

## **A Brief Look at the Activity of the Holy Spirit and the History of the Assemblies of God in Vietnam**

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### **Introduction**

The country of Vietnam and its people have without doubt made their mark on history and a name for themselves on the world stage. From Chinese rule to French colonization to Japanese occupation during WWII to reunification of the North and South under communism in 1975, the Vietnamese people have proven their resilience and ability to preserve their cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> However, less well known is the activity of the Spirit of God in Vietnam, especially over the past century. Despite intense persecution from family and government, as well as unrelenting opposition from the kingdom of darkness, the Holy Spirit has used the people's near unbreakable spirit and tenacity to build the Church and advance God's Kingdom throughout the nation.

In this paper, we will look at how the Spirit of God has worked powerfully in bringing redemption, deliverance, and healing throughout Vietnam as the Gospel has been preached and the Church established. First, we will look at how the Spirit used the earliest Catholic and Protestant missionaries to drive back darkness and plant seeds of the Gospel, as well as the revivals he sent that have helped form, prepare, and sustain the Church. Next, we will look at the formation of the Assemblies of God and how the war involving Vietnam and America affected the Church after 1975. Lastly, we will explore how, in 1989, the Spirit blew upon the embers of spiritually desperate believers and caused the Vietnamese Assemblies of God (VAOG) to be fanned into flame once again and how he has used the VAOG over the past twenty-five years.

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<sup>1</sup>Giang Son is used as a pseudonym

<sup>2</sup>Ngoc, Huu. *Wondering Through Vietnamese Culture*. (Hanoi, Vietnam: National Library of Vietnam, 2010), 835-919.

### **Early Years of Catholic Missionary Work (1533-1900)**

The earliest record of any gospel presentation in Vietnam dates back to 1533, when a Christian named I Ni Khu attempted to preach in several villages along the nation's northern coast.<sup>3</sup> According to Phan, "I Ni Khu was probably a Christian pastor who was sailing from Malacca to Macao along the coast of Vietnam and decided to enter the country to preach the Gospel."<sup>4</sup> The first convert "could have been Do Hung Vien, the son of a court official by the name of Do Bieu, under King Le Anh Ton (1556-73)."<sup>5</sup>

From 1533 to 1624, a splattering of missionaries attempted to establish a work in the north and central parts of the country, but very little resulted from their efforts. However, in 1624, six Jesuit Catholic missionaries landed in Cau Han (present day Da Nang) and successfully established an ongoing work in the area.<sup>6</sup> In that group was Alexander de Rhodes, who had a deep desire to preach the Gospel and see the Church established. He declared,

My sole ambition in my travels has been the glory of my good Captain Jesus Christ and the profit of the souls He conquers . . . Through God's mercy, I sought no other pearls than those Jesus Christ glories to set in His diadem . . . no other amusement beyond giving joy to the angels by converting not a few sinners.<sup>7</sup>

Within twenty-five years of de Rhodes's arrival in Vietnam, believers numbered in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>8</sup> According to Reimer, their success was marked by these key factors:

De Rhodes' journal and other writings make clear that the spiritual power of the priests in working miracles, healings, and exorcisms played a major part in this growth. It also attracted local shamans and Buddhist monks, who were confronted by

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<sup>3</sup>Sunquist, Scott W. *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 876.

<sup>4</sup>Phan, Peter C. *Mission and Catechesis—Alexandre de Rhodes & Inculturation in Seventeenth Century Vietnam*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 8.

<sup>5</sup>Sunquist, 876.

<sup>6</sup>Phan, 45.

<sup>7</sup>de Rhodes, Alexandre. *Rhodes in Vietnam*, (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1966).

<sup>8</sup>Reimer, Reg. *Vietnam's Christians—A Century of Growth in Adversity*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 18.

God's superior power. . . . These European priests also believed that their [teachings] had been invested with divine power to perform miracles, restore sight, and even raise the dead!<sup>9</sup>

From 1624 until the early 1900s the Catholic church grew but also encountered great persecution. Conservative numbers suggest that at least 130,000 believers were martyred for their faith during the 1800s. Some were strangled, drowned, sawn in two, hacked to death a limb at a time and trampled to death by elephants.<sup>10</sup>

### **First Protestant Missionaries and Early Years of the Protestant church (1900-1945)**

Whether by neglect, difficulty of access, a lack of missionary burden, or mere ignorance of need, the Protestant missionaries did not make their way to Vietnam until nearly 1,900 years after Jesus has given the Great Commission and nearly 300 years after the Catholic missionaries established their first work in the nation. In 1887 A.B. Simpson, a Canadian who was to found the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), in his magazine *Word, Work, and World*, wrote,

The southeastern peninsula of Asia has been much neglected. The great kingdom of Annam should be occupied for Christ. Why should it not be one of the first fields for a new aggression by the people of God? Finally in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the first protestant missionaries set foot on Vietnamese soil.<sup>11</sup>

Although Protestant missionaries had visited Vietnam in 1897, it wasn't until 1911 that the first ones took up permanent residence there. During their early years, God confirmed his word with many conversions plus signs following the preaching of the Word. Thus, within that first decade of missionary activity, "They had seen revival. . . , especially right after World War I when the church doubled itself each year . . . God confirmed their ministry with signs and wonders and many converts."<sup>12</sup> One of the pioneer missionaries was E. F. Irwin. In his book, *With Christ in Indo-China*, he often referenced the power of God during those early years:

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup>Steinkamp, Orrel N. *The Holy Spirit in Vietnam*. (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1973), 13-14.

They [the Vietnamese people] had believed in demons; they still believed in them, but they learned that Jesus had conquered Satan. . . . They expected interpositions of divine power on their behalf, and they received them. Miracles similar to those recorded in the book of Acts were enacted before our eyes, not because of the faith of the missionaries, but because of the faith of these ‘babes in Christ’ who expected from their newly found Savior greater power than they had thought belonged to their old enemy the devil. The child of one of the students of the Bible school at Tourane was taken sick. He was unconscious and apparently dead. The father called the Vietnamese pastor, who was led to kneel at the bedside and ask God to raise him up. In a few minutes the boy say (sic) up. Within a couple of hours he was playing outside with the other children. Such answers to prayer were common in the church.<sup>13</sup>

From 1925-1932, many people were saved and churches planted throughout central and southern Vietnam. Reimer notes that,

. . . Scores of converts were also attracted to the Christian way because they witnessed the power of Christ in healing diseases. They found in Christianity a release from the depressing and binding fears of the animistic beliefs. The exorcism of demons and spirits was common. . . . People were delivered from opium addictions. Sorcerers were converted and became evangelists. It was a New Testament kind of movement in many respects.<sup>14</sup>

In 1938, as a result of two years of prayer meetings by a group of students at the Bible School in Da Nang, a great revival broke out among the churches through the ministry of a Chinese Evangelist named John Sung.<sup>15</sup> When Sung began preaching in Vietnam, the people did not know what to think of his demonstrative and exuberant style. However, as Reimer notes,

The Holy Spirit broke through! The result was an outpouring of Gods power to purify and renew His people. Leaders and lay people alike experienced deep conviction of sin . . . The powerful preaching of Dr. Sung also burned residual animistic

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<sup>13</sup>Irwin, E. F. *With Christ In Indo-China*. (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1937), 51.

<sup>14</sup>Reimer, Reg, 33.

<sup>15</sup>Steinkamp, Orrel N., 15.

beliefs and practices out of the lives of believers. Missionaries reported that they had never seen such power.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that via this great revival, God was preparing his people for the extremely dark decade that lay ahead; for just two years later, the Japanese would invade Vietnam and soon make a bold advance on Hanoi. That invasion plus World War II, a great famine, and increased persecution made the 1940s incredibly dark days for the Church.<sup>17</sup> Over that time, many missionaries in the northern part of the country had to make a difficult decision between their work and their families' well-being. Some stayed, but many left.<sup>18</sup>

Not only did the Church face difficulties from 1940 through 1945 due to heavy-handed Japanese rule, but as soon as they were defeated, the French returned, which led to another conflict in northern Vietnam, this time between France and Ho Chi Minh's communist troops. That war ended in the defeat of the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Those eight-plus years left the Protestant church battered and bruised and caused a major division in the body of Christ due to the communist curtain that would separate the north from the south for the next several decades.<sup>19</sup>

However, despite the significant trials for the Church during this time, God continued to stir his people with the fires of revival. For instance, in March 1950, God used Rev. H. E. Nelson to deliver a powerful, Spirit-filled message at an annual conference in Da Nang. After his sermon, the church building was filled with people weeping and confessing of sins.<sup>20</sup> Duong describes the outcome of this revival thusly: "Revived children became God's vessels to reach their backslidden parents, and many young people devoted their lives to full-time service."<sup>21</sup> In 1951, a spirit of revival continually consumed the national evangelical church of Vietnam, the pastors again becoming passionately evangelistic after many years of spiritual dryness. As a result, the first class of students graduating from the Bible School in Da Nang entered the ministry and brought the first revivals to the tribal people.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Reimer, Reg. 33.

<sup>17</sup>Steinkamp, Orrel N., 16.

<sup>18</sup>Sawyer, Anh Vu. *Song of Saigon*. (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2003), 59-64.

<sup>19</sup>Reimer, Reg. 38.

<sup>20</sup>Orr, Edwin J. *Evangelical Awakenings in Eastern Asia*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), 140.

<sup>21</sup>Duong, Mary. "History of Revivals In Vietnam." (An unpublished research paper by the daughter of the current VAOG general superintendent), 4.

<sup>22</sup>Duong, 5.

Although South Vietnam would enjoy a five-year period of relative peace, another war was in the making that would have an unfathomable impact on the nation and its Christians. In 1962, Ho Chi Minh and his troops began their southward march in an attempt to ‘unify’ all of Vietnam under the communist government he had established in North Vietnam in 1945. During this time, many missionaries were killed by the Viet Cong and many others taken captive.<sup>23</sup> Steinkamp notes that “Vietnamese Christians and pastors suffered, but always their resilient faith bounced back. Their exploits for God amid the ravages of war would fill volumes.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Season of Growth, Revival, and Growing Persecution (1962-1975)**

As the war between the North and South continued to escalate and the communist troops advanced southward, God once again visited his Church with a powerful move of the Holy Spirit. It began in the mid 1960s as a group of mostly C&MA missionaries sought God for personal renewal in their lives. As the Spirit moved among them, he also ‘broke out’ among the students at the C&MA Bible School in Nha Trang during a class on the History of Revival being taught by Orrel Steinkamp:<sup>25</sup>

As the Christians repented, confessed their sins and got right with God, the Holy Spirit fell anew and afresh on the believers. This visitation of the Spirit empowered the believers “to be witnesses” just as Jesus had told his disciples to wait until they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit” who would give them the power to be witnesses. Not only were the Christians in Viet Nam empowered to be witnesses, they were also given many gifts that demonstrated the indwelling power of the Spirit, gifts of tongues, of healing, of prophesy, of evangelism, of helps, of apostleship, of teaching, and of many more signs and wonders. Living in the Christian community in Viet Nam in those days was like walking through the pages of the book of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>26</sup>

Mirroring that which occurred in 1938, the revival sent to the Vietnamese church in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a gracious act of God to ready his people for the dark days of persecution that would

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<sup>23</sup>Steinkamp, Orrel N. 16.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 17.

<sup>25</sup>Reimer, Reg. 50.

<sup>26</sup>Hall, Penelope, “Stories from the Revival In Vietnam.” An unpublished paper the author gave me in 2014.

come with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Says Stienkamp, “I always felt it [the revival of the early 70s] was a preparation for the church just prior to the difficult days of trial after the war of reunification. I, with other missionaries, was evacuated from Vietnam. But the Christians suffered greatly.”<sup>27</sup> Starting in Nha Trang, the revival quickly spread throughout the central highlands, up to Da Nang, and down to Saigon, the Church being set on fire by the Holy Spirit to live holy lives and preach the Gospel with power and authority.

### **Beginning of the Assemblies of God in Vietnam (1970-1975)**

It was during the time of this revival, which had begun among the C&MA missionaries and Bible School students, that God saw fit for the Assemblies of God in Vietnam to be brought forth. As has been the case with authentic Spirit-birthed revivals throughout church history, this one was likewise marked by a renewed sense of God’s holiness, repentance from sin, evangelistic fervor, and various Pentecostal manifestations of the Spirit. These manifestations included divine healing, casting out evil spirits, prophetic utterance, words of knowledge, and speaking in tongues.

Although the revival was initiated by hungry believers within the C&MA fellowship, the theological and organizational position of the Vietnamese C&MA church would not allow for a sustained movement of God punctuated by Pentecostal manifestations and workings of the Spirit. Thus, in God’s divine plan for the Full-Gospel message to go forth with power, he was not willing for the fire of this revival to die out. In his providence, God called to Vietnam a number of Spirit-filled Assemblies of God missionaries who would be instrumental in stoking that fire and establishing a beachhead for Pentecostal ministry. Through these missionaries, the revival would embrace the Pentecostal power harnessed into a Book of Acts-type of evangelism and church planting. As a result, the Assemblies of God was the first Pentecostal/Full-Gospel fellowship to officially be established in the nation.<sup>28</sup>

Around 1969, Dr. John Hurston, who at that time was serving as a U.S. Assemblies of God missionary in South Korea, became increasingly burdened for Vietnam. Therefore, he made an exploratory trip to Saigon to seek permission from the South Vietnamese government to establish a mission that would be based in the city.<sup>29</sup> Between Hurston’s

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<sup>27</sup>Stienkamp, Orrel, N. Holy Spirit in Vietnam—Afterward. (An unpublished paper as a follow-up to his book, *The Holy Spirit in Vietnam*).

<sup>28</sup>Reimer, 69.

<sup>29</sup>Hurst, Wesley. Vietnam Update: An interview with John Hurston in the early 70s. (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

exploratory trip in 1969 and his return in 1972 as a resident missionary to South Vietnam, another Assemblies of God couple—Don Warren and his wife—(although not officially appointed missionaries) began relief work among orphans and refugees in Vung Tau:

According to the presentation of Paul Ai, the Vietnamese Assemblies of God (AG) or the Pentecostal church was first started through the relief ministry of Don Warren and his wife in 1970. Together with Cao Than Phat who was an elder of [the] Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA), they started an orphanage. . . . Cao Tan Phat was later baptized in the Spirit. The group grew so fast that they themselves could not meet all the needs of the ministry.<sup>30</sup>

As a result of what God began doing through the orphanage work and the surrounding ministry in Vung Tau, the Warrens sent a request to the U.S.-based Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions (AG DFM) asking for additional workers. Between 1971 and 1974, the AG DFM responded by sending John and Maxine Hurston, Glen Stafford, Aaron and Linda Rothganger, and Robert and Ginny Tripp.<sup>31</sup> The Hurstons, who led this missionary effort, were the first official Assemblies of God missionaries commissioned to live in Vietnam.<sup>32</sup>

Within three short years, as the fire of the Spirit continued to ignite the hearts of believers for the sake of the Gospel and God's power was being manifested through salvation, deliverance, healing, and baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Assemblies of God was given a license to operate as an official religious entity in Vietnam:

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1973, The Interior Department of the then Saigon Government issued License #326/BNV/KS 14b signed by Deputy Minister Le Cong Chat, permitting the AG/VN to start operation, then under Rev. Prof. and Dr. John Hurston as The First Superintendent General.<sup>33</sup>

Just two months after that official licensing, the first Vietnamese Assemblies of God church was opened in Vung Tau. "On August 30,

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<sup>30</sup>Joshua. Pentecostalism in Vietnam. (*Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 4/2, 2001), 315.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>*Mountain Movers Magazine*. September 1994, pg 18. (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>33</sup>Ngo Trung Can, A Brief History of How God the Holy Spirit Has Revisited the Assemblies of God in Vietnam. (An unpublished paper by Rev. Duong Thanh Lam, current general superintendent of the VAOG) 4.

1973, our first Assemblies of God church was organized and set in order with 67 charter members—forty of those being Spirit-filled. . . Brother Cao Tan Phat was elected as pastor along with four deacons.”<sup>34</sup>

During the next two years, the Vietnamese Assemblies of God (VAOG) began to grow quite rapidly—from a few hundred people, a central office, five churches, and a small Bible School in 1973<sup>35</sup> to 10,000 adherents and more than 40 churches in 1975.<sup>36</sup> According to Ginny Tripp, over that time, powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit were often experienced as the missionaries preached the gospel:

In the summer of 1974 we were having special services at the AG chapel at the base of the mountain outside of Da Lat on the road to Phan Rang, which is the area where we were serving as AG missionaries. The AG had built a school, a clinic and a chapel at that location to help with the relocation of the Ra Glai tribal people. With the chapel packed full of people, during one of the services, a lady came to the front for prayer, and she was literally hemorrhaging like the lady who touched helm of Jesus’ garment and was healed. She was prayed for and God did a total miracle for her and healed her body. As a result of that, the people kept coming up for prayer; first for salvation, then for healing and then the third time to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It was wonderful to see God powerfully working in the hearts and lives of people who had previously not heard the good news.<sup>37</sup>

During these early years, the VAOG continually experienced the mighty working of the Spirit of God through salvation and signs following the preaching of the Gospel. “Miracles, signs, and wonders were the normal experience in those days, as should be the case with any truly Pentecostal ministry.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Season of Purification and Persecution (1975-1988)**

On April 30, 1975, when the communist troops captured Saigon “unifying” Vietnam under communism and bringing the war to an end,

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<sup>34</sup>Stafford, Glen & Kay. “A church is born.” September 27, 1973. (An unpublished letter by the Staffords and taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>35</sup>Ngo Trung Can, 4.

<sup>36</sup>Joshua, 316.

<sup>37</sup>Tripp, Ginny. Information obtained via personal interview by the author of this article, September 2015.

<sup>38</sup>Dao, Hoa Van, Information obtained via personal interview by the author of this article, August, 2015.

most of the religious freedom enjoyed in South Vietnam also came to an end. Soon after, on order from the American Embassy to evacuate, John and Maxine Hurston, who had been the first Assemblies of God missionaries to live in Vietnam, were among the last Americans to leave.<sup>39</sup> As the communist government established itself in South Vietnam, by 1976, the newly formed Vietnamese Assemblies of God (plus almost every other religious entity) had its sovereign status revoked and its church properties confiscated.<sup>40</sup>

At that time, almost all Protestant believers and church organizations, including the VAOG, were forced to come under the Southern Chapter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN-S), which essentially was the general counsel of the C&MA church. Says brother Dao Van Hoa, an early local church leader and translator for the missionary team, “If the leadership team of the newly formed VAOG had included some Vietnamese senior leaders, rather than being almost exclusively made up of foreign missionaries, we might have had a chance to salvage the VAOG after 1975.”<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, as a result of the forced merger of Protestant denominations, along with a drastic increase of Christian persecution and political oppression, the Assemblies of God and the fires of the Pentecostal revival seemed to be ‘snuffed out.’

During what historians on Vietnam call the “dark decade” (1975-1985), the Church struggled to maintain its focus and fulfill its mission.<sup>42</sup> One leader describes his experience during this time:

Immediately after the events of April 30, 1975 many of the young VAOG local church leaders were either arrested or felt forced to flee. At that time I was leading churches in Da Lat and Phan Rang and felt that I needed to go to Saigon to check on the well-being of our young church leaders and see if they were keeping the faith in the absence of the foreign missionaries. Twenty days after arriving in Saigon, I was arrested by the communist officials on the faulty accusation that some of the foreign missionaries had been holding firearms at the AG printing press in Saigon. I spent two months and 18 days in prison and was then sentenced to spend 10 years in a

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<sup>39</sup>Proctor, Carlton. *Pensacola News Journal*. June 6, 2005, pg. 1-D. (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>40</sup>Joshua, 316.

<sup>41</sup>Dao, Van, Information obtained via personal interview by the author of this article, August, 2015.

<sup>42</sup>Reimer, 75.

reeducation camp, but I must say during my years in the reeducation camp God blessed me greatly.<sup>43</sup>

Although many other Christians in Vietnam could tell many similar stories of the hardships that they faced, nevertheless even in these incredibly dark years, God faithfully graced his people with a touch from Heaven, which Reimer summarizes as follows:

In the early 1980s, following a time of sifting and purification, God visited some churches in Saigon with unanticipated blessing and revival . . . God used many means, including children, to convict Christians and their leaders of their lack of faith and courage . . .<sup>44</sup>

During this unexpected revival among those churches in Saigon and various ethnic minority believers, God showed his power through miracles of healing and deliverance from evil spirits.<sup>45</sup>

Then in 1988, some thirteen long years after the fall of South Vietnam and dismantling of the VAOG, God once again visited his people with a fresh outpouring of the Spirit as a result of a group of C&MA pastors (many of whom had been part of other denominations before the forced merger) fasted and prayed for ten days. Recalls one church leader concerning that move of God:

With the desire to have the power of the Holy Spirit, about 100 believers fasted and prayed in Saigon, as Jesus' disciples did in Jerusalem. In a fantastic way, the Holy Spirit visited the church, poured out his power, and baptized many spiritually thirsty Christians, giving them spiritual gifts for the service of the Lord.<sup>46</sup> Among those who experienced this outpouring of the Spirit was Tran Dinh Ai [Paul Ai], one of the original members of the Assemblies of God executive committee when it was formed in 1973.<sup>47</sup>

In 1988, during the days of God The Holy Spirit's visitation to His Church in Vietnam, Pastor Tran Dinh Ai shared with those spiritually touched Christians about [the] baptism of The Holy Spirit, explaining and guiding them into the Pentecostal Faith

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<sup>43</sup>Dao, Van. Interview.

<sup>44</sup>Reimer, 60.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Duong, 6.

<sup>47</sup>Ngo Trung Can, 5.

and Teachings . . . Everybody enjoyed receiving what had been promised in Acts 1:5 by Our Savior Lord.<sup>48</sup>

As a result of this outpouring, many of those who experienced this touch of the Holy Spirit were put on probation then expelled from the ECVN-S for “tolerating the practice of speaking in tongues”<sup>49</sup> and other Pentecostal manifestations. Ngo Trung Can continues:

In those days of revival, The Holy Spirit baptized believers not only received the gift of praying in new tongues but also put into practice other granted gifts [such] as: to prophesy, to perform healing miracles, and to expel evil spirits. They boldly went out to remote and dangerous areas to spread the Full Gospel for salvation of many people. They paid a high sacrificial price for the Lord, in terms of strength and energy, of money and time, and even of their own lives when necessary. Numerous children of God were persecuted and put into jail. However, no matter what happened to them, they still proved faithful and kept on going on the difficult but blessed road The Lord had called them to.<sup>50</sup>

### **Revival and Re-Opening of the Vietnamese Assemblies of God (1989-1997)**

This re-visitation of the Holy Spirit marked a distinct turning point for the Church in Vietnam, namely for those who had personally experienced the Pentecostal blessing. With more and more people thirsting for revival and being baptized in the Spirit, together with many having been expelled from the C&MA church, the need for re-organization among the Spirit-baptized believers quickly became apparent:

This was the turning point for the explosion of the Pentecostal movement in Vietnam. During that time, God used Tran Dinh Paul Ai, an AG minister who also served as General Secretary of AG before 1975 and many other pastors to restart the Assemblies of God of Vietnam.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Reimer, 70.

<sup>50</sup>Ngo Trung Can, 5.

<sup>51</sup>Joshua, 318.

Thus in 1989, a Vietnamese Assemblies of God General Council meeting was held and an executive committee elected, with previous general secretary Tran Dinh Paul Ai chosen as general superintendent (garnering 95% of the vote) and Duong Thanh Lam as assistant superintendent.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, two years before, following four years of negotiations with the Vietnamese government and twelve years absence from the nation, the U.S. Assemblies of God Department of Foreign Missions (DFM) was granted permission to send a delegation, led by Robert Houlihan, to discuss with government officials the possibility of the Assemblies of God re-entering Vietnam for the purpose of relief work.<sup>53</sup> Finally in 1991, Ron Maddux, DFM's area director for Peninsular Asia) received the first visa issued to an AG missionary since the end of the war.<sup>54</sup> By the next year, through various forms of relief work (including drug rehabilitation programs and orphanages), Assemblies of God missionaries were able to re-enter the nation for the purpose of doing relief work.<sup>55</sup> And by 1994, there were teams of AG missionaries living in both the northern and southern parts of the country.<sup>56</sup>

On January 16, 1997, at VAOG's General Council meeting, Paul Ai joyously reported that this fledgling group of Spirit-filled believers had grown from 100 spiritually hungry believers (including about twenty pastors) in 1988 to a movement of 180 churches<sup>57</sup> with around 18,000 adherents.<sup>58</sup> Also at this meeting, general superintendent Ai stepped down and Duong Thanh Lam was elected to the position.<sup>59</sup> (Rev. Duong continues to serve as VAOG's general superintendent.)

### **New Season and New Leadership for the Assemblies of God (1997-2019)**

Since 1997, the Assemblies of God in Vietnam has continued to grow despite periods of intense persecution and other major setbacks. According to an article by general superintendent Duong appearing on

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *Pentecostal Evangel*, February 28, 1988, pg 24 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>54</sup> *Pentecostal Evangel*. November 24, 1991 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>55</sup> *Pentecostal Evangel*. November 29, 1992 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>56</sup> *Pentecostal Evangel*. April, 5 1998. pg 11 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>57</sup> Ngo Trung Can, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Tran-Dinh, Paul Ai, "Vietnam A/G hold Historic General Council." *World Link-Asia Pacific*. July, 1997, pg 18 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>59</sup> Ngo Trung Can, 8.

the VAOG's official website, following much prayer and fasting and many years of waiting, on October 19, 2009, the VAOG received a one-year probationary permit from the Vietnamese government.<sup>60</sup> After successfully completing the requirements of that one-year temporary license, on October 20, 2010, it held its first General Council in Ho Chi Minh City as a semi-legal religious entity in post-1975 Vietnam.<sup>61</sup>

Although the 2010 registration marked a significant step forward for the Vietnamese Assemblies of God, it proved to be only a partial registration. It wouldn't be until nine years later that the government's Department of Religious Affairs would officially grant the VAOG full permission to operate as a legal entity in Vietnam in full view of the government. According to the Department's news outlet, "The Assemblies of God of Vietnam held, on October 23, 2019, a solemn ceremony to receive the certificate recognizing its legal entity by the Vietnam government"<sup>62</sup>

Communicating his excitement and gratitude in an email to various friends of the Vietnamese AG, general superintendent Duong wrote,

After 30 years existing and working as an unrecognized denomination, and after 10 years of operating with a partial recognition, we are now being recognized as an official religious organization. Praise the Lord! This is a wide open door that allows us to have church buildings, establish Bible schools, and other activities as an officially organized entity.<sup>63</sup>

In a recent interview, he shared that the Vietnamese Assemblies of God fellowship now had nearly 300 churches and over 34,000 adherents<sup>64</sup> throughout the nation—about 17,100 in the south, 6,600 in the central highlands, 800 in the central region, and about 9,600 in the north. He also reported that about 40% of VAOG adherents come from ethnic minorities groups and that, after conversion, over 90% of all Assemblies of God believers had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues, as was the norm for the early church.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> <http://aogvn.com/loi-ngo> (accessed June 12, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> AG News. *Assemblies of God World Missions*. November 16, 2010. (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>62</sup> Committee News, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, religion.vn, (accessed March 4, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Duong, Thanh Lam. Email received by the author of this paper in November 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Duong, Thanh Lam. Information given to the author of this paper in November 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Duong, interview.

### **Vietnamese Assemblies of God and Bible School Training**

In the early 1970s, one of the priorities of the first AG missionary team was to establish a Bible School for the training of pastors and church leaders. Directed by Rev. Glen Stafford, from 1973 until 1975, the VAOC had a Bible School in Vung Tau.<sup>66</sup> In addition, it also carried out an extensive training program through International Correspondence Institute (ICI). Under direction of AG missionary Aaron Rothganger, by June 1974, the ICI program had enrolled over 22,000 students.<sup>67</sup>

As a result of the legal status achieved by VAOG in 2009, the General Council was able to open a resident Bible School in Ho Chi Minh City that same year. Superintendent Duong and the executive committee firmly believe that this School is key to the future of the Assemblies of God of Vietnam.<sup>68</sup> On June 9, 2015, the School celebrated its second graduating class and marked the end of its sixth year of operations. Over that time, it had enrolled eighty students and celebrated fifty-two graduates from its two- and four-year programs.<sup>69</sup>

In conjunction with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, mentioned above, on October 25<sup>th</sup> 2019, the VAG celebrated 10 years of the operation of the resident Bible School. It was a grand celebration where friends and partners of the school along with most of the alumni as well as current students came together to celebrate all that God has done through the school in its first decade of operation. Superintendent Duong, who also served as the school's director for the first ten years, announced that during the first decade of operation the school had seen about 150 students trained and that an over whelming majority of the graduates have gone into ministry. The celebration was punctuated with praise, worship and joyous celebration, as well as vision casting for the future. The celebration concluded with superintendent Duong announcing that Miss Huyen (Bee) Nguyen would assume the position of school director, stating that he believed that God had called her to move the school into the next season of training and equipping Vietnamese men and women for Kingdom work. The VAOG also continues to maintain several continuing education programs, carried out in various locations throughout the country, for pastors and church leaders who are unable to attend the resident Bible School.

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<sup>66</sup>Silas Ya, Personal interview in 2015 with one of the Vietnamese interpreters who worked with the AG missionary team in the early 1970s.

<sup>67</sup>*Pentecostal Evangel*. Vietnam Explosion. 1974. (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>68</sup>Duong, Thanh Lam. Email to author in April 2015.

<sup>69</sup>Duong, Thanh Lam. Information emailed from the superintendent's office to the author of this paper.

## Vietnamese Assemblies of God and Humanitarian Involvement

In addition to church planting, evangelism, Bible School training, and leadership development, the Assemblies of God of Vietnam has continued to make humanitarian relief a priority. Throughout the country, there are endless opportunities for the Church to extend a hand in the name of the Lord. God has blessed and used these humanitarian efforts from the very beginning. As already mentioned, the Assemblies of God's very first activity back in 1970 (headed up by the Warrens) centered on addressing the needs of the forgotten and neglected.

From 1970 to 1975, the VAOG gained considerable recognition from the South Vietnam government by caring for orphans, helping refugees, and establishing Teen Challenge drug rehabilitation programs. In the early days of AG missions work during the war, the missionaries recognized that addressing felt needs was one of the major areas where the Church needed to help.<sup>70</sup> In 1971, U.S. missionary John Hurston stated, "Although our mission is not just to give material relief, I wouldn't want to go to Vietnam if I couldn't extend to them a helping hand in their desperate situation."<sup>71</sup>

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Vietnam finally began to open back up to western activity in the country, humanitarian relief was again the door that God used to bring AG resident missionaries back into Vietnam. Said Bob Eberling, one of the first such missionaries to re-enter northern Vietnam after the war, "Government restrictions prevent us from preaching and sharing our faith openly, but we share God's love by caring for children and helping meet peoples' needs."<sup>72</sup> By partnering with numerous NGOs and other entities, the Vietnamese Assemblies of God continues to address various humanitarian needs throughout the country. According to superintendent Duong, the VAOG is still working with a number of government agencies to provide medical equipment, wheelchairs, rice, basic housing, and emergency relief during natural disasters.<sup>73</sup>

In cooperation with the VAOG, Assemblies of God missionaries from numerous countries, including the U.S, France, New Zealand, and Australia, remain involved in various social and humanitarian relief and development projects throughout the country. These projects range from

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<sup>70</sup>Hurston, John. "We Must Extend a Helping Hand." *The Pentecostal Evangel*, October 29, 1972 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Eberling, Bob. Setting a Course In Vietnam. *The Pentecostal Evangel*. April 5, 1998, pg 11 (Article taken from the AGWM archive files on Vietnam).

<sup>73</sup>Duong, Thanh Lam. Information given to this paper's author by superintendent Duong in November 2014.

long-term livelihood development initiatives to human trafficking rescue and rehabilitation efforts for women to water purification and educational assistance for remote tribal people.

By helping to address these and other social and humanitarian needs, the VAOG is building bridges between the Church and unreached people, as well as between the Church and the government. Through the collective efforts of these projects by missionaries and the VAOG, felt needs are being addressed and relationships of trust established between the Church and the communist government, who has long been skeptical of the Protestant churches.

### Conclusion

It would seem that, in light of the persecution that ensued in the wake of establishment of the communist government, especially after the “reunification” in 1975 and continuing up to this day, the Vietnamese Church would have shriveled and died. However, the Gospel is like a seed, and its fruit is the church. Thus, when buried in persecution, that seed doesn’t die. Instead, its power is released, and it springs forth with unrestrainable life.

In 1975, at the beginning of country-wide communist rule, there were about 160,000 evangelical believers in Vietnam. But despite four decades of opposition and persecution, today, according to the Vietnamese Census Bureau, there are about 1.4 million evangelical believers in Vietnam—a more than 900% increase.<sup>74</sup> To God be the glory! Furthermore, according to secret government documents obtained by the Center For Religious Freedom, Vietnamese government officials have been quoted as saying about the Christian church, “The more we press, the faster it spreads and grows.”<sup>75</sup>

Through the faithful labor of selfless, Spirit-filled Vietnamese pastors and believers as well as foreign missionaries, God is continuing to write the story of revival, redemption, and transformation throughout the nation. And although still riddled with political challenges from the communist government,<sup>76</sup> cultural difficulties, and deep-seated strongholds of spiritual darkness, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the ripe fields of Vietnam will continue to be harvested and the fire of revival will continue to burn until all have heard the saving message of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>74</sup>Reimer, 1.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid, 107.

<sup>76</sup>Taylor, Philip. *Modernity and Re-enchantment-Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*. (Singapore, China: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 8.

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