

Yearning to Be Free in VIETNAM

Hunted, hated and persecuted by Communist leaders for almost 30 years, Christians in Vietnam continue to pay a high price to live for Jesus.

Most churches in the United States would be delirious with joy if their membership figures grew by sixfold in 25 years. Few denominations would complain about a net gain of 800,000 people during the same time. The question is, Would they be willing to endure what the evangelical church in Vietnam has endured to get that kind of growth?

There were an estimated 160,000 evangelical Protestants in the country when independent South Vietnam fell to the Communist North Vietnamese Army in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War. Today there are an estimated 1 million.

Most of the growth has occurred among the minority tribal groups of the Central Highlands and the northwest provinces. Fifteen years ago, there were no Christians among the Hmong minority, who number approximately 693,000 people. Today there are reported to be 300,000 believers. Another minority, the Ede, have seen their Christian numbers grow from 15,000 to 150,000 during the last 25 years.

However, these dramatic church growth numbers have come at a high price. They all share a common denominator. Persecution.

Signs, Wonders and Persecution

After the South Vietnam capital of Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, and the Communists joined the North and South of the country, hundreds of church buildings were confiscated or destroyed, forcing believers to worship illegally in houses or isolated areas. Since then, these house churches—the number of which has increased dramatically to about 3,500 nationwide—have represented both the forefront of Christian expansion and the focus of government harassment and attack.

“Victor” attends a house church established in 1994 whose members are believers from assorted tribes. The fellowship has grown quickly—its spurt the initial result of visible demonstrations of God’s power.

“We are blessed because through the ministry in our area the Lord continues to deliver people from the bondage of being addicted to drugs such as heroin and opium,” Victor says.

He quickly launches into the story of “Nam,” a drug addict who tried again and again to quit his habit, resorting even to cutting his fingers and toes to distract himself from the craving.

“When Nam came to Christ, he was totally set free,” Victor says jubilantly. “His family was restored, and they just had another baby.”

A woman in Victor’s church who had been diagnosed with heart disease was healed after church leaders prayed for her. About 120 people came to Christ in the village during the next two months as word of her healing spread.

Unfortunately, the timing of the miracle coincided with an underground training program for new church workers. The notoriety the healing brought made it easier for local police to apprehend Christians. Victor was arrested, charged with “spreading propaganda against the government” and sentenced to three years in prison.

“I was confined in a lonely, dark cell,” he says. “My legs were shackled as I sat on the cold ground. I spent one month there. But the Lord did amazing things. Twenty people received Christ as I shared the good news with them.”

To stifle him, authorities moved Victor to a prison camp where his health deteriorated and he grew close to death. It was there that Jesus came to him in a vision, he says.

“He stood there in brightness. He did not say anything. I just felt His gentleness,” Victor says. “I felt ashamed and realized how weak I was when faced with difficulty. I cried to Him in repentance.”

The next morning Victor awoke with renewed faith and began to share the gospel with others in the camp.

“There is now a church in one of the villages close to the prison where I was held,” he says.

The ‘Big Lie’

After the end of the Vietnam War, one word summed up the ruling Communist government’s strategy for dealing with Christianity. Eradication.

Missionaries were expelled. Churches were closed or destroyed. Christian orphanages, schools and medical facilities were shut down. Pastors were imprisoned and died or were killed. Many believers were forced underground.

The Vietnamese government changed its tactics with the progressive collapse of the world's most powerful communist bloc, the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s. Authorities would now attempt to control the church where growth was the greatest—among the minority groups.

Arrests of minority Christian leaders increased. Many were harassed and tortured. A bonus for the Vietnamese government was that these leaders and their churches were in the more remote areas of the country, hidden away from international scrutiny and the resulting public condemnation that could arise because of human-rights abuses.

Thus began what one Vietnam observer called “The Big Lie” strategy—a plan that promoted the country's lip service to religious freedom and denied its retribution upon those who practiced religion freely.

“There is complete religious freedom in Vietnam—our constitution guarantees it,” the nation's Communist Party officials parrot—noting church buildings that are full and the presence of Buddhist pagodas in the urban areas.

“Although they always say that Vietnam now has religious freedom, we are always in persecution,” disputes the Rev. Nguyen Ngoc Hien, leader of one of the country's house

churches.

In April the Vietnamese Communist Party officially recognized the southern branch of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN). Church leaders—foreign and domestic—praised the government's modest concession that legalized this solidly evangelical denomination.

Nonetheless, caution is warranted. The southern ECVN's legal status will cover about 350 churches, which represent only a fraction of the almost 1 million Protestants.

"There's still well-documented persecution of Christians in Vietnam," a Western diplomat told a correspondent with Knight Ridder newspapers. "But as a trend, this [legal recognition] is important."

How important, though, is yet to be seen.

To date, Vietnam's Bureau of Religious Affairs has not responded to any ECVN requests to ease restrictions on churches. Reports from some of the remote areas have said minority Christians are being told by local officials that the legal recognition of the ECVN was not intended for them. And some house churches have been told they must join the ECVN to have freedom of worship.

Western observers liken these tactics to those used by China, where unofficial house churches are pressured to join the official government-approved churches or suffer the consequences.

In reality, they observe, little has changed for Christians in Vietnam.

Additional confirmation of this came recently when two sets of internal Communist Party documents leaked to the West were published by Freedom House in November 2000 and April of last year.

Both sets contain details of how to stop or at least stringently control the growth of Protestant Christianity in Vietnam. Actual measures to do so included forcing Christians to deny their faith by drinking a mixture of blood from sacrificed animals and rice alcohol in a "Ceremony of Repentance for Following Christianity." Another involved setting up extensive spy networks to inform on the church and its activities.

The government position was perhaps best summed up in a statement by a local Communist Party functionary to a group of citizens in Vietnam's Dac Lac province: "We will severely punish Christian believers in the three provinces of the Western Highlands, so that they will not be able to raise their head."

A Vigilant Church

Still, Vietnamese Christians are cautiously hopeful of seeing their country change for the better. The naming of Nong Duc Manh on April 22 as the new general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party brought some initial encouragement.

Manh is an ethnic Tay, the first minority representative to hold such a powerful position. He had no part in the Vietnam

War. He also is a university graduate whom analysts see as a "pragmatic centrist with leanings toward the reform camp," according to a Reuters news report.

However, the new general secretary has yet to provide any encouragement to the church, opting instead to follow the oppressive party line. Some church leaders, therefore, are taking it on themselves, at great risk, to pressure the government for increased religious freedom.

One ECVN pastor of an illegal church in the Central Highlands wrote last fall to provincial officials and openly complained about "unfair" treatment. The letter referred specifically to a Communist Party official's statement that the recent recognition of ECVN churches "had its validity only in the flat provinces."

"Please treat us fairly," the pastor wrote. "Stop persecuting Christians who practice their faith and belief. Don't oppress us to the end of the road where there is no way of escape."

Nguyen Hong Quang, a pastor and the leader of several Mennonite house churches in Vietnam, wrote an open letter to Christians in the West, appealing for them to protest persecution in Vietnam. The worship services he holds in his own home have been broken up by security police.

Having some legal training, Quang has tried his best to approach the authorities on the basis of laws that purport to give religious freedom to Vietnam's citizens.

He is always rebuffed, he says, yet carries on his ministry and reaches out to help the poor.

On the morning of Aug. 17, security police broke up a school that Quang had established in one of the worst slums of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Children there do not have identity papers, so they cannot go to public schools. They are usually hungry and under-clothed. Quang raised funds among local Christians and opened a slum school for about 100 of the children.

When the police burst in, objecting to the “illegal school” and Christian symbols on T-shirts provided for the children, they arrested Quang, his wife, a teacher and an aide.

Authorities held the four all day without water or food. Quang was taken to a private room and beaten by three officers. Only when they threatened a hunger strike were the Christians released.

Believers are encouraged by signs of pressure for more religious tolerance coming from outside the country. On Aug. 16, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom named Vietnam as one of four countries cited for “grave violations of religious freedom.” The commission urged the U.S. State Department to closely monitor events there.

Mainly, however, Vietnam’s evangelicals look to God for help. Then they work as hard as they can to spread the gospel.

As one 85-year-old pastor in Ho Chi Minh City said when asked recently why he works so hard instead of considering his age and taking things easy: “If I don’t do it, nobody will. We do not have enough workers to cover the areas that have been reached by the gospel. So, I continue to help in whatever way

I can.” *

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Regional Statistics: Asia

Country with largest percentage Christian population: Timor (92.2 percent)

Country with smallest Christian population: Afghanistan (less than 10,000)

Country with smallest percentage of Christians in population: Afghanistan (0.1 percent)

Largest denomination: Roman Catholic Church, Philippines (56.5 million)

Largest Protestant or independent denomination: Isolated radio churches (90 million)

Country with largest Christian growth in last five years: China (from 6 percent to 7 percent)

Fastest growing denomination, movement: True Jesus Church, China (47 percent)

Percentage of Pentecostals and charismatics in Christian population: 3.7 percent (135 million)

Largest non-Christian population: Muslim (832 million)

Most dangerous country for Christians: Afghanistan

Country with most evangelistic efforts per person: Philippines

Country with most evangelistic efforts for size of population:
Philippines

Country with highest Christian income: South Korea

Country with lowest Christian income: Maldives