

## Why Vulnerable Mission?

(from Jims Journal 11.2011)

Offering resources to a two-thirds world community or church can be putting them into a trap. Resources may be impossible to refuse! Once the existence of an offer is known, people can oblige their leader to accept it on their behalf, even if receipt of it will be contrary to the community's actual interests. (It might create dependency or debt, build a white elephant, or distract people from more useful activities.)

Also an offer from the West, is its language. Your mother-tongue you get for free from your mother. Another language from afar (e.g. English), however, unless subsidised, must be paid for. If initially subsidised then sooner or later „updates“ will have to be „purchased“. Those offering the language may try to use their privileged access to it to control recipients.

A missionary or development worker using their Western language in interaction with the people being reached, as well as disadvantaging local people, will disadvantage him/herself! Parts of local people's lives will remain hidden if their communication with the foreigner is confined to the language that they learned at school. Those hidden parts may be important for the success or failure of a project.

A British or American missionary can never be truly „vulnerable“ to people in the two-thirds world while using English, because knowledge of English itself is like gold dust around the globe. In much of Africa someone's educational level is assessed by their mastery of English. A missionary or development worker from the native English speaking world using English easily provokes jealousy and attracts people looking for personal advance rather than the wellbeing of their community.

Perceiving these difficulties, the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission advocates that some missionaries (development workers) run their ministry or project in the majority world using neither a foreign language nor outside resources. Instead it advocates that they do their work using local languages and resources. This forces the missionary to face the same difficulties as locals are facing, which in turn enables him/her to demonstrate ways of working that are locally achievable. Jesus himself and other biblical characters engaged in „vulnerable mission“. The power they had was from God, and not from a foreign „economy“.

(Power from God is available to all who believe in him, whereas donor money may only be available to people of a certain culture, ethnicity, citizenship or educational level.) In the temptations (Matthew 4:1-11) Jesus refused to use his Godly power to buy popularity or impact. Other servants of God like Paul, Isaiah, Elijah and David all worked using the languages and resources of the people they were ministering to. In a famous passage Jesus strongly advocated much the same – Luke 10:3-4a.

Vulnerable means of working help counter the colour bar that seems to be growing in leaps and bounds in Africa. In much of Africa, white skin is equated with ignorance of local language and conditions, and with an inclination to giving money without careful thought. Black skin is equated.

with knowledge of local conditions and languages and wanting to receive money. A vulnerable missionary's knowledge of local languages and their „poverty“ (because they do not use foreign funds in ministry) is a major step in overcoming this racial divide. It is reaching people where they are, instead of impressing them with what they themselves cannot do.

Not having many outside resources at their disposal and having to use local languages requires Westerners to be close to and vulnerable to the community they are reaching. Those being reached can be honest with someone who is vulnerable because funds are not at stake. A vulnerable missionary or development worker can challenge the people being reached to greater commitment and exploits. The limits of the success of a project no longer depend on how much money a foreigner can raise at home in the West, but on the commitment of locals challenged to engage in Christian service.

Where wealth comes from

It tends to be frustrating for Western people to hear Africans mix their understanding of the Gospel with notions of material prosperity. The outcome is that they believe good Christians should also be wealthy. I have had to come to realise – that this situation is simply not easily resolved. This is because it is VERY HARD for many African people to distinguish the „material/physical“ from the „spiritual“. As a result, material blessing is always expected to come with spiritual blessing, and spiritual blessing with material blessing. Realising this does not really resolve the dilemma however; What should „we“ in the West do, when other people think that the wealth we produce using industry, hard work, commerce, economics and so on, comes from gods?

To Use English – dilemmas in a chat

“That’s amazing” said a man who was walking by in good English as he heard me speaking to a shop-keeper in Dholuo. “You’ve done very well to learn that language” he said, pronouncing his words clearly, suggesting he has lived in England for many years.

In saying this in this way this Luo man had painted a picture in which the Luo were „them“ and he (on account of his good English and the fact that he owned a car to which he was walking) and I were the enlightened opposite to the ignorant hem.

The correct way for me to respond now had to be in English. In that way I would

show that I use Dholuo to speak to ignorant natives but identified with him as one of the enlightened Westernised people, like myself.

Instead though, as is my want, I responded to this English-speaking Luo man using Dholuo. My doing this carried another message, something like “you might think you are one of us enlightened Europeans, but to me you are one of those people who you have just implicitly indentified as being primitive”.

So why didn’t I respond to him in English; many reasons. Perhaps mainly because to have done so would have been to give other over-hearers the message that the reason I speak to them in Dholuo is not because I value their language, but because they are too ignorant to speak English properly.

My wealthy educated friend now walked away sheepishly. My not responding to his invitation to consider others as „them“ and he as „one of us“ (enlightened ones) had embarrassed and humiliated him. Had I responded „properly“, he might have given me a lift in his car, but instead I had to walk home.

Such African people’s concentrating their application of their intelligence into the use of another language, leaves their own people floundering. Embarrassingly for them, a Westerner who has taken the trouble to learn their language, can put them right back into that „ignorant“ category from which they thought they had emerged!

Implicitly, unfortunately, a Westerner using English relegates most people to that „ignorant“ category all the time as he is forced to seek friends (to whom he ends up being financially generous) amongst fluent English speakers.

### Brief History of the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission)

By way of expressing thanks to God for his faithfulness, I thought it would be good to give a brief history to date of the AVM and its activities. The danger of mentioning names is that one can fail to mention others that are just as important.

Knowing where to start is also difficult ... Janet Maughan, John Butt (both from Andover Baptist Church) and Angela Merridale (originally from Andover but now at Winchester Baptist Church) have been indirectly supporting AVM for many years.

2005 I took as many opportunities as I could to visit mission interests in the UK so as to tell them of the December 2005 consultation at Andover. I remember being told that „I’ve heard this all before and it never goes anywhere“. Total attendance at the consultation was eight, and no administrative structure was set up.

2007 I made a trip to Europe and USA visiting mission agencies and a few colleges trying to make people aware of the importance of the vulnerable mission strategy. Dr. Stan Nussbaum, already by then a long-time colleague, helped me set up the trip.

AVM was formally launched with an executive board of three (Stan, myself, and Dr. Robert Reese) in March 2007.

2008 Rev. Clive Burnard became the new minister of my home church: Andover Baptist Church. Clive is very keen on mission, makes a special effort to understand vulnerable mission, and visited me on the field in 2009. Dr. Jay Gary replaced Dr. Robert Reese on AVM exec. Board.

2009 Vulnerable Mission conferences held at eight locations in USA, UK and Germany. Very helpful connection made with Frank Paul in Germany. Made key contacts and had good discussions. Had these conferences not gone well, that might have been the death of the AVM. Member of Norwich Central Baptist Church Tim Reeves identified strongly with our cause.

2010 I made visits to 16 Christian colleges and universities in Europe and North America. Some were very successful, others more mixed. Fiona Adams volunteered to be p/t administrative assistant to the AVM. We begin to build a strong link with Abilene Christian University's "missions" department. Andreas Lossl helped us set up a bank account. William Carey Library agreed to publish a compendium of my articles. Alex Araujo replaced Jay Gary on the AVM executive board.

2011 Dr. Chris Flanders (Abilene CU) replaces Alex Araujo on the exec board. Heather Gammon from Suffolk is helping us towards publishing a small book. Wipf and Stock agree to publish an introduction to vulnerable mission, and Marilyn James of ABC has taken on this project. Ben Christian is helping us in design. Global conference planned for 2012 at the Abilene Christian University and Cliff college. Many volunteers and staff at Abilene contribute to the AVM in different ways. The AVM consists of a strong and growing team!

Wary of the AVM?

Some people are wary of the AVM. It seems to threaten some ideas in mission that have been foundational for a number of years. I challenge those people to re-think. The AVM promotes the Gospel. It confronts the hegemony of the power of money.

Publishing

My recent sabbatical has helped give me time to work on writing and publishing. I just did a count, and I have now had twenty full-length articles published in peer review journals (plus one or two chapters in books). I am working on the publication in total of five books.