

Dr. Jim Harries visit to Dr. Marcus Grohmann in Cape Town, South Africa, August to September 2024, Background and Report.

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By Jim Harries

Frank Paul (board member of the AVM, Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) and myself attended a missions' fair in Germany in 2011. It was a large-scale affair with, from memory, 3,000 young people in attendance. Frank and I shared a stall, that promoted the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission), as well as the organisation with which he was serving, Reichelsheim OJC-Community. About two stalls on from us, was a stall for SMD, students' ministry in Germany. A young man was manning that stall. He took an interest in the work of the AVM. This young man was Marcus Grohmann.



Marcus (to Jim's right) and Jim at a Conference in Cape Town, South Africa, August 2024

Marcus' interest in what we were doing proved to be deep. While I cannot easily recall the details, he formed and then maintained a relationship with us in the AVM. We were very happy for such a relationship, and pleased to welcome him with open arms. In due course, Marcus was attending our events, and engaging in email and other correspondence.

Marcus later completed his term with SMD (the German branch of IFES). By this time a married man (married to Annethea), he sought to follow up on his long-standing interest in Africa. (His previous studies had focused on Africa and on anthropology.) Marcus moved to Cape Town in South Africa in 2016. This located him relatively close to the birthplace of and family of his wife, in Namibia. He began his PhD studies.

My own communications with Marcus increased after he relocated to South Africa. At the beginning, I did not expect them to last. My previous experience with new missionaries in Africa was that they could quite quickly 'turn me off'. That is, weeks into their field experience they choose to listen to nationals, and tune me out. That to me was always disappointing. That was because I knew that they could not clearly understand what nationals were telling them using European languages. I rarely, if ever, previously, had opportunity to explain why this should be so. Marcus kept the conversation going.

I recall telling Marcus that it took Westerners at least five years on the field while daily exposed to indigenous contexts, to realise 'what was happening'. Hence, what hope for him, in a very 'white' part of South Africa (Cape Town), living with a young white family. I expected a rebuff, like that I was the one who couldn't understand. Instead, he continued listening and asking questions. It helped of course that he was on the ground and engaging with indigenous people in Cape Town. Before long, inspired by what he was hearing from me, he began learning an

indigenous language. I took him to theory. I had already spent years (decades!) articulating theories in the hope that I could get Westerners to understand what I was facing in Africa, and why I was responding to it as I was. (Practicing vulnerable mission, wanting to work with some African people using only local languages and local resources.)

Our conversations continued. By this time we had moved to whatsapp, and whatsapp voice notes. This is a relatively relaxed way of discussion. I valued it. Marcus was engaged in his research. I shared my own discoveries – theoretical, and experiential. We began to read some of the same books, and studied certain concepts in parallel. Marcus took more and more interest in the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission). This was very encouraging for me. When Marcus eventually handed in this PhD thesis (in 2022), it slanted majorly in favour of missionary vulnerability. I was rejoicing and giving thanks to God for a companion; someone who had taken the time to explore issues that I had been chasing down. Marcus made the effort, he got to understand what I was saying and why, in some areas he began to overtake me, of course he developed his own understanding in parallel, drawing on his own exposure to South African contexts.

The above background underlies Marcus' invitation, for me to spend some time in his context in South Africa. Initially, I refused: I did not want to engage African people using English, but in South Africa it seemed that I would have little choice. Eventually I agreed, and we made plans for me to spend 17 days in Cape Town, 26th August to 12th September 2024.

One wonderful part of this visit, was Marcus both having made plans for my accommodation, and then accompanying me on most of the visits on the programme that he had drawn up. I did not have to be concerned on how to get to places I had never been to. I did not have to cough up money for accommodation. Marcus' opened his own trusted networks to me, as an 'authority' on vulnerable mission in Africa. I had already shared what I was to say in formal presentations with him in advance. He made his suggestions in response. I did not want to get misunderstood, or to damage his own (by then 8 years) process of relationship building. We visited individuals (some meetings I later made alone), visited Marcus' home church (where I preached), visited a Bible college at which I gave a lecture, and Marcus accompanied me to some of Cape Town's top universities at which I gave lectures and received questions.

I made various observations. Cape Town was an amazing place. For me, coming from East Africa, it looked and felt incredibly European. The white population was large. I already knew – that South African whites had some very profound and deep understanding of local African people. This was further confirmed in my conversations with many people. I learned some of South Africa's peculiar issues:

- The existence of a culturally and religiously diverse population formerly classified not as white or black but coloured.
- Relics of apartheid-thinking were everywhere, such as a transport system in which Black-means of travel (buses, trains) were rarely taken advantage of by Whites.

- Bountiful egg-shells in what one should and shouldn't say, given a delicate history of racism.
- A very prominent and overt anti-colonialism apparent in all sectors of life; church, bible college, university, and so on.
- Blacks (and coloureds) occupying a kind of 'underworld'. It seemed very possible for someone to come from Europe and to continue to live very much as if they were still in Europe, despite numerical domination by non-European people.

I was especially honoured when Marcus told me that his children had taken a liking for me! (I am all too often the boring or 'eccentric' uncle figure.) I spent time with Marcus and Annethea and their children. Annethea joined us for various events, such as discussion with a young mixed couple wanting to be missionaries. Plus an evening talking about how to more effectively engage (White with Black) in the Cape Town context. The host families Marcus had arranged with me were warm and friendly, as well as very interested in the 'vulnerable mission' proposals I had come to make. Some of the university professors we engaged with had harsh responses to my suggestions – yet we had not expected otherwise, and lights seemed sometimes to go on in their eyes despite this. (Vulnerable mission represents a new and strikingly 'original' alternative approach to creating relationship between Whites and Blacks in South Africa.) I even had considerable opportunity to walk along the foothills of Table Mountain, and to join a host family member in some mountain biking. Marcus and I attended a Zionist church in a township – that was to me strikingly similar to some of the indigenous churches we have in East Africa.

Marcus had already made a lot of headway in church and university circles. By the time of my visit, he was deeply engaged in a post-doctoral programme, and spending a lot of time writing academic materials and preparing and giving presentations, both in-person and on line. I hope my accompanying him, and declaring things similar to those he had been telling people, will have proved a boost to his own efforts. Perhaps, in due course, I might even make another visit to South Africa.