

NATIONAL REPORT: VIETNAM

Evangelism in “4IR” Era

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Vietnam today is a country located to the east of the Indochina Peninsula, with a population of about 97 million people. It is a very dynamic economy and a very high level of integration, and trade with the world. It is a developing and potential country in many ways. However, Protestantism in Vietnam in this “4IR” era is still a small community with a proportion of only 2.16% of the population. Even though Protestantism in Vietnam has undergone a history of 112 years of establishment and development (1911-2023), it is still not growing as expected. Therefore, it is necessary to look back at the past, and realize the reality in order to be able to look to the future with a brighter perspective for the development of the evangelical churches in Vietnam in the coming years.

LOOKING BACK AT THE PAST

The Gospel was introduced to the Vietnamese people more than a century ago. In 1911, the frontier missionaries of The Christian and Missionary Alliance brought the Gospel to Vietnam and concerted some Vietnamese people to God and established the first Evangelical church in Da Nang.¹ Then the Gospel continued to spread to the North, in Hai Phong and Hanoi, the capital of Indochina.² By 1918, missionary work had begun in Saigon and other cities in South of Vietnam.³

The first decade of missionary work (1911-1921) was an exploratory one. After 10 years establishing the first Evangelical church in Da Nang, the Vietnamese Evangelical community has been formed with 8 churches and 183 baptized believers, and the total number of believers is about 2,000 people.⁴

In the next two decades (1921-1941), The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) was formed its organization in 1927 with the original name of the Eastern French Evangelical Church. They have faced many difficulties, typically the Privy Council under Bao Dai's reign, which issued a notice banning the spread of Protestantism in 1925.⁵ the Japanese military occupation in 1941 causing 22 churches to be closed.⁶ But it was also at this time that the methods

of evangelization were thoroughly applied, marking a great step forward in the work of evangelism. By the end of this period, the ECVN had 203 churches,⁷ 11,751 baptized believers and a Evangelical community of about 60,000 people.⁸ In addition, since 1929, the ECVN has made efforts to bring the Gospel to the ethnic minorities, resulting in 14 ethnic minorities having received the Gospel, as of 1942.⁹

In 1954, the ECVN had 17,007 baptized members.¹⁰ According to the Geneva Agreement, Vietnam was divided into two countries at the 17th parallel border: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North and the Republic of Vietnam in the South. During the years of 1954-1955, more than a million people from the North migrated to the South, including 1,014 ECVN's members. The church in the North remained about 2,000 members and 14 pastors,¹¹ and continued to decrease to about 1,200 members in 1975.¹²

From 60,000 members in 1941, the number of members of the ECVN increased to 100,000 in 1961 (South Vietnam only).¹³

In the next 15 years (1961-1975), besides the ECVN, there were about 25 other missionary organizations operating in the South of Vietnam.¹⁴ However, the Evangelical community was still only a small religion among other religions in the country, with a membership of about 280,000 in 1975.

In the decade of 1975-1985, after the Vietnam War, Vietnam faced many economic and social difficulties. Evangelical denominations are not recognized, the Gospel is suspected and opposed. Yet, God's Church has grown tremendously through personal witness work, church evangelistic programs... After a steep initial decline, the number of believers rebounded rapidly, to 330,000 in 1985. Many new churches were established through the government's resettlement programs to New Economic Zones.¹⁵

In the decade of 1985-1995, Vietnam's economy had a renewal and development that opened up many

1. I. F. Irwin, *With Christ in Indochina* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc, 1937), 26-27.

2. Irwin, 30.

3. I. R. Stebbins, *Forty-One Years with the Vietnamese Church. Memory of a veteran missionary who served with great distinction in the Central and Southern Districts of the ECVN* (n.d.), 5.

4. Lê Hoàng Phu, *Lịch sử Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam 1911-1965* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tôn giáo, 2010), 128, 129.

5. Lê Hoàng Phu, 166-167.

6. Lê Hoàng Phu, 202.

7. Reginald E. Reimer, *The Protestant Movement in Vietnam: Church Growth in Peace and War among Ethnic Vietnamese* (Master thesis, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, May 1972), 47. Le Van Thien, *Church Development In Vietnam* (PhD Dissertation Submitted Trinity Theological Seminary, 2000), 63.

8. Lê Hoàng Phu, 203-205.

9. Tổng Liên hội, 'Khai trình Đại Hội đồng,' (1942), 8-10. Lê Hoàng Phu, 347.

10. CMA, Annual Report for 1954, 120.

11. Tổng Liên hội, *Kỷ niệm 90 năm Tin Lành truyền đến Việt Nam*, 2001.

12. Ginnetta, et.al., *A report on Vietnam, April 1975-December 1988* (Atherton, California: Aurora foundation, 1989), 107.

13. Lê Hoàng Phu, 358-359.

14. David Barrett & Frank Kaleb Jansen, *The world in Figures* (Lausanne, July 1989), 13-34.

15. Le Van Thien, 101.

opportunities for the development of the Church. Churches in the cities continued to conduct periodic evangelistic programs in their churches and while rural churches held evangelism on festive occasions at home. Membership increased to 558,000 in 1995, especially among ethnic members.¹⁶

In addition to the ECVN, which is the largest denomination in Vietnam, most other missionary organizations came to Vietnam after 1954. The Christian Missionary Church were established in 1956 and had 2,613 baptized members in 1972. The Mennonite Society arrived in 1957 and had 124 baptized members; Southern Baptist arrived in 1959 and had 1,173 members; The Church of Christ arrived in 1962 with 100 members, and other small groups.¹⁷ After 1975, for various reasons, many Evangelical denominations ceased to operate in Vietnam, but a number of new denominations appeared due to separation from the ECVN as well as being imported from abroad.

In 2001, it was estimated that the number of members of the ECVN and other denominations was about 800,000 people. Up to now (2023) it is estimated that there are about 1.4 million believers, 6,300 churches, more than 2,300 pastors in Vietnam belonging to about 100 different organizations.¹⁸ In which, the ECVN is the majority with about 1 million believers, 2,253 churches, 1,619 pastors and about 15,000 deacons of more than 40 different ethnicities.¹⁹ In addition, there are 61 churches for foreigners with more than 9,000 members.²⁰

ENTERING THE “4IR” ERA

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, 4IR, or Industry 4.0 is the industrial revolution following the trend of information and data exchange in production technology and production automation, taking place mainly in three fields: physical, digital and bio-technology. In this era, the church has to face more challenges of faith but also larger and broader opportunities to preach the Gospel with new methods, in line with the trend development of the times. However, Covid-19 pandemic is a test for the church

16. Le Văn Thiên, 141. Patrick Johnstone, Operation World, year 1998. Johnstone đã ghi nhận con số tín hữu Tin Lành tại Việt Nam là 600.000 người. This number is consistent with the report of the Vietnamese government in Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (1), Những nội dung cơ bản về Đạo Tin Lành (Hà Nội: Tài Liệu Phổ Biến Nội Bộ, 1997), 1-6.

17. Reinald E. Reimer, Protestant directory, churches, missions & organizations in Vietnam (Sài Gòn: Office of Missionary Information, 1972), 47.

18. According to government statistics in December 2020, there are about 1.12 million Protestants. Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (2), 'Tài liệu bồi dưỡng kiến thức, kỹ năng nghiệp vụ thông tin, tuyên truyền chính sách, pháp luật về tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo và công tác tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo,' (Hà Nội, 2021), 83.

19. <https://danhba.hltvn.org>. In response to the growing needs of the Church, a seminary (The Institute of Bible and Theology) was established by ECVN in 2003 that offers a 4-year bachelor's degree program (B.Th.) and a master's program (M.Div.), in addition to the theological centers for training the workers for local churches. Every 2 years, there are 100 graduates of bachelor's degrees and hundreds of graduates of other training programs.

20. Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (2), 83.

to enter the “4IR” era also.

Not long after the outbreak of Covid-19 in December 2019 in China, on January 23, 2020, the first Covid-19 infection was also detected in Vietnam.²¹ The social life of Vietnamese people was strongly affected. The state of emergency over the epidemic was declared by the government, along with restrictions on freedom of movement, freedom of residence and freedom of assembly. In addition, the chains of infection stemming from religious activities concentrated in the United States,²² South Korea²³ as well as Vietnam have led the government to impose more restrictions on religious activities during the pandemic outbreak.²⁴

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During the pandemic, Evangelical denominations in general and each local church have taken advantage of the opportunity to participate in epidemic prevention and control activities very actively²⁵ such as donating money,²⁶ joining the epidemic prevention and control force, giving medical equipment,²⁷ medications,²⁸ providing meals and necessary supplies for people,²⁹ creating a good image of the Gospel - which is

21. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exemplar-vietnam>

22. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/coronavirus-churches-outbreaks.html>

23. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-korea-coronavirus-daegu-sues-religious-sect-over-covid-as-it-grapples-with-2nd-wave/>

24. In May 2021, the investigative agency prosecuted the case of “spreading diseases related to The Revival Evangelical Church.” This action has become a great pressure for the church's concentrated activities in the epidemic situation. <https://thanhvien.vn/khoi-to-vu-an-lam-lay-lan-dich-benh-lien-quan-hoi-tin-lanh-truyen-giao-phuc-hung-1851072817.html>

25. Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (2), 90-92.

26. <http://mattran.org.vn/dan-toc-ton-giao/tong-lien-hoi-hoi-thanh-tin-lanh-viet-nam-mien-nam-ho-tro-11-ty-dong-cho-quy-phong-chong-dich-covid19-tp-ho-chi-minh-38776.html>, <https://traon.vinhlong.gov.vn/xem-chi-tiet-tin-tuc/id/188038>

27. <https://www.hcmcpv.org.vn/tin-tuc/tong-lien-hoi-hoi-thanh-tin-lanh-viet-nam-mien-nam-trao-may-tho-oxy-cho-benh-vien-da-chien-thu-dung-1491880824>

28. <https://www.binhthuan.gov.vn/4/469/66822/571263/thong-tin-quyen-gop-covid-19/ban-dai-dien-hoi-thanh-tin-lanh-viet-nam-tinh-ung-ho-lien-va-nhu-yeu-pham-phong-chong-dich-covid.aspx>

29. <http://mttq.bentre.gov.vn/loi-dung/ban-dai-dien-hoi-thanh-tin-lanh-viet-nam-tinh-ung-ho-lien-va-nhu-yeu-pham-phong-chong-dich-covid.aspx>

stigmatized in society because of misunderstandings about the Gospel beliefs and propaganda.

In the situation of "social distancing," religious institutions including churches must close and the church must quickly adapt to the new situation by organizing activities online. Plans to send missionaries to new fields were interrupted. Worship programs, personal witness, as well as church or stadium outreach programs that could not be performed, have been replaced by programs of worship,³⁰ evangelism,³¹ study Bible, training... online through Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook, Youtube and many other media platforms.³²

By the end of 2021, when the epidemic situation has been brought under control, the Vietnamese government gradually loosen restrictions during the epidemic emergency and social life will shift to a "new normal" - activities social life is gradually restored to the way it was before the pandemic. The spiritual hunger after days of "social distancing" became a greater need than ever. Church activities gradually resumed with more people attending; witnessing work is promoted; stadium outreach programs were held with tens thousands of attendees and thousands of people adopting faith in the Lord; Many new churches continue to be opened...

At the beginning of 2023, after many postponements due to Covid-19 pandemic (February 22-23, 2020; December 4-5, 2021), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has finally been able to hold the evangelization campaign called the Spring of Love in Hochiminh city for 2 nights: March 4-5, 2023. There were around 25,000 people to attend on the spot each night,³³ 165,000 viewers through different media channels and 4,500 people who were willing to accept Christ Jesus.³⁴

The pandemic has passed, but its effects still affect many aspects of Vietnamese society and create many challenges:

The negative aspect: the economic recession along with the effects of the war in Ukraine has made people's life difficult.

Many people have a suspicious or even discriminatory view of others because of their obsession with disease transmission. Leading to reluctance in contacting strangers and going to crowded places, making it difficult to witness and invite friends to participate in any outreach program.

The consider of government in religious activities and missionary work on social networking platforms with the ambition of managing religious activities in

tin-lanh-viet-nam-mien-nam-tinh-ben-tre-tuong-tro-nguoi-dan-vung

30. <https://httlvn.org/ca-mau-muc-su-hoi-truong-giang-boi-linh-truc-tuyen-cho-cac-hoi-thanh-trong-tinh.html>

31. <https://httlvn.org/truyen-giang-giang-sinh-truc-tuyen-cua-ban-dai-dien-long-an.html>

32. <https://httlvn.org/dak-lak-boi-linh-hiep-nguyen-truc-tuyen-quy-i-2022.html>

33. <https://congthuong.vn/tp-ho-chi-minh-hang-ngan-nguoi-dan-cung-hoa-minh-trong-dem-nhac-xuan-yeu-thuong-244875.html>

34. <https://oneway.vn/tin-tuc/xuan-yeu-thuong-cong-tac-cham-soc-4500-tan-tin-huu-50535.html>

cyberspace.

The sending of missionaries to other countries has stalled.

The social media environment is like a double-edged sword, a good means to spread the Gospel, but also a means for cults to spread false doctrines.

MOVING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

According to a report by the Missionary Committee of the ECVN, in the period of 2009-2022, on average 60-80 new churches were established each year (the rate is 2.5-3.6%/year), which corresponds to the annual membership growth rate surveyed by the Joshua Project (approximately 2.6%/year).³⁵ Although the process of globalization integration with the world has had a positive impact on the development of the Church in Vietnam over the past 30 years,³⁶ the number of believers has increased about 2.5 times from 558,000 in 1995 to 1,400,000 in 2023. The number of ethnic groups that have received the Gospel from 14 in 1942 has increased to more than 40 in 2022. However, the percentage of Evangelical community in Vietnam today is still low, only at 1.44% (1.4/97 million people),³⁷ it is a long time before Evangelical community can become a strong community in Vietnam unless a revival hits Vietnam.

Therefore, entering the "4IR" era, the Vietnamese Church needs to quickly access scientific and technological achievements, to seize the existing opportunities to devise an effective evangelization strategy in the challenging and rapidly changing "4IR" era:

- The view of the Evangelical Church of the government and the people becomes more open and sympathetic through the church's practical contributions during the pandemic, creating a better relationship between the community so that the church can receive more people.
- The spirit of camaraderie and suffering spread during the pandemic pulls people closer together. People are more open to receiving God's love.
- Online meetings have become more popular. People in rural areas or the elderly, who have little access to social networks, have gradually become familiar with technological devices and social networks. It is an opportunity for the church to preach the Gospel across borders through social media platforms without being limited by space and time.
- More attention should be paid to the field of Christian communication on social media platforms, applying AI (artificial intelligence)... both to protect the faith against heresies and to spread the Gospel beyond the limitations of space and time.

35. <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/VM>

36. Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (2), 78, 92.

37. The Joshua project's statistics have higher results with about 2.1 million believers out of a total of 97.5 million people, reaching 2.16%. <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/VM>

- The spiritual hunger after the pandemic is an opportunity for the seed of the Gospel to be sown and bear fruit.
- Targeting unreached ethnic minorities (Chut/Arem, Gelao, Coong, Giay/Nhang, Lu, Qabiao, Xinh Mun/Puoc...³⁸).

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38. <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/VM#peoplegroups>, http://sachcodoc.com/?m=book_online&view=detail&cat=0&id=17

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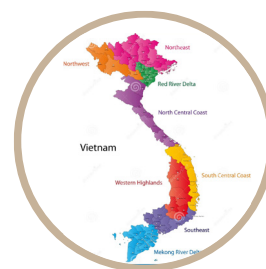
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