

# The Evangelical Church of Vietnam

By Mahlon M. Hess

The world thinks of Vietnam as a troubled land. In the midst of its war and poverty and disruption have risen heroism and faith and personal victory, and of these the world knows too little. Vietnam has its Christian stalwarts to match those of any place and time.—(Homer E. Dowdy, *The Bamboo Cross*, p. 11.)

Thus a modern newspaper reporter described our brethren in Vietnam, after he had had the opportunity to live among them for three months, sharing in part their sufferings. This church took root and spread throughout the country despite government restrictions for the first forty years of its life. For twenty-five years since then (these two periods having a thirteen-year overlap), the church has suffered disruption and martyrdom.

## Growth Under Restrictions

The Evangelical Church is a fruit of the work of the Christian and Missionary Alliance which was founded in 1887 with a particular view to taking the Gospel to closed Indochina. For many years missionaries to South China were camping along the northern border, awaiting the opportunity to enter the country.

Not until 1911 was Robert A. Jaffray able to establish the first Protestant mission at Danang. Within four years nine missionaries were working in the country with bright prospects. But then, on the basis of an 1884 treaty which gave to the Catholic Church exclusive rights to propagate its faith, a French government decree prohibited further work among the indigenous peoples. The following year the ban was lifted, but Gospel work was limited to port cities and South Vietnam. In rapid succession the few remaining missionaries occupied six main cities.

In miraculous ways the Holy Spirit brought key men and women into contact with the missionaries: a celebrated Annamese sculptor, a wealthy university man, the editor of the newspaper, five members of the royal family, and a popular actor known throughout the province, who became the most successful soul winner in the country. Though there was fierce persecution in every village, for a time there was almost a mass movement to the Gospel.

Since missionaries were prohibited to witness, except in the main cities, the national believers carried the Gospel message to the lesser towns. Their witness was blessed to the point that in 1927 the Evangelical Church of Vietnam was

formally organized. Complete self-support was a requirement for full membership in that national body, and by 1941 three fourths of the congregations had attained this goal.

## Strengthened Through Sufferings

After France fell in 1940, the Japanese occupied Indochina, and the promising work suffered a severe blow. Some of the missionaries were evacuated; others were interned. Following the war they returned, finding that nearly all the property of church and mission had been looted. Some pastors and many Christians had been martyred. Of those who escaped, many were sick, destitute, and afraid. It was unsafe to travel. Slowly the scenes of desolation and ruin began to turn for the better, but shortly thereafter the war for national independence broke out.

During this conflict the church suffered greatly. In the interior, rice fields were looted. Due to threats, rumors, and sporadic attacks on the towns, many Christians fled to out-of-the-way places. When they returned, they found that their homes had been looted, and everything lost. Many of the people of this onetime rich granary of Southeast Asia became quite poor.



Gene Stoltzfus, a Mennonite from Aurora, Ohio, is working under International Voluntary Service.

Mahlon M. Hess, missionary to Tanzania, is presently assistant to the secretary of Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, Salunga, Pa.

Being under suspicion from both sides, the Christians experienced the greater suffering) They were in constant danger of attack; some were drafted, tortured, or imprisoned. Scarcely a week passed but that some prominent Christian, often a pastor, was robbed or killed. The Trench were equally guilty with the Vietminh. The Christians themselves were divided in their loyalties, quite a large number siding with the Vietminh, due to their passionate love of country and their determined though silent opposition to anti hatred of foreign control.

Following on the division of the country at the seventeenth parallel in 1954, when many northerners fled to the south, there was begun a campaign of revolutionary activity. Roads were dug up, poisoned bamboo spikes were planted where people pass, and bridges were destroyed. Several mission stations had to be closed. In some places Christians were forbidden to leave their villages; church attendance was not possible.

In other areas village groups were forced to follow the guerrillas into the mountains; there were mass defections to communism. From the congregations nothing has been heard for a long time. Some family groups fled from the insurgents and sought government protection.

Tens of thousands of the people are being resettled in Strategic hamlets, fenced and protected from Vietcong raids. Two Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries and Paxman Daniel Gerber were abducted in May, 1962. A number of Christians have been killed, among them at least two pastors.

The guerrilla warfare and terrorism are steadily mounting. Both peasants and intelligentsia live in fearful insecurity. Effective government control stops at the city limits.

#### We Can Learn—We Can Share

The Evangelical Church of Vietnam, now fifty years old, has many excellent qualities, for which we offer praise to God, and from which we can learn. Recognizing that we share with them the same kinds of human weaknesses and temptations, and that each of us understands spiritual truth only in part, one can discern that God is calling us to a sharing together through which we can be mutually encouraged and edified.

This church is known for its simple acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the revelation of God to man, as the foundation for faith and life. The Bible school is a most important institution in the life of such a people. In 1962 there were 240 in long-term Bible school and worker training courses, and 430 in short-term courses in Bible truth and Christian practice.

Our brethren stand for holiness of life and for separation from sin and worldliness. However, in the life of the church there is room for growth in some matters of ethics and honesty.

The Evangelical Church of Vietnam has a firm belief in the power of prayer. There are special prayer services each Sunday morning and midweek. During church conferences the period from six to seven o'clock each morning is spent in prayer. Congregations which are threatened by rebel attack

frequently gather in daily prayer meetings.

This young church has a strong emphasis on evangelism. Pastors give active leadership in outreach; each congregation has a "witness band"; each district has a full-time itinerant evangelist. Colportage work, market preaching, and radio programs over fourteen stations (valuable in reaching students, military personnel, and government officers) are fruitful methods of evangelistic outreach.

For several decades the Vietnamese Christians have carried on evangelistic work among the tribal groups, and fifteen workers are now engaged in this ministry, in 1962 the first Vietnamese foreign missionary was commissioned to serve in Vientiane, Laos.

The church presently has 294 workers, and during 1960 and 1961 experienced a 40 percent increase in membership. By 1963 there were 354 congregations south of the seventeenth parallel; there were 42,000 baptized adult members, and the total Christian community numbered 100,000.

The church has a concern about stewardship of life and possessions. Self-support is a condition for membership in the national church organization. However, the church has a real problem in the matter of pastoral support.

The Evangelical Church has a conscience sensitive to the social needs of the people. From its own resources an orphanage, with school facilities, was established to care for the children of pastors who had been killed. With the assistance of Mennonite Central Committee, a hospital was established at Nha Trang. Twenty nationals now share with the missionary staff in the ministry carried on from the leprosarium at Banmethuot.

Our brethren are growing through the discipline of suffering. While due to the testings and opposition, some have grown cold and turned back, many have been purified and perfected. A witnessing band went into a communist-infested area, and had the joy of seeing thirty respond to the Gospel.

A leading pastor was given a gun by government officers, but declined to use it, even when he had to flee for his own life. He was continuing in earnest prayer for the backslider who sought to kill him, and looked forward to a day when they would be reunited as brothers.

These brethren, as also their neighbors, are in need of food, clothing, medical care, help in resettlement, etc. They also need understanding fellowship, particularly from such who share their convictions about the way of love and peace. Moreover, Christians who have passed through the fiery furnace, ready to lay down life itself, have much to teach us. The challenge is upon us "to match their sacrifice."

A government official has attributed the complete ineffectiveness of Vietcong infiltration and control in one tribal area to the influence of the Evangelical Church; in this area there are fifty churches and 5,000 communicants. The foreign secretary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance sees in the present situation the greatest opportunity for witness in Vietnam since the inception of the work; for the next number of years his society will give Vietnam top priority in deployment of resources—large-scale evangelistic efforts are planned.