

This is a compilation of documents to be presented at the 2009 Vulnerable Mission conferences in the United States, UK, and Germany. For more information, see <http://www.vulnerablemission.com>.

---

# Mzungu! Mzungu!

## an appeal for vulnerable western missionaries to Africa

by Jim Harries

Be-coming the centre of attention to groups of children shouting “*Mzungu, Mzungu*” and “how are you” is a common experience for White visitors to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> “Children do this because they are happy to see you,” local people have explained to me. Locals seem to see nothing wrong in this practice, blissfully unaware of how such racial discrimination would be seen in the West. (Imagine children in a Western city shouting ‘black man, black man’ on seeing an African!)

White people are far from being integrated into African societies. Many prefer to remain distinct. Partly at least this is because of poverty in Africa. Who wants to join poverty? Such poverty does not happen without reason.

Some aspects of African lifestyles are repugnant to Westerners. African people realize this, so don’t mind keeping them at a distance. “Don’t interfere with us, but do allow us to benefit from your being here” can be the implicit message. A distance is maintained, but Whites are valued for what they can give. An African church looking to relate to the West is often one seeking to get money. Presumably African children are told that Whites are wealthy and powerful – hence they are marked out for the kind of attention that their own people never get – shouting ‘*Mzungu Mzungu*’ when they appear.<sup>2</sup>

A combination of things gives Whites in Black Africa a reputation for ignorance that makes it hard to take them seriously. Many Whites seen in Africa these days are short-term visitors. Many of those who are around for longer do not learn local languages. They are driven around in cars and stay in hotels, rather than walking and staying in people’s homes where they could find out what is happening in the community.

Whereas Africans make major efforts at reaching out to Westerners by spending many years in school learning European languages and ways, the typical

European visitor knows little about Africa. It is hard for the few who may be better informed not to be painted by the same brush, at least whenever they travel.

If Westerners want to run projects in Africa, they are expected to pay for them. As a result they cannot tell how much the people value them. European knowledge is greatly valued – but for the formal sector of the economy, and not for how it touches people’s hearts or inner lives.

These are some of the issues that an orientation to Vulnerable Mission seeks to address and resolve. One way of doing this is ensuring donor aid not be identified with or controlled by a particular Westerner working on the ground in Africa. Vulnerable Westerners may have finances to support themselves, but should not be privileged to be the gate keepers to other outside funds.

This levels the playing field! It means what the Western missionary or aid worker can do is no longer a result of privileged financial status. Instead Westerners must use their wits and learn how the local society functions in order to make a positive contribution – of the Gospel of Christ, of a testimony of holiness and love, through some development activity, and so on.

Once Westerners are no longer financial gatekeepers people need be less cautious in what they say to them. We all know that “you don’t bite the hand that feeds you”! A Westerner can be accepted into the ‘in’ group only if the risk that honesty can cut funding is removed. Once on the inside, a Westerner begins to learn those things essential for requiring a true grasp of what is going on in a community, in turn enabling clear communication.

It is the European whose ‘project’ is not subsidised by foreign funds whom local people can imitate. Trying to imitate a foreign-funded

enterprise quickly hits the rocks, in the absence of foreign funds. The need for funds to maintain Western-founded initiatives has led to much frustration and corruption. For an activity – be it a church or a development project – to flower, it must be capable of surviving and multiplying in local soil. If a foreigner cannot ‘make’ his/her project succeed under local economic conditions, then what chance for the locals themselves? If locals can’t do it, then what is being created is dependence.

Foreign subsidy is more likely to result in unhealthy dependence than in indigenously rooted change. The aim of an outside change agent should be to change people’s priority in their use of already available resources. Outside subsidy usually cannot be refused, but changing people’s use of their own resources (including time, money, land etc.) is a sign of real, deeply rooted change.

Use of local languages greatly aids understanding. What is said in English may be for the benefit of donors. This does not apply to African languages. Having to learn to speak like native English speakers while not in a community of native English speakers constantly ensures that African people stay ‘behind’. They can never catch up! Even less can they ever get ahead. But, when African people use their own languages, they are already ahead. This is one good reason for outsiders to

encourage the use of African languages—preferably by using them themselves!

Making something ‘one’s own’ requires it’s being in one’s own language. Once in one’s own language, someone can work with it, whatever it is. If confined to a foreign language, insights remain foreign. When moved into another language, because no two languages have identical sets of words and meanings, insights change. So then they have to be re-understood, re-formed and re-articulated in the light of the new language, context, or culture. The process of ‘re-understanding’ is a vital part of the appropriation of knowledge. Without it, learning is confined to rote, and / or building on foreign models. I agree with Qorro’s saying that: “there is a need, therefore, for policy change in the whole of Africa towards using African languages as media of education in order to bring about development”.<sup>3</sup>

Using African languages enables ‘enculturation’. By confining themselves to local languages and resources foreigners can be enabled to contribute, even if in a small way, to internally-motivated growth and development of the Christian church in Africa. Enculturation is not something done by people in think-tanks in ivory towers and in foreign languages. It is done with the people within the strictures of their economy and using their language in the ebb and flow of life.

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/mzungu-mzungu-an-appeal-for-vulnerable-western-missionaries-to-africa>

## Endnotes

1. On reading ‘Africa’, assume ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ in this article.
2. Of course not all Westerners are White, but the association seems to be strong in many people’s minds. ‘Mzungu’ being very widely used for Whites, has come to mean ‘White man’ in Kenya. It could also be taken as meaning (from Kiswahili) ‘he who walks around a lot’ or ‘the wise and capable one’. This phrase and variations of it are used to refer to Europeans in much of Eastern, Southern and Central Africa – and perhaps even beyond.
3. QORRO, MARTHA, A.S., 2003, ‘Unlocking Language Forts: language of instruction in post-primary education in Africa – with special reference to Tanzania.’ 187-196 In: Brock-Utne, Birgit and Desai, Zubeida and Qorro, Martha, 2003, *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA)*. Dar-es-Salaam: E and D Limited. 194.

---

# Vulnerable Mission Supports the Church in Africa, and Beyond

*by Dr. Jim Harries*

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, build a white elephant, or distract people from more useful activities.)

Also on offer from the West is its language. Your mother-tongue you get for free from your mother. Another language from afar, 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 it to control the recipients.

A 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 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 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, and instead that they do their work using local languages and resources. This forces the missionary to face the same difficulties as locals are facing, so enabling 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 ethnicity or citizenship.) 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 is growing in leaps and bounds. In much of Africa, white skin is equated with ignorance of local language and conditions and having money to give. Black skin is equated with knowledge of local conditions and languages and wanting money to receive.

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.

We are calling this way of working 'vulnerable mission'. 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. Usually they will need an additional support network from 'home'. 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, but on the commitment of locals challenged to do Christian service.

The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission is inviting interested people to attend conferences on vulnerable mission. It is seeking to add 'vulnerable mission' to other overseas activities already engaged in by the Western church. For details see <http://www.vulnerablemission.com>.

Dr. Jim Harries is the chairman of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission and a missionary in Africa.

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/vulnerable-mission-supports-the-church-in-africa-and-beyond>

---

# Deep, Diverse, Difficult: the Long Slow Task of Vulnerable Mission

By Richard Briggs

## Introducing the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission

The world has changed, and the world of mission is about to change. Small groups of people will meet in January of 2009 to chart one possible future of world mission. Rather than focus on mission statistics, or dream dreams of glorious success and strength and power, this group will consider *vulnerability* as the vocation, essence and leadership style of the missionary. In a post-2000 era where macro strategies no longer resonate, could a new way of thinking about incarnational ministry be about to reshape 21<sup>st</sup> century missions?

The story of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission began in 2007 with a meeting of a small international group of missionaries and mission scholars. They were passionately committed to mission, but frustrated. Despite their attempts to follow their cross-cultural calling to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ, they shared a sense that too often there were barriers and in-built problems in the mission settings where they had worked, and in the 'tools' or strategies they had been using. Aware of all the questions in the air about the changing paradigms of modernism and the post-modern, they were determined to bring some new direction to the practices of cross-cultural Christian mission.

Now the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission is ready to begin its next phase – bringing together a

wider group of people to talk and think and share stories about this new and radically different mindset for mission work. Their first major conferences on this theme will take place in the USA in January 2009, with further events arranged for Europe in the following months. Details of all 9 conferences are available at <http://www.vulnerablemission.com>.

## The Global Village: But at What Cost?

One of the most fundamental changes in today's world is in the very nature of communication itself, and this has had profound implications for the ways in which we understand culture and cultural difference. It has long been said that we live in a 'global village', but this idea has become much more deeply rooted during the communications revolution which engulfed the turn of the millennium and which is only speeding up as we embark on the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditional differences in nationality, in culture, and in social contexts and expectations, are increasingly disguised by the extraordinary speed and apparent ease of communication anywhere around the world today. People can use Facebook for generating friendship and Skype for free instantaneous interpersonal communication; they can be in contact with almost anyone anywhere at any time; and they can do much of it in the increasingly 'international'

language of English. But for all the benefits of this brave new world, there are some profound hidden costs in terms of the dynamics of cross-cultural communication.

Not so very long ago the world was clearly marked by national and international language and cultural boundaries. Today, by contrast, it is easy for what are essentially Western languages, marketing strategies, products, indeed the whole range of associations of Western culture, to be found anywhere around the globe. The latest youth trends of any well-resourced Western country can be disseminated around the world all but instantly. The communication is so fast, in fact, that it probably outruns the ability of those receiving it to keep up, in terms of making the necessary adjustments to understand these strange values and foreign modes of expression.

This works both ways: for every puzzled member of an extended family in Africa trying to conceive of why Americans get so excited watching a sit-com about *Friends* who have no attachments at all, there will be a puzzled American Christian running a small on-screen window playing the latest report from their missionary in Africa, giving perhaps the illusion that they are experiencing African culture all from the comfort of their kitchen table laptop. The 'global village' has come at a price: the dumbing down of cultural depth and diversity, and the reduction of cultural interaction to a simulation of the 'other', in fact as simply a slightly exotic version of oneself.

It was not always so. Even just a few decades ago, for people from different regions of the world to meet each other required real cultural exposure. An African coming to the USA, or a German going to China: these necessarily resulted in an uncovering of the way of life of the 'other'. To develop and certainly to deepen any relationship *required* a holistic exposure to the all the multi-dimensional messiness of someone with another language, interests, appearance, quirks, habits, customs, values, traditions, expectations... and all this would quickly become evident because any relationship required face-to-face contact.

The world was slower then, and the differences loomed large. But in faster times, the differences are not gone, just submerged and increasingly ignored as an irritating distraction or mere curiosity. The implications for Christian mission are enormous.

## The Global Gospel: but in how many different ways?

The founders of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (AVM) think the kinds of issues raised by these changing circumstances call for a radical rethink of contemporary Christian mission and its role in the global church. And in responding to these challenges, they want nothing less than to spearhead a renewal of mission into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Whereas the international communication revolution enables widespread communication but with little depth, the gospel of Jesus Christ spreads slowly, one person at a time, but with a depth which transforms lives from the inside out. So often when Christians have taken advantage of bigger, newer and faster ways of 'spreading the word', they have in the process reduced the gospel to something far more manageable than the life-changing reorientation which Jesus sought to provoke through his outrageous parables and perspective-shifting teaching, as he walked his painstaking way around Palestine, one person at a time.

People need depth as much as ever, and spiritual growth always comes where the challenge is strongest. All along the Christian faith has really been deep and demanding in every way. It is a sad irony indeed, then, that in today's world the gospel can sometimes be presented as if it were a kind of multi-national fund-raising opportunity, seeking new business partners and trying to sweeten the task of getting on board by downplaying the call to lifelong Christian discipleship.

So what will happen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, presented as it so often is amongst the English-as-international-language communication revolution? This is a question which deeply concerns the AVM. The prospects for the Gospel amidst the wide open communication lines of today may at first glance seem good, but the reality is more mixed. Yes, on one level the Scriptures are distributed more widely than ever before, and evangelism is enabled in ever new locations. But when such achievements and presence are strongly associated with the spread of the Western world, what are the implications?

Even more importantly for the 'poor world'; what are the implications of the Gospel so often coming hand in hand with foreign finance? Can its acceptance ever be heartfelt and can it become a deep and embedded part of a local community if it is perceived in some sense as a pre-requisite step along the way to the acquisition of foreign funds? Whatever gospel is being intended for (and preached in) such situations, one must ask: what sort of gospel is being heard? If communication in English becomes the key to successful relationships with the donors who present the Gospel, then will the Gospel be able to move into people's day to day lives, languages and cultures, or will it remain stuck in the international English that is so convenient for those who speak it, but is not the language of the heart for those who hear?

The AVM is well aware of all these dangers and more, if only from their own experiences of frustration and inability to get to the deep places of spiritual transformation in their own former experiences. They believe it is time to propose prayerfully a new way ahead, but this 'new' way draws on some very old ways of thinking, taking inspiration from some of the hard-fought lessons of mission work in ages past too. There is rich wisdom in the old and slow 'methods', rooted in the belief, surely correct, that there can never be a short-cut to engaging with people where they are and on terms that make sense to them.

So although increasing numbers of people may be spending more and more time on the internet, our experiences of depth and day to day dependence in human relationships often continue to be with those with whom we live physically, in the three-dimensional world of unprogrammable joy and despair. International internet English can simply never match a person's mother tongue in which the significant interactions of their home and family take place. Different cultural and physical contexts will always have a profound impact on people's worldviews. There is never going to be a shortcut to appreciating people, communicating with them, or understanding them without 'traditional' face to face interpersonal contact or the use of people's own languages.

## Vulnerable Mission: Two Proposals

Therefore the AVM proposes that there is an urgent need for mission to be done in the language of the people being reached, and without foreign subsidy in ministry. Such a proposal could bring far-reaching benefits.

Working in the local language forces the missionary to learn the culture of the people being reached, and enables a presentation of the Gospel that is relevant to that culture at depth. Using the language of the people is vital if one wants a deep comprehension of the particular issues that are being faced in any particular situation. If the culture is not comprehended at depth, then it is likely that any advice and counsel given will not make sense. And then it becomes unlikely that the missionary will be sought out for counsel in the first place, and they can end up largely irrelevant to the ongoing concerns of day to day living. How much more does this apply to disembodied forms of communication brought in pre-packaged from overseas. To have valued words to share one must understand at depth, and this in turn requires a profound knowledge of the local language.

Secondly, avoiding subsidy does away with 'pleasing the hand that feeds you', and forces missionaries to hear the truth and meet the rebuttals coming their way. The temptation to buy his or her way into acceptance by a community is avoided, and a missionary must consider how the eternal message of Jesus Christ impacts upon a community and takes root at its deepest levels. Everyone knows that true friendship and true respect cannot be bought, but the lines become blurred when financial subsidy goes hand-in-hand with any form of Christian ministry. By removing the complications of allied finance, the missionary is forced to earn (and to be seen to earn) friendship and respect only by a long-suffering and deep commitment. It's a slow approach – slow enough, perhaps, to stand a chance of being properly understood and embraced from the inside out.

## Responding to the Vision

The AVM is seeking to encourage Western people to engage in long-term Christian mission according to these twin principles: using the language of the people being reached, and without foreign subsidy to one's Christian ministry. This is what they mean by mission from a position of vulnerability.

Playing a leading role in the forthcoming AVM conferences is long-term missionary in Kenya, Dr. Jim Harries. For him, the challenge of vulnerable mission is a call to follow in the ways of Jesus in terms of identifying with the people one goes to, experiencing life alongside them, and trying, as far as possible, to see the world in their categories and through their own framework for understanding. Dr

Harries concludes: 'AVM is seeking missionaries who will follow this example in today's world. Please come and talk with us at the above conferences.'

It's a vision for mission which is both daring and yet also simple; new and yet also old. Vulnerable mission might not create headlines, but it might help change the world, if it is indeed getting on board with God's own slow and patient agenda.

*Richard Briggs teaches the Old Testament at Cranmer Hall, an Anglican theological college in Durham, England, and has previously been involved in mission work in Western Europe.*

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/vulnerable-mission-supports-the-church-in-africa-and-beyond>

---

# Vulnerable Mission: Radical Fringe or Common Practice?

By Stan Nussbaum

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 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.

Stan Nussbaum is Staff missiologist with GMI Research Services in Colorado Springs.

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/vulnerable-mission-radical-fringe-or-common-practice>

---

# Invulnerable Mission: a Confession

*by Rev Dr Stephen Skuce*

**S**t Patrick wrote his 'Confession' and right at the start I need to declare that what you are reading is my confession and, to some extent, my testimony. You see, I was a missionary in Sri Lanka and while I was contextual, holistic, evangelical, co-operative, fairly inclusive, living in the local church ministers' accommodation and so on, I was fairly invulnerable. Let me unpack that and then bring a challenge (to myself).

I served with the Methodist Church, Sri Lanka as a pastor between 1997 and 2001. I was assigned to that church by the Irish Methodist Church, of which I am a minister, and worked wherever the Sri Lankan church stationed me. Consequently I had pastoral responsibility for several churches in the capital city, including for my last couple of years a very large (approx 1000 membership) city centre congregation in a complex where the church headquarters were based alongside a very large Methodist school.

On the surface I was almost a model missionary. With my wife and two young daughters I lived in the local ministerial accommodation and avoided renting large, air conditioned homes like other missionaries in Colombo. I was paid the standard Irish Methodist missionary stipend which was very significantly less than my colleagues in Ireland received (although approximately 15 times the level of Sri Lankan colleagues). We had no private health insurance. I thought I was as culturally sensitive as a missionary could be: learning the language, eating the local food, observing local customs and integrating myself into the (at times) fairly alien way of life and ministry. Back in Ireland I was considered a fine missionary and in Sri Lanka was 'promoted' within the denomination, additionally taught in a

Bible College and got involved in the sort of social and building projects that holistic evangelical missionaries tend to promote. So far so good? But there is a but ...

Firstly, I never mastered the Sinhala language and defaulted to the use of English and translation where necessary. By way of justification, for a lot of my time my ministerial appointment was where I was expected to use only the English language. The Methodist Church Sri Lanka has several city congregations where English is the chosen medium. This reflects the education and choice of members and also offers a place where Sinhala and Tamil Christians can worship together in the same medium—the pragmatic use of English enabling a very important statement about the uniting power of the gospel to a tragically divided nation, although this, of course, helped to create evidence for the claim by some that Christianity was 'foreign' to Sri Lanka. It was local choice to use English for this purpose. I found myself personally questioning this policy, but also recognising issues that an outsider may be wise to be silent on. Yet it was seen as appropriate that I, as a foreigner, could be a 'successful' missionary in Sri Lanka without a mastery of Sinhala or Tamil. In my appointments I had three congregations meeting in the one building, congregations based on the use of English, Sinhala and Tamil respectively. Many of the members were bi- or trilingual, but many not. Joint meetings, irrespective of my presence, normally were conducted through English even though this disempowered some members. Language and its use is a key issue.

Secondly, like far too many evangelical missionaries, I was very keen 'to do' and not so keen

'to be'. One of my projects was to build a hostel for young working women who moved from rural areas to the capital. This was an excellent project that met the physical, social and spiritual needs of a group of vulnerable young women, introduced many of them to Christian faith and provided a financial income for the congregation which was spent on further social projects. The actual building was completed shortly after I left, financed with money I raised in Ireland. When I came back for the opening, to my surprise, disappointment and even a little shame, the grand dedication plaque contained my name (not the name of my Sri Lankan colleague who had the original vision) and reference to the financing by Irish Christians. Don't get me wrong, it is an excellent, self sustaining project, meeting a specific need in an appropriate contextual way. But it had to be largely financed from outside of Sri Lanka. Is this so bad? Maybe, maybe not. But what I did realise on the day of its opening was that as long as the building stood it would be a reminder of foreign influence, mostly financial, in a nation where Christians are (almost always) wrongly accused of 'buying' converts.

Thirdly, I was personally fairly invulnerable. My children attended a fee paying school, when sick we headed to the best fee paying hospital, and when the civil war appeared to put us at clear risk (as opposed to just the rest of the population) my wife and

children were ready to leave, even if I expected to remain. Finally, I left when one of my children found life in Sri Lanka increasingly difficult. Vulnerable mission? I found it hard to escape from the western mindset where so much of the lifestyle is intended to make us invulnerable.

Cross cultural mission, from everywhere to everywhere, is valid; but some of the ways in which this mandate is carried out need to be questioned. For me the real question is, will I do it differently in the future? Philosophically and theologically I have no hesitation in saying yes. But practically? Can I limit myself to Sinhala (or whatever language), and to whatever finance and ability can be generated locally? An answer comes to me not from my reasoning but my observation, because the 'successful' evangelists in Sri Lanka today are nationals who are incredibly vulnerable with little finance, at times little education, little protection and nowhere to escape to. And because of that, while in Ireland I was viewed as a successful missionary by what I did, I always knew that national workers were far more authentic to the gospel by who they were.

Rev Dr Stephen Skuce is with Cliff College, Hope Valley in the UK. He can be reached via email to [s.skuce@cliffcollege.ac.uk](mailto:s.skuce@cliffcollege.ac.uk)

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/invulnerable-mission-a-confession>

---

# Vulnerable Mission: You Mean What?

*By Jay Gary*

“You mean what?” I asked over breakfast, as Jim Harries explained the principles of Vulnerable Mission. “I agree with the principle of local language, but why should Western missionaries avoid using outside money to sustain ministry activities?”

As a mission leader and now a professor of leadership, I thought to myself, how will Vulnerable Mission ever fly, much less make headway against more powerful jet streams which now shape missions, such as Business as Mission, Social Entrepreneurship or Holistic Mission?

Since that breakfast I’ve initiated several email exchanges with various Vulnerable Mission stakeholders. I’ve also read several papers at [www.vulnerablemission.com](http://www.vulnerablemission.com) (see also [www.jim-mission.org](http://www.jim-mission.org)). I’ve come to the conclusion that Vulnerable Mission, marked by voluntary simplicity and poverty, can be a sign of hope for our times.

Despite flying straight into the headwinds of rock star activism or economic globalization, in due course Vulnerable Mission can become a core value among thousands of new missionaries, from both the West and Asia. Why do I believe the best about Vulnerable Mission? Three reasons: first, Vulnerable Mission encourages a new generation to engage in God’s mission in God’s way; second, Vulnerable Mission learns from the way of Jesus in his poverty; and third, Vulnerable Mission tempers the power of the Industrial age to remake the world into a shopping mall.

First, consider the new generation. Many younger 20- or 30-something Christians are not impressed by the strength of mega-churches, nor of economic globalization. They are anti-institutional, anti-war and anti-global. They stand against the day,

as David Korten warns, when corporations will rule the world. They care about social networks, personal authenticity, and spiritual relationships. As new monastics or emergent Christians, they are ready to do God’s work in God’s way. Vulnerable Mission can appeal to their aspirations.

Second, Vulnerable Mission is open to learn from the way of Jesus. Everyone in the gospels, who was drawn to Jesus, learned a different way. The Magi learned the way of humility and worship, in contrast to the killing machine of Herod. Paul learned the way on the road to Damascus, in contrast to the power of Second Temple proselytizers. Francis of Assisi learned the way of Jesus, in contrast to merchants and Knight Templars chasing after holy relics and crusades. In an age today marked by Islamic, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists feeding a clash of civilizations, can we learn the way of Jesus anew through Vulnerable Mission.

Third, Vulnerable Mission is a sign of the cross in an Industrial Age of media markets and hyper-consumerism. This missional mindset of embracing vulnerability calls us to take up our cross and deny ourselves. Vulnerable Mission can lead us beyond managerial and one-sided missions, where we target others, but not ourselves. Vulnerable Mission can be the hand of God to lift both the unevangelized and the evangelizer. It can transform the South and the North, and help us find mutual postures for global leadership.

Whatever noble plans we might have to employ human or financial capital to launch transformative enterprises in the developing world, we must guard against anything that violates the ‘spirituality of relational power,’ as Bob Linthicum writes.

Jim Harries has it right; we must not use the power of foreign language, or the power of foreign money to overplay our hand. We must not overshadow the formation of new indigenous churches. We must model the way of Jesus. We must avoid any practice that creates neo-colonialism and Western dependency.

Instead as servants, as missional Christians, we who have been sent – as Jesus was sent (John 20:21), must learn from those we serve and appreciate local ways of thinking, being and doing. Please join me in making plans to attend an upcoming Vulnerable Mission conference in Germany, the UK or in the U.S.

JAY GARY is an assistant professor at Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, in Virginia Beach, VA. He is also the program director for a new online Master of Arts in Strategic Foresight, [www.regent.edu](http://www.regent.edu); helping mid-career professionals from both ministry and the marketplace learn authentic leadership, innovation and strategy as practice. He is best known among Evangelicals as the lead developer of the Perspectives Study Program and the AD 2000 Movement. For more see [www.jaygary.com](http://www.jaygary.com).

## Comments?

Post them online: <http://www.momentum-mag.org/2008/10/vulnerable-mission-you-mean-what>