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The Task of Empowering the Vulnerable Communities

H. Daniel Kim

VULNERABILITY AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES: DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING

Vulnerability, as a concept, is difficult to define as it can arise from a wide range of factors, including historical, cultural, social, environmental, political, and economic conditions. Moreover, vulnerability can be dynamic, changing with time, and can be heterogeneous even within the same vulnerable group. There is no universally accepted approach for measuring vulnerability.

However, for the purposes of missions work, we can adopt a definition of vulnerability that is relevant and useful. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines vulnerability as the conditions created by a mix of physical, social, economic, and environmental factors that make a person, community, property, or system more likely to be affected by hazards.

Factors that contribute to vulnerability include poverty, lack of access to resources, natural disasters, environmental degradation, health crises, political instability and conflict, discrimination, and inequality. The consequences of vulnerability can include emotional and psychological harm, physical harm, financial harm, social exclusion, exploitation, and a reduced quality of life.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT VULNERABILITY

Unfortunately, there are several misconceptions about vulnerability that can hinder our understanding and response to the needs of vulnerable communities. One common misconception is that vulnerability is a personal weakness or a sign of personal failure or lack of resilience. However, vulnerability is a natural part of the human experience and can arise due to external

factors beyond an individual's control.

Another misconception is that vulnerable people are solely responsible for their circumstances. This view ignores the systemic issues and structural inequalities that contribute to their hardships. Finally, some people believe that assisting vulnerable communities creates dependency. In reality, well-designed assistance programs can empower individuals and communities to become more self-sufficient and resilient.

In summary, missions targeting vulnerable communities require a nuanced understanding of vulnerability and the factors that contribute to it. It is important to dispel common misconceptions about

CONTENTS

- 1 The Task of Empowering the Vulnerable Communities**
H. Daniel Kim
- 8 The Future of Disciple-Making**
Susanta Patra
- 12 Theatrical Paradigm of Theodrama and Its Implications for Christian Life and Mission**
Daniel J. Kim
- 22 Inspired, Instructed, and Enlivened for the Future**
J. Nelson Jennings
- 27 TESTIMONY**
Jaque Dy
- 30 BOOK REVIEW**
Benij Cruz

vulnerability to develop effective and sustainable solutions that empower individuals and communities.

EFFECTIVE APPROACHES FOR ENGAGING VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

To work effectively with vulnerable communities, it is essential to take a considerate and respectful approach that places the community's needs, viewpoints, and autonomy as the top priority.

To ensure that our interventions for vulnerable communities are inclusive, effective, and sustainable, it is important to avoid certain approaches that can perpetuate harm and reinforce existing power dynamics. These include stereotyping, top-down approaches, tokenism, over-reliance on charity, ignoring power dynamics, and failing to address inequality.

1. Stereotyping can reinforce harmful mistaken idea or belief many people have about a thing or group that is based upon how they look on the outside, which may be untrue or only partly true. This can perpetuate discrimination.
2. Top-down approaches can undermine the agency and voice of vulnerable communities, leading to ineffective or unsustainable programs.
3. Tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups. It involves community members only symbolically or superficially.
4. Over-reliance on charity can prevent the development of sustainable solutions.
5. Ignoring power dynamics can perpetuate harm and reinforce existing power imbalances.
6. Failing to address inequality can neglect the underlying inequalities and injustices that contribute to vulnerability.

By avoiding these approaches, we can design programs and interventions that prioritize the perspectives and needs of vulnerable communities, foster interdependence, and address the systemic and structural factors that contribute to vulnerability.

THE MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUNDING DIRECT AND INDIRECT MISSIONS

In contemporary religious and missionary circles, there is an ongoing debate surrounding the understanding of missions. A central point of contention is whether a mission must necessarily include the direct proclamation of the gospel. As a result, activities that involve directly sharing the gospel are referred to as direct missions, while those that do not are labeled as indirect or auxiliary missions.

However, this dichotomy can lead to several

misconceptions regarding missions. One common misconception is that direct missions are superior to indirect missions. Direct missions often involve evangelism, preaching the gospel, and converting individuals to Christianity, while indirect missions are those that are aimed at providing physical, social, or economic support to vulnerable communities. Due to this, indirect missions are often viewed as a means to pave the way for direct missions, leading to a situation where direct evangelism is prioritized over other forms of mission work. However, we must ask ourselves: Did God and Jesus truly differentiate between direct and indirect missions? In Jesus' earthly ministry, as declared in Isaiah 61, His mission was to preach the gospel to the poor. We often get caught up in the abstract notion that the gospel, the good news, must always be synonymous with the Word of God. Yet, for those living in poverty, the most immediate good news may be the provision of food, and for the sick, it is the prospect of healing. Jesus provided for the physical needs of people and healed their illnesses. Was this done solely to prepare them for the Word of God? No, it is not a matter of sequential order. Jesus' miraculous works were, in and of themselves, a manifestation of His kingdom ministry. When we genuinely engage in God's mission, both the spiritual and the practical aspects are simultaneously fulfilled, and the two become inseparable. As we embark on missions for vulnerable communities, let us remember the importance of addressing both their physical and spiritual needs. By doing so, we follow the example set by Jesus, embodying a holistic approach to ministry that embraces both direct and indirect means of sharing the gospel.

The dichotomy between direct and indirect missions can lead to a narrow understanding of the nature of mission work. Some engaged in indirect missions may feel that they are not contributing to the spread of the gospel, leading to a sense of frustration or inadequacy. Conversely, those engaged in direct missions may feel that they are solely responsible for spreading the gospel, leading to an overemphasis on evangelism at the expense of other forms of missionary works.

Another common misconception is that the missionary is the central figure in missions. This view can lead to a situation where the focus is on the missionary's actions, overshadowing God's presence. To prevent this, it is essential to recognize that the ultimate agent in missions is God, and not the missionary. By remaining humble and faithful and allowing God to work through us, we can effectively participate in His mission and spread the gospel, whether through direct or indirect means.

It is essential to recognize that both direct and indirect missions play a vital role in reaching out to vulnerable communities. In regions where openly sharing the gospel is not possible, indirect missions

become an indispensable tool for expressing God's love through actions and support. For instance, providing food and medical care to vulnerable communities can create opportunities for sharing the gospel indirectly. This can lead to individuals becoming receptive to the gospel message and embracing Christianity.

IMPACT OF VULNERABILITY ON MISSIONS

The impact of vulnerability on missions is significant as it often affects the communities that missions aim to serve. Vulnerable communities often face challenges such as poverty, lack of access to basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare, and limited opportunities for social and economic empowerment. These challenges can lead to further marginalization, discrimination, and injustice.

In mission strategies, addressing vulnerability is a critical component for achieving positive, long-term impact. This requires a deep understanding of the specific needs and challenges faced by vulnerable communities and working in partnership with them. By focusing on sustainability, building local capacities, and addressing root causes of vulnerability, missions can help to create a more equitable and just world for all people.

MISSION STRATEGIES

To explore mission strategies for vulnerable communities, the key considerations for a successful mission strategy are as follows:

Mission strategies towards vulnerable communities should focus on addressing the root causes of vulnerability and promoting sustainable development. The following points are key considerations for a successful mission strategy:

- 1. Understanding the Community:** It's essential to tailor interventions to community's specific needs. This can include assessing needs, consulting with the community and reviewing related data and research. This knowledge helps make interventions culturally suitable and fitting. For example, in rural Bangladesh, the non-profit "BRAC" performed an in-depth needs assessment to comprehend the local community's context and needs. They analyzed relevant data, collaborated with community leaders and residents, and evaluated current programs and services. This information guided the creation of a community-led development program aimed at tackling the root causes of poverty and vulnerability in the area.
- 2. Building Partnerships:** Collaborating with local organizations, government agencies, and stakeholders offers benefits like increased resources, more expertise, and better access to

decision-makers. These partnerships also ensure community involvement in the development process and that interventions meet their needs. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a community organization *Desenvolvimento Urbano Sustentável no Brasil*, "Sustainable urban development Brazil" partnered with local government, businesses, and stakeholders to address vulnerable communities' needs in the city's favelas. The goal of these initiatives is to promote more just, safe, healthy, and sustainable cities for all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

- 3. Addressing Root Causes of Vulnerability:** Tackling underlying issues like poverty and inequality promotes long-term resilience and reduces future vulnerability. Interventions may involve providing education and healthcare access, supporting income-generating activities, and encouraging sustainable livelihoods. For instance, in Nairobi, Kenya, "Slum Dwellers International" implemented a program to address urban slum dwellers' vulnerability. The program included initiatives to improve healthcare, education, and income-generating activity access. This effort significantly reduced poverty and improved residents' quality of life in the slums, showcasing the importance of addressing vulnerability's root causes in promoting sustainable development.
- 4. Promoting Inclusive and Equitable Development:** Design interventions to be inclusive and equitable, ensuring all community members have access to opportunities and resources, regardless of their background. Implement targeted programs, like gender-sensitive livelihood initiatives, and use participatory methods to involve the entire community. For example, in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, the non-profit "Oxfam International" implemented a program to foster inclusive and equitable development in vulnerable communities. Oxfam is a global movement of people, working together to end the injustice of poverty. That means it tackle the inequality that keeps people poor.
- 5. Investing in Human Capital:** Investing in education, health, and skills development builds individual and community capacities, supporting their ability to benefit from economic and social opportunities. This can include supporting education and training access, providing health services, and promoting healthy lifestyles. For example, in rural Guatemala, the non-profit, *Cada Niño*, provides services to orphans, vulnerable children, and those with special

needs.

6. Promoting Environmental Sustainability:

Consider the importance of environmental sustainability in interventions and minimize adverse environmental effects. This may involve preserving natural resources, decreasing waste and emissions, and advocating for renewable energy sources.

For instance, in the Amazon region of Peru, the non-profit “Amazon Conservation Association” implemented a program to foster environmental sustainability in vulnerable communities. The program included initiatives to reduce deforestation, enhance water management, and promote renewable energy sources. This effort positively impacted the preservation of natural resources in the region, highlighting the importance of promoting environmental sustainability in vulnerable communities.

7. Measuring and Evaluating Impact: Effective measurement and evaluation of impact requires a robust monitoring system that facilitates the assessment of impact and identification of areas for improvement. A range of data collection methods, including surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder consultations, can be employed to measure progress and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Consistent reporting and transparent communication of results are crucial to ensuring efficient resource allocation and achieving the desired impact.

For example, in Mumbai, India’s slums, The non-profit organization, “Majlis Manch,” has implemented a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to assess the impact of its programs and initiatives. They are also involved in training, research, campaigns, and publications on issues concerning violence against women and children. They work to demystify laws and make them accessible to judges, lawyers, prosecutors, police, NGOs and other government and non-government representatives and most importantly, to women themselves.

Many missionaries have already been engaged in various forms of missionary works for vulnerable communities, regardless of the scale or approach taken by their organizations. This is because such work is at the core of missions and an inevitable task that needs to be addressed.

OVERCOMING DEPENDENCY

As a missionary engages in missions for vulnerable communities, we are often faced with practical difficulties, particularly in overcoming the mindset of dependency on external support. It is crucial for us to find ways to break this cycle of beneficiary-dependency relationships and foster mutual

interdependence instead. By doing so, we can promote sustainable development and empower these communities to create new possibilities for themselves.

Missions for vulnerability aim to address the physical, social, and spiritual needs of vulnerable communities through a holistic approach that includes practical assistance and the gospel. These missions emphasize empowerment, collaboration, and advocacy to promote self-sufficiency, sustainable solutions, and social justice. To build empathy and understanding, missionaries engage in active listening, immerse themselves in the local culture, and encourage open dialogue.

The question then arises: how can we help these communities break free from this dependency? The answer lies in building a relationship of mutual interdependence. To address this issue and foster interdependency, it is important to recognize the interconnected nature of individuals, communities, and systems. Vulnerability and interdependence are closely related concepts, and addressing vulnerability requires a holistic and integrated approach that acknowledges the mutual interdependency of social, economic, and environmental systems. By promoting interdependence, interventions can encourage individuals and communities to work together to build sustainable solutions that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability for all. This way, vulnerable communities can move beyond a cycle of dependence and towards a mutually beneficial and supportive relationship with those who seek to assist them.

MISSIONS FOR VULNERABILITY AS A WAY TO TRANSFORM WEAKNESS TO STRENGTH

Missions for vulnerability aim to address the physical, social, and spiritual needs of vulnerable communities through a holistic approach that includes practical assistance and the gospel. These missions emphasize empowerment, collaboration, and advocacy to promote self-sufficiency, sustainable solutions, and social justice. To build empathy and understanding, missionaries engage in active listening, immerse themselves in the local culture, and encourage open dialogue. By promoting shared experiences, missionaries can foster mutual trust,

respect, and understanding between themselves and vulnerable communities.

To inspire positive change, missions for vulnerability mobilize volunteers and resources to support community-driven initiatives and advocate for policy changes that address systemic issues. These missions also facilitate partnerships between vulnerable communities, organizations, and stakeholders to promote collaboration and shared learning.

In conclusion, missions for vulnerability have the potential to transform weakness into strength by empowering individuals, building empathy and understanding, and inspiring collective action. By focusing on the key elements of these missions, we can create lasting change in the lives of vulnerable communities and work towards a more just and compassionate world.

WEAKNESS AS PARADOX

- 2 Cor 12:9-10

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

PARADOX OF THE POWER OF THE CROSS: WOUNDED HEALER

The cross is a mystery that reveals the divine nature of God hidden within the suffering of Jesus Christ. It represents a paradox, where extreme shame can lead to the pinnacle of glory. Similarly, disabilities may be viewed as shameful, but within the context of the cross, they can become a source of great strength and triumph. However, the cross itself has no inherent power or ability; it is simply a symbol of despair and shame. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ's cross became the symbol of power as it transformed weakness into strength.

When Jesus Christ came into this world, he embodied humility and willingly suffered. His ultimate sacrifice on the cross was an expression of love for humanity and a meeting place between the spiritual love of Jesus Christ and human suffering. He did not come to eliminate pain and suffering, but rather to offer a way to transform it into something greater. Thus, the cross represents the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity, where suffering and weakness can be transformed into strength and glory.

Jesus did not rely on miraculous power to heal people, but rather used his own wounds and suffering to bring about healing. The cross represents God's power to transform tragedy into glory and is not simply a symbol of conquering disability. Instead, it

is a place where God's grace meets our weakness and suffering, and transforms them into something new.

True healing in Christ occurs through the process of restoration, which happens when God's love enters into a person's pain and suffering. Even for those with disabilities, physical limitations do not equate to helplessness. By applying the grace of Christ's sacrifice, their limitations can be transformed into God's power. The cross is a symbol of transformation, where tragedy is turned into glory through the endurance of extreme pain and suffering, leading to ultimate resurrection.

Paul is a person who knows the secret of this paradox better than anyone else. His confession is always centered on Jesus Christ, and he speaks of a theology of weakness. This is the theology of the cross. This theology of the cross is a revolutionary way of thinking that overturns the conventional system of thinking that considers a healthy body without wounds or disabilities as normal. This paradox is where weakness and wounds become strength.

Isaiah 53:4-10 is considered the pinnacle of disability theology, and the passage portrays Jesus Christ as a wounded healer. The passage speaks of how Jesus carried our grief and sorrows, and how He was pierced and wounded for our transgressions and sins. This is the plan that God had for the redemption of sinners, and the cross represents the highest form of love that God could show for us.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18, the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The cross swallows human helplessness and weakness with God's power and replaces them with God's power. The cross is where Jesus Christ, who came as a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45), exchanged death for the glory of life. Therefore, the cross is a place of essential transformation.

PARADOXICAL BENEFITS OF BEING VULNERABLE

While vulnerability is often seen as a weakness or something to be avoided, it can actually have paradoxical benefits. Here are a few examples:

1. Building stronger relationships: Being vulnerable can create a deeper connection with others, as it allows for authenticity and honesty. When we are vulnerable, by showing our true selves to others, we can build mutual trust and understanding, and create a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives.
2. Developing resilience: Vulnerability can teach us to be more resilient, as it requires us to face our fears and overcome them. When we are vulnerable, we learn to accept and work through our emotions, rather than repressing or avoiding them.
3. Creativity and innovation: Vulnerability can also

stimulate creativity and innovation, as it requires us to think outside of our usual patterns and comfort zones. By embracing uncertainty and taking risks, we can explore new possibilities and ideas.

4. Compassion and empathy: Vulnerability can also cultivate compassion and empathy, as it allows us to see and feel the struggles of others. By recognizing our own vulnerabilities, we can develop greater empathy for others and become more compassionate and understanding.

In summary, vulnerability can have paradoxical benefits that can lead to personal growth, deeper connections, creativity, authenticity, and compassion. By embracing vulnerability, we can tap into our true potential and become more resilient, adaptable, and compassionate individuals.

THE POOR AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the beginning of his ministry, Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah 61 at the synagogue in Nazareth, declaring himself as the fulfillment of the prophesied Messiah and the protagonist of the end-time Jubilee. This declaration confused the Jews who believed that the promise of the prophecy was exclusive to them. Isaiah's prophecy not only identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy, but also describes his role as the Messiah on earth.

One significant difference between Isaiah's prophecy and Jesus' perspective is the replacement of the term "day of God's vengeance" with "year of the Lord's favor" in Luke 4:19. This change represents a shift from judgment in the Old Testament to grace in the New Testament. Jesus' Jubilee proclamation emphasizes his social responsibility as the Messiah, including freeing the oppressed and bringing value to the marginalized groups of society.

Overall, Jesus' declaration of Jubilee reaffirms the presence of the marginalized in the Kingdom of God and challenges the religiously incorrect habits of his time. His proclamation brings a dramatic reversal in perspective, declaring that those considered outsiders by society are insiders in God's eyes. Jesus' proclamation of Jubilee has implications in spiritual, physical, and social aspects of life, making a significant impact on all areas.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF LUKE 4:6-20

And he went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And stood up to read.

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, Because he has

anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim for the prisoners released and recovery of sight for the blind, to send away the oppressed into release to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them .

There are intentional changes in the sentence structure of the biblical passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 that Jesus quoted in Luke 4:18-19. Specifically, the Hebrew word for "prisoner" was changed to "oppressed," and "the day of God's vengeance" was replaced with "the year of the Lord's favor." These changes create a chiasmic structure in the passage, which emphasizes the central message of the passage - that the proclamation of the gospel and God's grace is the essence of the Messiah's mission. The term "the poor" is used to represent all marginalized groups, including prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed, and emphasizes that the gospel is for all people, including Gentiles. The passage also suggests that those who were previously excluded from society may play a leading role in the new kingdom of God. Finally, the term "the poor" is expanded to encompass not only material poverty but also spiritual poverty.

The meaning that can be obtained from this intentional sentence structure is as follows:

1. The parallel structure between "good news to the poor" and "the year of the Lord's favor" in part B emphasizes that these two phrases convey the same meaning.
2. The salvation work of God's kingdom, which is achieved through grace, is emphasized by the central vertex of the cross-symmetric structure (bold text), which becomes the main theme of the entire passage. In other words, the central part directly speaks of the essence of the gospel and grace, namely to free the captives, give sight to the blind, and release the oppressed.
3. "The poor" is ultimately presented as a representative of the categories listed in the middle part, namely the captives, blind, and oppressed. Therefore, "good news to the poor" ultimately means "good news to the Gentiles," and that is the essence of the Messianic ministry.
4. The phrase "the blind" in the sentence can also be considered to represent the disabled. This highlights the fact that the disabled play a pioneering role in opening the door to missions among other marginalized groups and Gentiles.
5. "The day of God's vengeance" was deleted and "the day of God's grace" was emphasized.
6. The most essential content is that these marginalized groups were not just objects of sympathy or welfare work, but Jesus took them as partners in Gentile missions. This emphasizes

the shift from being objects of God's kingdom to being stewards and subjects of missions.

7. The message of sight restoration, where the blind see, is a message of eschatological restoration that is in line with the prophecy of Isaiah 29:18-19 and Isaiah 35:5-6. Through such restoration, the passage emphasizes the unification of the entire kingdom of God.

THE POOR AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As we have seen, the poor ultimately serve as representatives of the Gentiles. Therefore, when Isaiah prophesied to preach the good news to the poor, it means that Jesus was sent to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Preaching the gospel to the poor means freeing the marginalized under the power of darkness, which means the Gentiles are freed by the gospel. Furthermore, we need to examine the meaning of "the poor" in connection with the Kingdom of God. There are two possible interpretations of the term: the poor as the object of salvation and the poor as the subject of salvation. If we see the poor as the object of salvation, they are just like anyone else who needs salvation. If we see them as the subject of salvation, they become a paradigm of God's salvation plan. Jesus began His ministry with the poor and was identified with them. Therefore, we should view the poor not only as a social problem but also from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. The New Testament teaches us that poverty is not only an economic problem but also a spiritual one. Preaching the gospel to the poor means that they can find hope and salvation through Jesus Christ, who welcomed, embraced, and transformed them.

To fulfill this Kingdom motivation, we must empower the vulnerable. We must follow the method used by Jesus.

For instance, in the story of the ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19, ironically, the leper community had already achieved social integration by living together as Samaritans and Jews. This was a dream-like state that was unimaginable in the existing social order. However, in the stage of their healing, a reversal of the reversal occurs. After being cured, they return to the stage of social separation, dividing Samaritans and Jews again.

The reason for praising the returning Samaritan was that he knew how to give thanks, while the Jews who went to the priest were considered ignorant of gratitude. This is a misunderstanding of the text. Although the Jewish lepers were cured, they were still considered impure until they received a declaration of cleanliness from the priest. Therefore, it was most important and urgent for them to go quickly and receive the declaration of cleanliness from the priest. That is why Jesus also told them to go and show themselves to the priest. However, for the Samaritan, the act of going to the priest to receive a declaration of cleanliness was meaningless in itself. Even if he

received a declaration of cleanliness from the priest, he was fundamentally impure from a religious purity code because he was a Samaritan.

So, the fact that the Samaritan came to Jesus while the Jews went to the priest reveals the truth that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came from heaven to establish the kingdom of God, where even Gentiles can take a seat as guests of honor.

Therefore, our missions for the vulnerable are not just social welfare work or indirect evangelism. It is the very heart of ushering in the kingdom of God.

As such, the characteristic of Kingdom missions is that it brings about holistic restoration. Firstly, physical restoration such as healing and financial recovery, secondly, spiritual restoration, and thirdly, social restoration where individuals return to mainstream society and their families.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the chaos that vulnerable communities face does not always lead to tragedy or failure. We as missionaries can learn from God's use of chaos as a material for creation and strive to create new possibilities for these communities. This involves embracing the challenges and complexities of interdependence, promoting sustainable development, addressing root causes of vulnerability, and fostering inclusive and equitable development.

As we carry out this mission, it is important to recognize the vulnerability that we as missionaries and pastors also face. The pressure to appear strong and powerful can lead us to a messiah complex and a reluctance to acknowledge our own limitations and weaknesses.

Let us not forget that in Jesus' parable of the shepherd and the sheep, we often think of ourselves as the shepherds. However, we must remember that we are first and foremost the sheep of Jesus, and among his flock, we hold leadership roles.

Therefore, let us embrace vulnerability and seek help when needed, as we work towards the realization of God's kingdom on earth, where justice, peace, and love prevail. Amen.



H. Daniel Kim
joycenter@hotmail.com

Dr. H. Daniel Kim is Founder and Executive Director for the Joy Research and Service Center for the Disabled. The joy Center is striving for the empowerment of vulnerable communities around the world with a focus on disability as a motif. Now its mission focus is on African countries. Westminster Theological Seminary, MAR; M.Div. (Philadelphia, USA) and Reformed Theological Seminary, Th.M; Ph.D in intercultural studies (Mississippi, USA