

Christians in Vietnam Hold Another Historic Christmas Celebration

✖ For the second time in 10 days, Protestant history was made in Vietnam Sunday when 12,000 people gathered for a Christmas rally in Hanoi.

The event, which took place in the large square in front of the entrance to My Dinh National Stadium in the heart of Hanoi, was said to be 10 times larger than any prior Protestant gathering in history in northern Vietnam. On Dec. 11 in southern Vietnam, an estimated 40,000 people attended a Christmas celebration in Ho Chi Minh City (see “Unprecedented Christmas Gathering Held in Vietnam”).

Local sources said long-requested written permission for the event, titled “Praise Jesus Together,” never came in spite of several reminders. But four days before the event was to take place, Hanoi authorities and police told organizers—in words as close as they would get to granting permission—that they would “not interfere.”

“One can hardly overestimate the importance of such an event in the lives of northern house church Christians,” said one long-time Compass source. “For many, this will have been the first time to join in a large crowd with other Christians, to feel the growing power of their movement, to hear, see and participate in the high quality, and deeply spiritual mass worship.”

The day before the event, Christians gathered near the stadium for final prayer and to help with preparations. Witnesses said the huge public square at the entrance to the stadium was arrayed with thousands of stools rather than chairs—plastic, backless, and bright blue and red. In 10-foot tall letters,

“JESUS’ was emblazoned on the backdrop to the stage.

Invitations had been sent through house church networks even as official permission for the event was still pending. When church leaders decided to move ahead only days before, Christians were asked to send out mass invitations by text-message, leading some to speculate whether this may have been the largest ever such messaging for a Christian event.

Nearby Christians as well as those bussed from more distant areas began to fill the venue hours before the event. They were not dissuaded by a Hanoi cool spell of 12 Celsius (56 Fahrenheit) with a chill wind. Bundled in thick jackets, their heads wrapped in scarves, they waited expectantly without complaint.

They were not disappointed. Witnesses said the throng deeply appreciated a program of outstanding music and dance, a powerful personal narrative followed by a gospel message and an extended time for prayer for the nation. As at the previous event in Ho Chi Minh City on Dec. 11 that house church Christians had long worked and prayed for, the program featured music from Jackson Family Ministries of the United States.

In a world of globalized gospel and praise choruses, songs included hymns such as “How Great Thou Art” as well as classic praise songs such as “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord.” Witnesses said the music was accompanied by tasteful, emotionally engaging dance. Top Vietnamese artists performed, including new songs by Vietnamese songwriters, and a Vietnamese choir of 80 sang, as did a Korean choir.

A young man in his 30s who now pastors two house churches told the crowd how an encounter with Jesus proved more powerful than the grip of drug addiction. His story, simply and humbly told, proved an effective bridge to a Christmas evangelistic message by Pastor Pham Tuan Nhung of the Word of Life house

church. Then the winsome Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan, a top southern house church leader, gave a disarming but strong invitation to follow Jesus, witnesses said.

Organizers said approximately 2,000 people then poured forward in response, packing the large area in front of the stage.

The final portion of the program included a time of intense prayer for the nation, with pastors confessing and praying for righteousness for Vietnam's leaders, as well as for God's protection and blessing on their land. In their prayers they claimed Vietnam for Christ, witnesses said.

A high point for the throng was the superimposing of a large white cross on a yellow map of Vietnam on the backdrop. As the Korean choir sang a spirited revival hymn, the crowd raised thousands of hands and exploded in sound.

"The sound of crying, of praise, of prayer were blended as one, beseeching Almighty God for spiritual revival in Vietnam," said one participant.

The event was streamed live at for Vietnamese and others around the world to see.

Until recently—and still in some places—most Vietnamese meet in small groups in homes knowing at any time there could be a hostile knock on the door, a source said.

"None of these groups is registered or recognized by the government," the source said of the crowd at yesterday's event. "What you see is Christians standing up!"

In addition to this event and the Dec. 11 event in Ho Chi Minh City, a large public Christmas rally was held by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) at the Hoang Nhi church in Nam Dinh Province on Saturday. Some 2,500 people gathered in the church's large courtyard, with sources saying 200 responded to an invitation to follow Christ.

In Tuy Hoa, on the coast of central Vietnam, a Christmas program is planned for Dec. 26 in a 4,000-seat theater. Many smaller events are also planned in other areas, part of an unprecedented public display by Vietnam's Protestants.

At the same time, the freedom for Christians tolerated in large cities has not reached some more remote parts of the country, where ethnic minority Christians live. In Dien Bien Dong district of Dien Bien Province, authorities on Tuesday (Dec. 15) orchestrated immense ethnic social pressure on a new Christian couple to recant. The couple told Compass that police added their own pressure.

"The police said they would beat me to death, and take away all my possessions, leaving my wife a widow, and my children orphans with no place to live," the husband told Compass. "I folded. I signed promising that I would no longer follow God. I really want to, but it is very, very hard to be a believer where we live, as the officials will not allow us."