

## **Vulnerable Mission - a 'normalisation' of Christian mission practices in anticipation of a post-colonial situation**

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Scholars and laymen alike accuse Christian mission of being a 'child of colonialism'. The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) proposes a bold strategy to counter neo-colonialism in mission; by advocating that some Western missionaries to the majority world follow two simple principles to 'de-power' themselves: 1. Use the language of the people being reached in ministry. 2. Conduct ministry using only locally available resources.

Language learning (ideally done 'in community') is a humbling experience. It includes being laughed at and corrected even by children. It forces the foreign missionary to reconsider their message in their new linguistic / cultural context. It forces a healthy delay between entry to the field and serious ministry engagement. Engaging in ministry using the language of the people being reached can put the foreign missionary onto a life-long learning curve. It builds appreciation and trust with locals, and leads to contextually appropriate ways of sharing the Gospel. It boosts the pride and self-respect of the people being reached. Through avoiding translation gaffes and fine tuning with the local context, it means that ministry engaged in can put down deep local roots.

Enormous present day inter-regional global economic imbalance, combined with the communications and technological revolution, greatly empower western people. Many of these are the 'traditionally Christian' people of the world. Should such economic domination embarrass westerners into apologising for the Gospel that majorly contributed to who they are today? The identity of white skin or Western accents with 'wealth' and 'ignorance' (of local conditions) certainly troubles many Westerners working in the majority world. As Christians - do we presume to use all the 'earthly power' that we have in our service to God, or is there a place for choosing to de-power in order to reach people? Can God use the weak? Is there a case for becoming vulnerable, so as to be more useful to God?

The AVM believes that there is such a case, and finds the Bible in its support. Again and again God chooses to use that which is weak to confound the strong: Moses was an outcast for 40 years before being used to redeem Israel. Gideon reduced his army to a fraction of its original size before overcoming the Midianites (Judges 7:1-7). David beat Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Old Testament prophets could be beaten and killed (Mt. 23:31). Jesus chose, at the time of his temptations in the desert, to reject the way of 'power'; either to win followers by feeding them, amazing them with miracles, or by domineering them using force (Mt. 4:1-11). He emptied himself (Phil. 2:7). In my weakness is strength, shared Paul (2 Cor. 12:9). When ministers are 'vulnerable', the glory goes to God.

Because it is hard to be vulnerable when one is controlling the funds, vulnerable missionaries opt out of this role in their ministry. That is not to say, necessarily, that their ministry is not subsidised from the West, but that they are not controlling that subsidy. They may be dependent on outside support for their livelihood, but see this as a problem that reduces their legitimacy for working in the local community, rather than a means to get a head-start over

locals. They lead by example, and not by paying people to follow. Instead of expanding their ministry by winning over foreign donors (and thus putting them out of reach of most locals where they are working, creating donor dependency and an orientation that links success with 'pleasing the westerner'), they choose to confine themselves to what is available to other local people. Thus, by default as well as design, their ministry comes to be sustainable under indigenous economic conditions.

While teaching part-time in a 'conventional' theological seminary in Kenya 10 miles away, this author sees his key ministry to be that which is unsubsidised, rooted in the locality in which he lives, and conducted in African languages. He has ministered in this 'vulnerable' way for 15 years. (See [www.jim-mission.org.uk](http://www.jim-mission.org.uk)). He has observed the frustrations of westerners who come determined to utilise their superior linguistic and financial resources in the interests of the Kenyan people. Now he seeks to share the advantages of vulnerable ministry with others through the AVM (Alliance of Vulnerable Mission). Inaugurated in 2007, the AVM has organised a series of conferences in the USA and Europe in early 2009 - details at [www.vulnerablemission.com](http://www.vulnerablemission.com).

The vulnerable mission method, akin to that advocated by Jesus in Mark 6:8-9, is not simple, uncontroversial, or politically naïve. As Old Testament prophets in their day, vulnerable missionaries are likely to come in for stick and opposition. Some find vulnerable mission threatens their more comfortable strategies. It challenges 'armchair missiology'. It can be intimidate those whose ministries are heavily rooted in financial subsidy and European languages. Many people, including missionaries, prefer not to be 'vulnerable'. Many in the majority world prefer a missionary to come loaded with money instead of trying to 'level' with them. Many African countries especially have invested heavily in European languages at the expense of local languages. Some people consider globalisation to be such, that a vulnerable missionary's task is impossible. Unprotected by a cocoon of linguistic and financial superiority, vulnerable missionaries can find themselves under attack from many quarters.

On the other hand of course, by avoiding the 'political clout' that comes through foreign subsidy (wealthy missionaries through the nature of their impact can make more enemies faster than can poor missionaries), vulnerable missionaries are much less likely to offend through their actions than are those using foreign finance and languages in their ministry. So a vulnerable missionary can survive better in an alien environment! Vulnerable mission is 'freedom': minimising one's 'power', means that less people get upset over the actions of a vulnerable missionary. Instead, ministries can be practiced and honed to local conditions. The 'offence' caused by a vulnerable missionary comes to be that of the Gospel, not their blundering like an elephant in a china shop through someone else's culture.

Vulnerable mission needn't be an alternative to more conventional mission strategies, it can run in parallel with them, given sufficient care to the relationship between the two. Vulnerable mission is a 'normalisation' – it is the way mission has been done for centuries, and continues to be done in much of the world. I believe that the current globalising scene makes conscious 'vulnerable mission' on the part of the West more and more of a 'necessity' for the sake of the future of the worldwide church, and to be a part of God's plan. Please join us at a conference: see [www.vulnerablemission.com](http://www.vulnerablemission.com) for details on how to minister outside of the west using local languages and resources.