

Unprecedented Christmas Gathering Held in Vietnam

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✘ On Friday evening, history was made in communist Vietnam.

Christian sources reported that some 40,000 people gathered in a hastily constructed venue in Ho Chi Minh City to worship God, celebrate Christmas and hear a gospel message—an event of unprecedented magnitude in Vietnam.

A popular Vietnamese Christian Web site and other reports indicated up to 8,000 people responded to the gospel message indicating a desire to follow Christ.

For the last two years, authorities surprisingly granted permission to unregistered house churches in Ho Chi Minh City to hold public Christmas rallies, and last year more than 10,000 people participated in one in Tao Dan Stadium.

This year visionary house church leaders approached the government in October and asked for a sports stadium seating 30,000; they were refused.

Authorities offered a sports venue holding only 3,000, located eight miles out of the city. This was unacceptable to the organizers. They pressed for another stadium in the city holding about 15,000, and officials gave them a verbal promise

that they could
have it.

The verbal promise did not translate into the written permission that is critical in the country—church leaders say such promises are empty until “we have the permission paper in our hand.” Christian leaders believed event planning had to proceed without permission and sent out invitations far and wide—only to have authorities deny the stadium they had promised.

Led by pastor Ho Tan Khoa, chairman of a large fellowship of house church organizations, organizers were forced to look for alternatives. They found a large open field in the Go Vap district of the city. When permission was still not granted five days before the planned event, several church leaders literally camped for three days outside city hall, pressing for an answer.

Authorities, who often work to sabotage united action among Christians, tried urgently to find ways to talk the leaders out of going ahead, promising future concessions if they would cancel the event. Organizers stood firm. Ultimately they told the deputy mayor that refusal to grant permission at that point would have far-ranging, negative ramifications in Vietnam as well as internationally.

Finally, at the close of business on Dec. 9, just 48 hours before the scheduled event, officials granted permission that required clearance all the way to

Hanoi. But the permission was only for 3,000 people, and many more had been invited.

Organizers had less than two days to turn a vacant field into something that would accommodate a stadium-size crowd. They had to bring in ample electricity, construct a giant stage, rent 20,000 chairs and set up the sound and lighting. The extremely short time frame caused contractors to double the prices they would have charged with ample time.

Organizers also rented hundreds of buses to bring Christians and their non-Christian friends from provinces near the city. Thousands of students sacrificed classes to help with last-minute preparations and to join the celebration.

Just after noon on Friday, word came that police had stopped busses carrying 300 Steing minority people from the west to the event scheduled for that day. Organizers, fearing all buses would be stopped, put out an emergency worldwide prayer request.

Christian sources said that authorities either did not or could not stop buses from other directions, and that by evening the venue became the biggest "bus station" in all of Vietnam. By 6 p.m. the venue was full to capacity, and at least 2,000 had to be

turned away.

Christians described the event, titled "With Our Whole Hearts," in superlative terms. For house churches, large gatherings are both very rare and very special, and for many this was their first glimpse of the strength of Vietnam's growing Christian movement. Thousands of Christians joined a choir of more 1,000 singers in loud and joyful praise.

Sources said that the main speaker, the Rev. Duong Thanh Lam, head of the Assemblies of God house churches "preached with anointing" and people responding to his gospel invitation poured to the front of the stage "like a waterfall." With space in front of the stage insufficient, the sources said, many others in their seats also indicated their desire to receive Christ.

Organizers along with many participants were overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude as the event closed. People spontaneously hugged each other and cried, "Lord, bring revival to all of Vietnam!" Other comments included, "Beyond our fondest imagination," and, "Nothing could stop the hand of the Lord."

The event raised more than 60 million dong, or \$3,280, for a charity helping needy children. People were quite surprised to read a positive article on the event in the state-controlled press, which often

vilifies Christians.

House churches in the north were hopeful that they could hold a similar event. Organizers in Hanoi have heard encouraging reports that they will get permission to use the national My Dinh sports stadium for a Christmas celebration, though they do not have it in hand. Sources said they have sent out invitations across a broad area to an event scheduled for Dec. 20.

Friday's event also made history in that it was streamed live on the Vietnamese Web site and viewed by thousands more in Vietnam and by Vietnamese people around the world.