

A NEW DAY DAWNING FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VIETNAM

RELIGION AND THE RULE OF LAW- REPORT OF THE JUNE 2006 VISIT BY THE INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Bethel University - James F. Lewis – July 2006

I was privileged to be one of six members of a delegation sponsored by the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) which visited Vietnam from June 5-15, 2006 meeting with both government officials and Christian leaders in the Capital, Hanoi, and in four strategic provinces. Hosted by the Vietnam-USA Society (VUS), a Vietnamese government-sponsored NGO whose reports go to the Prime Minister's Cabinet, meetings were held in Hanoi with the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the Central Executive Council of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), The Vietnam Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam- North (ECVN-N). At all levels, it was clear that Vietnam is seeking to improve its image on human rights and religious freedom which has gotten it tagged with "Country of Particular Concern" – the U.S. State Department category for international offenders. Vietnam hopes the U.S. Congress will remove them from the blacklist thus opening the way for permanent normal trade relations with the U.S.

Our ten-day visit was the first non-diplomatic delegation (neither Embassy, Consular, EU nor UN appointed) to meet with senior government authorities and Christian leaders to discuss reports of systematic, egregious and longstanding persecution. Along with numerous meetings with Communist Party, provincial, district and commune officials we were able to meet with most of the Christian leaders on our list and is said to be the first such NGO to have unrestricted access to places and persons of our choice.

In Lao Cai and Lai Chau provinces in the Northwest and in Gia Lai and Dak Lak provinces in the Central Highlands, discussions with the Peoples Committee and the Committee of Religious Affairs responded positively to IGE's vision for promoting religious freedom. Officials took

special note of IGE's stance which links issues of faith with four commonly recognized and interlocking concerns: development, security, culture and the rule of law. This comprehensive and positive approach to religious freedom was the context for free and frank exchanges and while not elevating religious freedom above the others, it was argued that it was indeed a key to other advances. Taking the approach of neither investigators nor judges, direct questions on the current treatment of Evangelical Christian communities were put to and fielded by provincial, district and commune authorities. Chris Seiple, Director of the institute and head of the delegation counseled that "Perceptions of the international community cannot be changed by diplomacy but only by evidence."

It would be accurate to say that the past history of Vietnam's official responses to the concerns of international advocacy groups has been to categorically deny any and all abuses against faith communities. But Seiple sought to get beyond this rhetoric and get to matters which could unambiguously improve relationships between the two countries. Putting it bluntly he said: "In Washington D.C., [this province] is known for two things: unparalleled back-country mountain trekking and persecution of the evangelical Christian minority. Help us dispel this perception."

This drew a strong defense from the Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee who, pro forma, denied any abuses: "All have freedom as long as there is no violation of the laws." But at the same time, citing the recent "Directive 01" by the Prime Minister promulgated on February 4, 2005, it was acknowledged that local officials needed and had recently undergone training in the policies and directives affecting "the new religion" (Evangelical Christianity) in their midst. In other provinces it was learned that similar training of cadres was planned or in process. It was disappointing, however, that delegation requests to see training materials, view training schedules or visit with trainees went unmet. At this point, it was troubling that evidences were not forthcoming to match claims.

An unforgettable trek into the mountains bordering China in northern Vietnam's Lai Chau province on June 9, 2006 took our party of six American religious freedom advocates and Vietnamese officials along the narrow and steep mountain-incised path overhung with bamboo. Our purpose was to reach Muong Mo commune in Muong Te district to find Mua Cho Thu, a young new convert and leader of the fledgling Evangelical church. We had credible evidence that he and his congregation had been suppressed by local authorities. After an 8 kilometer trek we found him working in his field. He did not know we were coming and was surprised to hear that we were there to support him in his request to the government for legal recognition as a Christian church. Perhaps in connection with our advocacy, authorities told him the day before our arrival that 17 churches in his district would soon be allowed to register, which if granted would be the first such registrations in the history of the province. Pastor Thu asked the delegation to pray for him and his congregation and requested that we do what we could to assist him and other untrained pastors to get better leadership training. He also asked if there was anything we could do to get a bridge across the swollen river that separated his commune from market roads! A bit beyond our influence. Our visit with a Hmong pastor in Lao Cai revealed that registration requests submitted years ago have gone unprocessed and he was told in the presence of the IGE delegation he must resubmit it since there are now new procedures. Progress is real, but uneven.

In the Central Highland cities of Buonmethuot (Dak Lak province) and Pleiku (Gia Lai province) we met with E-De and Jarai provincial ECVN leaders (ECVN - Evangelical Church of Vietnam) whose early churches were planted in the pre-1975 period by the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Training programs for government officials in administering the new religious freedom policies is notably successful so much so that the legal status of the expanding evangelical movement has reached unprecedented proportions. Whereas a year ago 21 congregations were recognized now the total is 29 and expectations by evangelical leaders are for that number to continue to grow. In addition, more than 235 meeting places are now officially sanctioned. Due to a comparatively well-developed provincial-based Evangelical leadership team and recently improved religion-state conditions, circumstances for evangelicals were clearly improving. However, given the hundreds of congregations, perhaps meeting at as many as 1000 separate sites in the area, this progress is slow. The numbers of Evangelical Christians in the provinces

are put conservatively at 80,000. Two church facilities were visited by the delegation near Buonmethuot and Pleiku, each of which could only seat 2,000 -inadequate for the entire congregation. Church bodies of this size are typical, we were told.

IGE team members inquired of authorities about the possibility of linking resources of their local home churches to help meet pressing needs of pastoral education. Officials responded: “These arrangements can be made.” Throughout discussions with officials and local Christian leaders in both northern and central Vietnam, a striking convergence of interest was the matter of theological training. All agreed that “Seminary is security,” because: 1) Christians led by informed pastors are less likely to be misled by divisive cults and cults of personality; 2) Christians oppose corruption, are morally upright and become model citizens; 3) their social activism in behalf of the poor and needy supplements state programs and resources. If indeed “sister-church” arrangements can be facilitated by the Vietnamese government, Evangelical church leadership will take enormous strides forward.

Vietnam is trying hard to overcome the stigma and perception of egregious, systematic and long-term abuses. By degrees they are becoming more open and transparent. Among the Kinh or Vietnamese Evangelical church, there are still challenges. But these are minor compared to the restrictions and abuses which ethnic minorities, especially in the mountains of the north, have experienced, some of it in very recent months.¹

A very wise onlooker has said, “Vietnam wants to change. It is just not sure how to do it.” Some things are changing while other matters are changing slowly. It will take some time for Vietnam’s officialdom, especially at the local level, to overcome the bad habits and bad practices which have, deservedly, brought international criticism and approbation. At the same time, Vietnam is making progress in the area of religion and the rule of law - seeking to preserve its integrity yet perform respectably in the arena of religious freedom and human rights. Things are moving in the right direction.

¹ For a history of Hmong Christianity and Vietnamese state relations see James F. Lewis, “The Evangelical Religious Movement among the Hmong of Northern Vietnam and the Government’s Response: 1989-2000,” in *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2002 (16:2), 79-112.