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/s/ Homer Dowdy

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What If You Were a Christian in Viet Nam Today?
By Homer E. Dowdy
2,100 Words

What kind of a Christian would you make if your hometown was
terrorized night after night by marauding guerilla bands, perhaps your
church had been burned, and the leading members of your congregation
driven off or even killed because they dared stand for Christ?

What would be your attitude if government policy had destroyed
your house and fields and the edict to move made you a refugee? Or if
followers of other ~~all~~ religions kept you in your place as a member of
a minority?

You'd find out what kind of a Christian you'd make under pressure
if you lived in Viet Nam, a fascinating land of Oriental ways, but
whose fascination has been tempered by 23 continuous years of war, a
war that has become a pivot between the free and communist worlds.

For 50,000 ~~men~~ evangelical Christians in South Viet Nam the years
since 1940 have been years of bloody war, poverty, and disruption. For
many thousands, they have been years ~~and~~ when Christianity collided with
communism, a personal conflict that has had to be faced every morning
on arising, all through the ~~and~~ uncertain hours of day and evening, and
sometimes in the small hours past midnight. For others these years
have been a time of catching the crossfire of two ideologies, a strange
contest that the knowing say is between East and West but which to the
simple villager boils down to which side can make the other lose the

most face.

If you lived there, how would your faith fare? What would you expect of your church? How have the Vietnamese Christians and their church faced the issues?

Recently I was the guest of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Viet Nam. Sometimes with missionaries, sometimes with national Christians, other times just on my own I traveled up and down the 700 miles from the rich rice delta of the Mekong River in the south to the rugged mountains hugging the 17th Parallel in the north. In flatlands and mountains I saw the fruit of more than 50 years of faithful labor by Alliance missionaries and their national brethren -- believers in Jesus Christ. With few exceptions, they are affiliated with the Alliance through their Evangelical Church of Viet Nam. I visited impressive city churches and thatch-roof country chapels. I ate and slept in the homes of Christians from one end of the land to the other. Everywhere I found the long and exhausting war pressed hard on the church and its people.

The pressures, and reaction to them, varied in intensity and in kind.

Churches in the larger cities, I discovered, are relatively free of distress. Relatively free, because while many are self-supporting, they are barely so; while they are in little danger of mortar shelling, they are hampered by restrictions imposed by government or guerillas. (Evening services are seldom scheduled since nighttime travel is uncertain.)

In some rural areas -- and not all of them remote -- churches have been closed, their people scattered by war. Duc Pho is one such place.

This town, nestled in the narrow coastal strip of rice paddies,

has the South China Sea at its front door and steep mountains at its back. A year ago the Duc Pho church was the strongest in its ~~part~~ province. Its members had worked hard to make their pretty new stucco building debt-free. Christians were learning to be zealous witnesses, souls were being saved. Today, because of the Viet Cong rebels, the church stands nearly empty. Every member of the governing committee has been forced to flee for his life; many families have lost lands and possessions.

Other churches, particularly those in the extreme south, lie in areas controlled by the enemy. They are neither free to carry on in their own way, nor are they slapped shut by angry enemy action. Rather, they sit precariously on a slippery path, like those on which their people walk in the midst of flooded rice fields. Occasionally word emerges that the going is rough -- there are alternating demands on the youth to serve both national and rebel causes, the people are poor beyond description, every way is the wrong way to turn. But the Gospel is still being preached!

Before I left America I believed that anything short of open denunciation of communism was weakness. But the news out of Viet Nam was confusing -- and this included news about the Christians, too. Did they or did they not stand opposed to the communist menace? After arriving in Viet Nam and knocking about for a time I had to admit that sometimes it was hard to see where opposition to the ruling party left off and sympathy toward the communist guerillas began. Still, I thought, these people should discern this point of cleavage and, just as at home in America, to be Christian is automatically to be militantly anti-communist.

This belief was strengthened by what I heard of Ghao, a fervent young preacher among the mountain folk. Ghao was first and foremost a

flaming witness for Christ, but he was outspoken against communism. He knew that this godless religion and Christianity were mortal enemies, that they could never coexist.

He frontally assaulted the persuasive talk the Viet Cong gave his people. One night after preaching in the bamboo chapel of his home village he stretched out on the floor to sleep. At midnight a band of Viet Cong tramped into the church and hustled Ghao off to the jungles. The stories still differ on how Ghao was killed. One thing is certain: The site of his grave.

Subconsciously I began comparing the experiences of everyone I met with that of Ghao, and found myself wondering, "If Ghao died for his stand, why is this one or that one alive?" Black was black and white was white.

I was even more convinced when I heard of a few who had dropped from the ranks of the church to go over to the communists, no longer caring about the Gospel. And it fit into form when I heard of some who still loved the Lord who had joined the rebel cause for nationalism but on discovering its communist cadre had pulled out. Yes, there was only one way to deal with the communism that kept Viet Nam in turmoil: Individual and church alike had to throw everything into a vigorous "anti" crusade.

Then one day on the edge of the Plain of Reeds, whose swamps and crisscrossed waterways have always been a guerilla stronghold, I heard of Thay Ro, and my thinking was jolted into a new dimension.

Like Ghao, Ro was a promising young preacher and he, too, understood the conflict between Christianity and communism. But unlike Ghao, he practiced no horse-locking with the enemy.

Before Thay Ro was assigned to pastor the small country church

near the Plain of Reeds, the parishioners there had succumbed to rebel pressure to steal and lie for the guerillas' benefit. Slowly but nearly steadily they learned under Ro's ministry that a Christian's duty is to live honestly. Without a word of politics, Ro taught his people that they had to live pleasingly to God or to the communists. They chose to live God's way.

No one living by plunder could count any more on help from Ro's people. For this the rebels visited his house one night and escorted him into the Plain of Reeds. No one ever saw this young preacher again, either -- only his grave.

I thought I had known the issues and how they must be faced. Chao confirmed it for me. The near-empty church at Due Pho was proof that you couldn't coexist. But then, there were those churches still operating behind enemy lines and there was Thay Ro, who had spoken not a word of politics, but whose positive preaching of the Word day in and day out had dried up a source of communist sustenance, just as surely as if he had crusaded.

Puzzled, I approached Dean van Mieng, president of the Evangelical Church.

"In ~~the~~ this war of liberation, Mr. Mieng, just where does the church and its people stand?" I asked.

His reply was brief and pointed:

"Our warfare is spiritual. We are totally committed to it."

Mieng is soft-spoken, a spirit-filled man. Often breaking through his natural reserve were evidences of a keen mind -- a mind recognizing that for many people the war in his country is on a local basis of political likes and dislikes, but a mind understanding also that the free and communist worlds have staked their fortunes in Southeast Asia

on the outcome of battle in Viet Nam. As he enlarged on his primary theme I could see the picture coming into focus. The daring of Chao was an admirable display of forthrightness, a heroic exception. But where the exceptional was not called for, the positiving living out of Christian fundamentals day by day required a brand of heroism, too, and could carry just as steep a price.

I came to appreciate the policy to which Mieng and his associates were committed: To hold the church to its primary function, the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mieng is careful to remind his preachers and district superintendents, "As individuals, we must be loyal citizens. But the Church, of which we are just a geographic part, belongs to the Son of God."

For years the Protestant church in Viet Nam has withstood the pressure of those who would use it as a political tool. First the occupation army of Japan and then the Ho Chi Minh forces that ousted French colonialism and ruled all Viet Nam for a time tried and failed.

Le van Thai, Mieng's predecessor, blazed the trail of no political ~~entanglement~~ entanglement for the church, standing staunch even against the demands of Minh in three face-to-face encounters. Thai called on history to support his arguments for non-alignment, reminding the Moscow-trained Minh that wherever religion and politics had joined, eventually either church or state snuffed out the rights of the other. Through a succession of governments the Evangelical Church has stuck to its business of Gospel preaching. It is one of the few religious groups in Viet Nam that has needed no private army to fight for its survival.

There was Chao's way, and there was the non-deviating policy of the Evangelical Church (no conflict here since Chao was being as loyal a citizen as he knew how), and I knew full well that as the

Gospel left its imprint the end of the church's "positive" approach could be the same end as they Ro's. But there was something more than martyrdom, either real or potential; even in a land of upheaval like Viet Nam more people are required to live through tragedy than die in it. My mind shifted from those who died for their cause to those who were living when one morning I visited the Alliance leprosarium at the end of a bumpy road 15 miles out of the town of Banmethuot.

It was from this leprosarium that last May the Viet Cong ~~kind~~ kidnapped three American missionaries in a raid. These three had sought only to do their jobs -- bringing cures for both the physical and spiritual ills of hundreds of lepers. But they were carried into the jungle one night. At this writing they are still prisoners.

Reports have come that the three are alive. It is believed that their skills are being directed into ~~what~~ binding up the wounds of their captors. As I inspected the homes from which they were taken, and reconstructed in my mind that awful scene when they were torn from loved ones to be marched ruthlessly away into the dark of the forest, I asked ~~my~~ myself, "What kind of a Christian would I be if I were one of the three forced to live and work deep in those inescapable jungles?"

I don't ~~know~~ know how I would meet the issues, and neither do you; few of us live under the pressures the Christians in Viet Nam do. Can you say how your faith would fare if you were called on to die -- whether as retribution to militance or to quiet, positive Christian living -- or if your lot was to live through village sackings and refugee wanderings?

Regardless of the incidents I think there is little doubt that we, like the Christians there, would be faced with the basic issue -- full commitment to a spiritual warfare. Whether we were ~~g~~ equipped to win the

fierce struggle would depend on the power of Jesus Christ within us. And how much of His power we possessed would depend on how closely we walked daily with Him.

If we were not called on to die like the young preachers, we might be called on to walk the slippery paths behind the lines or to minister to those who hated us and the God we served. But isn't this our calling in America; if not always to take a heroic stand against the adversary, at least to live rightly, exhibiting Christ as the answer to the world's ills?

Christians in Viet Nam are hard pressed. If we were one of them I know we would need the faithful prayers of Christians everywhere in order to die triumphant or to live victoriously.