

Report by Nick Henwood, published in the *Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Bulletin*, February 2020.

.....

This report is on the following event:

Missionaries: aliens, providers, or fellow travelers?

International Conference

Sunday 8th December for a 6pm start to Wednesday 11th December 2019 finishing at midday. All Nations Christian College, Easneye, Herts, UK.

- This conference was co-sponsored by AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) and ANCC (All Nations Christian College).

Should the majority world be the target of patronage from rich missionaries?

Outside Christian workers who build on foreign presuppositions in work amongst indigenous communities can, especially when foreign funded and using outside languages, be interpreted as riding roughshod over indigenous sensibilities. True empowerment of local people requires getting alongside them. This necessitates vulnerability to their position and context. Such vulnerability can best be achieved if one shares the Gospel using indigenous languages utilising local resources.

.....

Report of conference

With personal views of the papers and discussions by Nick Henwood.

Our time together revolved around the presentation and discussion of VM (vulnerable mission) papers, with opportunities for worship and Bible input and informal interactions over meals and breaks.



Conference picture

Hans Baer, Peter Stagg, Frank Paul, Clive Grey, David Smith.

Peter Sholl, Donna Sadowitz, Gudrun Harries, Daniel Sadowitz.

Nick Henwood, Jim Harries, Johannes Reihm.

Others who took part in the gathering but who missed the photo were:

Chris Sadowitz, Andy McCullough, Marcus Grohmann, Mark Smith, Andy Dipper.

After Sunday evening supper, Jim led a time of welcome, worship, and personal introductions and testimonies around the room.

We began Monday morning with worship and an introduction to Vulnerable Mission by Jim

(Introduction: what is vulnerable mission? By Jim Harries. [Click here to hear audio version.](#)) and then worked together through the day, basing our discussions on 5 papers.

Jim structured his introduction around 7 points that capture VM. (link to this short paper?* Yes. I'll try and do this Nick). The need for Vulnerable Mission has been brought into focus through the work of Western missionaries to the two-thirds (and resource-poor) world. This is the primary focus of VM thinking. The primary keys are 1) using indigenous languages and 2) reliance on local resources for ministry needs. However, in the room were, among others, the Sadowitz family - who work in Japan - with people who are generally more wealthy than they are... Are there principles from VM that are helpful for missionaries working in rich contexts? There are.

Paper 1. Introducing Vulnerable Mission, and paper: Mission Vulnerability essential to avoid conventional-mission pitfalls. Jim Harries [Click here to hear audio version.](#) (Note – audio recordings are not available for all the papers.)

Jim told a little of his journey in East Africa - where he's opted to be a missionary for life. He is a father of 12 adopted children in a rented home with a house-mother. He seeks to live this role in local languages and his children wear worn clothes just like their neighbours. Having this family role in his local community gives him standing as a caring man – and he is able to approach his work with indigenous churches (bringing Bible teaching in local languages when it is requested) without having to also be the finance behind initiatives.

His paper was critical of conventional mission practice in East Africa. He observes that while westerners picture their financial giving as somehow free, or un-tied, recipients feel that they are being placed under obligation, or in debt. Jim argued, with vivid examples, that financial flow (and the use of English) are the seeds from which 3 outcomes are seen: Corruption... the Prosperity Gospel... and a tendency for the Western Missionary to be kept in ignorance...

Our discussion looked at “What does generosity look like if we're not giving money?” A participant noted that in Papua New Guinea the missionaries who lived in relative luxury were assumed to have gained their wealth in the same way as officials who were known to be corrupt.

Vulnerable mission approaches de-power Western missionaries, but they follow scriptural precedents... Are there young would-be missionaries who are ready to give a life-time commitment to vulnerable mission?

Paper 2 Mission without Conquest – learning to be guest, companion and friend in the Argentinian Chaco: an alternative missionary practice.

Frank's paper presented learning from Mennonite mission in north Argentina, where indigenous people had been ruthlessly oppressed by incoming Spanish settlers in preceding centuries. Traditional mission practice brought western benefits towards health and education through the medium of Spanish.

However, indigenous churches only began to flourish when, unwittingly, the missionaries were spread too thinly to maintain their control on congregations. The forms of worship and practice that these churches adopted turned out to be far from the forms that American Mennonites expected.

Instead of abandoning the indigenous Indian work, the Mennonite community took the courageous step of seeking to re-fashion their approach.

They sought to display God's love as a non-intrusive presence. They changed their practice towards being a non-paternalistic presence. They started drinking Mate Tea¹ with their indigenous friends, and ate their food, and slept in their homes.

In addition to Bible Translation, they conducted pastoral visits, literature distribution and fostered Bible teaching through “Bible Circles” - a culturally appropriate participatory method.

In our discussion we explored the dignity that this approach brings to indigenous people - with their language written down - people are recording their own history and developing a pride in themselves.

The issue of syncretism was raised - mixing indigenous with Christian practices... Frank is concerned that syncretism is a problematic word – in fact, no-one can receive truth in a vacuum - everyone builds from what they know as a way of processing and working out what is helpful into the future.

Paper 3 - Going Alongside Unreached People Groups. Mark Smith.

¹'Mate tea' is a traditional S American beverage drunk from a common vessel around a group of friends.

In his paper, Mark shared about Bible translation in a tribal Islamic context.

Historically there had been a Bible translation, but it was not “owned” by local people, and has remained on the shelf.

Instead, he recounted that community tasks (like the construction of a boat) might be accomplished by many people together, without payment, but with the unspoken expectation that future benefits of the community task would be shared widely. Perhaps Bible translation could be the same?

Mark generally travels by bus - this results in him meeting people... and, on arrival in a distant town, he is, thereby, already known!

Mark presented findings from his informal research with stake holders who gave pointers to western missionaries about how they should behave – pointers like – accommodate to culture, avoid pride, discuss things, avoid giving orders and be ready to talk about faith after 10 pm.

Will the translation of the Bible into these indigenous languages progress? Mark thinks that, it will only be after local people are ready to explore their own language literacy and see its benefit, that worthwhile Bible translation will follow.

(It is possible that the languages concerned will die before this can happen.)

In our discussion we looked at the idea of affirming someone’s mother tongue ... what that looks like ... We discussed how language has power - and language is a tool used by the powerful to suppress minorities. But Mark gave a glimmer of hope - local languages are again being used for singing at weddings.

Paper 4 How to establish yourself as a fellow traveler - with many positive examples of learning language/culture and using the local resources. Hans Baer

Hans presented his thinking in the context of working with Karen tribal people in Thailand. He and his wife felt under pressure to be financial sponsors... but also (by refusing to give clothes directly - rather pointing a woman to the church elders who managed clothes’ donation to the poor) he saw that they could raise the dignity of local people by avoiding giving hand-outs.

Hans asks - “Is it wrong for a missionary to come to the field with a vision and strategy?” He identified examples of bad practice (e.g. setting up an orphanage to tackle child trafficking in a situation where there was no significant trafficking). This practice lacks integrity because the Karen children are viewed as in danger of trafficking, when they are not. The organization gets money which actually is not used for the purpose they asked for.

Observation: The less missionaries give the more the Karen do.

Hans presented an approach of being a fellow traveler... seeding ideas to leaders... and seeing elements of his vision (to disciple young men) emerge years later.

In our discussion we looked at the place of dreams as important in many cultures (including the Karen), and embracing a theology that is willing to embrace mystery and dreams.

Paper 5 How can Western Missionaries best support a viable Mexican church planting network without dominating it.
Peter Sholl

Peter’s paper explores whether it is possible for a western organisation (MOCLAM - a Spanish language distance learning institute) to give support to an indigenous network of local churches without dominating it.

The keys that underlie his conviction that peer to peer support will be possible are:

- 1) There was a relationship already present before the idea of helping and receiving was envisaged.
- 2) No money will be exchanged (this will positively help local work - he observed that when pastors (who are conventionally bi-vocational in Mexico) become supported full-time workers, they are viewed with suspicion and envy by others.
- 3) Spanish-language resources may well be a useful asset for the Mexican church network - provided they find their own ways to use the resources - that suit their context.
- 4) In our discussion we questioned whether external resourced theological training can damage leaders - perhaps they can become over-emboldened by external qualifications? Frank P spoke a little about the 'Bible circle' method of Bible study used in Argentina.

It may well work for Spanish to offer a starter for a topic - provided that opportunity is given for small group exchanges where an issue can be explored using indigenous languages.

Our first whole day together had been thrilling and exhausting...

Some tried the All Nations hot chocolate and further discussion... others headed for an early bed.

We started Tuesday looking at Philippians Ch.2 in English and German (two heart languages around the room). Then we engaged in two remote audio visual seminars before choosing between small group seminars.

Paper 6 Putting Reconciliation at risk? Engaging in vulnerable mission as a multiracial church in South Africa. Marcus Grohmann

Marcus Grohmann offered a lively presentation on a topic of study he is exploring in post-Apartheid South Africa.

He described the policy of Apartheid and its aftermath. Looking back, white Christian churches generally view Apartheid as sinful. There has been a concerted effort to attempt reconciliation by white dominant people but the journey is problematic. The spaces for coming together are owned by white people. The language for engagement is English. "Gospel Truth" is assumed - but this is dressed in western culture and theology. White people give to black people. Control is retained by whites.

Marcus presented the heart of his paper by acting a dialogue between 1) a cap-wearing-man who is seeking to learn an indigenous African language and culture as a stepping stone to appreciating their contribution and theology and 2) a jacket wearing elder of a white church who is weary of close engagement with Africans - rather he would prefer to support / educate and uplift Africans towards his western standards.

The dialogue, with some humorous innuendo, revealed challenges faced by someone attempting to work across racial boundaries using VM principles.

At the end of his presentation we discussed what we understand as Christian culture... is there such a thing – or must it always be embedded in a racial culture... It was pointed out that God did not make any mistake in making diversity, indeed, in the book of Revelations we see that we're headed not for uniformity but for a celebration of diversity.

Andy's paper and presentation opened John 13 - Jesus washes his disciples' feet.

He noted the mood of the setting – love and eating together... with the threat of darkness and the presence of evil.

In the passage Jesus undresses, becomes a servant/slave and washes feet.

His Undressing - from heaven to earth, self-emptying... cf Hudson Taylor's – change into Chinese dress... renouncing western background. Divestment of preference.

His Enslavement – took a towel – the uniform of a slave... Those in the north need to go the extra mile in serving the world. Western missionaries share the blame for the West's power... Joseph and Daniel are examples of biblical slaves.

His Action - Washing feet - touching the shame of a culture... washing that uncovers the beauty that's already there.

In our discussion we looked at:

Ultimately people learn little from ideas, they learn more from Practical examples.

How can we incorporate vulnerable thinking into young people's view - as they move into mission?

In many ways vulnerable thinking is "Old Fashioned" - Hudson Taylor... and so many things mitigate against it!

Towards the end of Tuesday morning we divided into two groups for seminars -

Jim Harries led one looking at The work of René Girard.

Nick Henwood (me) led one in which we looked at some practical tools in mission practice and undertook a critique of how they marry with the principles of vulnerable mission.

One of the tools presented in that session was the Bible Circle, a method of community Bible exploration that was presented by Frank Paul.

After lunch we again separated into groups to look at the "What next?" for VM.

The Issues: giving and generosity, whether we are ever truly vulnerable (we can always take a plane "home")? and the challenge of "home assignments" emerged in my group.

We went on from our groups to bring key thoughts back to a whole plenary session.

Usefully - Frank P underlined the importance of our prioritising relationships rather than programmes... If we spend our time visiting people in their homes we may well have done the best thing possible.

On Tuesday evening Andy Dipper facilitated a panel discussion with 3 speakers under fire with intensive questions from participants. Helpful insights emerged including the time it takes to see fruit when applying VM approaches. The difficulty we have in ever truly understanding someone when they are not speaking in their mother tongue (it's my mother tongue that speaks to my heart) and the importance of silence.

After-hours several of us shared refreshments together at a mini conference party.

On Wednesday morning we began with worship and prayer and continued with our programme - two further stimulating papers:

Paper 8 Understanding, embracing, enacting ministry from a position of weakness. _____ Chris Sadowitz [Click here to hear audio version.](#)

Chris is an American, serving in Japan in Christian ministry with his wife and son... His paper and presentation explored his own social priming - as an American youth (where winning was everything).

He identifies that the Christendom mindset instinctively resists weakness.

And, although we live in a post enlightenment world... the church has found it hard to disengage from Christendom thinking.

Chris was disarmingly self-critical of some of the mission approaches he's engaged with in Japan – e.g. insisting on attendance at Sunday worship, and patterns of worship in Japan that follow American norms.

The attitudes of Western missionaries need to embrace learning, listening, serving. We need to be comfortable with silence. The importance of conversation.

(His paper goes on to detail a study of American churches to explore their self-perception of issues related to vulnerability – e.g. “with whom do you identify in Good Samaritan story...” “Your favourite Bible character...” (David, or Thomas...))

He explores Bible examples of vulnerable mission - Ruth, Jesus and Paul.

“Weak” ministry metaphors - Servant, shepherd, sheep.

And what weakness in Christian ministry might look like in Japan.

Recognising and embracing our weakness.

We discussed aspects of his paper, including the importance of being comfortable with silence. Where there is conflict - this may be an opportunity for conversation rather than something that needs an immediate solution.

Paper 9 Money, Vulnerability and Mission: The Example of Paul and the "Collection" For the Poor. _____ David Smith [Click here to hear audio version.](#)

David presented his paper beginning with his disquiet that life in Nigeria raised questions that were never answered by Western systematic theology. He increasingly feels, in contrast to bold military language, that there needs to be more space for doubt and lament in our theology.

He went on to look at Paul, who in Acts is often portrayed as heroic, but who in his letters reveals vulnerability.

In Romans 15:18-29 Paul confidently affirms he's finished his task in the Middle East and he senses a strong mission call to Spain. But he delays. Why? - to take a gift of money to Jerusalem.

Why should this pastoral reason delay his mission mandate?

Taking Gentile money back to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem was his priority.

(In fact, his mission failed... he never made it to Spain but...)

The old tensions between Jews and Gentiles would undermine his ministry in Spain if he didn't act to tackle it with this gift.

It seems that history does not favour the inter-cultural balance that Paul strived for. (Very soon the Gentile church would dominate the Jerusalem church.)

But - can we seek a new catholicism where mother and daughter churches sit comfortably together - with no seeking to dominate the other?

In our discussion we explored the topic of solidarity across the church, and as an example, Frank Paul noted that visitors to Argentinian indigenous churches are seen as "angels". Just being together, sharing hospitality is the heart of solidarity.

Final Plenary.

Following on from this final paper Jim encouraged us to bring together our final reflections on the conference. Various issues included:

How can VM thinking be propagated among the next generation of emerging Christian missionaries? (A challenge for us is to be out there in social media).

It has been good working together and seeing VM depicted biblically.

How can VM be mainstreamed into mission thinking?

This conference is a valuable forum for sharing between practitioners.

In many ways VM is a rediscovery of ancient mission practice - recovering something that's been lost.

This plenary completed the conference (which concluded with lunch and farewells).

Big thank yous

To Jim and his committee colleagues who brought the conference together.

To every paper-presenter who brought the meat for us to chew on.

And to every participant, who with their ideas, questions and contributions enriched the event.

Speaker Biographies

- Frank Paul (58), member of an intentional community of families in Germany (www.ojc.de), 18 years of family & missionary collaboration in a slum in BsAs and with indigenous churches in northern Argentina.
- David Smith was a pastor in Cambridge before moving to serve in Nigeria for five years and on many subsequent visits. He has taught in many institutions and has published work on various aspects of mission, including *Mission After Christendom* (2003), *Liberating the Gospel* (2013) and *Seeking A City With Foundations: Theology for an Urban World* (2nd.ed. 2019).
- Marcus Grohmann, Cape Town/South Africa, PhD student from Germany in the field of reconciliation studies, studying how white Christians in multiracial churches try to work for reconciliation in contexts they are usually dominating. Living and working on his research project involves learning the Xhosa language. With his wife, Marcus is serving part-time with the Student YMCA at the University of Cape Town. Together they have two daughters, 4 and 1 years old.
- Nick Henwood lives in multicultural Leicester. He works almost full time as a GP, is a member of a local New Frontiers church, and has an allotment for growing vegetables. He and his wife seek to be good news for the neighbours on their street. They are associates of Interserve - that ministers to people from an Asian and Middle Eastern background. Previously Nick and Ros spent 9 years in medical / community / church work in Nepal. He teaches about community health for Christian Medical Fellowship. He's a board member of Arukah Network - a global community health NGO. (Nick Henwood is to lead a workshop.)
- Jim Harries, PhD (theology, Uni. Of Bham, UK). Missionary in East Africa from 1988 to date. Main ministries include: bible teaching to indigenous churches using East African languages, looking after orphan children who stay in his home, reading, writing and research related to mission, development, linguistics, and anthropology. Chair of the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission.)
- Mark Smith, one-time missionary in Africa, first heard about the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) in 2012. He is very concerned to encourage missionaries to work in such a way as to be vulnerable to the people being reached. Mark's dedication is demonstrated by his and his family's having spent over two decades in Africa.
- Hans Christoph Bär (DMin), from Switzerland, married to Beatrice, four children, four grandchildren. Working with OMF among the Karen people in North Thailand 1982-1998 and 2006-present as fellow traveler, church planter and Bible teacher. 1998-2006 pastoring the evangelical free church, Chrischona Stammheim (CH).
- Peter Sholl has lived in Monterrey, Mexico for the last 11 years. He serves as the director of MOCLAM, an organisation that offers theological education by distance in Spanish to students all over the Spanish speaking world. Pastors, campus workers, youth leaders and more study using locally produced core materials and study aids. Peter is Australian, and is a graduate of Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia.
- Andy McCullough was born and grew up in Cyprus, has been involved in cross cultural church planting in Turkey, and is the author of *Global Humility: Attitudes for Mission*.
- Chris Sadowitz has served as a missionary to Japan since 1993. His educational background includes a BRE from Baptist Bible College In Clark's Summit Pa. and a M-Div from Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary in Michigan. Chris writes: "Most recently we are coming to realize that there is more truth and praxis to be mined from ways of weakness than our present practice and cultures admit."

'What is vulnerable mission'.

The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission believes that some Western missionaries should engage in ministry, at least some key ministry, in the majority world using indigenous languages and resources.

Prepared for conference, All Nations Christian College, 8th to 11th December 2019. By Jim Harries.

We're an alliance, not a missionary agency.

We say 'some' Western missionaries, not necessarily all of them.

We address 'Western' missionaries.

We focus on ministry, which can be different from 'lifestyle': We are concerned with contexts of ministry, and not necessarily what people do in their homes or with their families.

This may not be all of a missionary's ministry, but at least some of it, i.e. we propose that some key relationships *not* be built on a missionary's possession of outside resources.

We talk of 'using' an indigenous language, not 'learning' an indigenous language. Ideally, that language should be used exclusively top to bottom of a 'project'.

Although outside resources can be used to get a missionary there and to keep them alive, we talk about not sharing those outside resources, or benefits of them, with locals. This includes indirect means of sharing them – such as giving people contacts with the West, or a vulnerable missionary sharing in the decision making of a not-vulnerable missionary regarding the use of resources by the latter.