

Statement on investigations against Dr Jim Harries

16 April 2025

Preamble

We, the Executive and Governing Board of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, wish to express our bafflement and our great concern regarding the criminal investigations against Dr James O. 'Jim' Harries. These are currently being undertaken against him in his long-time host country Kenya on the initiative of the UK and concern alleged violations of safeguarding standards towards children living in his home in Siaya/Kenya.

1) The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission

Dr Harries founded the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission years ago and is still a member of the Governing Board of the association, which was registered in Germany in 2024 as *Allianz für Verletzliche Mission e.V.* (AVM). The AVM is an international network of Christ-followers mainly from Western Protestant backgrounds who are active in mission and development. As practitioners, trainers and scholars, we share a deep concern for power inequalities in North-South relations. We seek to self-critically engage with unhealthy Western mission praxis that is often rooted in an inadequate understanding of cultural differences. Instrumental in overcoming imbalances has been for us the focus on using local languages and local resources in ministry contexts. Our members are past, current or aspiring practitioners of Vulnerable Mission, as well as those appreciating the concept.

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2) Background of Jim Harries' ministry and living circumstances in Kenya

Based on his conviction that deep understanding of other cultures, worldviews and customs can only come from making oneself 'vulnerable' as an outsider, submitting to local conditions and sharing life with other people 'on their own terms', Jim Harries sought ways to do this in his village context from the beginning of his ministry as a Bible teacher in Kenya in the mid-1990s. His theological education and training work and his sharing of God's love with people in rural Africa was to be rooted in the local context and based on continuous learning about the lifestyles, values and beliefs of his hosts. In order to be able to devote all his energy to the local people, Jim decided to remain single. At the same time, his local context gave him the opportunity to participate intensively in everyday life outside of his work as a theological teacher by taking responsibility for orphans in his home together with a widowed woman who took on the role of a mother. In Kenya – a country where many children become single or double orphans due to the high prevalence of AIDS, among other things¹ – caring for needy children is an important pillar of their care throughout the country. Children in Kenya, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, are often brought up in families that are not their biological ones.² The community thus assumes responsibility and offers advantages over institutional care facilities because the children remain part of a normal social network. 'foster care may be formal (legally mandated guardian) or informal, as occurs in cases when a non-relative takes on caring for orphaned or separated children, usually a neighbour or family friend.'³ By renting a plot of land with two simple houses in the village at his own expense and raising the children there under the care of the widowed woman, Jim Harries provided them with care, protection and the opportunity to grow up in a quasi-African family environment.⁴ Supervision was provided informally by the village community and local church congregations.

Aware that celibate living and caring for children comes with high expectations regarding how one conducts one's own life, Jim took measures from the outset to ensure the greatest possible transparency. Local pastors, who know the circumstances of families in their communities well, were involved in ensuring that children found a home where they were fully cared for. In their presence,

¹ In an article published in 2014, the proportion of orphans in the number of minors in Kenya is put at 13%: Embleton, Lonnie, Ayuku, David et al. (2014) Models of care for orphaned and separated children and upholding children's rights: cross-sectional evidence from western Kenya. *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 14(9): 2.

² See Lombe, Margaret and Ochumbo, Alex (2008) Sub-Saharan Africa's orphan crisis: Challenges and opportunities. *International Social Work* 51(5): 682–698. [10.1177/0020872808093345](https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872808093345); Oduro, Abena D (2010) *Formal and Informal Social Protection in sub-Saharan Africa*. Background Paper for the *European Report on Development 2010*. https://www.academia.edu/download/49706877/Oduro_Formal_and_Informal_Social_Protection_in_Africa.pdf.

³ Embleton, Ayuku et al. (2014: 11).

⁴ Drawing on du Toit and Neves (2009a p.12) to point out the 'fluidity, porosity and spatially "stretched" nature of African households', Oduro (2010:18) writes: 'Transfers in cash or in kind occur when a family member is faced with a crisis. Household composition can change in response to a crisis as family members move between households.' It is therefore not unusual to see 'the payment of school fees of a child a relative [sic] or having a child reside in the household of another family to attend school'.

arrangements were made with the children's relatives for them to stay in the home run by Jim and the 'housemother' until they finished secondary school.⁵ Male and female residents of the home slept strictly separately; Jim in his own bedroom. There were no dogs, paid night-watchmen or fences to keep observers out. On the contrary – members of the village community used to visit Jim's home like any other in the village. Jim and his household cultivated bean and maize fields in the village, and water was fetched from a nearby spring. The housemother was almost always present. Very seldom, perhaps once in three years, Jim was left overnight with the children without another adult present, with the approval of the housemother. Visitors (even the rare ones from abroad) had limited access to children and had to follow house rules resembling the child protection standards of international organisations. The children attended local schools where they had the freedom to speak openly. School issues, where necessary, were discussed by Jim or the housemother in the schools.

Unlike in a children's home or orphanage, the children grew up in a family environment.⁶ This was appreciated to such an extent that some of the children later as adults had their own children temporarily cared for in Jim's home. For 28 years, this was a well-functioning home, known to local churches, schools and even the local children's office.

3) The dilemma of Western child protection standards

From 2022, a new legal situation arose. Jim learned that, on some interpretations, organisations and churches from the UK could only continue to support him if he implemented stricter safeguarding requirements for children and vulnerable people. He studied these intensively, attended a training course and considered how he could meet the requirements – of the British government – in his context in Kenya. However, although various organisations in the UK repeatedly emphasised that concepts should and may of course be adapted to the local context, in the end the requirements always amounted to demands that would have led to special treatment for the children in his care and a distancing from locally practiced norms. However, it was precisely the extensive integration into and adaptation to local conditions that was the purpose of a homestead that was not run as a project or children's home and was experienced as a family situation by household members as well as people in the neighbourhood.

Jim lives in a context where international child protection regulations often don't match up with a practice governed by informality.⁷ Introducing a Western-style approach to protection from potential

⁵ Here, local churches fulfilled the role that Embleton, Ayuku et al. (2014: 16) envisaged for religious organisations in supporting family-based care for orphans.

⁶ This fulfils a demand made by Embleton, Ayuku et al. (2014: 16) in relation to a neighbouring government district in Kenya.

⁷ Referring to 'most of Africa's least developed countries', Johnson and Sloth-Nielsen write: 'Informal community practices are often the prevailing system employed for dealing with child abuse. While these may not always seem to provide adequate protection when "judged through a Western lens", they are "often considered the least stigmatising, most accessible, and most helpful of interventions by communities"' (Johnson, Afroz Kaviani and

abuse in a family setting would necessarily have forced a number of local people into unfamiliar formal accountability structures with disclosure and reporting requirements. To illustrate what this might imply, it is worth quoting at length from a yet unpublished article by Harries and Grohmann:

In practice, for example, an adult relating to youth may be required to always be in the company of other adults, all of whom answer to someone higher up a hierarchy, who ensures accountability. The expense and restrictions that will result in implementation of this kind of system would be there whether applied within the UK or elsewhere. The difference between the contexts would be in a community's knowledge of and buy-in to the system. When universally applied, such as within the UK, bringing in such a system of surveillance need not imply the suspicion that a particular person (people) is or has been engaging in inappropriate exploitation. Relatively isolated Brits living in communities unfamiliar with and unaccustomed to such kinds of 'new' structures, being imposed on them, may arouse considerable suspicion that the structures are there as a response to prior abuses. Putting such structures in place then amounts to implicit accusation, even in situations where there is no hint that any abuses have taken place. Such implicit accusation from what seem to be reputable authorities (those put in place through the British government) being taken seriously by local community members can result in traditional deterrents, such as shaming or even lynching, of innocent people, now misunderstood as having engaged in abuse.⁸

The dilemma for Jim Harries since 2022 was as follows: On the one hand, he understood that from a British perspective, he might be legally obliged to comply with the new safeguarding regulations. On the other hand, he was aware that they could not be implemented in his specific, organically grown and locally rooted family context without taking risks for himself (such as mob justice based on rumours and suspicions) and the people entrusted to his care. In the period since the end of 2022, Jim Harries has held intensive discussions with relevant structures in church, child protection organisations and politics. He has always spoken openly and transparently about his living circumstances and his dilemma with the aim of finding solutions. He himself and Dr Marcus Grohmann (Director of the AVM) have drawn attention to this predicament in academic articles in missiological journals.⁹ The dilemma resulted precisely from the attempt to sidestep power imbalances in the post-colonial world and to

Sloth-Nielsen, Julia (2020) Safeguarding Children in the Developing World—Beyond Intra-Organisational Policy and Self-Regulation. *Social Sciences* 9(6): 98, p. 14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9060098>, quoting Krueger, Alexander, Emma de Vise-Lewis et al. (2015), p. 22). This description appears applicable to the rural area in Kenya as well where Jim Harries resides.

⁸ Jim Harries and Marcus Grohmann "Responsible and Contextual: Attending to the Downsides of British Safeguarding Standards in Africa", unpublished manuscript (2025:6).

⁹ Harries, Jim (2023) Preventing Abuses in the International Aid Sector: A Global Effort, and a British-based Case Study. *Global Missiology* 20(3): 11–20. <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/2778/6926>; Grohmann, Marcus (2024) Religious liberties of missionaries under pressure from within: The unsettling nature and the potential of vulnerable approaches to mission. *Norwegian Journal of Missiology* 77(1): 5–21. [10.48626/ntm.v78i1.5589](https://doi.org/10.48626/ntm.v78i1.5589).

share life with people on their own terms. Of course, the protection of vulnerable people in Jim Harries' care was and is a concern for him.¹⁰ The responsibility he took on in his household was also accompanied by a duty of care, which – in addition to living according to high ethical and moral standards – he also tried to fulfil with the greatest possible transparency towards the various members of the local village community. Unfortunately, all attempts to have these locally accepted and customary accountability structures recognised as sufficient for the fulfilment of legal requirements from Great Britain have so far been in vain.

4) Latest developments to the best of our knowledge

On 26 March 2025, a group of 12 Kenyan criminal investigation officers turned up at Jim's house. Following allegations from the UK forwarded to Kenya via Interpol, they began an investigation into Jim's family living circumstances. In addition to the accusation of running an illegal children's home, the nature of the search (confiscation of electronic devices; examination of photos in the prayer diary, which also depicted children; verification of the relationship with the adult daughter of the housemother; immediate ban on contact with minors for Jim; etc.) indicated that evidence of alleged abuse was to be sought. As a result of this UK-initiated investigation, the responsible children's office in Kenya ordered the complete closure of the home. Family members of the children that had been under Jim's care were called to a meeting on 4 April 2025 that was held at Jim's home. The small, gathered crowd was told of the illegality of the situation, and that Jim was to face further charges. They were instructed to leave with their children on that very day. The children's officer encouraged Jim to pay school fees for the children who had been in his care up to the end of 2025. She offered bursaries from thereon. She was available for consultation and would ensure that all the children could continue with their schooling. Any alleged incidents were not confirmed by those present. 'Former children' protested vehemently against the children's officer's actions. Local representatives such as pastors from various churches, general household acquaintances as well as Jim's children that have already grown up, expressed great puzzlement about the whole affair in conversations with him. The investigations are seen as completely unfounded and their origin in the UK as incomprehensible and intrusive.

Jim Harries is still waiting to be informed of the outcome of the preliminary investigations. It is currently unclear what the charges, if any, will ultimately consist of and whether they will lead to a trial in Kenya, in the UK, or both.

¹⁰ For this reason, a Safeguarding Statement is also available on the AVM website (<https://vulnerablemission.org/about/safeguarding/>), even though we as an organisation do not send employees or volunteers and Jim Harries or other persons do not work for AVM in their respective areas of service.

5) Our position as the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission e. V.

Whilst taking sides with our association and board member Jim Harries, we would like to make it clear that the household in question is not a project of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission. Our organisation has no operational, financial or organisational connection to the now closed home, nor does Jim Harries carry out his service in Kenya as an employee or agent of the association.

The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (*Allianz for Verletzliche Mission e. V.*) is a registered, non-profit organisation in Germany, which operates solely within the framework of its defined purposes and under the direction of its executive board. We are committed to legal compliance, ethical behaviour and responsible conduct in all our activities. This naturally includes our full participation in contributing to a fair and transparent solution in this matter.

Nevertheless, we fear that in attempting to make externally funded projects for children and other vulnerable groups safer for them, UK law has tragically failed to take into account the possibility of family situations such as Jim Harries' that are embedded in locally rooted protection measures. In these circumstances, someone becomes part of a local community – not through their job but through a holistic sharing of their life. As seen above, 'family' in such a Kenyan context is in practice often defined differently than in Europe.

After careful consideration of the current situation, the Governing Board has therefore decided that Jim Harries will remain a member of this body. For us, there is nothing to suggest that sexual violence has occurred in any form. However, if, contrary to expectations, the investigations reveal evidence of sexual exploitation, the AVM will react appropriately and make the necessary decisions in line with its responsibilities.

In addition, we strongly protest against the measures imposed, citing the following reasons:

- a) Dr Harries has been ministering sacrificially as a missionary in a remote part of western Kenya since 1993. He has pastored and discipled many of the residents in Siaya and the surrounding area in a culturally sensitive manner. The reactions to the investigations from his local community (including current and former members of his household) testify that his conduct is appreciated, and the allegations are regarded as absurd.
- b) Dr Harries has been living there very simply in a culturally appropriate way serving the people of the village and the surrounding area. These culturally appropriate ways of serving could seem strange to practices in the United Kingdom and the West, but they are very consistent and expected in his area of service.
- c) Dr Harries is strongly motivated by the principles and practice of his Christian faith that would abhor and condemn any practices that put children at risk.

- d) As the founder of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, he is living out the principles outlined under 1) above.
- e) Since 1997, Dr Harries has also been caring for orphaned children who otherwise would find themselves living under very difficult and challenging circumstances. They have been housed, fed, clothed, and educated under Dr Harries care.
- f) There has been no evidence whatsoever that his care of orphaned children has in any way compromised their safety.
- g) A number of security measures were put in place to make hidden actions, abuse and cover-up more difficult.

We also protest against the exploitation of inter-state dependencies and the imposition of colonial-style practices and customs on the independent and sovereign Republic of Kenya.

We appeal to the Kenyan government to exercise charity and care in ensuring a secure future for the now wantonly dispersed members of Dr Harries' household.

Finally, we call on the UK Government – alongside the justified prosecution of actual abuse – to ensure the protection and rehabilitation of those harmed by unwarranted suspicion or allegations.¹¹

Signed:

*Dr Marcus Grohmann (Director)
on behalf of the AVM Executive and Governing Board*

(Addition from 22 May 2025: The statement was written by members of the Governing Board excluding Jim Harries; he was also not involved in the decision to publish it.)

¹¹ The following documents from experts emphasise the importance of this often-neglected topic: Burnett, Ros (2017) Why it is too easy for innocent people to be wrongly accused of sexual abuse. In: *The Justice Gap*. Available at: <https://www.thejusticegap.com/easy-innocent-people-wrongly-accused-sexual-abuse/> (accessed 10 April 2025); Devine, Lauren (2017) The adequacy of remedies in respect of unsubstantiated accusations of child abuse. *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 29(1): 43–61. https://publications.aston.ac.uk/id/eprint/43602/1/_2017_cflq_43.pdf; Hoyle, Carolyn, Speechley, Naomi-Ellen and Burnett, Ros (2016) *The Impact of Being Wrongly Accused of Abuse in Occupations of Trust: Victims' Voices*. University of Oxford, Centre for Criminology. Available at: https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/the_impact_of_being_wrongly_accused_of_abuse_hoyle_speechley_burnett_final_26_may.pdf.