

Vulnerable Mission Conference Summary

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Summary of papers presented at the consultation, “Moving Beyond Post-Colonial Dependency: Developing Sustainability through Vulnerability” Nov. 8-11 2017.
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From the 8th to the 11th November, 2017, the American branch of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission held a consultation at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA, USA.² The host for the event was the Stanway Institute for Mission and Evangelism, which is under the direction of the Rev. Dr. John A. Macdonald. Presenters were Dr. Jim Harries and Dr. Stan Nussbaum (founders of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission), Jean Johnson, Fred Lewis, Carol Lewis, Gena Thomas, and Peter Sholl (Director of MOCLAM, the Moore College in Latin America theological training program). The focus of the consultation was, “Moving Beyond Post-Colonial Dependency: Developing Sustainability through Vulnerability.”

Dr. Stan Nussbaum, most recently the founder and director of SYNCx.org, opened the consultation with a presentation that focused on the benefits of working within the local language in missionary work. “Local people interpret interest in their language as a sign of love,” he said. “Gift-giving can also be a silent communication of love—but this can cause a lot of problems, too.” The aim is to avoid the creation of dependency, but to present mission as the response to the genuine love of God. “God honors the missionary even if their work is flawed. It produces a flawed good. Communication of love is non-verbal.”

Vulnerable Mission has focused on the twentieth-century mission context that depended on rich countries sending resident missionaries. However, as we enter the twenty-first century, this context is vanishing. Other countries are sending missionaries. Vulnerable Mission needs to relate to these new contexts. “The future of mission is limited to the future of mission as a whole,” said Nussbaum. The aim should be to train disciple makers to start a disciple-making movement and sustain it. Like-minded ministries are to do the same. They should keep their efforts “Simple, sustainable, and scalable.”

Vulnerable Mission works in an “Anti-Client-Patron” paradigm. Future work should seek to restore and redeem the patron-client relationship in biblical terms. This will create a healthy inter-dependence. Nussbaum prefers to see a “Peer-Partner” relationship instead of the problematic client-patron relationship. In addition to Vulnerable Mission’s commitment to working in the local language using local resources, Nussbaum wants to add the necessity to work through and with the local congregation.

Jean Johnson, Director of Five Stones Global and author of *We Are Not the Hero*,³ talked on the ramifications of mission that produces an unhealthy self-image, which then leads to an unhealthy community. In the Patron-Client paradigm, the client is to take on the patron’s belief system. American missionaries, traditionally working under this paradigm, approach mission from a position of power—usually economic power. If there is an unhealthy self-image, the client takes in and does not produce: the patron provides everything. “The result,” says

Johnson, “Is the creation of an unhealthy community that is dependent on the patron.” The response that is necessary in order to create a healthy community is the application of the sacrificial love that is expressed in “material, emotional, and spiritual support.” Caution must be taken in the provision of material support, however, in order to avoid the American understanding that “I have stuff that I give to people who don’t have stuff.” This creates a power play around charity.

Carol Lewis, language coach and missions consultant serving with WorldView, and Fred Lewis, a cross-cultural trainer with WorldView, talked on “Worldview and language learning advanced thoughts arising from lifelong engagement.” They drew on their many years of language engagement to show what processes and strategies were helpful in language acquisition. Carol Lewis covered three areas of language learning that have to work together: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For knowledge, there is the formal side of learning proper pronunciation, grammar, tone, and vocabulary. Accompanying this formal learning is social linguistics, affecting how you use your language. Sixty-five to ninety-three percent of communication is non-verbal, so body language, tone of voice, silence, touch, even what you are wearing all have an impact on communication. Discourse is important for putting thoughts together in a coherent whole. Listening skills are key. Finally, in the knowledge area, a strategic approach is required: this is the ability to correct errors in communication in real time. The learner has to signal the listener that more time is needed for expressing thoughts properly or clearly.

The second area is utilizing the requisite skills. A language helper can be useful here. At the same time, a lot of the learning will need to be self-directed to be administrated effectively. Reflection on the language learning process answers the questions, “What?” and “How?” The learning can be facilitated if a personal structure is implemented that supports not only the acquisition of the language, but a progressive entry into the culture. This enables the learner to enter more fully and consistently into the rhythm of life in the new country.

And finally, the proper attitude is critical. First, the learner needs to know that he or she can do this. Learning the language is possible. There will be moments of anxiety, but they need to be managed effectively so that the anxiety does not become an impediment. Living safely in seclusion is not a good idea: risk taking is paramount. The only way to learn a language effectively is through taking risks. And finally, in light of the importance of non-verbal communication that takes place, the “actor factor” needs to be applied. How much can the learner lose himself or herself?

Fred Lewis provided a useful handout and a summary of how he teaches worldview and culture from a vulnerable mission perspective. The desired outcomes of this training are as follows:

- That you will be able to articulate what worldview is, and how worldview relates to culture.
- That you will be able to explain how an understanding and use of worldview/culture may facilitate a better understanding and practice of vulnerable mission.
- That [everyone] will come up with ideas or suggestions for how talking about worldview/culture with a wider audience may draw their attention to and generate interest in vulnerable mission.

Jim Harries then spoke about the unintentional—in most cases—cultural insensitivity that can occur when a Western missionary moves to their area of service. The missionary has power:

usually economic power, but also power that comes merely from coming from the West. The implication is that the missionary is better trained, better prepared, and usually in a position of authority that inevitably puts the local residents in an inferior position. If the missionary goes into the culture with poor language preparation—or none at all—there is the danger of misinterpreting or misunderstanding what is happening in the culture due to a lack of language. Efforts to change what has been a traditional, and in many cases, unhelpful pattern of missionary service have been met with resistance. “When dysfunctional systems are threatened, the system blocks the reforms and expels the reformers,” said Harries.

Harries opened up various other avenues for discussion, drawing on the research avenues he is currently exploring. He told us that a missionary should be dead – in other words, worldly desires are necessarily excluded from missionary service. Intercultural translation should be engaged by native-speakers of the language being translated into, Harries suggested. He alluded to positive ramifications for mission and theology arising from contemporary research into cognitive science. Anti-racism, for Jim, is not a default-good, but a potential problem for mission and killer of the Gospel; Christians need to be wise in the use they make of secular approaches to race, Jim emphasized. When missionaries teach before they have a profound knowledge of a culture, they can end up presupposing that recipients have knowledge that actually they do not have, thus effectively omitting necessary foundation stones from the intended message, Jim warned.

Gena Thomas, author of *A Smoldering Wick*,⁴ spent four and a half years on mission in Mexico, an experience that has changed her life. She found a great deal of frustration in mission. She has dedicated herself to addressing some of that frustration. Gena’s focus was especially on abuses of charity in mission that end up being injustices. She offered a critique of Americans – that they are too ready to send gifts. In one example she reported how Americans gave Barbie dolls, when they should have been engaging in ‘learned compassion’ that is more thought-through.

In addition to sharing her insights on mission, into which she has clearly already invested considerable reflection-time as well as prayer and dedication, Gena enlightened us about ways in which she is sharing the message using contemporary media. (Being in an earlier generation, I won’t do justice to what she shared, except to say that it had to do with Twitter, hashtags, and other social media, expert use of which already has her gaining a lot of attention, especially from younger missiologists on the American scene.)

Stan Nussbaum gave a progress report on his new project: “SYNCx,” which stands for “Seeing Yourself in Christ.”⁵ Nussbaum’s first point was that God has been proactively working through history since the time of Abraham. If a believer synchs with this strategy, he or she gets to be part of this ancient plan to make the world better—and so the believer becomes a deliverer of blessings and is blessed in return. SYNCx places Christ in the middle, and the Christian moves through seven different seasons:

- Life
- Connection
- Freedom
- Power
- Forgiveness
- Courage

- Glory

Each of these seasons provides an opportunity for prayer and Bible study, thus connecting the Christian to the different seasons of the Christian walk.

Peter Sholl gave a presentation on the MOCLAM—Moore College in Latin America— theological program he directs in Latin America. His focus was on “Sustainable Mission in Cuba,” and he talked about the development of the MOCLAM program there and some of the challenges that they encountered. The training started well and national tutors became sufficiently prepared so that the program could reach more people. The program, unfortunately, began to suffer for some of the following reasons:

- Increased access to Cuba from the US. This meant increased visits of mission teams.
- Conference on missionary strategy.
- The program to run MOCLAM ran out of money.
- Unhelpful patterns had been established: the program was not locally sustainable.

He recommended the following changes:

- The students should have paid a small subscription fee from the outset. Failure to have that in place lowered the commitment to the course. It also established an unhelpful patron-client model.
- Now: Students have to pay \$1.00.
- Enrollment numbers have dropped.
- Tutors should not have been paid. Travel, food, etc., though, should be covered.
- Change the emphasis of MOCLAM from an organization that teaches to an organization that teaches teachers.

He proposed the following strategy as a new phase in the evolution of the training:

- A new model: A graduate from the general area becomes the tutor of the new group. The tutors are trained and receive ongoing coaching and training.
- They are now working through the implementation of the change. This is causing a lot of stress in the program and pushback from the Cuban tutors.
- The real need: slow and steady training.
- No short-term missions. No large donations.
- Situation: Another large donation came through. But they are sticking with the current theme.

The consultation finished with broad discussions on the role of the vulnerable missionary and the need for further conversation to take place.

A second meeting will occur in May 2018 in Minnesota.

¹ www.vulnerablemission.org

² www.tsm.edu

³ Jean Johnson, *We Are Not the Hero*. Sisters, Oregon: Deep River Books, 2012.

⁴ Gena Thomas, *A Smoldering Wick: Igniting Missions Work with Sustainable Practices*. 2nd edition. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

⁵ www.syncx.org