

Vietnamese Churches Growing Under Indigenous Leaders

In Washington state, pastors such as Giao Le of Olympia are equipping local immigrant congregations for evangelism

Police kicked in the door to Giao Le's house, dragged him into the street and put a gun to his head, demanding that he stop preaching about Jesus. It would be his final warning, they said.

As pastor of an underground Assemblies of God congregation in Saigon, Vietnam, a church that had been meeting secretly in people's homes for 20 years, Le had been persecuted for his faith many times. He had been arrested in 1984, imprisoned for three years and savagely beaten by police.

They promised he'd be set free if he'd stop preaching. He never stopped. "It's my responsibility to talk about Jesus," Le told Charisma through an interpreter.

In 1996, just one month after the police gave Le his final warning about preaching, he received approval to come to the United States. He had worked for 10 years to receive authorization to leave Vietnam. With his life at risk, Le and his wife and five children left their homeland to resettle where he could speak freely about Jesus.

Today, Le is pastor of a small Vietnamese congregation in Olympia, Wash., that meets in a classroom of Evergreen

Christian Center, an Assemblies of God (AG) church. Churches such as Le's are part of a growing movement in the state of Washington. There are 12 Vietnamese-speaking churches in the Seattle area, nine of them under the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the 1990s, the AG's Home Missions, a program aimed at evangelizing foreign-speaking communities, flourished as the number of immigrants in the state increased. Many of these émigrés leave countries that are closed to missionaries, as Le did. Chris Thomas, director of the Home Missions in Washington state, sees the arrival of these uprooted people as an opportunity to evangelize.

"These people return to their homes every year. They go to visit, and they talk about Jesus. We help disciple them so they can evangelize their own people," Thomas said.

The impact, then, is "missionaries" are being sent into a country that may be closed to evangelism.

Evangelism, church planting and leadership training are the three vital tasks for Home Missions, Thomas says. "It is necessary that the leadership of the church be turned over as quickly as possible to someone within the ethnic group itself. When he talks, people listen." Thomas notes that is what happened with Le's church in Olympia, a city with a growing Vietnamese community.

However, unlike most other potential indigenous leaders, Le already was trained as a pastor. He was studying to be a Catholic priest in Saigon in 1973 when he heard Glenn Stafford, an Assemblies of God missionary, speak.

Le dropped his studies despite his parents' protest and became an AG youth pastor for a church with an attendance of 1,000.

Just before the North Vietnamese Army overran Saigon in 1975, Le's senior pastor urged him to go to the United States. Le refused, and stayed with the church.

"I couldn't leave my church," he said. "I knew hard times were coming. I wanted to stay and help."

Le took a big risk to stay. The congregation met secretly in homes and was forced to abandon the church sanctuary. It wasn't long before the police began coming to Le's home, repeatedly taking him to court, where he was told to stop speaking about the Bible and Jesus. Finally, when Le wouldn't remain silent, he was imprisoned.

Over the next three years, prison guards beat him brutally and sometimes fed him only a small glass of water in a day. Several times they stuffed him into a box that was so small he couldn't sit up.

He was in isolation for three months inside the box, in total darkness. When they finally pulled him out, he couldn't stand.

Le has stayed in contact with his church in Saigon. He frequently gets letters about how the underground church is still growing despite the ongoing persecution. The Vietnamese government will not allow Le to return.

But Le still is grateful he doesn't have to live in fear.

“Freedom,” Le says. “Hallelujah.”