

THE MENNONITE CHURCH WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY IN VIETNAM

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After decades of war, Vietnam today is working hard to catch up with the world. Vietnam has been making great strides in economic development. While charges persist that this socialist nation of eighty million people denies basic human rights and restricts religious freedom, even critics agree that Vietnam has made much improvement in the past decades. Is religious freedom denied in Vietnam? It all depends on who is asked. Vietnamese officials say no. They point to the revised 1992 Vietnamese Constitution and to the 1999 decree by the Prime Minister that “ensures the freedom of belief and religion and the freedom of non-belief and non-religion. Discrimination on belief and religious grounds is strictly forbidden.”

Vietnam has a Bureau of Religious Affairs (BRA) to see that religious bodies operate within the law and to prevent “all acts of misusing belief and religion to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” Vietnam has granted legal status to Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Hoa Hao (Buddhist), Cao Dai (a local indigenous faith) and Muslim religious organizations. Religious leaders are asked to participate in local chapters of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, a national organization with the task of helping implement the policies of the Vietnam Communist Party and the state. However, religious leaders of bodies that have not been granted legal status continue to experience harassment, fines, arrests, and - in some cases - physical abuse and imprisonment. Leaders of the United Buddhist Church, for instance, have been kept under strict detention.

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

The Protestant church in the south, Evangelical Church of Vietnam – South (ECV-S), received formal recognition in early 2001. The Evangelical (or Tin Lanh) Church had been long recognized in the north. With the country’s reunification in 1975, the government urged the southern church to unite with the much smaller church in the north. Church leaders declined because they considered the northern church too restricted by the state policies. Without legal status, most congregations

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in the south experienced difficulties for a few years, and many pastors were interrogated and even spent months or years in prison. But this changed in the Eighties, and in the last decade there has been growing freedom. While the church was not permitted to operate any theological training institutions nor to hold national conferences, many local congregations were able to effectively carry out programs of evangelism and nurture.

The Catholic Church, with around seven million adherents, has been able - with its legal status - to operate several seminaries. Enrollment is limited, and students need to be approved by the state. To prevent the installation of leaders who might oppose state policies, the church is not permitted to ordain priests or bishops without the approval of the government. The Church has been able to publish a new Bible translation and other religious literature.

Since 1975, the Evangelical Church in the south has grown significantly. For years there was discussion among pastoral leaders about possible advantages of legal status. In conversations with the Bureau of Religious Affairs, the government gave permission for the church to hold a conference in February 2001 when a new constitution was adopted, committed to "living the Gospel amidst the nation." New leaders were chosen, among them the highly respected Pastor Pham Xuan Thieu as president. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in March signed an order granting legal status to the church. This was publically announced at a church meeting in Ho Chi Minh City on April 3; the same day the church commemorated the 90th anniversary of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam that came into being from the missionary activity of the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

On June 19, 2001, Pastor Thieu and a few other leaders of the church had an audience with the Prime Minister in Hanoi. Thieu's foremost request was for the church's seminary property in Nha Trang to be returned so they could reopen the seminary. This property is not being returned. However, the head of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, Le Quang Vinh, announced in mid-2002 to church leaders that the seminary would reopen in Ho Chi Minh City in September. Again there was stalling. On October 23, 2002, the ECV-S general secretary sent a letter to the leaders of each congregation, noting that permission was not yet granted, and asking the churches to pray that this matter would be resolved. On January 3, 2003, the government granted

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permission to open a seminary for fifty students in Ho Chi Minh City; opening exercises are planned for February, 2003.

But Pastor Thieu did not live to see this. In May, 2002, he was part of an eight-member religious delegation to the United States that met religious and government representatives in New York and Washington. Led by BRA head Le Quang Vinh, it purportedly demonstrated the vitality of Vietnam's religious community. Many leaders of the ECV-S believed Pastor Thieu had been manipulated into participating to further the government's agenda, and he was widely criticized. A month later, on June 24, he died suddenly of an apparent brain aneurysm. The first vice-president of the church, Pastor Duong Thanh, then assumed leadership.

With legal recognition, the church also anticipated publishing religious materials. In mid-2001 the government announced the creation of its Religious Publishing House in Hanoi which would produce works commissioned by "state-authorised religious groups" as well as publish materials serving the "propaganda and educational aims and religious policies of the party and state." The United Bible Societies has been granted permission to publish Bibles.

CHURCHES AMONG THE MINORITIES

Prior to 1975, the Christian message was embraced by many of the minorities in the central highlands who earlier followed traditional animistic practices, and Catholic and Evangelical churches were growing. Some of the minorities had once agitated for political independence, and many of them had fought against the communist forces. Thus for political reasons the government after 1975 forbade group meetings. This order effectively closed most of the churches, and most meeting facilities were torn down. Virtually all the pastors spent time in prison. However, by the late Eighties things were more relaxed, and believers gathered in homes or outside.

Gospel radio broadcasts from overseas were a great encouragement to these believers, and a people's movement among the H'mong and other groups in northwest Vietnam led to several hundred thousand more persons coming to faith. Though for many years the government had criticized "superstitious" practices of the minority peoples, some local authorities in the past few years encourage new believers to return to their old traditions like sacrificing water buffalo as blood sacrifices, and in many areas forcibly ask them to sign statements rejecting the Evangelical Christian faith.

Open demonstrations by the minorities in the central highlands in January and February, 2001 called attention to the loss of their lands to Vietnamese settlers,

and to religious restrictions.⁸¹ With some evidence of political agitation by minority persons who had settled in the United States, the government denounced this as an American plot to continue aggression against Vietnam. More than a thousand persons fled to Cambodia. Several hundred of these were resettled in the United States in 2002 while others were forcibly returned to Vietnam. Human Rights Watch reports that more than 200 people have been arrested and more than 70 have been sentenced to long prison terms for their part in these protests.

In early December, 2001, a group of about twenty minority Evangelicals were invited by the government to travel to Hanoi to meet with government and Communist Party leaders. They met with National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Van An who called on the Evangelical community to strictly follow Party and State policies to fulfill their citizenship for the development and prosperity of the nation, and said he hoped they would “stay vigilant and fight bad elements who abuse religions to undermine national unity.” Mr. An praised the progressive policies of “Viet Nam Protestant Church...of living the Gospel to serve their religion, the nation and the people.”

There is more than a little irony here. While many of the minority Evangelicals were part of the Evangelical Church before 1975, the government today does not recognize that relationship. The government only recognized a handful of their congregations as part of the ECV-S. In late 2002 several hundred congregation were forcibly disbanded, and pastors told that they were not permitted to even carry out religious ceremonies like weddings and funerals even in homes. This means that more than half of the more than one million Evangelical Christians do not enjoy the benefits of the legal status accorded the ECV-S. Government officials criticize what is referred to as “Dega Christianity” practiced by minority Evangelical Christians who agitate for political independence. Since not nearly all advocate such a radical stance, there should be room for both the Christians and the government to find a resolution.

⁸¹Some of this is documented in *Repression of Montagnards*, an April, 2002 publication by Human Rights Watch.

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NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

The United States lifted the trade embargo with Vietnam in 1994, and in 1995 the two countries established diplomatic relations. The December, 2001 ratification of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), negotiated in 2000, provides interesting insights into how American and Vietnamese governments approach the whole issue of human rights. While the government supported BTA, Vietnam delayed action until the United States Congress first ratified the agreement.

Observers were certain that the US Senate would approve the agreement, but were less certain about the House. Groups opposed to US normalization of relations with Vietnam and persons expressing concern about Vietnam's human rights record saw this as a political opportunity. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom held congressional hearings in February, 2001, amply documenting the parameters Vietnam's religious groups must live with. Several scholars noted, however, that very significant improvement in human rights have occurred in recent years, and argued that open trade would lead to a more open system within Vietnam; to reject the agreement would only increase the influence of conservatives within the government, they said. On the other side, emigre dissidents and others asked Congress to block ratification. Fr. Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly from Hue testified in absentia that the involvement of the communist state in religious matters resulted in the loss of freedom; his testimony implicitly called on Congress to reject the agreement. He was soon arrested; the official Communist Party newspaper Nhan Dan said his remarks were aimed at undermining their political system. The People's Army (Quan Doi Nhan Dan) newspaper branded him a traitor and said that Ly had "repeatedly carried out actions that violated the laws [while] disguised in clothes of a priest." In October, 2001, he was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of undermining national unity and probation violation.

In September, 2001, the House approved the trade agreement only after first adopting, by nearly unanimous vote, the Human Rights Amendment which tied approval of the trade agreement to improvement in human rights. The Vietnamese government reacted very strongly against the Human Rights Amendment, and threatened not to ratify the agreement if the US Congress tied this to the agreement.

American non-governmental organizations working in Vietnam, including Mennonite Central Committee, also objected to any effort to link trade to human rights issues. But Fr. Chan Tin, a well-known priest in Ho Chi Minh City who was also a thorn in the side of the Saigon government, circulated a paper that read, "From my point of view, the issue of the US Congress passing the Vietnam-US Trade Agreement in conjunction with the Vietnam Human Rights Bill has great meaning for the people of Vietnam.. ...For Vietnam to develop into a prosperous country in

the region...is not only an economic issue.”

The Fatherland Front rallied organized groups to protest the Human Rights Amendment. An article in the *The Worker (Nguoi Lao Dong)* newspaper quoted a Ho Chi Minh City Evangelical pastor saying, “We pray that we [Christians] will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and that we will live in the land of Vietnam to bring glory to the Lord; therefore we are not in agreement with the ‘Vietnam Human Rights Act’ passed by the Congress of the United States.” Since the Evangelical Church has historically tried to be as apolitical as possible, it is clear that such a statement was either requested by the authorities or offered to gain some favor.

The US Senate approved the BTA October 3, 2001 without this amendment, and it was not in the final bill President Bush signed October 16. The Vietnamese National Assembly ratified the agreement November 28 by a 73 % vote. Formerly the National Assembly rubber-stamped government proposals. However, under the former chairman, Mr. Nong Duc Manh (now the general secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party), the National Assembly has become more independent. Some who opposed the BTA were concerned that it would harm some segments of Vietnam’s economy; others were concerned that it might open their society to more unwelcome outside political influences.

With the BTA ratified by both countries, Permanent Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and the Trade Minister led a delegation to the United States in early December, 2001. Mr. Dung delivered a well-received speech at Johns Hopkins. After returning home, Nhan Dan newspaper reported that he had told the United States “to put an end to the intent to approve the so-called ‘Viet Nam Human Rights Act.’” He said that Vietnam protests any scheme to use human rights or religious issues to interfere in Vietnam’s internal affairs.

COMPARISON WITH CHINA

It is generally not helpful to compare the situation in one country with that of another. And what is true in one part of a country may differ significantly with the situation in another part of the country. However, the Vietnam News Agency in Nhan Dan (People’s) newspaper in June 2001 quoted the same Deputy Prime

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Minister speaking to a visiting delegation from the Religious Department of China. Mr. Dzung said that Vietnam is similar to China with respect to its religious policy; it respects the freedom of religion but also feels justified in punishing citizens who use religion to abuse the government or in any way harm the country. He said "all Vietnamese citizens are equal before law; however, any citizen or dignitary who in the practice of his religion breaks the law will be duly punished by law." He indicated that, since the two countries are both led by Communist Parties and both on the way towards socialism, Vietnam and China have much in common, especially with regard to religious policies. He said the exchange of experience in religious matters among the two countries was necessary to help improve their work.

Religion is flourishing in Vietnam today. Moving away from an earlier policy of denouncing all religion, several years ago the Party Secretary visited a Buddhist pagoda and a Catholic Church, and spoke about the positive contributions that religious people make to the country. Now Party leaders make publicized visits to religious leaders on special occasions. While at one time Party ideologues would have denounced religion, today Party leaders recognize the strength of religious inclinations of the people, and are willing to tolerate and even affirm this. However, they are committed to preserving the dominance of the Party in national and local affairs.

MENNONITE CHURCHES

At the time the socialist government gained control of southern Vietnam in 1975, there was a thriving Mennonite congregation in the Saigon area and a few small groups elsewhere. Within a year the local government authorities assumed control of all the church properties. With a crisis in church leadership, the congregation no longer met, but dispersed, with many attending a Baptist congregation or one of the congregations of the Evangelical Church.

Ten years later Nguyen Quang Trung, who had served as an associate in the Mennonite Church, led in reorganizing the church council and petitioned the government for permission use the former church property or to meet in some other property. Eventually the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee and the Bureau of Religious Affairs indicated that there was no obstacle to the group meeting, provided the local ward granted permission. The local authorities have not done this. On a few occasions when the group met, Trung and others were fined for holding unauthorized meetings. He has been told that his own house would be confiscated if the church meets there. They have on several occasions met in a nearby church building of the Evangelical Church, and now meet in small groups in homes. In spite of the difficulties, the church has recently been growing with adults and youth

asking to become members of the church, and dozens of persons have been baptized. In the past few years, the church has organized several flood relief operations to Quang Ngai in central Vietnam and to Dong Thap province in the Mekong Delta; these projects have been coordinated with local governmental authorities. The group has gotten some outside assistance, but the local group has also raised significant resources. Pastor Trung, who has supported his family by teaching English, has consistently emphasized to the authorities that the church is both a worshipping and a serving community.

The Mennonites value their ties to the international Mennonite movement to counter any criticism that they are a cultic or independent group. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, adopted by the Canadian and US Mennonite churches in 1995, was translated into Vietnamese, and Trung submitted copies of this to local and national government authorities.

In 2000 an official of the Bureau of Religious Affairs publically stated that the government would seek to officially recognize the Baptist, Mennonite and Adventist churches as well as house fellowships after the Evangelical Church of Vietnam is recognized. In late 2001 officials discussed the issue of legal status with leaders of the house fellowships. Most of these leaders, however, are reluctant to pursue this, believing recognition would only mean more control by the authorities.

MENNONITE HOUSE FELLOWSHIPS

While the overwhelming number of minority Christians are part of house fellowships, the house fellowship movement has also been significant among the majority Vietnamese (Kinh) people. A few years ago in Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen Hong Quang, one of these leaders, indicated a desire to affiliate with the Mennonite church. After Quang received a copy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, he promptly made several hundred copies and handed them out to both Christians and to government authorities—at ward, district, city and national levels. A native of Quang Ngai who came to a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ after 1975, he had been imprisoned several times because of his Christian witnessing. In the past few years he and colleagues have been frequently harassed by local authorities because of their home meetings. This has not intimidated him. While some leaders prefer to

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work quietly, Quang has spoken out.

On a visit to Hanoi in May 2000, Quang wrote and presented to the Prime Minister, the Communist Party head and other leaders a carefully written “Letter from the Heart” along with Bibles. In this letter he noted that Mennonites had served in Vietnam for 45 years. A trained lawyer by profession, he expressed appreciation for the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. He noted that Ho Chi Minh, the “father” of modern Vietnam, had supported the people’s right to practice religion. Quang affirmed Vietnam’s constitution, but called on the government to pass and implement laws that would enable the full implementation of religious freedom. He pointed out how local authorities often hinder the people’s freedom to practice their faith, and laws lack penalties for those who harass the religious believers. The authorities acknowledged the letter.

In 1999 Quang asked the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee and officials of the Religious Affairs Bureau for legal status as a Mennonite Church. The authorities listed four requirements for getting legal status: a statement of beliefs, a procedure for recognizing leadership, documented members, and an active group that has been meeting for some significant duration.

In early 2001 Quang was optimistic that local authorities had tacitly accepted a fellowship group meeting in his home. However, on Good Friday, April 13, when more than one hundred believers were meeting for fasting and prayer, the security police of Ho Chi Minh City’s District 2 burst into their meeting. The police and members of the Fatherland Front threatened them and wrote up charges against some of them. Quang sent a letter of complaint to the police station. However, on June 5, seventy children, aged 7 to 13 years, were meeting at the same place when the district’s security police came in and stopped the meeting, threatening the children. Pastor Quang was not there at the time. Charges were written up against the teachers.

A major incident occurred on August 17, 2001. Some of the teachers of the house fellowship had gone to a slum area of 400 families in the 26th Ward of Binh Thanh District of the city to open classes for children who had no opportunity to go to school because their families were not registered in that area. The local security police seized evangelist Truong Tri Hien and took him to the police office, requesting that Pastor Quang’s wife and another teacher also come. When Pastor Quang heard this, he went to the district police office to intervene on behalf of their teachers. The group was held at the police station the whole day, and Quang was handcuffed, kicked and beaten. The authorities insisted that the teachers sign pledges to stop teaching the children, something they refused to do. Pastor Quang and the teachers all returned home late afternoon of that same day. Later an officer of the Ho

Chi Minh City Security Police apologized for the beating by the Binh Thanh security police.

Vietnam mandates that education at the elementary and secondary level is the prerogative of the state. Since there are insufficient schools, the government has authorized some private secondary schools. Likely the children in this slum area were not duly registered, so were not able to attend school at all. And religious instruction was likely part of these classes. At any rate, the government had not given permission to hold these classes. Hence the police action.

At some point that day, someone sent an email message to someone outside the country, stating that Pastor Quang was arrested. There was no follow-up message saying that he was released. Thus it was reported widely in the international press that he was arrested, giving the mistaken impression that he was still being held.

Pastor Quang and others of their house fellowship network experienced continued harassment. In a September 9, 2001 letter widely circulated, he said that the security police for many years have been “continuously shadowing and frustrating every effort” of his and “his community of leaders.” He said that it has angered many of the believers and “has even given headaches for conscientious government authorities.” He called on people, in Vietnam and abroad, to denounce these actions so that those perpetrating them would be punished by law. Again in October he was told that their group could not meet. Still he and his associates continue to find ways to meet for study and worship and to serve the community. Their house fellowship has experienced less harassment this past year.

In mid-2002 Quang was able to leave Vietnam, and studied for a few months in a Vietnamese-language seminary in California. During that time he also visited Mennonite communities in Pennsylvania and several Vietnamese Mennonite churches on the East Coast.

Pastor Quang also values support from the world-wide church. On December 26, 2001, he sent a general letter of thanks to those who wrote to him following the August incident:

“Thank you to all beloved brothers and sisters, both Vietnamese and those from all around the world, for praying and raising your

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voice publicly, and for sending us Christmas greetings. I especially thank organizations in England, America, Switzerland, Canada, Hong Kong and New Zealand, for building up in us the warm fraternal love that is the mutual experience of all of us who share Jesus Christ

“Not only we, but all the leaders of the Evangelical house church movement in Vietnam are grateful for showing this great concern on our behalf.

“On behalf of my family and our church, I pray that the Lord of Heaven will pour his blessing on all of you servants and children of the Lord who have sent us encouragement.

“The Lord is hearing your prayers. Hallelujah!”

Pastor Trung and Pastor Quang first met in 1999. While they currently work independently of each other, they have been making plans to work more closely together. Both are committed to developing the church within the Mennonite understanding of biblical faith.

OUR RESPONSE

Vietnam’s stated official policy is to allow freedom of religious expression. Religious *practices*, however, cannot conflict with state policies. It seems apparent the government is pursuing policies that prevent minorities from practicing their Christian faith. Among the majority ethnic Vietnamese Kinh population, churches affiliated with the recognized ECV-S function openly. The church has been growing significantly. Many leaders have indicated that they are able to carry out their ministries effectively. Many unofficial house fellowships in urban areas also function with the tacit recognition of local authorities. Other groups experience harassment. In the past two years, reputable international organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have

documented this. It is important for Americans to note that some of these organizations have also identified human rights violations in the United States

It is possible that some of the harassment of religious groups is perpetrated by local authorities without regard to national policies. It has long been an axiom in Vietnam that the law of the king stops at the village gate, i.e., regardless of the king's edicts, the local community operates with its own rules.

It is important to recognize that there were movements to restrict the Christian faith and other religions within Vietnam before the communist inspired political movement came to power. Over the past centuries there were times when faith flourished and times when religious followers suffered persecution. In fact, faith often grew in times of severe restrictions. This is also true today.

There are those who say that the Vietnam government must be opposed because it follows a socialist political system, and wish to deny Vietnam's entry into the family of nations. Matters of human rights and religious freedom become convenient issues over which to denounce the government. Others suggest that Vietnam will naturally allow more freedom as it opens to the outside world and develops better international relationships. Still Mennonites, who have known a heritage of persecution in past generations, would do well not to forget those who suffer for their religious faith, and seek ways to call those in authority to implement policies that respects all faith communities.

It seems somewhat ironical for Americans to accuse Vietnam of violating the human rights of its citizens; when the United States pursued policies a generation ago that brought suffering and violent death of several million Vietnamese. Thus it would seem that Americans must speak with some humility as we seek to support all the Vietnamese people, our brothers and sisters.

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