Positioning the "Vulnerable Mission" Strategy in Mission Thinking and Practice

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Main questions to be addressed

- How does Vulnerable Mission (VM) fit into the big picture of mission today?
- How does it compare and contrast with what people have been saying for a long time, especially in the areas of contextualization and dependence?
- Why is this the right time for a new articulation of the principles?

Introduction

VM principles are *mission strategy principles*, and all strategies are evaluated according to how well they serve a given goal. In AVM we are not saying much yet about the goal of mission since we think we agree with the mainstream on that. However, we also think VM principles are a much better route to the goal than the standard alternatives are, which makes us wonder if the mainstream really believes in the mission goal they talk about.

Four paradigms of mission from the West in the past century

1. Classic, top-down mission--Resources and control from the West to the rest; converts become Western. Well-known problems of dependence, weak leadership, and little vision for mission.

2. Contextualization in mission—What is brought from the West is adapted to the local context (usually by the outsiders).

3. Partnership in mission—Insiders make the decisions about mission goals and methods; outsiders assist with human and financial resources (combines the best of # 1 and 2? Reverts in practice to # 1?)

4. Vulnerable mission—Outsiders use VM principles in order to create space for genuine contextualization of themselves and their strategies as well as genuine partnerships at a deep level (best of # 2 and 3).

Premise 1:

The dominant practice of mission by Westerners is widely divorced from the theoretical study of it. Strategic principles that are routinely accepted in academic circles and among mission executives are routinely ignored at the congregational, individual, and field levels where many decisions are made and carried out.

Examples: The Swaziland fiasco. The cultural default settings of North Americans in Latin America.

Corollary 1A: AVM is an Alliance which wants to see changes in practice, not just refinements in theory.

Corollary 1B: We will be particularly interested in getting the VM message out to the people who spend millions of dollars with good mission intentions but who never read academic

studies of mission, and also in assisting the mission executives who are already trying to get their field workers up to speed with VM or similar principles.

Premise 2:

The gap between theory and practice is particularly acute at the two points which are the focus of AVM—language and money.
Examples: My mission board resolution on language learning. Many short-term mission trips. P.E.A.C.E. plan for Rwanda?
Corollary 2A: The opposites of "vulnerable" mission are "insulated" mission (language is the major insulator) and "controlling" mission (money is the major mechanism).

Premise 3:

When VM principles are presented, the short-term difficulties of VM principles are much more obvious to most people than the long-term disasters they would prevent.
Example: melt-down of the Bible college industry in Central Asia.
Corollary 3A: The literature on the issue of dependence is basically an attempt to help people deal with the long-term disasters once they are recognized. That overlaps with the AVM agenda but we focus more on preventing problems in new relationships than in undoing problems in old ones.

Premise 4:

The emphasis on partnership in mission can fit with VM principles but it is more commonly seen as a method of bypassing the need for them.
Example: The COSIM (Coalition on the Support of Indigenous Ministries) network
Corollary 4A: Instead of de-emphasizing money, many on both the sending and the receiving end regard the transfer of money as a key essential element of the partnership, perhaps even the reason for it. Their questions are all about how to channel the money, not whether the local people might do their mission better without it.

Premise 5:

Social and physical accessibility may be a third key aspect of vulnerability, though we aren't yet sure whether ranking "accessibility" as a third key component with language and money clarifies or confuses the overall picture of VM. (This is vulnerability of the person as opposed to vulnerability of the strategy.)
Corollary 5A: The busier a mission worker feels, the less accessible and vulnerable he/she will be considered by the local people.
Corollary 5B: Much of what Bonk about the "righteous rich" relates to their accessibility as people. They do not wall themselves and their resources off from the poor.

Premise 6:

There are some huge success stories with VM principles but they have two common traits which are not emphases of VM as we are talking about it so far: 1) the VM principles are used out of necessity by people from poor countries not voluntarily by people from wealthy countries, and 2) signs and wonders are involved.
Examples: Indigenous churches in China and Africa.
Corollary 6A: Many of the people we present VM to will assume that it is an inappropriate strategy for people from wealthy countries because they have biblical obligations to share their wealth with the poor.

Corollary 6B: Besides developing our theories of what ought to work, we need to keep studying and reporting what is actually working around the world for people who do VM by necessity.

Part 3: Mission goals and strategies

- Bringing spiritual change
- Starting mission movements
- Discharging our responsibility to give

Spiritual change is salvation, reorientation of life, reconciliation, liberation, transformation—people entering individually and as one body into the arriving reign of Jesus the Messiah.

Movements contrast with "projects" and/or "organizations."

"Rich" senders and missionaries discharging their biblical obligations to share.