

## Vulnerable Mission: Radical Fringe or Common Practice?

While visiting a number of mission agencies, training centers, and friends with Jim Harries last year in the Colorado Springs and Chicago areas, I had the privilege of observing the first impressions of a broad spectrum of mission practitioners and thinkers when the “vulnerable mission” concept was presented to them. Though not many explicitly said so, it appeared that a fair number thought they were hearing something so radically different from ordinary mission practice that it sounded bizarre to them—unfamiliar, idealistic, unworkable, irreconcilable with the realities of the mission world, and quirky if not fanatical.

At the time I was a bit surprised about this. These people were neither stupid nor uninformed. They had heard many times about the problems of creating dependence and the value of becoming fluent in local languages, and they had very probably been involved in doing something about both issues. Why then did such simple and familiar concepts—an appeal to get back to the basics, really—strike them as if it were coming from the radical fringe of missiology?

Having mulled that over for almost a year, I’m at last ready to venture a response. We were unwittingly feeding that impression by putting so much emphasis on Jim’s realisation that virtually everybody who comes from the West to Africa to do mission does it with lots of money. Hence the need for somebody to emphasize “vulnerable mission” (“low-budget or no-budget mission” is one dimension of vulnerable mission) in contrast to the prevailing practice.

But whose prevailing practice? Only those mission agencies that are based in wealthy countries and work in non-wealthy ones. I do not discount or demean the present and future significance of those groups, but I do encourage them not to see themselves as the ones whose practice defines what is “normal” in global mission any more. They are being joined and will be surpassed (though I think not eclipsed) by mission agencies based in non-wealthy countries (the Majority World). *The prevailing practice of those new, non-wealthy groups will increasingly define what is “common practice” in the mission world.*

My thesis is that the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission is, at this stage of its emergence, a group of missionaries from wealthy countries advocating that a larger percentage (not all) of the missionaries from wealthy countries should *voluntarily* adopt the stance which the Majority World missions already routinely adopt *by necessity*—don’t use money to create and/or prop up mission programs that would collapse without a continuous flow of that money. Instead, let your mission programs be “vulnerable” to local economic realities and to the motivation of local people to participate in them and maintain them.

In the coming months and years, what I expect to happen in the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission is that we increasingly take note of how the Majority World mission agencies are going about things. *“Vulnerable mission” is not something we have to invent. It is something already going on that we have to notice.* It is just that there is so little of it going on in the places that Western mission agencies and missiologists pay attention to.

What has made an extremely poor church grow phenomenally in places like China and southern Sudan without outside help? Vulnerable mission. Most of this was mono-cultural, but both vulnerable mission's advocacy for local languages and missionary poverty are clearly in play. There are cross-cultural examples of vulnerable mission as well. Some are within a country, as the bulk of the Indian missionary workers are. Some are piggybacked on emigration (Africans to Europe and North America) or migrant labor (Philippines to the Middle East). Still others are stated as conscious, united strategies with goals of tens of thousands of low-budget or no-budget missionaries in the next few years (the Nigerians and Chinese evangelizing their way "back to Jerusalem").

As Majority World mission activities come more and more into view, it becomes less and less viable for Western missions to regard "vulnerable mission" as quirky and Jim as a single, unusual missionary, a voice crying in the wilderness. He is rather one of the few in the Western mission movement who already recognize the value of the mission approach which is dominant in the Majority World movement and which, we believe, will be increasingly appreciated and practiced voluntarily by Westerners.

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