

Louis L. King

VIETNAM REPORT

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The church in Indo-China is little known to the rest of Asia and perhaps also to the rest of the world. Indeed, apart from a very small company of Seventh Day Adventists, the only Protestant missionary society that works in Vietnam is The Christian and Missionary Alliance. Because our Society does not belong to the World Council of Churches or the International Missionary Council, the work has not received much publicity. A historical resume, therefore, is in order.

At the founding of our Society 70 years ago, it was declared to be one of its main objectives to take the gospel to the closed land of Indo China. As early as 1893 our Foreign Secretary visited Saigon. At the same time our missionaries in South China were camping along the northern border waiting for the first opportunity to enter. No missionary, however, succeeded in getting a foothold for the Mission, despite repeated efforts, until 1911. In that year property was purchased at Tourane, half-way down the coast; then, four years later, with a staff of 9 missionaries and the prospects bright, the French Government issued a decree prohibiting any further mission work. Our chapels were closed and some of the missionaries forced to leave the country. The few who remained were not allowed to do any missionary work. A year later the ban was lifted, with the proviso that gospel work could only be done in the port cities in South Vietnam. A treaty made in 1884 between the Annamese Empire and the French Government, which restricted all missionary propaganda in the Empire to the Roman Catholic Church, was responsible for much of the trouble, and it was a thing the Mission had continually to reckon with in most of the intervening years.

At the time the ban was lifted, the Alliance missionaries, though now hopelessly depleted in number and restricted in their orbit of labor, decided on a policy of "spreading out". In rapid succession they occupied Hanoi, Haiphong, Tourane, Saigon, Mythe and Cantho. In each of these cities the beginning of the Lord's work reads like a continuation of the Book of Acts. The Holy Spirit brought key men and women into contact with the missionaries. In Hanoi a celebrated Annamese sculptor as well as a wealthy university man and also the editor of the newspaper were among the first converts. At Hue one of the first converts was the wife of a duke at the royal court, and their first pastor had been the royal court historian. The Tourane Church began with the conversion of a Confucian classical scholar of reputation, as well as four members of the Annamese royal family, three custom officials, and three secretaries employed in the head office of the government railway. This Tourane Church doubled its membership each year for a number of years, until there were over 1,000 members. The Christians had received the contagious type of salvation, and as in the days of the apostles they went everywhere gossiping the gospel.

At Faifoo a popular actor well known throughout the province was converted, and after being trained in the Bible School became a famous preacher. In one year's ministry 1,000 people were converted. Like Paul he was called before the governor and then finally exiled because of his phenomenal success in preaching the Word. The work in South Vietnam sprang up in what seemed for a time to be almost a mass movement, and that in spite of fierce persecution in every village. At present there is a Christian community of about 50,000 in the Evangelical Church at Vietnam, with 30,000 baptized communicants.

One remarkable feature of the work in this country was that while the missionary was prohibited to minister in other than the main cities, the national brethren carried the saving message to the lesser towns and their work yielded good results. By 1927 the work had progressed to such an extent that the Evangelical Church of Vietnam was organized, completely separate from the Mission, with its own administrative setup.

Complete self-support was made a requirement for full membership. Congregations that were subsidized by the Mission were permitted to send delegates to the Annual Conference of the national church. They were allowed to take part in the discussions, but they could not vote or hold office. The method employed in the attaining of self-support was rather novel. For every 10 members the Mission subsidy was reduced 10%. When a church attained 100 members all Mission subsidy ceased. By 1935 sixty-three churches had attained full membership in the national church; each had its own church building built with its own money. By 1941, 75% of all the churches, or 121 congregations, had attained full self-support.

One of the remarkable features of the national church in Vietnam is its missionary zeal. Through the years the vision of the church has steadily broadened. They have a growing sense of responsibility outside their own communities. Special projects have been undertaken by them in unevangelized districts. A gospel boat has been operated under their direction on the rivers of South Vietnam. A gospel auto, given to the Conference by one of the Vietnamese Christians, has been used in spreading the gospel. Eleven missionary Vietnamese couples and two young men are working among the tribes in the central highlands of Vietnam. Once a year a great missionary convention is held at which these national missionaries tell of their work and give witness to the power of the gospel in winning these tribal people to Christ. A part of the annual support of these missionary couples is raised at the Convention. Itinerant gospel teams working independent of any foreign supervision have had continuing success through the years.

This promising work was dealt a severe blow with the coming of World War II and the occupation of Indo China by the Japanese. Some of the missionaries were evacuated; others were interned, not to be released until after Japan was defeated. Most of the released internees then return to America to recuperate. For ten months one lone missionary in the country carried on as the sole administrator for the Society, and the only missionary counsellor for the distressed national church.

As soon as possible after the close of the war, missionaries began to return to the field. They found scenes of desolation and ruin throughout Vietnam. Nearly all property of the Mission and Church had been looted and every building required extensive repairs. The damage in property, however, was nothing in comparison to what the national church had suffered. Some pastors and many Christians had been martyred. Of those who were spared, many were left sick, destitute and afraid. Travel was unsafe throughout Vietnam except by aeroplane or convoy, and even convoys were sometimes attacked and destroyed. Slowly, however, the scenes of desolation were changing for the better and thousands of evacuees were returning to their homes, when the war between the Viet Minh, who were striving for national independence, and the French, who sought to hold Indo China in colonial status, broke out. Beginning in 1946, this caused heavy loss of life and property and tragic suffering among the people, including the Christians. During this war, disaster came to many Christian homes, and death to not a few of the pastors. Pastors and missionaries worked in the face of constant danger from ambushes and grenades. Our preachers and Christians were often under suspicion from both sides. In the interior, where a number of our churches were located, some of the rice fields had to be abandoned and crops were repeatedly looted. Consequently, many people in this once rich granary of Southeast Asia were made poor, and this made it most difficult to continue self-support. During the years of the civil war crisis there was scarcely a week that some prominent Christian, often a preacher or pastor, was not robbed or killed. In South Vietnam alone, ten churches were completely demolished - only five have been rebuilt to date; one church has been rebuilt no less than three times.

Christians in all the areas were terrorized. Because of the threats, rumors and sporadic attacks on the towns, many Christians decided to seek safer surroundings. They wandered in the mountains and out of the way places and when they returned in rags, they found all their possessions gone. Other Christians had been drafted, tor-

tured or imprisoned by both sides in the conflict. The Christians themselves were divided in their loyalties. Quite a number sided with the Viet Minh. This was due largely to their passionate love of their country and their determined opposition to foreign control.

The church has gone through fire and blood, and because of it some have grown cold. Their suffering and want did not always result in increased faith and devotion. As in other lands, in this post-war area carelessness has crept in and a light view of sin is noticeable in some. A great number of believers were without spiritual teaching for months, with their churches closed, burned or occupied by the military. Some Christians have faltered, but others have come through purified and perfected.

In order to bolster the faltering and beleaguered Church, the Mission began to subsidize the pastors' support, as well as to help in the re-building of churches. The result is that the number of self-supporting congregations has been greatly reduced. At present, however, of the 154 organized churches situated south of the 17th parallel, 76 are still on a full self-supporting basis.

There is not much to report about the 40 churches north of the 17th parallel in Viet Minh territory. After the Geneva Conference, all but 11 of the pastors in this territory left for South Vietnam. The pastors who remained behind were all native to that region. Practically no word at all has come to us concerning the welfare of the Christians in that area. At the present time there are 27 missionaries working as helpers with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

In the central highlands of Vietnam we have Tribes work that is separate from our Vietnam mission and from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam. In this area there are a million aboriginal people divided into about 100 tribes, each with their own language and customs. Our Mission is working among 26 of these tribes. Here there is a staff of 31 foreign missionaries, 11 Vietnamese missionary couples and 2 Vietnamese single men as well as 117 trained tribesmen who conduct organized day schools in addition to the work of the church.

The latest figures show that there are 71 organized churches and 91 outstations with a baptized church membership of 3, 183.

The Alliance Mission established a printing press in Hanoi as early as 1918. Later other presses and equipment were added. The Alliance missionaries by 1926 had completed the translation of the entire Bible into the Vietnamese language, making the Word of God available for the first time to one of the largest language groups then in the world without the scriptures in their own tongue. Our presses have printed helps, Bible studies, tracts and missionary biographies, commentaries on the books of the Bible, a concordance, and a book of systemic theology. There has been an effort to give to the Vietnamese Church the finest in evangelical literature, so that the pastors and people would be well equipped in this field.

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