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The Church in North Vietnam and Revolutionary Change

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I begin by disclaiming any direct knowledge of revolutionary change in North Vietnam and of in-depth knowledge about the Protestant Church there.

My first visit to Vietnam was to Saigon in 1954, following the decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu and on the eve of the Geneva Conference that partitioned the country at the 17th parallel. At the time of my visit only one C&MA missionary still resided in the North. All the others had previously come to the South.

After the establishment of the 17th parallel, my office has had no correspondence and no personal contact with any Christian--lay or clergy--in North Vietnam. Pastors and especially the church leaders in South Vietnam tell me their knowledge of the Church in the North is minimal and is obtained exclusively through another source--a person residing in another Asian country who maintains correspondence with pastors in North Vietnam. What they have, they share with me. Additionally, Dr. J. Harry Haines as well as the news releases of the World Council of Churches Commission on Inter-Church Aid and World Service have on occasion provided information. And finally, before the Tet offensive, a keen committed Christian, serving on the International Control Commission, made it a point to discover what he could about the Protestant Church in North Vietnam. As he was able he visited Protestant churches--observed the maintenance of their buildings and the attendance at the services. He reported orally his observations to me.

At this point an historical resume of the Evangelical Church in North Vietnam is essential. It will, at least, help our understanding of the church as it exists today.

Although the Roman Catholics started their work in Vietnam in the 16th century and succeeded in building up a strong church in the 18th century, the Protestant Church of Europe and America paid scant attention to this land, even in the 19th century, often considered the great century of Protestant missions.

When The C&MA was founded in 1887, Vietnam was listed as one of the earliest countries to be entered. In 1889, and again in 1893, Alliance officials visited Vietnam. After that, repeated efforts to establish a permanent Protestant witness in the land finally were honored with success in 1911 when a contingent of Alliance missionaries settled at Danang. In 1915, missionaries took up residence in Haiphong and in Hanoi in 1916.

One of the very first converts at Hanoi was a celebrated sculptor. Another was a university trained man from a wealthy family. But most who responded were farmers, artisans, laborers, shopkeepers, students; some clerks, civil servants and soldiers. Among these were those whose life had been suddenly transformed. Opium addicts, robbers and crooks, men and women whose homes had been broken because of drunkenness, gambling or brutality had unexpectedly turned from their way of life and became worthy sons and daughters, decent husbands and wives and honorable citizens--all because of the transforming power of the gospel.

It was upon this transformation in personal character that the Alliance missionaries placed most emphasis in their preaching and teaching. Except for promise of "Blessing in Jesus Christ," the Alliance Mission offered no tangible benefits to the believers. Unlike other Christian missionary agencies, which provide, along with their message of hope, some physical and material privileges in their schools, hospitals and social welfare programs, the Alliance missionaries

made it clear to Vietnamese inquirers that "they would be given nothing of material things." This no doubt explains somewhat the limited response to the gospel for at no time was the response in North Vietnam very large. I say "somewhat" for the response in Central and South Vietnam was truly considerable despite the same "no inducement" policy.

Another reason for the rather small response to the gospel in North Vietnam (in comparison to that in South Vietnam) was the social and religious life closely knit around the concept of communalism before the Independence War.

Also, South Vietnamese Protestants believe the intrinsic qualities and characteristics of the North Vietnamese, viz. their toughness and tenacity of character along with an intensified nationalism, contributed to a lessened response. Comments have been heard of the "proud and stubborn" attitudes but one may recall that the Roman Catholic Church, working under much more adverse conditions had succeeded in building up a prosperous church in North Vietnam since the 17th century.

Some would list persecution as a deterrent to a larger response to the gospel in North Vietnam. That strong opposition and outright persecution occurred in North Vietnam, especially in the late 1920's, the early 1930's, and during the last years of the War of Independence, is undeniable. An impartial observer, however, may note that the opposition and persecution came from the government and never from the general population. To be more accurate, only a fraction of the Administration was responsible for these harsh acts. Moreover, unlike the Roman Catholic Church which had preceded the Protestant pioneers by almost four centuries and which had to sustain a series of bloodletting persecutions, the Evangelical Church of North Vietnam has so far encountered only mild persecution.

Church planting began in North Vietnam in 1915. By 1927 there were 6 organized churches and 6 pastors North of the 17th parallel. By 1934, there were 38 churches. In 1940, the Evangelical Church in North Vietnam reached its highest mark of extension with 58 churches. With the occupation of North Vietnam by the Japanese military in 1941, the military and economic crisis which ensued forced the closing down of 22 churches--reducing the number to 36. (Central Vietnam closed 1 church and South Vietnam organized 10 new ones.)

In comparison with the work in Central and South Vietnam, North Vietnam consistently recorded the fewest converts, and the highest rate of clergy casualties. Even though the strongest and most successful pastors were moved from South Vietnam to North Vietnam and expended much effort and fervor, the church in North Vietnam remained through the years the smallest and weakest section of the Evangelical Church.

Of all the pastors who served in North Vietnam between 1927 and 1941, 18.3 percent asked to be transferred to the South, 26.6 percent dropped out of the ministry due either to illness or other causes, and 13.3 percent died during active service. This added up to 58.2 percent of the total staff and provides a partial explanation to the sharp drop in the number of churches from 58 in 1940; to 36 in 1941; to 35 in 1952. By this year, the number of pastors had dropped to 16. In 1954, there were 1,547 baptized members in the Evangelical Church of North Vietnam. Children under 15 years of age as well as nonbaptized adherents were not included in the records of the church. Through the years, however, by careful checking a fair idea of the size of the Evangelical Church (baptized, children and adherents) could be obtained by multiplying the baptized membership by four. Thus in 1954, the size of the church in the North was approximately 6,000. Ninety percent of the total

evangelical membership was located south of the 17th parallel.

Between July 1954, and July 1955, more than eight hundred thousand (860,206) refugees from the North poured into South Vietnam. This largest migration in Vietnam's history involved 676,348 Roman Catholics, 182,817 Buddhists, and 1,041 Protestants. Telford Taylor in the May 1973 issue of "The Atlantic" stated that during his December 1972 visit to North Vietnam he "was told more than three-quarters of the Evangelical Protestants had gone South."

At the time of the Exodus to the South, only thirteen pastors and preachers stayed on in the North to care for two dozen churches. Shortly thereafter we know that one of these died and in 1964 another--reducing the number to eleven.

Needless to say, the ECVN of the North became at once completely independent of any foreign interference or influence. Rev. Duong Tu Ap became its first president and held this office until his death in 1964. He was succeeded by Rev. Hoang Kim Phuc (1964-68) and Rev. Bui Hoanh Thu (1968-). After 1956, a national conference has been held annually in Hanoi. A Bible school was opened in Hanoi to train workers between 1961 and 1963. Pictures of the faculty and student body for the two years of the school's operation show the student body consisted mostly of young people and several older lay leaders, including a seventy-year-old woman.

In 1955, the government of the DRVN issued what is often known as the "Decree of Freedom of Religion." It was published in Nhon Don (People's Daily), No. 488. This document somewhat clarified the official view on liberty of conscience which was casually inserted in the constitutions of 1946 and 1960.

According to this decree, religion could be preached only in churches, seminaries and church-controlled schools. No preaching was allowed in town halls of non-Christian villages. Christian clergymen were not permitted to visit hospitals for religious purposes unless they were personally invited by a patient. This was interpreted as the Administration's duty to guarantee freedom of religious belief for all by protecting its citizens from unwanted propaganda. Even in the churches, clergymen should preach patriotism, duties of citizens, loyalty to the government, etc. In actuality, the policy of the DRVN has been to tolerate existing religious bodies and to limit their functioning to their existing constituency, thus leaving little provision, if any, for the propagation of their faith.

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