like what I write or report. Should I therefore stop and be silent on these issues so as not to arouse opposition? If I stop reporting truth in this way, though, who will ever again know if I am telling the truth again? Should I stop telling the truth if it makes people (especially my people, Westerners) uncomfortable?

Sometimes the truth is not very visible in black and white. I cannot pretend that I see all the evidence! But yet, the evidence I see may be overwhelming. Sometimes also, it is possible to see why other Westerners would not see that which I am observing. Often I see no alternative but to tell the truth, even if it makes some people unhappy; especially if telling the truth would seem to be important for the quality of life of the many.

Peace at last for the old man

Sometimes sharing the joy and grace of Christ has a very evident impact ... This old man has struggled with alcohol issues for many years. A serious heart attack very nearly killed him. Now, given a new lease of life, he has turned away from drink. There is an ongoing case, where he claims someone else has stolen his land. The lady concerned has planted trees on the disputed ground. The matter has been in court for ages. It was driving the old man into intense anger and frustration. After my sharing with them from the Scriptures today, he told me that he has turned that land issue over to God. "The lady says she will come to cut and harvest her trees soon" he told me. "I have given the matter over to God. When I meet her, I am not going to be angry and accuse her of stealing. I am going to greet her in a friendly way. I have forgiven her. It's in the Lord's hands" he added. Just a very small thing, yet for the lives of this old couple a very big issue that is being laid to rest because the old man has been able to take the teachings of Jesus truly to heart.

Splutter ...

We found the 40 or so year old man sitting in the corner. His wife did the talking. He looked distraught. It transpired that he could not eat or drink. Talking was an enormous effort for him. About six of us sat down. The visiting-preacher took the lead. His objective was to discover which ancestor had died in a bad way and was therefore coming back to trouble this man? We eventually identified the man's grandfather, who had been involved in World War II. Once so identified, we could ask the couple to kneel before us as we all prayed noisily for them. We prayed for some water in a glass. We offered it to him. He spluttered as he attempted to drink. There seemed to be no change. We left them with some encouraging words. ... A few days later when I went back to visit, thinking (oh me of little faith!) to encourage the family further: the man had been totally healed from what seemed a life-threatening illness! Give thanks.

Gem Bible Institute

Some things just cannot be explained across cultural divides, I thought to myself as I faced questions from African members of our board considering the way forward for GBI (the Gem Bible Institute, previously called the Yala Theological Centre) in October 2012. Their problem was; how come that I was the founder to the above programme yet while implicitly I was expecting them to cough up to pay for it, I was saying

that I was not ready to pay my share. To them, I was the visionary. On my side; I wanted to make sure that what we did came from them and not from me so that it had a good local fit.

I came to this part of Kenya 20 years ago desiring to be a part of increasing people's biblical understanding. They read that as meaning that I wanted to set up a Bible institute / college. Fair enough, I said, if you want to set up a Bible institute, then go ahead, and I'll help out. In the end, we all came to understand that although they thought the Bible institute was my idea, I was at the same time saying that for it to work it had to be their idea. Thinking it was my idea, they wondered why I didn't want to pay for it. Knowing it had to be their idea and within their budget for it to be sustainable, no way was I going to pay for it.

I pointed out that they were wanting to use me as a teacher, but not only did they not want me to pay me anything, but they also wanted me to cover the cost of the school. It is hard to say no to something if you receive it tied to a gift of money, I pointed out. They liked the idea if someone else was paying, but the idea of a formal Bible institute with a campus and offices seemed much less attractive if they had to pay for it themselves. So; we managed to ditch the idea! (Not that we'll never resurrect it ... but for now; good riddance.) Instead, everyone agreed that indeed it would be excellent for me (joined by others) to continue making efforts to travel and meet and share with a variety of church congregations at their various functions.

'Glory to God'

"You are very widely respected in this community Jim" my colleague told me. "People appreciate that you have chosen to live with a people who are not your people. You live with the poor. You feed and take care of orphan children, and visit and encourage widows." After having said all that he asked: "How do you ensure that God gets the glory and that the praise does not go to you?"

The question hit me a little like a thunderbolt. My Kenyan colleague seemed to challenge missionary reporting practice! As a missionary sent from the UK to serve in Africa my supporters are looking for evidence that the money they are spending on me is well spent for the Kingdom. Supporters want to hear how me (and their money) are 'making a difference' for God. I seem to be in a competitive field – many others are much more professional than am I in explaining to Western donors that *their* intervention is making the difference and meeting the most urgent need. They are reaching the most people, having the biggest impact, changing the most lives. The pressure is on for me to prove that I am making an exceptional contribution over and above what local people could do for themselves. Otherwise my supporters might conclude that I am a poor investment, and pull the rug!

"Consider others better than yourselves" we read in Philippians 2:3. No part of the body is more important than another, says 1 Corinthians 12. Christ is the head and the rest of us are merely 'body' Colossians 2:19. Those who desire the praise of men, receive no reward from God (Matthew 6:1-4). What to do? Do I have to promote myself as a kind of super-person, and take some glory for myself, to keep my supporters happy?

Deborah

"She was raised like a bird" her uncle told me (i.e. always on the move between different family members). I was attending a fellowship at Deborah's mother's home. Epilepsy troubled Deborah for years. She is now 34. She has five children. Four remain alive. Her marriage to a man from Ugenya looked very unlikely: he was mad, she was epileptic. Amazingly God healed them both, and life went on OK.

Until recently that is. Deborah's husband had married another woman. The new wife's baby died. Tensions ran high in the homestead. Witchcraft accusations were rife. Deborah was accused. Deborah asked her neighbours (i.e. family) to help her search for a missing pot of beans. Something brought their anger to the surface. They jumped on her and hit her repeatedly, while pinning her to the ground. They poured weak (fortunately!) acid onto her face, in her eyes and in her mouth. The following day her mother came to 'take her home'.

Pray for Deborah (false name used). Her father is insisting that two cattle plus some money be paid in compensation. Pray these be paid in full, for a complete recovery, for healing for her marriage. Deborah is a born-again believer. Pray that others in her family observe her testimony and choose to follow Jesus.

Missionary Attrition

Many missionaries spend much shorter periods of service in Africa than originally planned. They have to leave the field early.

Many who leave the field prematurely had many years and often large amounts of church money invested in their training and preparation. Missionaries who are forced to leave the field can be devastated. They can have deep feelings of failure. They feel they are forced to go home before having 'succeeded'. It is important to minimise missionary attrition.

Unhealthy expectations are one side of this issue. Budding missionaries' expectations are often high. Positive promotional material produced by big organisations for fund-raising purposes is part of the reason for this. When we read the glossy leaflets, we always find charities and missions doing wonderful work reaching numerous people. On the field; it doesn't work like that. Confusion and disillusionment become the order of the day. Confusion and disillusionment can become anger. They can become depression. New missionaries are often relatively unaware of the way the money they carry and potentially carry is skewing their relationships with 'poor' nationals. They are unaware of the mincemeat made of their well-thought-out plans when translated into local idiom in local context.

Pray that I can be an encouragement and source of comfort and Godly wisdom to missionary colleagues.

Fools wanted

"No Mission Agency could send a Vulnerable Missionary" (i.e. a missionary who works with indigenous languages and resources) a friend of mine told me recently. Mission agencies in America have to be careful, he said. If not then their missionaries could sue them and bankrupt them!

I am not sure I entirely agree with the above prognosis. I haven't really researched it. But I have said to people that you have to be a fool to be a missionary. That is because the advice you receive will always be to play safe. The pastor might tell you in a sermon to stick out your neck for God. But no one will tell you one-to-one. This is through fear that later you will blame them for what might go wrong. Then they'll seem to be liable. The decision to do something as foolish as becoming a missionary for Jesus Christ has to be your own ... Any more fools out there? (If you want to 'stay safe'; are you a Christian?)

Nonsense words and Touching the Heart

Cultural barriers are fishy! They appear not to exist at all. The global use of English makes them especially likely to disappear from view. (Especially for Englishmen.) Yet the barriers are very real, and are massive.

Have you ever chatted to someone, later to realise that they do not understand the language you are using? That's what it can be like when a short-term visitor comes to share their hearts with African people. The latter are too polite to tell their wealthy visitor that they are not understanding what they are saying. Imagine having someone attend a serious meeting while jiggling with their body with their ears plugged into some song. They think those who are annoyed and upset by their behaviour, are appreciating them. That's what a short-term mission exposure can look like.

Action is different from words

I was very challenged by observations I made on visiting a certain church. The problem is; that I am often very impressed by the teaching coming from this and similar churches.

On this occasion two men clothed in red robes joined us for the midweek fellowship in a home. They were visitors. They had the appearance and bearing of having been given a task to perform. Sure enough, before long one of them was moving between people as we sung and ‘jigged’ to the beat of drums. He grabbed babies, removed their clothes to expose their bellies, and then used his mouth to suck out harmful (as far as he was concerned) witchcraft objects from them. He began to do the same to adults, sucking out witchcraft substance from their shoulders or stomachs. Later the real action began. He and a small entourage ran around the compound of the house ‘smelling out’ places where someone had supposedly buried items that were intended to (magically) harm the people who lived there. After digging holes, he returned repeatedly into the house as we sung, depositing his dirty findings in front of us, sometimes having carried them to us in his mouth, his face covered in mud. It was presumably our presence as singers, already purified of evil spirits (we chased them away at the start of the meeting and he had sucked out the rest) that now resulted in the ‘medicines’ designed to kill household members either being neutralised, or turned against whoever had brought them. When all this was done, we went back to receiving bible teaching from half a dozen or so members of our group.

Truth

English has separate words for ‘truth’ and for ‘faithfulness’, as for ‘fear’, as against ‘respect’. What would be the implication of truth and faithfulness being the same term and essentially the same concept? What if also fear and respect are the same term and essentially the same concept? Could it mean that the person who is ‘faithful’ to what they are doing will be taken as somehow following ‘truth’ by default? What is ‘true’, then, is what works, i.e. empowers one person over others, resulting in others fearing (i.e. respecting) them?

2013 Trip

Below is the current latest information on my proposed 2013 trip. For an updated version go to:

<http://www.vulnerablemission.org/jim-harries-travel-2013/>

Month (2013)	Dates	Location	Institution / activity
September	3-7	Egypt?	Coptic Orthodox Church
	7-12	Costa Rica	Glocalade.
	12-18	USA Portland, Oregon	Worldview Centre (others pending)
	19-21	Dallas, Texas.	Mission Nexus conference?
	22-25	Pasadena, Los Angeles	WilliamCareyInternationalUniversity. Vulnerable Mission Day Workshop 24th Sep. (others pending)
	26-30	?	
October	1-5	Dallas, Texas	Graduate Institute for Applied Linguistics
	5-8	?	
	8-9	Cary, North Carolina	Trans World Radio, conference on Business in Mission.
	9-14	Anderson, Indiana	Anderson University

	15-19	Minnesota	North West College
	19-24	Ambridge, PA	Trinity School for Ministry ?
	24-27	New England	Overseas Ministries Study Centre
November	27-2	Philadelphia, PA.	Eastern University
	4-8	Marburg, Germany.	Participation in Master's teaching (unconfirmed).
	14-16	UK Norwich	Vulnerable Mission Conference
	18-23	Germany Korntal	Akademie für Weltmission
	27-30	Bergneustadt	Forum Wiedenest
December	30-6	Fritzlar	Fritzlar Bibel Schule

Internet Bible Teaching

From end of January to March 2013 I am to take a course on 'how to teach over the internet', led by a facilitator from IBS (Internet Biblical Seminary) based in Colorado Springs. I am to teach East African people over the internet using Swahili. This could put me at the cutting edge of the teaching of contextualised African theology? I am to work with iTEE.kenya; Internet Theological Education by Extension, Kenya.

Tent making

An organisation called Tentmaking International are to have a large Congress in Dar-es-Salaam 1st to 4th August 2013. They have asked me to help in translating between English and Swahili. I have agreed. I hope to combine my attendance at this conference with a few weeks of visits to various churches in Tanzania, including a seminar or two.

AVM Conferences

The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) is to hold conferences in the USA and UK in 2013. In the US, the day conference is to be in Pasadena on **24th September 2013**. The UK conference will be held at NCBC (Norwich Central Baptist Church) in **Norwich 14th to 16th November 2013**. WELCOME TO ALL. For more information see vulnerablemission.org

Coptic Orthodox Church

I continue to be very grateful to the Coptic Orthodox Church for opening the door for me to rent a bedsit/office within their compound in Maseno, Kenya, 7 miles from home. I have a lot of fellowship with Egyptian Christians. I am assisting in theological teaching and some other areas.

Visitors

I am looking forward to welcoming my sister and husband (Veronica and Steve Cresswell) on a visit February 2013, and Rob and Sue North and children (from York) June 2013.