

# Six Theses on the Future of Vulnerable Mission

Stan Nussbaum

Published in *Global Missiology*, [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org). April 2018

## Abstract

There is increasing interest in the message of Vulnerable Mission (VM), but a sizable group has yet to gather at a conference or become involved in an ongoing way in the VM Alliance. Those of us who are involved believe that we are saying the right things but not in an adequate way, so we are asking ourselves how we could say them better. Doing so may include grasping the things we are saying more clearly ourselves and/or structuring them in ways that are easier for people to connect to. This article breaks our large question about communicating better into six smaller questions. Each was developed into a thesis in a parallel format starting, “Until now, VM has . . . The future of VM may lie in . . .”

*The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) believes “that there should be some missionaries from the West whose ministries are conducted in the language of the people being reached, without use of outside financial subsidy. . . . Vulnerable mission aims to encourage cross-cultural workers to follow the humble example of Jesus, who demonstrated His vulnerability in part by living like the Jews of His time and place. Examples of humble vulnerability include but are not limited to carrying out ministry in culturally appropriate ways, refusing a high-status position, learning a local language, and avoiding the use of imported resources in favor of local ones” (vulnerablemission.org).*

The message of Vulnerable Mission (VM) has generated increasing interest in a number of places, but it has not yet succeeded in getting a sizable group together at a conference or involved in an ongoing way in the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission. We have the sense that we are saying the right things but not in an adequate way, so we are asking ourselves how we could say them better. This may include grasping them more clearly ourselves and/or structuring them in ways that are easier for people to connect to.

This article breaks our large question about communicating better into six smaller questions. Each was developed into a thesis in a parallel format starting, “Until now, VM has . . . The future of VM may lie in . . .” The six theses were circulated to attendees prior to the Pittsburgh conference<sup>1</sup> and presented in the opening plenary to stimulate discussion.

In light of the discussion, a new numbered heading and my reflection on the discussion have been added to each thesis. The sequence of the six theses has been rearranged so those that generated the most or deepest comments would be listed first.

## I. Is VM behind the times, addressing the 20<sup>th</sup> century context?

Until now, VM has focused mostly on the 20th century mission context--mission by resident foreigners from rich countries working in rural, linguistically homogenous areas of poor countries that have religious freedom and a Christian majority or sizable minority that is not persecuted. That context is vanishing while others are emerging and growing. The future of VM is to relate itself more directly to the “new normal” for mission (right column below).

20 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY “NORMAL”	21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY “NORMAL”
1. Foreign agency plans and owns the mission	1. Local and regional initiatives and ownership
2. Foreigners are resident long-term	2. Foreigners mostly short-term and/or occasional
3. Rural mono-lingual contexts	3. Urban poly-lingual contexts
4. Missionaries from rich countries to poor ones	4. Missionaries from poor or mid-level countries
5. Government allows or favors mission work	5. Persecution by government
6. Local Christians visible, possibly a majority	6. Few if any Christians in the local people group

**Reflection:** Discussion showed that item 3, the shift from rural to urban, poly-lingual contexts, was the one the group considered most important for VM to develop and address. What is the “local language” when people are bi-lingual or tri-lingual in their everyday lives? Items 1, 5, and 6 were also taken as serious issues. Items 2 and 4 got less attention.

The challenge in this shift is that most VM thinking up to this point has come from Jim Harries’ context in western Kenya. Additional VM voices are needed in other contexts, especially urban ones, to spell out the shape and implications of VM there. The alternative is for us as a VM movement to state that VM thinking applies only or primarily to mono-lingual mission contexts, a shrinking yet sizable slice of the total mission pie.

## II. Is VM really necessary?

Until now, VM has not effectively engaged two dominant assumptions about mission strategy that undermine the need for VM theologically and linguistically:

- 1) If mission is done from genuine love of God, God will bring good out of it even if the action or strategy is flawed.
- 2) Communication of love is essentially non-verbal, and thus a foreigner does not have to learn the local language in order to communicate love.

The future of VM may lie in acknowledging the partial truth of these assumptions while leading people beyond them.

**Reflection:** There was strong agreement that these two assumptions dominate current mission thinking at the grass-roots level, and that they do great damage. Repeatedly during the

consultation, various participants used the image of turning a big ship, expecting that it would take a very long time.

### III. Is VM too rigid about not giving money or anything it can buy?

Until now, VM has implied that giveaway projects are unwise at best. The future of VM may lie in articulating criteria for exceptions to the rule. For example, would VM agree that it is fine to donate Bibles from outside a country if all the following criteria are met?

- 1) The Bibles are in the local language.
- 2) They are illegal to sell or own.
- 3) The demand for them is driven by rapid growth of the local church.
- 4) Good anti-corruption methods to prevent profiteering are in place with long-time friends.
- 5) No resident foreign workers are present.

**Reflection:** The non-VM world keeps looking for ways to use outside resources constructively. VM says use local resources instead. Re-think.

My impression is that we are not sure whether it will help or hurt the VM cause if we start trying to define exceptions to the rule, that is, defining criteria for circumstances when outside resources could be used. If we did, our criteria might turn out to be so narrow that very few such usages would qualify, and this would have a constructive effect on those who are using outside resources in wrong ways. On the other hand, perhaps discussion of the criteria would be a disincentive for the more radical re-think we are calling for.

### IV. Is VM based on a misunderstanding of patron-client relationships?

Until now, VM has assumed there is no such thing as a healthy patron-client relationship in cross-cultural mission. Patron-client equals unhealthy dependence. The future of VM may lie in exploring and redeeming patron-client relationships in biblical terms (see deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*<sup>2</sup>). That is, patron-client can potentially equal healthy interdependence even though hierarchy is central and highly valued—a combination the West does not think possible but much of the rest of the world assumes.

**Reflection:** This concept was so far out of bounds that the discussion never went anywhere. At the surface level it does seem to be a direct contradiction to VM's core principles; however, I am still wondering after the consultation whether at a deeper level this is a challenge VM has to engage, lest we be hypocrites when we profess our commitment to "local resources."

We oppose use of outside funds because those funds are tied to donors' agendas, which means local people have to use strategies and measurements the donor requires. That produces irrelevant, inefficient activity on the ground and/or a lot of spin when the local person reports activity and results to the donor. We want the local person to be free to decide the strategy and measurements according to local needs and realities.

We say we do not impose conditions like financial donors do. We certainly intend not to impose them, but do we actually do it anyway by saying that patron-client relationships must be rejected because they cannot be redeemed?

Such relationships are so unfamiliar to us and look so problematic for mission that we can only see them as unbiblical. But when we conclude they are unbiblical, we may be making a theological judgment on cultural grounds, just as missionaries have done far too often in the past. For example, African drums were rejected and considered irredeemable for Christian worship for a long time. (Readers please note: the idea that patron-client relationships might be redeemable is my personal view as the writer, and I realize I am out of step with the group here.)

## **V. Is VM an attempt to get mission done without trusting anyone locally?**

Until now, VM has focused on two basic policies (local language, local resources) that make it unnecessary for the foreign worker to seek the Spirit's guidance about the spiritual and/or financial motivations of particular individuals or organizations. If we trust nobody with money, we don't have to discern trustworthy people from the corrupt or corruptible. The future of VM may lie in spelling out the positive side of trust between local people and resident missionaries. For example, if patron-client relationships were developed, they would require a lot of trust in both directions.

**Reflection:** This point was only made in passing during my presentation and the group discussion did not come back to it.

## **VI. Should VM challenge the Western congregational model more directly?**

Until now, VM has not said much about the Western view of a "congregation" being a group with at least one paid pastor and a building for weekly meetings. The future of VM may lie in adding "local congregational model" to "local language and resources" as a third core emphasis, since the Western model is the root of most if not all the other factors in dependency around the world.

**Reflection:** This was given a little more attention in my presentation, and there was some interest in it but discussion was inconclusive. It may be a point we revisit.

Considering all six theses and other discussions during the consultation, my view is that the two biggest questions about the future of Vulnerable Mission are:

1. Will VM practitioners in other contexts than western Kenya will join the discussion and help elaborate VM thinking in their settings?
2. Will a North American branch or node of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission will develop a life of its own, not dependent on Harries' rare trips to the USA?<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This conference was held at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, near Pittsburgh, PA, on 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017. The conference title was: **Moving beyond post-colonial dependency: developing sustainability through vulnerability.**

---

<sup>2</sup> David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Westmont, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Harries' recent trips to the USA occurred in 2017, 2013, 2012 and 2010.