

The Mennonite Church in Vietnam

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Vietnam is a densely-populated nation in southeast Asia with a long and rich history. Influenced by a thousand years of Chinese domination, Vietnam's literate class embraced Confucianism, while the majority of the people followed the Taoist understanding of life. Mahayana Buddhism also came by way of China and was widely accepted; in neighboring Cambodia, Laos and Thailand Theravada Buddhism is dominant. People had no trouble accepting and combining elements of all these religious streams. Whatever the religious orientation of the people, ancestral veneration provided an order within Vietnamese society. The living show devotion to the departed, and the dead guide the living. The Vietnamese people are deeply religious. An official government release in December 2021 noted that "at present, about 90 percent of the Vietnamese population practice their religions and beliefs."²

Catholic missionaries introduced the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Vietnam in the early 16th century and significant missionary work was done by Jesuits in the 17th century. Foremost among these missionaries was Alexandre De Rhodes, who not only evangelized, but prepared a catechism for new believers and set up a church hierarchy. His Latin script became the foundation of the national written Vietnamese language. The church was established first in central Vietnam, and then spread to the north and south. The Catholic Church developed throughout the next two centuries in spite of periodic repression and martyrdom. In the 19th century during the reigns of the Nguyen emperors Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị and Tự Đức (1820-1883) an estimated 100,000 Christians were killed. France used this repression to justify sending military forces into the country. Thus many people linked the Church to the long French colonial occupation.

A small Protestant Christian community formed in the late 19th century. However, Evangelical Christianity took root among the people through the work of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), begun at Tourane (Đà Nẵng) in central Vietnam in 1911. The church developed rapidly there, and a Bible school was established in 1921. A Bible translation was published in 1926. Churches were also established in the cities of the north, but self-supporting congregations of the Evangelical Church in Vietnam (ECVN) developed more rapidly in the south.³

French colonization of Vietnam gave rise to strong resistance movements. The communist Viet Minh faction led by Ho Chi Minh would eventually succeed in driving out the French (and later, the American military forces). The defeat of the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ by the Viet Minh in 1954 and the Geneva Accords brought an end to the French era. With the partitioning of the country and population exchanges, large numbers of Catholic

Christians and a much smaller group of Evangelicals went south in 1954 and 1955.

Mennonites come to Vietnam

Mennonites from North America expressed interest for ministry in Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century. During the French Indochina War, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)—the relief agency of the North American Mennonite churches—considered a program of relief assistance to the Vietnamese people.⁴ In early 1954 Orie O. Miller, the MCC executive secretary, projected a program of relief assistance. When the Geneva Accords, ending French rule, were signed on July 1954, Delbert Wiens, a Mennonite Brethren college graduate from California, went to Vietnam to direct a relief program. Wiens arrived in Saigon August 16. J. Lawrence Burkholder, a Mennonite who had worked in China for MCC, also went to Vietnam on a short assignment for Church World Service (CWS). Burkholder and Wiens together evaluated relief needs, and both CWS and MCC began relief programs there. MCC soon sent additional personnel.

MCC initially gave relief to displaced persons who settled in the Đà Lạt area, but soon focused its work in the Buôn Mã Thuột area of the central highlands where material aid assistance was given to displaced persons and to ethnic minorities. When medical doctor Willard Krabill came in 1956, MCC began medical work. For a few years MCC assisted at the CMA leprosarium and developed their own medical program. On May 30, 1962, guerilla forces abducted MCC worker Daniel Gerber, together with CMA missionaries Rev. Archie E. Mitchell and Dr. E. Ardel Vietti. They never returned.

In Saigon MCC personnel made friends with students, taught English classes, and assisted in the founding of a Vietnamese YMCA. MCC personnel developed close relationships with Evangelical Church leaders. For many years the Church assisted MCC in distributing material aid to victims of floods in central Vietnam, and in 1960 MCC developed a joint clinic and hospital with the Church in the central Vietnam coastal city of Nha Trang; another joint medical program began in Plei Ku in 1966.

Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), the mission agency located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, sent missionary personnel to Vietnam in 1957. Orie O. Miller also served as executive secretary of EMM, then called Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. James and Arlene Stauffer arrived in Vietnam in May 1957, and Everett and Margaret Metzler came later that year to form the Vietnam Mennonite Mission (VMM). At that time the main Evangelical Christian presence in South Vietnam was the 30,000-member Evangelical Church; there was also a much smaller Seventh Day Adventist Church.

While studying the Vietnamese language, the new missionaries lived in Gia Định, a provincial city adjacent to northeastern Saigon (now Bình Thạnh District of Ho Chi Minh

City). They regularly visited Evangelical Church (ECVN) congregations, became friends with many pastors and lay leaders, and assisted the Alliance Mission in evangelistic ministries. They also maintained close association with MCC personnel who encouraged them to work directly with ECVN rather than establish separate Mennonite congregations. However, ECVN leaders—who expressed appreciation for the Mennonite missionaries—preferred that they work independently. Vietnam Mennonite Mission was granted official status by the government in 1964.

As missionaries developed friendships, they began their own evangelistic ministries, including visitation, telling Bible stories in their homes to neighbor children, and teaching Bible classes in English and Vietnamese. The first believer, a young man, was baptized in 1961. Missionaries organized English language classes for high school and university students and adults throughout their years of service. Students were pleased to study English with native speakers. Some missionaries later taught English at the University of Saigon.

In 1960 the Mennonite Mission developed a student center located on a main street in Saigon across from the Bình Dân Hospital. The mission office was established here. This student center maintained a continual schedule of seven or eight English language classes with 200 students enrolled. Through the witness at this center, occasional persons embraced the Christian faith, were nurtured and baptized. By Easter 1963 four young men were part of the fellowship that met at the Saigon student center on Sunday mornings for worship services with singing, Bible reading, preaching, prayer and testimonies. Missionaries spent much time studying the Bible with these new believers, individually and in groups, seeking to live out the Christian life with integrity in a country increasingly torn apart by war. Some of these new Christians became members of local Evangelical Church congregations. It was not until 1974 that a significant Christian community formed at the student center; the dynamic Christian youth group that blossomed here continued its witness throughout the revolutionary events of 1975.

With additional missionary personnel, in late 1964 the Mission began a witness and service program in Gia Định (now the Bình Thạnh district of Ho Chi Minh City). The property was on the edge of Đồng Ông Cộ, a public cemetery that became a slum as people from the countryside fleeing the war squatted among the tombstones. The community had both stable families and transient people with many one-parent families. Some women had lost their husbands in the war, and others were abandoned. There was much sickness; tuberculosis was endemic. It was also a hideout for draft resisters and army deserters.

The community center on Phan Văn Trị Street opened with a day care nursery. In 1966 this evolved into the Rạng Đông (Sunrise) primary school (Grades K-5) under an experienced principal. By 1970 there were around 600 students enrolled in half-day classes with MCC

providing tuition for 150 children. MCC also supported a family child assistance program which enabled dozens of young people from poor families to study and learn trades. A small business loan program helped families. Later a clinic served students and community people.

English language classes were also offered here; among the students were teachers and government workers. Missionaries organized Sunday afternoon evangelistic meetings with Bible study, preaching—often by pastors from the Evangelical Church—and occasionally question and answer sessions or gospel films. Within a few months a church was established here when several adults and youth confessed faith in Jesus and were baptized. Later Christians from the Saigon center became part of the group here in Bình Thạnh district. With the growth of the church at the community center, a five-member representative committee was elected by the church in 1965. Three members were Vietnamese, one woman and two men.

The Church Grows

Missionaries early sensed the limitations of giving pastoral care to Christians of a different culture. In 1965 Mr. Trần Xuân Quang⁵ was invited to teach a Sunday afternoon Bible class. Quang was a graduate of the ECVN Bible Institute and directed a Navigators Bible correspondence course. Both fathers of Quang and his wife, Nguyễn Thị Tâm, were well-loved pastors in the Evangelical Church. The congregation eventually called Quang to pastor the church, and he was ordained on March 16, 1969.

One of the young men from the Bình Thạnh congregation in 1965 enrolled in the Evangelical Church's Bible Institute in Nha Trang. Two years later Nguyễn Hữu Lắm became one of the assistants to Pastor Quang in charge of the children's Sunday school. Mr. Nguyễn Quang Trung, a staff member in the student reading room since 1965, also assisted Pastor Quang.

A Bible school to train members of the congregation was begun in May 1969. The program included Old and New Testament introduction, evangelism, Christian education, doctrines of God, man, and the church, church history, and book studies on Matthew, John, and Genesis. Ten courses were completed by mid-1971. Twenty students studied in this program; one took all ten courses. In 1974 MCC staff member James Klassen taught a course on evangelism with thirty persons enrolled.

The Vietnam Mennonite Church was birthed amid war and revolution. When national elections were not held in 1956, opponents of the Saigon government in 1960 formed the National Liberation Front (NLF/Việt Cộng) in an effort to overthrow the government. As military activity increased, the United States began bombing North Vietnam in August 1964

and introduced combat personnel into the South in March 1965 while South Vietnam expanded its armed forces. Three members of the Evangelical Church who worked in the Mennonite centers were drafted into the armed forces.

The military draft was an obstacle to leadership training in the church. The two assistants to Pastor Quang were deferred in late 1965, and two others were deferred later. One youth leader managed to dodge the draft for the duration of the war. Two young men who hoped to avoid the draft by working as interpreters for government agencies were later inducted into the armed forces.

The Bình Thạnh area by the community center was hard hit by the Tết (New Year) and May 1968 military offensives by NLF forces. The center property survived, but hundreds of nearby houses were bombed. Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS), formed in 1966 as a joint ministry of MCC, Church World Service, and Lutheran World Relief, provided resources which the center's staff used to feed and clothe many displaced people. Missionaries, at personal risk, hauled water into the area even before security was restored. VNCS later supplied materials to assist more than one hundred families to rebuild their homes.

Most of the MCC personnel within Vietnam Christian Service came from Canada and the United States, but MCC tried to internationalize the staff. Among its volunteers were Yoshihiro Ichikawa from the Japan Mennonite Christian Church Conference in Hokkaido (Nihon Menonaito Kiristo Kyokai Hokkaido Kyogika) and Devadoss Maddimadugu from the Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in India.

Many community adults came into the Bình Thạnh congregation after the 1968 fighting. Sixty-three persons were baptized in 1968 to 1970. While many of these had received relief assistance, others were attracted to the gospel message after seeing the way the center and the congregation served the people. Not all of these persons stayed, but many were zealous in their new-found Christian faith, brought others into the church, and later assumed leadership within the congregation.

The Mennonite missionaries, all from the United States, were greatly troubled by the overwhelming American political and military involvement in Vietnam which at one time reached 500,000 soldiers. Many people consciously associated Protestant Christianity with the United States similarly to their associating Catholic Christianity with French colonialism. Thus missionaries chose to limit association with American military and diplomatic personnel. Beginning in 1965, they released several statements calling for a change in American policy and for peaceful resolution of the Vietnam conflict.

Thirty-six persons were employed in the two Mennonite centers in 1971, though that

number dropped a year later. The Rạng Đông School at the Bình Thạnh center employed the largest number. Some of the teachers who were not Christians also chose to follow Christ and became active members of the church. When some Christian staff from the Evangelical Church (ECVN) asked to become members of the Mennonite congregation, this was affirmed by the ECVN district superintendent. The 107 members of the Mennonite Church in 1970 included eighteen persons who had transferred from the ECVN. The Bình Thạnh center programs were turned over to the local congregation in 1971. Pastor Quang, who had worked part time with the VNCS material aid program for a few years, became director of the community center in March 1972. New facilities built on Phan Văn Trị Street the same year included a pastor's residence, worship area, enlarged facilities for the Rạng Đông School, a clinic, sewing room, and office space.

The Bình Thạnh congregation had a full schedule of activities. On Sunday mornings at 8:00 Nguyễn Hữu Lắm and Nguyễn Quang Trung led the children's Bible class. The men and women met at 9:30 for Sunday school classes. The main worship hour was 11:00 to 12:00 with more than one hundred persons attending. Services consisted of singing hymns with piano accompaniment from the Evangelical Church (ECVN) hymnbook (mostly hymns and gospel songs which Christians had translated from the missionaries' hymn books), Bible readings, prayer, testimonies and preaching. The first Sunday of the month the Lord's Supper was commemorated, a pattern practiced by the ECVN. There were regular baptismal services after several months of catechetical instruction. Both adults and young people were being received into the church. Baptism was usually by pouring; in ECVN congregations it was by immersion in a baptismal pool.

The youth group met Sunday afternoons. There was a Tuesday afternoon women's home Bible study, a very significant nurture ministry that involved as many as eighteen people. There were Thursday evening prayer meetings at the church led by various lay members. Thirty-five adults plus children would gather to talk about the Christian life and to pray for each other with various lay men and women leading the Bible discussions. On Saturday evenings there were home Bible study and prayer gatherings.

With its school and social service ministries, the center was always a buzz of activities. There was a monthly program including gospel preaching for the young people studying trades. At Christmas time the congregation and center prepared three programs: for the youth studying trades, for the Rạng Đông School, and for the congregation. Some years a summer Bible school was held; in June 1972 there were 250 children enrolled in these morning classes.

Wishing to see vibrant congregations formed in other areas, church and Mission leaders in 1970 established another center in the Mekong delta at Cần Thơ, a city 170 kilometers south-west of

Saigon. Here a reading room was opened, and missionaries taught English, both at the center and in the university. There were weekly Bible classes, and a girls' homemaking class. The Mission also worked with Christian Youth for Social Service (CYSS), a fledgling organization of Christian university graduates and professional people who were inspired by the MCC model to engage in service ministries. A CYSS male student hostel was opened here. In early 1975 the Mennonite Mission purchased an apartment building for the hostel and student center, but this program never developed fully due to the dramatic events of April 1975.

The church learned about Mennonite churches in other countries through visits of church leaders from Japan, India, Indonesia, Taiwan and the United States. Pastor Quang and Mr. Nguyễn Văn Ninh, a long-time staff member of MCC and VNCS, attended the first Asian Mennonite Conference in India in October 1971. The following year the Vietnam church hosted the Mennonite-sponsored Eighth International Reconciliation Work Camp with a work project at the Evangelical hospital in Nha Trang. Participants came from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Philippines.

Church growth led to the formation of a seven-member Joint Administrative Council in August 1971 consisting of three missionaries and four local persons. The church became autonomous in 1973 as the *Hội Thánh Tin Lành, hệ phái Mennonite* (Evangelical Church, Mennonite). A five-member Church Administrative Committee was selected to give overall direction to church development. Missionaries expressed readiness to work under an all-Vietnamese committee, but church leaders requested that two missionaries serve on this committee. There was also a larger Advisory Council that met quarterly to share concerns and ideas. These meetings were opportunities for frank conversations between missionaries and local church leaders.

Church leaders drew up a preliminary statement of faith, and were preparing a constitution. In August 1974 the Church Administrative Committee called a meeting of twenty-five church leaders and missionaries where the local authority of the church was affirmed, a decision of critical importance in light of the military and political revolution after April 30, 1975. Total membership in the Mennonite Church on the eve of the revolution was 152.

Although the Mennonite Church came into being during a turbulent war period, the church could hardly have anticipated the chaos that characterized March and April 1975 as the revolutionary military forces closed in on Saigon. In early March, Pastor Quang went to North America to attend the annual EMM missionary conference. Following attacks from the North in Buôn Ma Thuột, by late March South Vietnam's President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ordered his troops to leave the highlands. Soon the government forces lost control of the entire central area. On Easter Sunday, March 30, there were not enough seats for the 200 people who gathered to worship at the Bình Thạnh congregation. By the next Sunday, several missionary families due for a summer furlough had left the country. The remaining missionary went to Bangkok in late April on

business. When the People's Revolutionary Army rolled into Saigon and to victory on April 30, 1975, the missionaries were all gone, though four MCC men remained.

Revolutionary Period

On Sunday morning, May 4, 1975, both congregations in Saigon and in Bình Thạnh district met for worship, but not “as usual.” Everyone was aware that the former political order was gone. A battle for Saigon had been averted, and all thanked God that the military conflict spanning three decades has ended. The war was over.

Fear of living under a communist government, fear of reprisals, and fear of an unknown future had caused unimaginable panic among much of the urban population in preceding weeks. The rapid rout of the Saigon armies by the swift movement of the revolutionary military forces, the flight of the civilians from many cities in central Vietnam, and frightful rumors had combined to propel many people to leave the country. But most of the church members stayed. Nguyễn Đình Tín, a youth group leader and a MCC staff member, prepared a statement which others signed, pledging to stay to contribute to the future of Vietnam.

The next days and weeks saw many changes affecting all religious groups within South Vietnam.⁶ The entire leadership team of the Bình Thạnh Mennonite congregation was intact except for Pastor Quang who had not returned from his visit to the United States. The congregation elected Nguyễn Quang Trung to administer the church and the community center, and assigned pastoral ministries to Nguyễn Hữu Lắm. The Rạng Đông School closed, but the social programs and the clinic continued for a time. Some of the church members—who had fled the countryside during the war—returned to their fields. One of these farmers was killed when his hoe detonated unexploded ordnance in his field. But two-thirds of the congregation remained in the city.

The local government revolutionary committee confiscated the Bình Thạnh church center on May 23, but the church auditorium and parsonage were returned two days later. But there was more trouble to come. Lắm, living alone at the church center, invited a local government official to move in, and by September it was difficult for the church to meet there due to armed guards. At this point the congregation was approached by Mr. Nguyễn Thành Long, an Evangelical Church layman and member of the National Liberation Front presidium of Ho Chi Minh City, who was working to unite all the evangelical churches into a United Evangelical Church. Believing he could assist them to evict the governmental official and his armed guards, the congregation joined this united church. In early October the congregation signed an agreement with the Department of Education for the classrooms to be used as a public school since private schools were no longer permitted to operate. Most of the previous teachers were retained, and the school—which kept the Rạng Đông name—reopened with around 700 students in two levels (grades 1-5; 6-12). The church was permitted to use the auditorium for congregational meetings. The crowd attending the traditional Christmas Eve service included some who had already moved back to the countryside

and returned for this special occasion. By this time the local district People's Committee and the Fatherland Front required all churches and pagodas to register their religious activities and special holiday celebrations with the local authorities.

James Klassen, one of the MCC men who had stayed, assisted the congregation at the Saigon center after the government change, often teaching in the Sunday morning worship service, and leading the class for new believers on Thursday evenings. Several young adults were baptized in June and others in December. Choirs from the Bình Thạnh Mennonite congregation participated in the Christmas service on Sunday afternoon, December 21. Mr. Long also assumed control over the Saigon facilities. However, after being shut out of the meeting room for the Tết (New Year) service in February 1976, the group arranged to meet with one of the student groups of the Evangelical Church. The fledgling united church movement of Mr. Long dissolved after he died of illness in 1976. Soon after the revolution it became clear that the new government did not permit the MCC men to engage in any meaningful social services, so they made plans to leave. The last of the four men left in late 1976.⁷

Uncertain Years

The Bình Thạnh congregation continued to meet until 10 June 1978 when the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City confiscated the church properties. Many other church and pagoda properties throughout the country were also confiscated. The Saigon youth center property on newly renamed Điện Biên Phủ Boulevard was eventually used by the Bình Dân Hospital located across the street.

In the first years after the revolution, some religious leaders—Buddhist bonzes, Catholic priests and Evangelical Church pastors—were imprisoned and many worship centers closed. Some of the leaders of the Bình Thạnh congregation were denounced by local authorities. There was pressure exerted on those without employment to move out into New Economic Zones, a government program to depopulate the city and to exploit untilled land, often in areas with poor soil and little rainfall. Trung encouraged believers from the Mennonite church to attend the Grace Baptist congregation or Evangelical Church congregations still meeting.

Life was difficult for a decade after the revolution. Though Vietnam was now united, it was cut off from its dependence on outside aid, and trade was restricted. The government-controlled economy led to sharp declines in production, and life became extremely hard for most people. Many people fled the country by boat. Hundreds of thousands of military, political, or community persons associated with the former government were held in re-education camps. Even though many religious leaders were imprisoned, courageous Christian pastors continued their ministry. When a few Evangelical Christian leaders who espoused the expression of charismatic gifts were no longer welcomed within the Evangelical Church, they began meeting in homes, starting what grew into a highly significant house church movement throughout the whole country. In Ho Chi

Minh City two ECVN pastors of rapidly-growing congregations were imprisoned for several years and eventually exiled from the country.

New Hope

In 1986 the government began to implement a market economy which slowly led to an improved economy and greater freedom for the whole society. Already in 1983 Nguyễn Quang Trung, now functioning as pastoral leader of the Mennonite church in Vietnam, invited believers to meet to worship the Lord in his home in Bình Thạnh district. Sometimes only a few people gathered; as many as seventy came to a Christmas celebration. Permission had to be requested from the local authorities for each meeting, and the church experienced much harassment. Often consent was not granted before the time of the announced meetings; even with permission, security police sometimes dismissed the meetings.

Pastor Trung, who was supporting his family by teaching English, reported in 1988 that there were thirty families totaling 200 persons related to the Mennonite church, most of them living in Bình Thạnh district of Ho Chi Minh City. Some of these had recently come to faith. A new church council was formed, and the congregation made plans to resume regular meetings for Bible study, fellowship, and worship. Trung contacted local and city representatives of the People's Committee and the office of religious affairs, requesting that the church properties be returned to the church. They were not returned.

In 1995 a representative of Eastern Mennonite Mission visited Vietnam to confer with government officials and visit persons in the Mennonite Church. Pastor Trung was given a Vietnamese language copy of a draft *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* which was prepared by two North American Mennonite bodies, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. Trung copied this document and sent it to local and national government officials as an expression of Mennonite faith and life, reminding them that the Mennonite Church was committed to both worshipping God and serving the people. This international expression of the Mennonite faith also reinforced the Vietnam Mennonite Church's argument that it was not a local cult.

Gerry and Donna Keener came to Vietnam in 1997 as representatives of Eastern Mennonite Mission. They studied the Vietnamese language in the University of Ho Chi Minh City, and eventually became involved with an international school in the city. As he was able, Keener attended special meetings organized by the Bình Thạnh congregation. He also accompanied church members on some of their relief teams to distribute food, clothing and blankets to flood victims in central Vietnam and in the Mekong delta. These projects were coordinated with the local Red Cross chapters or local government agencies. Mrs. Ngô Thị Bích, Pastor Trung's wife, who had many years of social work experience at the Bình Thạnh community center, also arranged for teams of doctors and medical students to provide relief and medical assistance. In

addition to flood relief assistance, since 1998 the Vietnam Mennonite Church has organized other relief projects, like a medical team to perform eye cataract surgery in central Vietnam. Church members organized “love classes” to teach poor and neglected children to read and write in Ho Chi Minh City’s Bình Thạnh district.

During this period in the late nineties local authorities still would not give permission for the congregation to meet for worship, and even threatened to confiscate Trung's home if meetings were held there. Church members tried to meet monthly in homes. On occasion the congregation would meet on Sunday afternoons in a church building of an Evangelical Church congregation nearby. Pastor Trung became more active in teaching and instructing for baptism, and rented vans to take new Christians to nearby lakes for baptism. Over a period of a few years Trung baptized 150 believers into the Bình Thạnh congregation, and nearly 300 believers in Quảng Ngãi province of central Vietnam. During this difficult period committed church leaders dealt with all kinds of needs, motivated by the Lord’s call to carry out the Great Commission entrusted to them. It was not until 2003 that the Bình Thạnh congregation again began meeting for worship regularly on Sunday afternoons in a rented property on a main street. After eight months, authorities requested that this place be closed, so the congregation soon rented a smaller place in a back street.

After the government in 1976 closed the Bible Institute of the Evangelical Church at Nha Trang, leaders of the Evangelical Church and other independent churches developed many different training programs; some of these were lay training programs used in the churches before 1975. During the late eighties and into the nineties, visiting pastors from the Philippines, Singapore, Korea and other Asian countries came to provide teaching seminars, and later teachers came from North America. Trung and other Mennonite Church persons enrolled in some of these training programs.

New Developments

Following the flight of many Vietnamese from their country at the time of the 1975 revolution and the later exodus of the “boat people,” several Vietnamese Mennonite congregations were founded in Canada and the United States. Pastor Trần Xuân Quang with his family settled in Philadelphia where he became the founding pastor of a Vietnamese Mennonite congregation. In the early 1990s he and his wife visited his mother in Vietnam and were able to fellowship with and encourage members of the Mennonite church in Bình Thạnh district of Ho Chi Minh City.

These Vietnamese Mennonite churches formed the North American Vietnamese Mennonite Fellowship (NAVVF) and began meeting for biennial conferences. When the NAMVF elected a standing executive committee at the July 1997 conference in Winnipeg, Canada, the president, Pastor Phạm Hữu Nhiên, stated their vision to encourage evangelism and church development both in North America and in Vietnam. Early in 1998 Nhiên traveled to Vietnam with another pastor

and met with leaders of several independent house churches, inviting them to work with the NAVMF in evangelism and church planting. They also used the *Mennonite Confession of Faith* which was accepted by an association of house churches with around 300 members and seven workers. They were given a certificate of recognition by NAVMF and by Mennonite Church, Canada. The following year Pastor Nhiên participated in the establishment of a provisional Vietnam Evangelical Mennonite Church with Pastor Nguyễn Hồng Quang as chairman.

Nguyễn Hồng Quang came from Quảng Ngãi province and was active in evangelism for two decades in his native area as well as in the central highlands among ethnic minorities. Frequently imprisoned for short periods by the authorities for his evangelistic work, he eventually came to Ho Chi Minh City where he gave leadership to a growing house church. Here he also studied law. With his legal training he was invited to provide legal counsel to an association of house churches. Frequently challenging the restrictive policies of local authorities, he built a large meeting room to the rear of his home in the City's District 2 (Thủ Thiêm) where his congregation met. An effective mentor who trained many young leaders, he also developed creative ministries like a Christian scouting organization.

There were other unplanned developments. In early 1999 a former missionary visiting Vietnam had a serendipitous encounter with Nguyễn Minh Sang, pastor of several independent house congregations at Hội An, an old city south of Đà Nẵng. When Sang requested guidance on several theological issues, he was sent a copy of the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. A few months later he and other leaders requested a relationship with the Mennonite Church.

Although many congregations of the Evangelical Church continued to meet continuously after 1975, even with restrictions, it was granted legal status only in early 2001 as the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, South. This brought greater freedom for religious activities to most congregations related to this church body. In the central highlands, however, many ethnic minority congregations historically related to the Evangelical Church were not permitted membership and were even denied permission to meet. The total number of baptized Protestant Christians in Vietnam at this time was around one million—1.2% of the country's population. More than half of these Christians came from some of the more than fifty ethnic minority groups who make up more than ten per cent of the country's population. These dedicated Christians insisted in meeting for worship and fellowship even though some leaders were imprisoned—or even killed. Unable to associate with the Evangelical Church (South), many associated with other denominations or independent groups. When leaders related to the Mennonite church group in Thủ Thiêm offered spiritual support, a few of these ethnic Christian communities affiliated with the Mennonite church. In early 2003 a pastor in Kon Tum province related to the Thủ Thiêm Mennonite group reported the formation of a Mennonite conference in the highland area with a few thousand members.

Given the restrictive government religious policy at that time, these leaders of Mennonite-related groups in different parts of the country had no opportunity to meet one another, and in many cases were not even aware of the other groups. However, by early 2003 Pastor Nguyễn Quang Trung (Bình Thạnh District church) and Pastor Nguyễn Hồng Quang (Thủ Thiêm District church) had met and called for the convening of a general conference of the Mennonite Church in Vietnam. When the Conference convened on July 27-29, 2003, twenty-some official delegates came from churches in several provinces as well as from Ho Chi Minh City. While most of the delegates were from the majority *Kinh* (Vietnamese) ethnicity, there also were delegates from the Stiêng (Bình Phước province) and Jarai (Kon Tum province) ethnic groups. The planners also invited several international representatives: pastors Đặng Hồng Châu and Châu Văn Hóa from the NAVMF, and EMM representatives Luke Martin and Gerry Keener, who was living in Ho Chi Minh City.

The conference adopted the *Confession of Faith* they had been using. After declaring the formation of Vietnam Mennonite Church, the conference affirmed a provisional church leadership group: Pastor Nguyễn Quang Trung was chosen president, and Pastor Nguyễn Hồng Quang vice-president and general secretary. Recalling the Mennonite Church established in Bình Thạnh district four decades earlier and to the more recently-formed groups, Trung declared, "There is now neither a pre-1975 church nor a post-1975 Mennonite Church. There is one united Mennonite Church."

Following the conference, the executive committee arranged the various congregations of the Mennonite Church into five geographic districts. With the successful registration in 2001 of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), Pastor Trung, now saw registration of the Vietnam Mennonite Church as a primary task. Together with pastors from the Adventist Church and the Grace Baptist Church in Ho Chi Minh City, Trung met with representatives of the government office of religious affairs to learn what procedural steps to take.

Pastor Quang and the other leaders from the Thủ Thiêm group gave greater priority to evangelism and church planting than to church registration. Insisting that the national Constitution already guaranteed the freedom of religion, Quang and others maintained that it was not necessary to register. Among the many independent Evangelical house church groups, and even within the now-registered Evangelical Church in Vietnam (South), there was no consensus among church leaders about whether registration was advantageous. Many sought only permission to meet within their local communities.

In March 2004 there was an incident in Thủ Thiêm that led to the arrest of several persons. When church leaders reported to the local ward officials that secret agents were harassing visiting church members from the highlands, these secret agents fled. Pastor Quang insisted that the local authorities investigate the incident. Instead, four of their young leaders was arrested and beaten. A

few months later Pastor Quang himself and a young Bible teacher, Ms. Lê Thị Hồng Liên, were also arrested. In November all six were convicted of “preventing officials from carrying out their duties” and Quang was convicted of inciting persons to resist arrest. All were given prison terms. They understood this as actions to restrict their religious activities. These “Mennonite Six” became an international concern with many people and organizations advocating for their release. Though sentenced to three years imprisonment, Pastor Quang was granted amnesty after sixteen months imprisonment.

A few months after this incident, Nguyễn Quang Trung from the Bình Thạnh church visited the United States. Before he returned home, he was ordained a minister by Lancaster Mennonite Conference at a ceremony in Philadelphia on July 18, 2004. Nguyễn Hồng Quang—then in prison—was also ordained in absentia.

Shortly after Pastor Trung’s return to Vietnam, officials from the government’s Committee of Religious Affairs in Hanoi came to Trung’s home to present filing instructions for legal status. As president of the Vietnam Mennonite Church, Trung met on July 26 with the Church’s Leadership Board together with the leaders and assistant leaders from each of the Church’s districts to explain the legal registration process. The young leaders associated with the Thủ Thiêm church expressed strong opposition to Trung’s plan to register. They claimed that the Vietnam Mennonite Church already had legal status based on the September 1964 authorization granted to the Vietnam Mennonite Mission. Furthermore, they insisted that Pastor Quang must be released from prison before they would consider registration.

After waiting years for this authorization to register, Trung could not agree with the position of the Thủ Thiêm leaders. When they convened their own meeting and voted to remove him as president of the Church, Trung did not recognize this action and called other district leaders together who elected a new leadership team for the Church. Trung later met with the Thủ Thiêm leaders several times, but they declined to register. After Pastor Quang was released from prison, the Thủ Thiêm cluster of churches asked about joining the registration process. Aware that Nguyễn Hồng Quang’s frequent challenges of government policies was delaying official recognition, Trung declined the late offer, and promised that the matter would be considered only after the Vietnam Mennonite Church had received official status.

Official Registration

Vietnam’s government requires all organizations, including religious groups, to register so that they do not threaten their one-party system. From a very restrictive period, Communist Party leaders in Vietnam gradually recognized the positive contributions of religious communities to the nation.

Although the government recognized the Evangelical Church in Vietnam, South in 2001, officials were reluctant to register the many smaller Protestant groups, some related to denominations, others independent. To deal with this matter, the National Assembly in March 2004 passed an *Ordinance on Religion and Belief* which relaxed government oversight on religion to some extent, while still requiring religious bodies to be officially recognized or registered. In early 2005 the Prime Minister promulgated further decrees with specific guidelines to facilitate the registration of other Christian churches.

During the era of heavily restricted religious activity, many independent house fellowships were formed. From 1998 on, with greater freedom and the government urging registration, many of these groups looked for a welcoming denominational group with a Biblical and theological affinity. Some church leaders found the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* extremely useful in articulating a simple biblical faith, dealing not only with theological beliefs, but with ethical living as well. Pastor Trung and his team adopted specific criteria for accepting these groups which included a commitment to “expand the realm of the kingdom of God.” If a group already belonged to an evangelical denomination, they needed to bring a letter of introduction from that body. Groups and their leaders could join the Mennonite Church with no preconditions; pastors would be considered apprentice pastors for one year before being accepted as pastors for possible ordination.

In September 2004 Pastor Trung filed an application to register the Vietnam Mennonite Church with the national Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA). Registration came in several steps. In March 2006 official permission was given for religious activities in the entire Ho Chi Minh City, and Pastor Trung’s home recognized as the temporary denominational office. Eighteen months later the national Committee for Religious Affairs issued a certificate granting permission for the *Hội Thánh Mennonite Viet Nam* (Vietnam Mennonite Church) to engage in religious activities throughout the entire country. In addition, this Committee authorized the Church to hold an organizing assembly to complete the legal registration process and to elect a church leadership board.

This assembly was held in Bình Thạnh district of Ho Chi Minh City on November 15-17, 2008. The constitution was ratified and officers were elected for a four-year term. Pastor Trung was elected president. Other election results included: Pastor Nguyễn Hồng Ân, 1st vice-president; Pastor Huỳnh Đình Nghĩa, 2nd vice-president; Pastor Nguyễn Minh Sang, general secretary; and apprentice Pastor Nguyễn Văn Khoa, general treasurer. Among the 17-member Leadership Committee were persons designated to work in the areas of building affairs, medical and social work, Christian education, evangelism, minorities, women’s ministries, and youth and children.

With full legal status, the church could now hold corporate title to real estate property, establish a formal Bible institute for training pastors and leaders, officially ordain leaders, publish materials,

forge relationships with other denominations to sponsor joint projects, serve as an official partner with MCC in relief and community development work, and extend and accept invitations for international conferences. In February 2009 the leadership team of the Church was invited to a ceremony in Hanoi at the office of the national Committee for Religious Affairs. CRA chairman Mr. Nguyễn Thế Doanh presented the official registration certificate for the Vietnam Mennonite Church.

In 2009 the Church published a translation of Alfred Neufeld's book, *What We Believe*, the first of several published books. In July 2009 the Vietnam Mennonite Church was received as a member of the Mennonite World Conference at Assembly 15 in Paraguay.

Gerry and Donna Keener went to Ho Chi Minh City in 1997 under the auspices of Eastern Mennonite Missions. Gerry soon became involved as administrator of an international school, and related informally to Pastor Trung as he was able. Beginning in 2005, Keener was able to assist the Mennonite Church in its training programs. Canadian pastor, lecturer and teacher Palmer Becker taught several classes. In March 2010, thirty students graduated from a pastoral training program and Pastor Trung formally ordained twenty-six pastors. Among the pastors who commissioned them were Becker, Keener and Pastor Nguyễn Thanh Tuyèn, then chair of the North American Vietnamese Mennonite Fellowship and pastor of the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Vietnamese Mennonite congregation. A week later the Vietnam Mennonite Institute in Theology and Renewal was officially opened with fourteen students enrolled in a program leading to a bachelor's degree in theology. The school followed a pattern of four weeklong courses a month, followed by two months of study, research and work in home congregations over a four- to five-year period.

The Vietnam Mennonite Church has more than one hundred congregations with over eight thousand members.⁸ Seventy-two of these churches have been officially recognized by the government. Women have been called to give leadership to eight of these churches. Churches are located in twenty-eight of Vietnam's sixty-three provinces and municipalities—in the north, central and southern parts of the country. Many churches are among the ethnic minorities. There are eighty-two ordained pastors and evangelists, and many more are being called and trained. Huỳnh Đình Nghĩa was elected president at the third quadrennial conference in 2016. The fourth general conference, postponed due to the global pandemic, is being scheduled for late 2022.

The unregistered Vietnam Evangelical Mennonite Church, with its church center in the home of Nguyễn Hồng Quang in District 2 (Thủ Thiêm), was forced to relocate when the area was razed to make way for the Thủ Thiêm New Urban Area. Pastor Quang's reluctance to accept the terms of relocation led to numerous encounters with the local authorities before he eventually moved in 2010 to the church's training center in Bán Cát town in Bình Dương province, part of the Ho Chi Minh City urban area. Quang focused on leadership training, and his wife, Lê Thị Phú Dung,

became president of the church. Quang was frequently harassed, in part for opposing government policies and alleging religious persecution. In 2015 he and other church leaders went to Hanoi for consultation with the government's Committee of Religious Affairs. There was agreement that Quang's family would resign from church leadership roles, and church leaders would not involve themselves in political affairs; the government would then allow the Vietnam Evangelical Mennonite Church to carry out religious activities in local areas and might eventually be granted formal recognition.

The Church chose Pastor Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Hồng to serve as president. Living in Ho Chi Minh City, she carries on an intensive evangelistic and training ministry throughout the country.⁹ The Church also has an intensive virtual training program. The Vietnam Evangelical Mennonite Church has thirty-five congregations in five districts with nearly 1,800 members.¹⁰ Each of their charismatic congregations are organized into strong cohesive cell groups with committed evangelists and pastoral leaders. Ten congregations are located in or near Ho Chi Minh City. Many of the other churches are comprised of ethnic minority Christians living in the central highlands.

There is informal association between the two Mennonite groups. Both churches are active in evangelism, teaching children, youth, and adults, and in daily witness. Following Jesus Christ as Lord in Vietnam calls for an uncommon witness.

(Last edited on 18 March 2022)

Notes:

¹ This is a 2022 revision and update of a chapter prepared by the author in *Churches Engage Asian Traditions*, part of the Global Mennonite History Series, John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, editors. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2011. Nguyễn Quang Trung, Nguyễn Thành Tâm, and Nguyễn Thị Tâm contributed material.

² <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/churches-in-hanoi-change-coat-for-christmas-season/218165.vnp>, Vietnam News Agency, Dec 15, 2021.

³ An excellent summary of Vietnamese Christianity is found under "Vietnam" by Peter C. Phan and Violet James in *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, 876ff.

⁴ This section drew heavily from material in *An Evaluation of a Generation of Mennonite Mission, Service and Peacemaking in Vietnam, 1954-1976*, an unpublished report prepared by Luke S. Martin for the Vietnam Study Project, July 1977. A more detailed study is found in *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam during the American War*. Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2016.

⁵ Vietnamese names follow the local pattern with the family name first and the given name last.

⁶ Much of this material is documented by James R. Klassen in *Jimshoes in Vietnam*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986.

⁷ The MCC continued its ministries after 1975. After the war ended, MCC initiated a large medical and educational aid program and later agricultural assistance, administering the programs from Bangkok and through regular delegation visits. Although MCC opened a Hanoi office in 1990, it had limited contact with the Vietnam Mennonite

Church. Later a few of the church youth were among the six young people who spent a year in North America through MCC's International Volunteer Exchange Program. With reduced income during the pandemic, MCC terminated its Vietnam programs in 2021.

⁸ Statistics were provided by church leaders in January 2022.

⁹ <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/are-you-pastors-wife>

⁹ Statistics provided by church leaders in January 2022.

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