To Compromise on Missionary Vulnerability in Africa?
- a response to critics of 'Vulnerable Mission'

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Jesus said unto him,
"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God
with all thy heart,
and with all thy soul,
and with all thy mind."
Matthew 22:37 (KJV)

"We can be vulnerable
because we are,
in the end,
simply invulnerable."[1]

Abstract

This article is a *response* to perceived criticisms of VM (vulnerable mission). After defining VM, the author acknowledges that some Western mission activities to Africa cannot easily be 'vulnerable'. Vulnerability is largely an either/or quality. The aim of VM is not to 'slightly increase' one's vulnerability. VM is not 'extremist', because what is being proposed is that some and not necessarily all missionaries follow it. It enables a missionary to be a pioneer, rather than a cog in a (largely Western) machine. It is needed in response to past missionary 'abuses'. It is a way for a missionary to build a reputation other than on the back of access to outside resources. VM needs to be promoted in its 'radical form' so as to be clearly communicated to challenge those wanting an 'easy way out' in mission. It is a way of challenging the indigenous African 'patron-client' system. It is a way of leveling the playing field between Africans and missionaries. It is a way of avoiding traps – particularly those of creating dependency. VM is not just another recipe for the 'polite humility' of missionaries. Because it is designed to tackle power issues in a carefully thought out way, it should be implemented and not 'compromised'.

Glossary

Vulnerable mission by Western missionaries in Africa is that ministry which operates in the language of the people being reached without outside financial subsidy.[2]

Introduction

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[1] Willard, Dallas. *Divine Conspiracy: rediscovering our hidden life in God*. San Francisco: Harper. 181.
[2] For more details see Harries, Jim, 2006. 'Vulnerable Mission as an Alternative to Failing Aid Paradigms.' http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/vulnerable-mission-as-an-alternative.pdf (accessed 21st January 2011) Note that the key thing here is not the provision of resources, but their control. If there was a means through which someone could contribute resources but then not 'control' them, for example have veto power over their use, then that would be a different case. It is very difficult to achieve this.

Vulnerable mission as we are defining it is Christian mission from the West to the majority world that confines itself in some key ministry to the use of local languages and resources. Sometimes I am told that vulnerable mission is too narrow. Some want 'vulnerable mission' to be something that can be adopted by all missionaries. Yet it seems to be too difficult and too extreme for many. What is needed, these advisors say, is a way for otherwise 'normal' missionaries to become more vulnerable. I attempt to answer such and other criticisms of vulnerable mission in this article.

Because this article is designed to answer criticisms of vulnerable mission, it is best read by someone who already has an understanding of what 'vulnerable mission' is. Such knowledge can be acquired by reading other material. See footnote 2 below.[3]

I think it would be excellent to be able to find the means to make 'normal' missionaries more vulnerable to the people they are reaching. This would seem to need a mission strategy that is broad enough to cover a wide variety of situations. That is, that can be adopted by many kinds of people in many kinds of ministries and contexts. Who would want to argue against that? Unfortunately what might be gained in breadth may be lost in depth. There may be kinds of mission work that as a result of their very nature *cannot* be rendered vulnerable; especially missionary activities using foreign languages and resources, and claiming to have superior insights of other than divine origin.[4]

Vulnerable mission as promoted here may be in some ways narrow, but it is also deep. My focusing on this does not mean that other missionaries should not be vulnerable. I would like to demonstrate that the most critical need is for a few truly vulnerable missionaries, rather than many 'slightly vulnerable' ones.

When one is only 'slightly vulnerable' one is of course not really vulnerable. 'Slight' emphases on vulnerability easily become lost as other needs and demands rise in apparent importance. The need for vulnerability cuts to the heart of much of the current Western missionary enterprise to poor parts of the world such as Africa. This is because this enterprise rests largely on assumed superiority, whether that is linguistic, technological, cultural, or educational and so on. Starting from a position of assumed superiority is not, it seems to me, a good foundation for vulnerability. (The exception is of course for a 'superior' knowledge about the nature of God.) In fact, does it not negate the possibility of true vulnerability? Am I vulnerable to someone if I already know what is best for them, and I am going to do all that I can to ensure that they take that 'best' course? Suggesting that missionaries to Africa be 'vulnerable' can be threatening to some Western missionaries working in or for Africa. Does that make it wrong?

I do not believe 'compromise' to be a Biblical word. The Bible calls for devotion, obedience and sacrifice of one's life for others. It does not advocate a mediocre life, but a life stretched to the extreme in service. While accepting that the need for some very vulnerable missionaries does not do away with the call for a more general vulnerability, I am not sure that I know how to effectively and helpfully[5] encourage that more general vulnerability. I

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[3] See previous footnote.
[4] For example those rooted in science, the foundations of which the target people given their particular worldview may fail to grasp.
[5] The aim of 'vulnerability' is to have one's presuppositions challenged and interventions guided fully by local conditions. The exception is of course the knowledge of God that is the central concern of a missionary, but that also needs to be expressed differently according to culture and context.

propose that there be missionaries, even if only a few, who be 'truly vulnerable' in at least part of their ministry.

1. Is Vulnerable Mission Extremist?

Moderation and avoiding extremes are often seen to reflect maturity. Young people tend to be radical in their thinking. Experience mellows them and accumulating years soften people's stand. The insistence on strict adherence to particular missiological principles (for example that local languages must be used and outside resources not be used in one's ministry) would therefore, according to some, seem to be a sign of immaturity to be put aside for practical purposes.

Extremes can appear divisive. Compromise results in mutual acceptance and in following comparable tracks of Christian service and ministry. This is especially important in the foreign-mission scene; it being known that what causes many missionaries to leave the field is difficult relationships with their missionary colleagues.[6] The last thing we would seem to want in the powder keg of human relationships on the African mission field, the critics will say, is stubborn people who prefer to stick to radical principles rather than adjust to what their fellow missionaries are doing.

The call for 'compromise' can be a rational and functional one. In foreign mission after all, everyone compromises. Medical people have to get by with fewer facilities than they are used to at home. Teachers have to adjust their expectations when they find that the standard of knowledge of English of their students is lower than that of native English speakers. Task oriented people have to come to terms with operating on 'African time'. Mission station fishbowls (the fact that on the African mission field the people one works with are the same ones that one socializes with and all under the close observation of the local community) require having to make do with less than ideal social networks. Hence surely a 'vulnerable missionary' also needs to compromise, so as not to be a divisive threatening presence in the missionary community at large?

Having outlined reasons why 'vulnerable missionaries' might ought to compromise like everybody else, I want to give the reasons why I believe that certain aspects of the guidelines of vulnerable mission (use the local language and don't use local resources in ministry) need for a few missionaries to be held to dearly.

Influential missiologists that guide the Western missionary enterprise are almost invariably based in the West. Unfortunately understanding arising from previous missionary experience, for all its value in their task, tends as a result to be distorted by interaction with the wisdom of their new circumstances. Radical scholars who fail to see eye to eye with their professional colleagues are less likely to climb career ladders or to acquire academic recognition. That scholarly communities are mutually self-regulating is often helpful; but self-regulatory mechanisms may act contrary to the interests of certain aspects of the truth. I have elsewhere pointed out how aspects of the 'truth' of the nature of life in Africa become compromised when translated to the West, for example in their having to be put into European languages. Because scholars working in the West or in close interaction with the West tend to adjust

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[6] "In reality, there is usually more conflict among ex-patriots than with national workers" Schultz, Geoge, nd. 'Pre-Field Training: Your Missionary's Future May Depend On It.' http://www.caminternational.org/index.cfm?go=page&pid=109 (accessed 23rd May 2007)

their stand to fit with colleagues, the scholarly community's tendency to condemn the 'extreme' may arise from bias.

2. Is there a Role for Missionaries Who are not Cogs-in-the-Machine?

Western people rarely perceive just how universally their daily lives are guided by national or even global concerns. That is; how they seek to make personal gains through serving the collective whole. For instance, many people's work is only of value in so far as others play their part. So one person will teach students, while another will write the examinations that they will sit, which can only work if the curriculum is mutually known and understood. Businessmen do not seek to provide for their own needs but those of others, in return for financial reward. The money they acquire is then used to purchase services from others who are working on the same principle. Businessmen producing shirts will not make only enough for themselves and their families, but will take advantage of economies of scale and make many more shirts in the hope that they can sell most of them and acquire other needs with their resultant earnings. An engineer may spend his life designing and manufacturing an item that is entirely useless by itself, but has an important role in a process in which other components that this engineer does not concern himself with are also necessary. Many Westerners are these days very careful with their resource use; conserving small amounts of electricity, preferring to use recycled paper, choosing to take a train instead of driving a car to work, purchasing the same product for a higher price because it is believed to have been 'fairly' produced and so on. This continues, even though any one person's orientation to doing this is bound to have only a very limited impact on the economy or environment under concern. People in all kinds of professions in the West are very accustomed to perceiving themselves as only a small part in a large complex social machine, in which the meaningfulness of the role of every part is dependent on the functioning of the whole.

This tendency to 'community orientation' is very different in many parts of the world outside of the West – especially Africa. The economy of the latter is largely based on family-sized agricultural units providing for their own immediate needs using primarily resources from their own land. That is, interdependent social units in Africa are very small by comparison with the global situation increasingly in the mind of Westerners in the world today. This tendency to focus on small social units is well illustrated by Shorter's observation that even urban African contexts have much of 'farmyard' about them.[7] Those African people who live in towns and cities tend to see economic security in home production of food rather than dependence on the wider market. It is very important for many African people to have a home built in the rural area even if they live and work in the city, for a similar reason. The urban system is not theirs, one day it will fail, and woe betide the person who has no rural home built to retreat to. The cattle rustling that goes on in parts of the African continent illustrates the same tendency – of looking after one's own social group regardless of the consequences for others. The African person of one clan or tribe is relatively (by comparison with the West) inclined to see a member of another clan as an enemy, and to understand himself as benefiting from the demise and not the prosperity of the 'other'.[8]

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[7] Shorter, Aylward, 1991. *The Church in the African City.* New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books. 7.
[8] Hence Mboya tells us that in the traditional Luo people's culture a cattle thief will be prosecuted only if the owner of the animal he has stolen is known. (Mboya, Paul. 1997. *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi.* np. 5.) Jealousy is widely known as being a problem in Africa – people do not like others to prosper more than they do. (Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1976, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande. (Abridged.)* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 45.)

Note that while it is often said that African and not Western societies are more community oriented and holistic, the apparent contradiction to this above arises from translation difficulties. With some risk of oversimplification; we can say that community in Africa is spiritually based, whereas in the West it is rationally based. That is, African people work together through fear of curses and calamity that would befall them should they break the taboos that bind them together, whereas Westerners carry strong notions of purpose and achievement that arise from their pulling together on a material/rational plane.

To reiterate; many Westerners see themselves as having a global, or at least national rather than a provincial perspective, so see themselves (by default) as extending the benefits of an inter-connected global society to the particular community they are reaching. That is – Western missionaries and aid workers see themselves not as isolated individuals, but as representatives of an enormous 'civilisation' that stands behind them. Such self-understanding clearly impacts the way they will operate within a local community in a given locality. But is this the best position for mission today? Are missionaries (and other Westerners) to fulfill a role that satisfies a large complex pre-existing community that has sent them, or are they to give a 'wholistic' testimony to a relatively small community in which they find themselves? The former means that their strings are being pulled by people from outside of the community that they are reaching. This is likely not to be understood by people from within their target society. The missionary or aid worker will be seen as a representative of foreigners, and will clash with local values.[9]

Few Westerners will claim themselves to be God. Fewer and fewer (at least in 'secular Europe') will even claim their society to be particularly guided by God. But, missionaries clearly claim to represent God in what they do and in how they interact with a host community. In the absence of a secular worldview in Africa, a non-missionary will also often be seen by many African people as representing God or being a god. If what those missionaries have to offer is 'globalised knowledge', then has God not become the globalised human society? Is God the Spirit of globalisation? If God is this global society, then how can there be a prophetic voice from outside of it? Is this alignment of God and 'society' either Christian or Biblical? This 'god' being of a society unfamiliar to many outside of the West means that those advocating 'him' advocate a dependence on the unfamiliar. This kind of approach clearly fosters dependency, which is not dependency on God in heaven of whom we read in the Scriptures, but on the 'global community', i.e. the West.

I advocate that a Christian missionary should set out to represent the Almighty God. That is the God who desires equally to be God to every community (Romans 10:12-13). Not God of one community – the 'global West', but God of all. Representing God is, I suggest, different from representing one's home community. Vulnerable mission, here being discussed, is an attempt at ensuring that a missionary does indeed represent God by being vulnerable to the community being reached, so as to understand that community and speak to it as God would want to speak and not as a representative of an earthly (globalised) kingdom would speak. A missionary has not been sent by a foreign government to represent their interests, or a foreign church to extend the realm of their control, but to introduce people to divine truth. (Aid and development thinking having arisen from European 'Christian' thinking has the same roots as the Christian mission community, so I here consider the two to be parallel concerns.) The people who advocate compromising 'vulnerable mission' are in effect advocating, I suggest,

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[9] That is not to say that s/he won't be appreciated. Such a person may be very much appreciated, but will not be able to work in the same way as local people.

that Western missionaries (in Africa) should continue to operate from that position and understanding that arises from the Western (or 'global') community. Vulnerability is needed for a missionary to acquire the perspective of the people being reached, and is a pre-requisite to speaking to them truthfully and honestly about the true God.

3. How to Overcome Preconceptions on Missionary Identity

A missionary who moves from the West to Africa today does not enter a historical vacuum. Certainly in the case of parts of Africa here under scrutiny, presuppositions held by Africans as to the nature of 'Westerners', typically Whites, already abound. A new visitor to Africa from the Western world already has an identity before they open their mouth or put their foot on the ground. This identity is often largely unknown to them, because it is not rooted in the familiar (to the new missionary) West, but in African culture, languages, history and ways. This identity has many features, typically including that missionaries are wealthy, that they will expect to use their own language in relating to the people they will meet, that they have the kind of global orientation to life mentioned above, that they will find the African people to be dirty and superstitious, and that they are unreliable and untrustworthy (see below). The question that a new worker ought to ask himself is – what should I do with this identity? Do new workers want to run with it, or do they want to challenge it? Do they want to understand it and work from a position of knowing what it means so as to communicate clearly from within it, or will they choose to ignore it as if it is inconsequential? How can they challenge it until they have recognised it?

The identity of speakers clearly affects how their words are heard. For example, an adult asking a child to be quiet is different from a child making the same request to a fellow child. Someone known to be wealthy and generous offering to assist me in building a house (who might give me a gift) is different from a bank manager offering to help me build it (who might give me a loan), which is different again from a craftsman builder making the same offer (who might offer to do the construction for me), and different again than the same offer if it came from terrorists (a cynical suggestion that if I build, they will destroy). Numerous examples could be sited of the same principle. Hence if we receive a message, letter or email, one of the first things we want to know is – 'who is it from?' So then; who are you, missionary to Africa?

A new missionary faces three closely related dilemmas: First, to know 'who they are' in a community that they are reaching; Second, to know how it is appropriate to respond given 'who they are'; Third, to find and then work from an appropriate identity given their God-given objective of testifying to the love of Christ. Given the long history of European intervention, assuming that one can just 'become a normal part of a typical African community' is, I suggest, naïve.

The reputation of Westerners as being wealthy and ignorant (of local languages, customs and ways of life) is particularly troublesome. The combination of economic power and local ignorance will result in people relating to a missionary being apprehensive. This will contribute to many seeing their relationship with the missionary primarily as a means to economic advance. How can the missionary tell whether or not the interest being shown in their project, programme or in themselves is motivated by a hope for economic or material gain? It is very easy in Sub-Saharan Africa today for a foreign missionary to totally unknowingly contribute to the spread of the prosperity Gospel. That is, to convey the understanding that the source of the kind of wealth that the West has arises primarily from

correct practice in worship and prayer. Countering the spread of this harmful doctrine requires knowledge of the context in which one's living, speaking and behaving is interpreted. But how can one acquire such knowledge if one's wealth instantly puts one at the top of the economic hierarchy? After all; people won't bite the hand that feeds them.

Attempting to operate in a community in which one cannot be trusted is particularly difficult. Community mores that guide social behaviour have deep roots in culture and tradition. People are able to function together within an organic community because of mutual understanding regarding those mores. Foreigners who do not have a 'vulnerable' approach to a community do not get to learn what those mores are. Hence we have the combination of a reluctance of African people to trust Westerners with sensitive information, alongside a jostling for the position of 'special friend' (with the hope for material / economic gain) when someone from European descent enters into an African community. I can give a church context as an example. Many African people see (some of the reasons for this have already been explained above) the church as a source of prosperity. Their allegiance to the church leadership is therefore related to economic dependence, or hope for material advance. Jealousy is known to be a widespread character of African people and communities.[10] It has been shown time and time again that Western visitors to Africa have money to give out. Typically they like to give money (or favours, even if years later) to people whom they have related to on a personal basis. People hosting the visitors, through knowing the above, are forced to restrict and carefully guard access to them if they are not going to risk loosing financial advantage to someone else. If the host is the leader of a church, then allowing those under him to get close to the visitor will, and I have personally seen this happen time and time again, be very likely to split the church. That is, once someone acquires a source of wealth independently from the church leader, they may leave that church and start their own.

One of the biggest factors that makes Westerners so unreliable and therefore unlikely to be privy to sensitive contexts, information and understanding when they reach Africa, is their tendency to put their hands in their pockets and give out funds without sufficient awareness of the context they are in. This would obviously *not* be a concern if the Westerner were poor. The tendency of Westerners to involve themselves materially and financially in poor communities that they do not understand condemns them to the perpetuation of the 'traditional' image of the ignorant European. Hence the need for vulnerability in mission in order to acquire a position as an informed member of a community, to try and counter the less than helpful implicit relationship structure that is already there as a result of experience of previous generations of Westerners in Africa.

4. Can Contemporary Missionaries Overcome the Identity in Africa of Westerners as Overloaded with Money?

The reputation of Westerners for wanting to invest foreign finance, often in vast (on a local scale, and sometimes also a global scale) quantities, is extremely prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa. In those parts with which I have personal familiarity (I have lived and worked primarily in Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania). There is not even a question about this. It is expected for a Westerner sooner or later to invest major resources into a project(s).

It is a human tendency for people to evaluate one another. A visitor to Africa is going to be under the scrutiny of the local community. They will want to know who they are, why they

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[10] As per footnote 7 above.

are there, and what they intend to do. They will report the outcome of their research to others. Is this 'reputation' of a missionary important to their ministry? I suggest that it is. Not that someone should always do things to please others. That may not be the best reputation to have. But, what kind of reputation is the missionary looking for? I presume a Christ-like reputation. Was Christ known for his material generosity, for handouts, for his building projects, and for founding of foreign institutions? I think not.

But then, what happens when Westerners are known for their material generosity is quite simply that they are evaluated according to the same. We have a situation in Africa today, in which in many local people's eyes a 'good' foreign missionary is one who has a lot of resources to give away. By implication a 'bad' missionary is one who has few resources to hand out. By handing out wealth a missionary is filling the traditional much respected African role of 'patron', and will acquire clients. The more they have to give away, the more popular they will be, and the more clients they will acquire. So there is a scale from excellent missionaries who are good fundraisers and are much loved, to very good missionaries, to good missionaries, and finally rather poor missionaries who have little money to spend. To put this another way; the more money foreigners have to spend, the greater their popularity. (This is obviously not entirely true, as there other character traits that are considered by people in addition to generosity. But I feel justified in giving material generosity a prime status.) Missionaries are all too often these days evaluated by local people according to the material benefits they have to pass on.

I suggest that this un-biblical (and certainly un-Christ-like) means of evaluating a foreign missionary needs to be challenged. This means opting out of the system in which favour is acquired using resources. Failing to 'opt out' is simply inviting a poor evaluation: if one missionary drills fifty wells in a year and another only two, both have identified themselves as 'well-diggers' but the former is clearly a better well-digger (i.e. missionary) than the latter. So with all other services – number of buildings built, clinics started, medicines brought, roofs put onto churches, hungry people fed, orphans looked after, widows provided for financially, vaccinations given and so on. If a missionary wants their identity to be in these things, then they may as well go the whole hog and do as much or many as they can of what they are doing. And there are many doing just that.

But what if a missionary invested themselves into a ministry, but did not bring in foreign resources to support it? The first response by African people may well be amazement; even shock or disbelief. This person is challenging their notion that what missionaries have to offer is superior resources. Then the people have to ask themselves – why are they here? What do they have to offer? Perhaps on investigating they will find that they offer Christ. To be known as offering Christ of the Scriptures a Western missionary may well have to opt out completely from their conventional Western identity as a resource person.

That is why it is important in practice not to compromise on the principles of 'vulnerable mission'. It was people's disappointment in Jesus' refusal to take up political power that had them realise that his kingdom was a spiritual kingdom. He did not compromise on this score. He did not take up any political office. Hence he confounded the view that his mission was political and that he was a king of this world (John 18:33-40). The same principle applies to missionaries to Africa today. Hence a missionary's ministry should be rooted in poverty, and not in a wealth of foreign resources.

5. Avoiding Giving License to Ministering with Money and Technology

Another reason to stick strictly to the advocating of 'poverty' for missionaries is because there is an army of Western people looking for loopholes. That is, looking for license or theological sanction for their materialist efforts. This became clear at the 1974 Lausanne conference, at which the pronouncement that 'development' efforts were as genuinely Christian as Gospel preaching, was met by euphoric celebration.[11] This 'loophole' gave ecclesial license to a plethora of well-meaning but paternalistic activities that bypass the Gospel and a lot of accumulated missions' wisdom in their service to 'the poor'. It is this granting of license from which, it seems clear to me, we are still suffering today. Numerous Western Christian organisations have especially since 1974 concentrated on 'development' and 'aid' activities at the expense of Gospel teaching. (I have looked at this in more detail elsewhere.[12]) My insistence that vulnerable mission principles not be compromised is an attempt to avoid opening loopholes to people whose actions can seriously compromise the Gospel.

Unfortunately Padilla, on advocating that the Gospel be 'holistic',[13] failed to realise that this was opening the door not to holiness, but to disempowering local communities and making them dependent on foreign technology and resources. Notions of holism rooted in the Bible as well as many traditional societies, recognise that God impacts people's day to day lives and not only their 'religious experience'. (This is what in primal religion was understood to have been the role of ancestors.) But, the secular West has left no room for a 'role for God'. Even Christians in the secular West have taken many of the values of their culture on board, and so through seeking to influence people's lives by means (financial and technological) divested of spiritual content are implicitly denying the truly 'holistic' Gospel. Meanwhile all too many of the people being reached with this 'gospel' having an insufficient grounding in God's word (both in terms of understanding and experience) understand material and financial contributions to 'holistic Gospel' designed through rational lifestyles as arising from magic, that is closely akin to what they understand as happening in their own tradition.[14] This boosts the already seriously misleading prosperity Gospel, much akin to the renowned cargo cult of the Pacific region, in which preachers in Africa seek to acquire vehicles, build churches, find wives, become wealthy and even acquire degrees through prayer. Hence Sato's commenting that in Pentecostal churches in cities around the world people with "outrageous vision[s] ... set goals for themselves that are utterly unattainable by normal human standards [yet] ... they often times attain these goals."[15]

The root of this problematic heresy is in many ways in translation. Westerners finding their language (English) in use in the Anglophone African countries (and beyond) that they visit assume the local people who know how to imitate their words to understand what they are saying. In reality this is the case only to a very limited extent. Terms such as 'sustainable

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[11] Padilla, Rene, C. 'Holistic Mission.' Occasional Paper 33. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004. 13.

[12] Harries, Jim. 2008. 'Material Provision' or Preaching the Gospel: reconsidering holistic (integral) mission.' *Evangelical Review of Theology.* Volume 32. No. 3. July 2008. 257-270.

[13] Padilla, 'Holistic Mission.'

[14] Harries, Jim, 2000, 'The Magical Worldview in the African Church: what is going on?' 487-502 In: *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4, October 2000 and Harries. 'Material Provision.'

[15] Sato, Timothy, 2002, 'Outrageous Vision: a conversation with Donald Miller about global Pentecostalism.' In: *Christianity Today*. November/December 2002 http://www.christianityody.com/bc/2002/006/18.31.html The reason they attain the goals, speaking as a Westerner, is of course because foreigners support them financially and in other ways.

development' are understood very differently by non-Westerners, accustomed to a lifestyle in which magic rules.[16]

Insisting that there be no compromise in applying principles of 'vulnerable mission' is an attempt to counter this heresy, that is extremely destructive in many insidious ways in African communities. The principles of vulnerable mission do not deny initiative and innovation, but they do deny that a Western missionary should constantly buy his/her advantage in relationship over and above local people. Let the Westerner instead work in a way that local people can imitate. That is much more helpful in the long term. It is a means to utilising local people's capabilities instead of rendering them irrelevant to the development task.

Some astute African church goers are very aware of the contradictions inherent in so-called holistic (now often known as integral) mission. They know that they are required to listen to a lot of 'Christian verbiage', and will sit through it patiently, waiting for the moment when the real action happens, and visitors or missionaries tell of their spending plans. Those who only tune in to the latter may miss out on the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

6. Should Missionaries become a Part of the African Patron-Client System?

David Maranz provides a clear and vivid account of an African approach to economics, apparently the same in principle throughout SSA, based on clients who are pre-occupied in taking advantage of wealthier patrons.[17] This way of life seems to continue unabated today, with just some adjustments and accommodations to the current era. It is a system of life in which relationship is key to success. That is – it is not what you know (or what you can do) but who you know, that counts. I have suggested elsewhere[18] that Europeans going to Africa typically find their niche by occupying patron roles.

Some missions' thinkers suggest that such 'fitting in' to African communities as a wealthy patron is a part of a Europeans 'respecting' of African culture.[19] On the contrary, I want to suggest that a European missionary need not and ought not to underwrite this aspect of African 'culture' because:

a. In encouraging a primary role for relationship (who you know) in order to progress in life, the patron-client system discourages many of the qualities that have been foundational to the wealth which has given Western culture its great renown in Africa. For Westerners to encourage this system just because it is a part of African 'culture' is to be dishonest, as people will be looking to them for insights into Western ways of *generating* wealth.

b. A missionary or aid worker travelling to 'poor' Africa is already a contradiction of the patron-client system. Why go to the poor if you need neither their money nor their services? According to the patron-client system it should be the other way around.[20] Foreign worker's failing to contradict the patron/client system while in Africa suggests that they have come to

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[16] Harries. 'The Magical Worldview'
[17] Maranz, David, 2001, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa.* Dallas: SIL International
[18] Harries, 'Vulnerable Mission.'
[19] I have picked this up in discussion at different places in a recent visit to the USA. Maranz himself seems to support this notion (Maranz. *African Friends.* 208.).
[20] Maranz. *African Friends.* 74-76.

Africa for personal material gain, something believed by many Africans,[21] but that the majority of missionaries would prefer to deny.

c. The Scriptures are themselves, it seems clear to me, an intentional and overt contradiction of the patron/client system. Christ came to the poor. God's grace is offered freely – and not conditional on external subservience on fear of rejection. We are told in 1 Samuel that God chose to work through Jesse's least likely son (1 Samuel 16:11-12). God chose the pastoral people the Hebrews and not the powerful Babylonians or Egyptians to be his own. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" says Zechariah 4:6. Christ's incarnation itself epitomises his rejection of the patron client system, well illustrated by the well known hymn recorded in Philippians 2:6-9.

d. Patron-client thinking is the foundation for much of the corruption that troubles many countries in Africa. Such making African economies inimical to development should not be encouraged. In other words; their home economy being bountiful is insufficient reason to oblige missionaries (i.e. God's servants) to be patrons. (God's servants need to listen to God, and not simply respond mechanically to the demands of economic conditions.)

That is not to say that the patron/client system should be overtly condemned by non-African people. While in my view missionaries (or development workers) should not overtly condemn the patron/client system, they should refuse to follow its precepts. This is one of the cultural traits that the Gospel does *not* uphold.

7. Can a Missionary Achieve a Level Playing Field with African Colleagues?

Sport has become a massive international institution. Uncountable millions follow the world cup and Olympic Games on radio, television and newspapers. Sport is a great leveler. Contestants who meet on the sports-field are stripped to the level of their personal physical capacities. Massively wealthy and incredibly poor countries meet as equals on the soccer field. The outcome depends on how they perform for those 90 minutes, regardless of whether a player's most valuable personal possession is a bicycle or a jumbo jet.

I wonder how appreciative a football team would be if their coaches only experience was in playing table-football? Or the judo team if it was to be trained by someone who only knew how to engage in simulated fights on a computer? Or an infantry-brigade if it received its engagement instructions from a jet pilot who had never engaged in ground warfare? In sport and warfare thankfully we know that the best coach, or even the only good coach, is the one who knows and who has experienced the conditions faced by the players (soldiers).

An important reason for missionaries to use local languages, and not to subsidise their ministries with outside resources, is to enable them to effectively instruct and guide others to continue God's work in conditions prevailing *in the absence of* foreign funding and in the contexts of the people they are reaching.

I am surprised by just how many people concerned with mission to the 'Third World' fight against this principle in favour of constant Western subsidy of their operations. Often this struggle is rooted in guilt. People feel guilty if they do not utilise their 'superior' Western

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[21] I hear this very frequently from African people who I know.

technology, knowledge and finance in their missionary task. What is the source of this guilt, and should it be there?

History is one source of guilt. Relations between Europe and Africa are stained with historical memories of slavery. As horrific as was slavery, and as important as it is to avoid repetition of such practices, I do not think that I need feel guilty for something done by my ancestors long before I was born. The Bible confirms this to me – "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous will be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Ezekiel 18:20 KJV). Whatever impact the slave-trade did or did not have on African societies and economies, I do not see that all contemporary Westerners today need to feel guilty for it.

Guilt felt by Western Christians on meeting what they perceive of as poverty, betrays something about the true source of their personal hopes and fears. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that a Christian's hopes should *not* be in this world (John 15:19) or in any abundance of possessions (Luke 12:15). Perhaps someone's feelings cannot be helped. Perhaps someone accustomed to having a house full of gadgets feels bad on seeing a lady cooking over a wood fire in a muddy kitchen with only 2 pots, a knife and a spoon. But then the person concerned ought to realise that their guilt may be *their* issue, of which the lady who has never known another way of cooking may be totally oblivious. If the West needs to feel guilty about having amassed all kinds of material things that are causing them problems and certainly resulting in a substitution of these things for God in their society – does it follow that the rest of the world must be made to suffer by their insisting that everyone else receive a surplus of those things that they insist on dumping on to them?

One of the saddest things to be seen in SSA today is the extent to which African people are implicitly and explicitly being told that they 'ought to be' like Westerners. The media, advertising, education, fashions, and even wealthy people's public presentations of themselves in Kenya, very often point to the same thing – an African understanding of what it is to have a Western way of life is set up as an ideal for African communities. A few examples will illustrate this. Let us take advertising. Family size shown in advertisements in Kenya is almost invariably of 2 or at the most 3 children, even though actual families are usually much larger than this. African homes are often shown as cluttered with materialist goods as are European ones. Couples are almost invariably depicted as monogamous – as if second and third wives are of no importance. In education books, languages of instruction, curricula and teaching styles advocated are almost invariably Western. African ladies seem to be following their Western counterparts into wearing trousers instead of skirts. The media is borrowing Western reporting styles often almost point by point, ignoring local conditions. The way up in African society is almost invariably 'the way of the West'.

One factor that exacerbates the guilty feelings of Westerners in relation to Africa is the fact that Westerners have set up and continue to set up their lives as the ideal for others to follow (even when it is actually impossible for many reasons for them to do so). As a British person coming to Africa, I find that 80% of what constitutes 'upper class' culture in Anglophone Africa is what I am! To behave in the way that is natural for me in Britain, is to identify with the upper class elites of African society.

If this were to be happening due to market pressures, we could say it is an inevitable part of human mixing and interchange. Much of it however is *not* of this ilk. It arises from subsidies

of numerous kinds. The wide spread of English, for example, is only to a small part due to expanding business from England or America. It is largely international and supposedly charitable bodies, many (if not all) of which have deep roots in European Christian history, that are responsible for such spread of English through subsidy of all sorts from free books to foreign aid.

British and American ways of life being identified with the rich and prosperous classes today makes it especially difficult for British and American people to work in the interests of the poor. Many people certainly in Africa are so desirous of learning British/American language and culture, as to fool some missionaries into thinking that in spreading their culture, they are serving God. Many aspects of family life (including what ought to be a private life) of British and American people having been set up as the international and wealthy ideal, makes it difficult for missionaries from Britain or America even to maintain privacy without appearing to be guilty. The way to turn people to God instead of to a culture is not to try to display it, show it off or claim it to be superior. Hence a Western missionary reaching Africa should not use their Western language or Western-originated resources in their ministry.

I suggest that the analogy of sport referred to above is a more helpful guide to effective mission, than Western guilt. As in sport, an understanding of the way a game is played (social, physical, economic etc.) is a prerequisite to being a helpful part of a team (community). Western missionaries could helpfully stop using guilt as an excuse, and get on with working with people in a way that *the people themselves* understand. If non-believers want to continue to be pre-occupied with wealth and technology transfers, then let that be their business. Christians, I believe, should follow God's example in Jesus Christ of accepting people into his kingdom, as they are.

The impact of many ministries by Westerners in Africa can be multiplied greatly through the use of outside subsidy. It is less often realised that this multiplication is almost invariably at great 'cost'. Especially 'cost' of ministry not fitting to the life situation of people being reached, and not being sustainable without the use of outside resources. Such ministry can easily be a dead-end road to nowhere for local people.

8. Are there 'Traps' in Inter-Cultural Involvement, and can They be Avoided?

I have considered the question of 'avoiding traps' in more detail elsewhere.[22] I recap on some of it here to counter anticipated objections to some of the above content.

There is a widespread, and foundationally admirable movement towards listening to what people outside of the West 'want'. The basic problem with this approach is one of language, and of dependence. Those non-Westerners who become our informers almost invariably have first to drink deeply from Western wells, so as to be able linguistically and culturally to communicate clearly with Westerners. In doing so they both become Western-dependent, and they loose touch with their own peoples and cultures.

Being dependent on what someone can neither influence, understand or control is a very peculiar thing. The degree of dependence on the West in much of SSA is already **enormous**. This makes it more and more difficult to know how to believe what is communicated from

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[22] Harries, Jim. 2009. 'Pragmatic Linguistics Applied to Bible Translation, Projects and Inter-cultural Relationships: an African focus.' 75-95 In: *Cultural Encounters: a journal for the theology of culture*, Volume 5, number 1, Winter 2009.

Africa to the West. The prerogative for responsible action hence falls increasingly on the one being depended upon, i.e. the donor. Dependence is not so bad if it is sustainable in the long term. Is it? Is the West committed to feeding, housing, educating and clothing Africa for another one hundred years, or for ever? The behaviour of the West seems to indicate that it is. It is in the interests of many African individuals to attempt to perpetuate Western charity to Africa. If the West is not able to guarantee supporting the African continent financially on an indefinite basis, then it needs itself to be responsible for its actions on the continent, and not delegate responsibility for decisions to African nationals for whom being dependent is not a problem.

9. Is Vulnerable Mission a Naïve Advocacy of Radicalism?

A further reason for my reluctance to 'compromise' on the principles of vulnerable mission (for some ministry to be carried out in local languages and without foreign resources) is my concern that it could become just another idealistic call for true transformation of the current situation to be lost and rendered unworkable and impractical in a sea of voices and ideas. 'Vulnerable mission' is not a sweet sop to be taken in small doses to make other mission methods run more smoothly. Vulnerable mission provides principles for cross-cultural ministry that allow God to speak when applied in totality, but not necessarily when half-cocked and compromised with that with which it is for practical purposes incompatible. Motorcycles on football pitches, sails on racing canoes, propellers attached to the backs of competitive swimmers and computer-driven mechanical horses in polo matches are simply against the rules. Similar things ought to be said for compromises to vulnerable mission; and must be said if it is not to suffer the fate of other initiatives in mission and development that started with a bang, then ended with a flop! I believe that someone wanting to be effective in 'vulnerable mission' must be very careful about compromising their principles.

Unfortunately it is all too often true – that given an inch, many will take a mile. Would-be missionaries in the West are desperately seeking (and often easily finding) justification for imposing foreign funded projects of all kinds on Africa. Almost all such are an imposition (through economic leverage) arising from Western initiative. I challenge Westerners to apply their project (whatever it is) in a *vulnerable* way, to see if it can sprout local roots.

10. Surely there must be Some Compromises?

I am not insisting in advocating vulnerable mission, that every missionary must follow its precepts. Rather that there be some missionaries who follow them, even if they constitute a relatively small proportion of the Western missionary force. Then that those 'some' be able to implement them seriously and with little compromise.

I am not suggesting either that those few be isolated from the rest of the missionary force. Rather that they be dependent on the larger missionary body. This may require the overcoming of some deeply-ingrained prejudices and preconceptions.

Moyo notes that Western missionaries frequently compete with each other: "there are few missionaries who would complement another missionary openly" shares Moyo.[23] (I don't think that this trait is confined to missionaries, but that does not mean that it is not an issue for missionaries.) While missionaries are busy 'reaching out' to Africans, and making them

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[23] Moyo, Levy, 2006. *The Gloved Handshake: Christian or Christianised Missions?* UK: Chosen Graphics, 90.

dependent on them, a fellow missionary is expected to pull his own weight, and not to join the dependent masses.

There is little doubt that 'vulnerable missionaries' can be threatening to those who are not 'vulnerable'. This is because of their superior understanding, good relationships and empathy with local people, including their ability to converse in local tongues. 'Vulnerable missionaries' can be despised by their fellows for being idle, unproductive and so on – if they are not pulling their weight in attempting to solve the endless administrative, financial, staffing and other crises faced by the missionary body. Their absence at parties, celebrations, meetings and social events may not be appreciated. It is a lot to ask of an existing missionary body to allow one of their members to bypass social conventions that the rest are so careful to keep. Vulnerable missionaries can easily find themselves ostracised by the very people on whom they need to stay very dependent – other Westerners in Africa. To ask a Westerner just to 'go native' and disappear into the African milieu, is in my view asking too much. Having some non-vulnerable missionaries accept the legitimacy of the vulnerability option is, in my view, a key requirement for vulnerable missions' success.

One alternative to having 'conventional' missionaries be there as support and retreat-people for vulnerable missionaries is to appoint people especially for that purpose. Older experienced people, especially if they have had good long-term missionary experience, would be ideal for such a task. Their primary role would not be to 'reach the nationals' but to be a resource for 'vulnerable missionaries'. These hosts would provide a 'retreat' context, and would be careful to inspire and not discourage vulnerable missionaries in their task.

Vulnerable missionaries must be careful not to use their relationship with conventional missionaries to acquire power over the people they are reaching by indirect means. That is, Vulnerable missionaries' 'powerless' position could be seriously compromised or even negated if they are seen to be able to influence other powerful players in the same community, such as fellow missionaries. The realm of operation of the vulnerable missionary will ideally be outside of the sphere of influence of his fellow missionary hosts. If this is not possible, then vulnerable missionaries may need to be very careful *not* to reveal the truth of what is going on in a community to powerful-missionary colleagues, lest they influence their actions for or against the interests of one or more local people known to them.

An example may help to illustrate this important point. A vulnerable missionary may be aware that a certain local person is misappropriating funds provided by a conventional missionary. Should the person concerned realise that they have been sacked on the basis of the testimony of the vulnerable missionary, or should people realise that the vulnerable missionary could have the power to have someone sacked by a generous donor, then they may no longer be free with them. The vulnerable missionary will have acquired power indirectly through a relationship with another power broker. The same will apply should a vulnerable missionary give advice as to who in a community should be given privileged access to Western contacts, who is the best person for a job, etc.

This can put the vulnerable missionary into a difficult position of being forced to conceal information from fellow missionaries. It should be remembered that this dilemma is shared by local people who live in the context of missionary (or development worker) ignorance. It is in this sense that actually all missionaries *should be* vulnerable missionaries – although for other reasons, such as great existing dependency on misappropriated funds, I am not advocating this as a practical option.

Because of this difficulty in relating to local colleagues, I suggest that a means be found for vulnerable missionaries to share the insights that they acquire through communication with higher echelons, or at least a different part of the Western missionary hierarchy. Perhaps even to an organisation outside of their sending agency – such as to a representative in the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission.

Studies have shown that a major cause of missionary attrition on foreign fields is difficulties in relationships *between missionaries*. A vulnerable missionary, as other missionaries, needs to be very careful in this area. Inter-missionary relationships seem, for reasons beyond the scope of this article, to be particularly delicate, so that levels of disagreement often have to be lived with rather than overcome. Conventional missionaries who use a lot of resources will usually have to learn indirectly (through published works, from the upper hierarchy of their organisation etc.) rather than directly from vulnerable missionaries.

Summary and Conclusion

The suggestion that some Western missionaries in Africa should work in local languages and without foreign resources, here referred to as 'vulnerable mission', has been seen by some as extreme, narrow or over radical. This article defends the tenets of vulnerable mission from such critique.

The pioneer nature of missionary work is considered; Having an ear to the Almighty God means that the missionary can have a prophetic role of challenging and innovating and not only of administering predetermined policies like a pre-oiled cog in a machine. New missionaries must realise that they operate in an historical context. Effectively communicating an identity as 'Christ' requires knowing and actively accounting for, not merely ignoring, the identity set for missionaries by their predecessors and colleagues. A truly spiritual identity for Westerners renowned for their high valuation of the material and financial is shown to require a deliberate break with this tarnished image.

Another reason to avoid 'compromising' on vulnerable mission principles arises from the need to close loopholes to materialists who all too easily direct the missionary agenda into unhealthy dependency-creating avenues. The argument that missionaries must fall-in-line with the pre-existing African patron-client system is not accepted in this article. It is suggested that, as in sport, in order to be able to give truly helpful advice an outsider must know how to operate under conditions comparable to those of 'contestants' (locals). Mission policies cannot be based primarily on advice from nationals being reached, as these are generally in dependence-traps that force them to answer questions in such a way as to please wealthy questioners if they also are or represent donors. The vital importance of good relationships with the wider mission-body by vulnerable missionaries is emphasised, in the form of a plea for mutual acceptance on the field by missionaries with widely divergent orientations to ministry.

Vulnerable mission, as here presented, is not simply another ingredient to add to the existing mix. It is not an attempt at *vulnerableisation* of existing practices; but a challenge to Westerners to grasp the nettle and be truly vulnerable to the African people who they are reaching. This will be greatly aided through the wider acceptance of it by the Western missionary community.