BOOKS I HAVE READ: VULNERABLE MISSION

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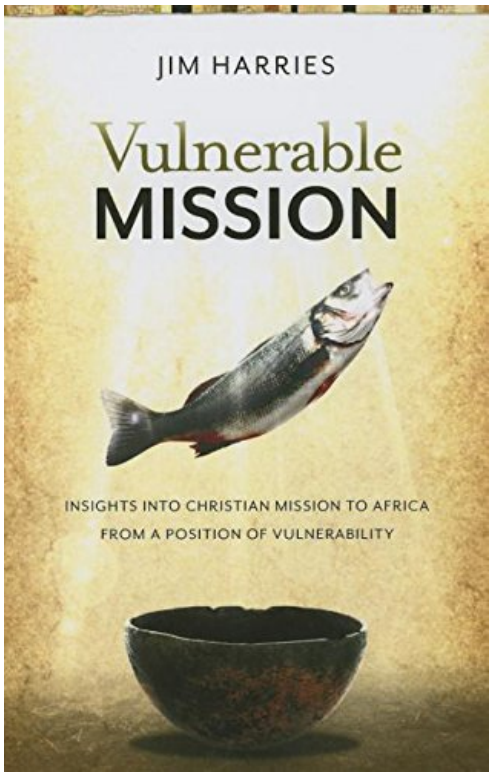
'I have little doubt as to the good intentions of the vast majority of mission efforts from the North to the South today. I do doubt whether many practitioners in the North understand what is happening in the South.'
Category: Reviews

Subtitled, Insights Into Christian Mission to Africa from a Position of Vulnerability, Jim Harries book, Vulnerable Mission,Â is one that needs to be widely read by anyone involved in Christian mission.

The central thrust of the book can be summed up in this quote.

> *I have little doubt as to the good intentions of the vast majority of mission efforts from the North to the South today. I do doubt whether many practitioners in the North understand what is happening in the South. (p. 150)*

The fact that Jim writes from a the position of having lived in rural East Africa for over twenty years, means that he has experience to back up his assertions. This is a voice we need to hear.



The book is written from the point of view of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission which seeks to encourage wider use of mission and development strategies that depend on locally available resources and local languages (see my earlier post). Coming from this background, the book basically addresses two issues; language use and finance. The various chapters originated as journal articles and there is a mixture of theoretical and more practical material.

To me, the strong points of the book lie in its criticism of unhealthy aid and development activities. I liked the way that he pointed out that it is futile to criticise the 'prosperity gospel' in Africa when, very often, we are feeding the phenomenon through the influx of huge amounts of cash from the West. His criticism of child sponsorships is as devastating as it is uncomfortable.

> *Parents now find themselves beneficiaries of a small windfall through having children. Whole families can seek to live off the "relationship" this child has developed with a white donor seen in a photograph. A small team of locally recruited, salary-earning people become foster parents on behalf of donors from many miles away. The African parents are no longer left to*

> *bring up their own children, and the child learns to despise his parents, as he knows from early on that his well-being is dependent not on them but on the image of his sponsors that he sees in a photograph.*

There is much more in this controversial, thought-provoking vein. With government aid, evangelism and Bible translation all coming under examination. Those of us who do this sort of thing as a living, need to be prepared to listen to the critiques that Jim brings.

However, despite believing that is a book that people need to read, I also believe that it has a number of flaws that mean that it will probably not be taken as seriously as it might be. Let me highlight a couple.

The first problem lies in the origin of the book as a a series of papers. There is a fair bit of repetition which is inevitable in a book of this sort. Of itself, this isn't a problem, but the fact that much of the book consists of strident criticism of current mission methods means that after a while, you feel like you've been repeatedly slapped by a missiologist.

Perhaps a bigger problem is that the book does not, to my mind, sufficiently engage with other thinkers. There is nothing inherently new or unique in much of what is said here, but there is very little engagement with other writers who have made similar points in the past. Likewise, when the book takes issue with positions, it does not pay adequate attention to contrary positions. For example, chapter 5 addresses the area of holistic mission with hardly a mention of the extensive literature on the subject. Chapter 9 takes a critical look at Philip Jenkins'Â Next ChristendomÂ but does not pay muchÂ attention to other writers or publications which support Jenkins' viewpoint.

The upshot of this is that the book is much more black and white than I am comfortable with. It rightly highlights the dangers of dependancy which can be created by Western funding. However, rather than seriously engage with the complexities and biblical defences of holistic mission it rejects the idea out of hand. The author may be correct to do so, but the evidence presented here is not sufficient to warrant that conclusion.

I remember reading a book about personal evangelism that said that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Were this book a little sweeter and a little less strident, it would, I am sure, gain more adherents.

That being said; you should still buy it!