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The Evangelical Fellowship
of Canada

**A SLOWDOWN AND NEW COMPLICATIONS:
The Protestant Experience with Religious Freedom in Vietnam**

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Current Roman Catholic Church Experience

Last month, the archbishop of Hanoi, Ngo Quang Kiet, a candidate to replace the ailing Cardinal Pham Dinh Tung, engaged with the author of this report in a discussion on religious freedom in Vietnam. The archbishop summarized the situation as follows.

The archbishop said that overall he is grateful that the situation has improved, especially in large cities. However, the Roman Catholic Church still struggles with church property issues and hindrances to activities in the rural areas. The archbishop remarked, “It is as I told some high government officials the other day. I said to them, ‘You have allowed changes, improvements only because of international pressure. But in your hearts you have not yet accepted that religion is a benefit to society. You still can’t keep your hands off of religion and just let it flourish.’”

On relations between Vietnam and the Vatican, seemingly given a boost with the Prime Minister’s visit to the Pope earlier this year, the archbishop said that although both sides had agreed to establish a committee to pursue normalization of diplomatic relations, the government side was now stalling and clearly in no hurry.

1.2 Current Protestant Experience

The archbishop’s summary echoes the current Protestant experience in Vietnam.

Protestant leaders in Vietnam observe that incentives for the government to continue positive change were greatly reduced once the major events of last November to January (hosting Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, being removed from the US State Department’s list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC), achieving Permanent Normal Trading Relationship (PNTR) and hosting President Bush for a state visit, and acceding to the World Trade Organisation) were all achieved. Momentum has slowed, if not stopped completely. The government is clearly in no hurry now. Many Protestant leaders anticipated this, and are not surprised at the stall on progress.

Following is a brief examination of some of Vietnam’s religion policy and practice, church registration developments, the status of US diplomacy in the struggle for religious human rights, and a number of other developments.

2. VIETNAM POLICY AND PRACTICE: SUMMARY OF CURRENT CONDITIONS

2.1 Good News

The good news may be summarized as follows:

1. Large-scale, government-sponsored programs to force renunciation of Christianity, especially among Vietnam's ethnic minority Christians, have ceased.
2. The registration of congregations, though sometimes with limited benefits, is underway. In February it was estimated that some 800 of the estimated 4,500 Protestant congregations (18 per cent) in Vietnam had some kind of registration. Church registration is discussed more fully below. The number of registered churches is slowly increasing.
3. Permission has been granted to print many Christian books, in addition to the Bible, and the New Testament in the languages of Vietnam's minority groups.
4. Protestant religious prisoners of conscience identified by the US have been released. The large number of Christians who remain in prison are accused of "political activity" which is criminalized under the draconian standards of Vietnam's one-party state. Many are, nevertheless, prisoners of conscience.
5. A "legislative framework" for more enlightened treatment of religion, religious communities, and believers was developed in 2004 and 2005. The potential benefits, however, have not been fully realized because of slow implementation and unchanged mindset of many local officials.
6. Some groups have been emboldened by Vietnam's claims to greater religious tolerance and have been more aggressive in their struggle with the government to realize those advances. Earlier they would not have dared to assert their rights.

The progress made within the space of some three (3) years, though considerably short of full freedom, is significant given the cumbersome nature of bureaucracies in general, the fact that Vietnam's officials started from a place of uninformed intolerance in their knowledge about religion, and with official policies hostile toward religion. These positive changes offer hope that more change is possible.

2.2 Current Challenges

Many challenges remain. Late last year an internal Central Bureau of Religious Affairs (CBRA) training manual on how to handle the larger Protestant movement in the Northwest provinces surfaced. It was translated into English and analyzed by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). Although an attempt to educate local officials in more tolerant practice toward Protestant Christianity, what was immediately apparent to analysts was that this internal manual gave clear instructions to local authorities to force people they deemed "new Christian believers" to return to 'traditional beliefs'. This was a direct violation of Vietnam's repudiation of forced renunciations. When the violation was pointed out to Vietnam through back-door channels, the CBRA agreed to edit the manual

forthwith. However, this was not done and it continued in use at least through July 2007 in a region of Vietnam long noted for harsh repression of Christianity.

A new, apparently public, publication of the CBRA was acquired by indigenous church workers in Ha Giang province in September 2007. Entitled *Questions and Answers on How the Law Relates to Religious Belief and Religion*, the acquired volume says it is from a second edition of 6,000 copies printed in the second quarter of 2007. Ironically, no other church leaders or workers, neither in the north nor the south, had seen this public CBRA document by late September.

It is 5 by 8 inches in size and contains 157 pages of question and answers, a familiar polemic style in Vietnam. It has three main sections:

- A. *Question and Answers on the Law and Religion*, 92 items.
- B. *Questions and Answers on the Use of land for Religious Purposes*, 34 items.
- C. *Questions and Answers on Petitions and Bringing Charges*, 44 items.

Though it is too recent an acquisition to have been thoroughly analyzed, some observations are possible. Section A, the longest, points chiefly to the so-called new religion legislation of 2004 and 2005. It is highly detailed and regulatory.

Section B, the shortest, addresses land use for religion purposes. Land issues in general are fast becoming a national crisis in Vietnam. And church land issues, though they have their own dynamics, are caught in the larger national land crisis. The answer to question 6 in this section appears to contradict earlier government decrees in saying that religious land and property seized by the government “for national defence, or the public good,” may be compensated.

Receiving compensation for confiscated land and property is still extremely limited. Positive experiences in acquiring new land and erecting new religious-use buildings are also still rare. Again, this section points to a plethora of laws and regulations long on the books, but which generally have not been working for common people.

It is interesting and perhaps hopeful that the publication includes a major section on petitioning against abuses and bringing charges against abusers. In recent years Protestants, especially those of the ethnic minorities, have sent (in their own words) ‘kilos of petitions’ complaining against the abuses and injustices they suffered. The most common response was none at all. When authorities did ask local officials to look into complaints and abuses, they often searched out and threatened or hurt the petitioners. Proper investigation and action against offenders on complaints is rare.

If this section on petitions signals a change, it will be slow in coming. The system itself, in which the Party, the government (including the police and the emerging judiciary), and mass organization administration through the Fatherland Front all overlap significantly, renders the likelihood of independent and fair investigations remote. If Vietnam would

consider an independent ombudsman role and give that position power, some progress might be made.

If this book is intended to help religious citizens understand and use the system to achieve a greater measure of legal status and protection, it is puzzling why the government has done such a poor job in its distribution.

2.3 Administrative Reorganization

There has been some significant reorganization of the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs (CBRA) in recent months. Diplomats who were questioned seemed unaware of this, but astute church leaders discussed the issue. No longer does the CBRA have quasi-ministerial status and report directly to the Prime Minister. It is now a section within the Ministry of Interior. In its former position as a quasi-ministry, local expressions of the CBRA were often at odds with other administrative units at the same level. This new arrangement is apparently intended to eliminate this ambiguity and make the administration of religion more consistent. Another way to put this would be that it gives the central government more power and demotes the independence of the CBRA. The September announcement of Mr. Nguyen The Doanh as the new director of the CBRA would seem to lend credence to this view. He is described as an older, long-time functionary in the bureau, rather than a leader. One church leader said that in some earlier CBRA visits abroad Mr. Doanh sometimes posed as a Protestant pastor.

It is interesting that the new, 2007 “question and answer” publication on religion did not anticipate this administrative change. It remains to be seen if the central government can make local administration of religion more positive and consistent through these changes.

3. CHURCH REGISTRATION REALITIES

3.1 House Churches

The provision for the possible registration of Vietnam’s hundreds of unregistered congregations was seen by some as a significant step forward when proposed in the “new religion legislation” of 2004 and 2005. There was a limited spurt of registrations in 2006 before the important year-end international events. The momentum slowed significantly immediately after.

There are at least three types of registration, and variances within them. The most basic registration is for a single house church congregation to carry on religious activities strictly according to approved provisions on place, time and number of people, and type of meeting. Sometimes this sort of registration requires annual renewal. The second type of registration is for all the congregations of a church organization in a specific geographic area, or sometimes nationally, to have permission to carry on religious activity. Sometimes, a year after obtaining this kind of registration, the church organization is allowed to hold an organizing convention at which a government pre-approved constitution is presented and ratified with officers chosen and a four-year

operational plan agreed on. This package is then sent to CBRA which reviews it and finally shepherds it to the Prime Minister who must sign it to authorize the highest level of registration, full legal recognition.

Churches seeking legal recognition are being forced to eliminate all levels of middle management between their central office and local churches. Since the ECVN(S)'s recognition in 2001, it sincerely regrets having agreed to eliminate its district level of administration because this change in structure has greatly added workload and stress to those leaders at the top. Registration is currently being withheld from two denominations that refuse to make this concession.

During a September survey of eight (8) house church organizations that applied to register virtually all their congregations for religious activity, the following was revealed. The eight organizations reported a total of 584 congregations and said they had received registration to carry on religious activities within stated confines for 207 of these congregations, or 35 percent. Of these groups, one received a nationwide certificate of operation on October 2, 2007 for all of its 135 churches.

Leaders said that churches in Ho Chi Minh City had received a significantly higher rate of registration approvals than had churches in other areas. This sampling of Ho Chi Minh City-based house church congregations showing 35 percent now being registered, compared to 19 percent of the national grand total of house churches documented in our February 2007 report entitled, *Gaining Traction? An Update on Religious Liberty Progress for Protestants in Vietnam*.

During the September meetings, house church leaders reported the following:

- Several said the specific promises made by officials to them regarding registration last fall have been broken. This discouraged them.
- The most common result of a registration application was no response at all.
- Some had received written refusals. A common reason given for refusal was that not a sufficient number of Christians actually resided in the administrative area where the congregation meets. According to such a ruling, one could not even cross the street to worship, if the street is an administrative boundary.
- Authorities are using more subtle ways of trying to stop the growth of the Christian movement. A common practice now is to pressure non-believing family members to, in turn, pressure new believers not to continue in their religious activity, and to threaten denial of social benefits to the whole family as an incentive for this behaviour.
- Two prominent house church leaders reported increased harassment very recently. This happened to one when he refused a request to inform on others. Officials became unhappy when he said he would "not serve as their hunting dog." He is now frequently followed by agents. The other, though patiently pursuing registration of his groups, continues all church activity as before. He refused to stop activities when told he must cease until registration. He reports he is being openly harassed. Agents make it plain they are following him. When the pastor

confronted them, the agents told him they were obliged by their superiors to follow and harass him. He finds it evidence that “nothing has changed in their hearts.”

- Leaders report encountering new requirements and forms not identified in the legislation in pursuing registration for their congregations. (See Appendix 1 for some samples). When they complain to higher officials about these requirements not mentioned in the “new legislation”, they have been told it is not a big deal, just a local requirement, and why not comply? The church leaders do not believe these are locally inspired requirements.
- Leaders report that in many locations local officials clearly have not been trained in the “new legislation”. “Many still don’t know anything at all about it”, was one statement.
- Leaders in the Ho Chi Minh City area report having received a questionnaire from the US Consulate on registration in June 2007. Some completed and submitted the survey form. Some felt it was inappropriate for the consulate to expect them to record their difficulties via this vehicle and did not.
- House church leaders are discussing the question as to whether the “changes” of the registration regime, with all its problems, represents “progress”.

3.2 The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)

The legally recognized Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) reports very slow progress in the full acceptance of many Montagnard congregations not yet in this category.

3.3 Ethnic Minorities in the Northwest Passage

In the Northwest, registration progress is very slow and plagued by a lack of clarity. The General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) says he has the lowest level, “religious activity”, registration papers for only 16 Hmong churches out of an estimated 1,100 to 1,200. The church was ordered to stop submitting registration requests after it had submitted 534. The president of the ECVN(N) says there are about 50 registered but is unable to supply a list. ECVN(N) leaders are prevented by the government from visiting any unregistered groups. Reports persist of the limitation of normal activities in the few registered churches.

3.4 First Full Legal Recognition Since the New Religion Legislation Nearly Complete

The first church organization to be allowed to hold an organizing general meeting in preparation for legal recognition since the new religion legislation, the “Hoi Co Doc Truyen Giao” or Christian Mission Church, held its meeting in Danang on September 17 and 18. The meeting opened to great fanfare as an estimated 100 government officials gathered with the faithful in a theatre for the opening session, made speeches, and offered garlands of flowers and congratulatory banners. According to an article in the official press, the church organization has 200 congregations and 21,000 followers.

In the same sort of charade endured by the ECVN(S) in 2001, the government required that a big banner in front of the auditorium say this was the “first” general conference of the church. In smaller letters it said “The 14th according to the church’s history”. Even in a detail such as this, the proclamation that “the government never interferes in the internal matter of religious organizations” rings hollow.

At the general meeting, the church’s constitution [pre-approved by the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs (CBRA)] was accepted, officers were elected and a four-year working plan was agreed upon. This package will now go back to the CBRA for review and approval and to the Prime Minister for signature. A response is expected before the end of the year. While this will be a “show and tell” for the government, the actual participants in the church are uncertain about what lies ahead. A number of the younger leaders express fear that they will now be much more restricted in their work than before. Like the ECVN(S) before it, this church will now need to learn to operate in two separate spheres.

Some American missionaries who had long worked with this church before 1975 attended this historic meeting. Tellingly, they were told by local church leaders to sit in the back corner of the balcony at the opening ceremony. After most officials left following the opening session, one CBRA official suggested that one of the American missionaries present, say a few words of greeting. It proved a high moment for the assembly.

It has also been announced that one part of the Mennonite church in Vietnam led by Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, the most pro-government Mennonite leader, received the second level of registration on October 2, 2007. This is described as a “certificate to carry on religious activity” for some 80 groups, according to Pastor Trung. The same day, this type of registration was also granted to Baptist Churches in Vietnam (BCV), one of at least six Baptist house church groups. According to an October 2nd Vietnam News Agency release, the BCV has 135 congregations and is led by Pastor Nguyen Thong.

On October 9, the Vietnam News Agency (VNA) reported that similar country-wide certificates to carry on religious activity were granted to a 7,000 member Presbyterian house church organization and to another called the Christian Alliance Church (or *Lien Huu Co Doc* in Vietnamese). The reported size of this latter group is highly problematic. The group itself has claimed to have 540,000 members. The VNA article says "up to 300,000", with over half being ethnic minorities. Recent defectors from the group and even some of its leaders say it is only around 30,000. Both of these groups are widely accused by other churches in Vietnam of unethically using dollars from American sponsors to lure Christians from other groups and to gain favour with government authorities.

3.5 Two Separate Worlds

Whatever level of registration a congregation or a denomination achieves, it is still far from full freedom. Each must learn, post-registration, to operate in two worlds. This induces a kind of double-mindedness in conscience and action among church leaders.

The registration situation has also introduced new suspicions among church leaders of registered and registering groups, as all know that some of them have been asked to be informers in exchange for promised advantages. Since the change in government policy about religion and the new attention focused on that policy, government agents have been making extraordinary attempts to infiltrate and influence church organizations. Substantive matters are therefore now rarely discussed in inter-church meetings.

4. US DIPLOMACY AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN VIETNAM

Internationally, the United States has played the leading role in pushing Vietnam toward greater religious freedom. However, there now appear to be differing views within the US government regarding the extent of religious freedom improvements as well as the question of whether the US gave up its leverage with Vietnam when the State Department lifted its Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation last year.

September was a significant month for US policy on human rights in Vietnam. On September 14 the Office of International Religious Freedom (OIRF) released its annual religion report on Vietnam. On September 18 the House of Representatives passed the 2007 Vietnam Human Rights Act, which is strongly critical of Vietnam. The same week, Vietnam cancelled a scheduled visit of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) saying it was not convenient. That visit was rescheduled for October following White House and Senate intervention with the Vietnamese ambassador.

4.1 International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Vietnam's state media commented widely on the 2007 Office of International Religious Freedom (OIRF) report and the 2007 Vietnam Human Rights Act. Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Dung, commented on the 2007 OIRF report in a response to a reporter's question. After the usual platitudes about Vietnam always respecting religion and creating all the conditions for religion to flourish, he commented that the US and Vietnam sides were in contact about matters of mutual concern. Concerning the OIRF report itself he said: *"Although there are still some un-objective evaluations, and unverified accusations, the US State Department report this year acknowledges concrete progress on religion in Vietnam."*

In Ambassador Hanford's September 14 news conference announcing the release of the 2007 report, he cited Vietnam as the example of best progress in religious liberty in the world for the second year in a row. He said Vietnam represented the biggest turnaround of any country he had seen in 20 years of working on religious liberty issues: *"They're really exercising evidences of what religious freedom looks like."* However, the OIRF

report itself describes many residual problems and makes quite clear that progress has slowed, is uneven and in places disappointing.

The OIRF report includes the surprising statement that “*There were no known instances of societal discrimination or violence based on religion during the reporting period.*” Christian Montagnard leaders have consistently reported that children of Christians are denied entry into government residential high schools. A letter written in July 2007 by a school principal to Christian parents in Quang Nam Province who had complained that their son was denied permission to write an entrance exam, was widely circulated and available to the OIRF. The letter explicitly stated that “*discriminating against students who follow a religion . . . is the policy of the Residential High School for Ethnic Minorities of Dong Giang District*”. It is rare for this to be admitted in writing, but ethnic minority Christians continue to report systematic discrimination in education, other social services, and benefits.

During his September news conference, Ambassador Hanford also said that “*As of last September, the last prisoner on the list we were working with them on was released.*” This was Hmong church leader Ma Van Bay. That the US considers there to be no more ‘religious prisoners of concern’ indicates a narrow view of religious freedom. For example, it could be argued that Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai is a religious prisoner of conscience. He himself has said that he is motivated in his struggle for justice by his Christian faith. Much of his work was on behalf of persecuted Protestants. He also worked for political pluralism. At his arrest in March the local newspapers ran long articles vilifying him for “sending abroad false reports about religious persecution.” He was sentenced under the more obtuse clause of “slandering the state.” Lawyer Dai apparently does not qualify as a US religious prisoner of concern. But a prisoner of conscience he surely is.

There is also the unresolved matter of several hundred Montagnard prisoners, many of them Christians, sentenced to long prison terms on questionable political charges after the 2001 and 2004 demonstrations in the Central Highlands.

Also omitted from the OIRF report was any mention of the death in the spring 2007 of Vin Y Het, an ethnic Ede man (not Hroi as first reported) from Phu Yen Province, as a result of beatings received by local police because he refused to recant his faith. This report from a reliable source and later reconfirmed, represents forced renunciation and violence.

A senior church leader and trusted source in Vietnam expressed “disappointment and regret” over the conclusion of the OIRF report that *there were no known instances of societal discrimination and violence based on religion*. Another leader who has often praised US intervention in the area of religious freedom characterized Ambassador Hanford’s effusive praise for Vietnam’s progress as “out-of-proportion with the realities we Vietnamese Christians still live with.”

4.2 The 2007 US Vietnam Human Rights Act

This Act was roundly castigated in the Vietnamese press as *completely out of touch with the real human rights situation in Vietnam*. Articles in the state media bitterly attacked Congressional representatives Chris Smith and Loretta Sanchez, perennial harsh critics of Vietnam's poor human rights record. One 20 September article on the Thanh Nien paper website appealed to the US lawmakers to try to "*evaluate Vietnam's human rights in light of its history and development progress of recent years and not to let such problems hinder growth in bilateral relations*". The act now passed annually by the House for several years but voted down or not considered by the Senate, may be useful in keeping Vietnam on notice that it still has a very long way to go according to many Vietnamese.

4.3 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom Report and Activity

Vietnam perhaps underestimated official US interest in religious freedom and human rights when it tried to scuttle the September visit of a US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation. This is almost certainly because the USCIRF had recently recommended re-imposition of "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) status for Vietnam in its May 2007 report. Many will be watching to see what the USCIRF delegation will be permitted to do during its late October visit.

Vietnam is a master at exploiting differences in human rights emphasis among US officials. Having signed major agreements with Vietnam in the areas of trade and security, US lawmakers and the State Department might more successfully entice Vietnam to human rights improvements if they better coordinated their approach.

5. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS - BEHIND THE SCENES

5.1 Travel to Cambodia

Cambodia had become a reasonably accessible place for Vietnamese church leaders to go for various study programs, seminars, and fellowship meetings. The government of Vietnam has made efforts in the last couple of months to halt that access.

The pastor of a large church in Phnom Penh, which hosted an assembly of the Vietnam World Christian Fellowship last year, was warned by Cambodian police not to host it this year. Police implied it was at the request of Vietnam. Last year some 400 pastors and church leaders came to Cambodia from Vietnam to join with 200 Vietnamese living overseas for an historic meeting. However, the event planned for Oct 1- 4, 2007 was cancelled. Vietnam authorities learned about this by temporarily detaining and questioning some participants from Vietnam last year after they returned. Many who went last year had their conference materials and the books they bought, confiscated at the border upon their return to Vietnam.

A theological college in California has held a month-long course in Cambodia for Bachelors and Masters level courses for a number of years. This year students in Vietnam were approached by authorities and warned not to go or else face the confiscation of their travel documents. The October course was cancelled.

5.2 Seeking redress for confiscated properties

The more upbeat religious freedom atmosphere some months ago encouraged the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) to again seek return or compensation for the 265 properties which the government or its agents had confiscated in 1975 or soon thereafter.

In a detailed four-page letter to the Prime Minister, dated February 10, 2007, the ECVN(S) executive committee requested return or compensation for 265 seized church properties. It lists as priorities five properties that are being used by the government, three that are abandoned, and three that were destroyed.

The letter also complains about government repression of Montagnard Christians, when officials hindered or prevented Christmas celebrations in 2006 in a number of specific locations.

The letter includes in bold letters this strong statement: ***“Through many long years the Evangelical Church of Vietnam has been silent, waiting and trusting in the (fair) policies of the government, but now we are completely discouraged because the promises have proven totally empty”***. It further informs the Prime Minister that if the church does not receive a reply in 45 days, they will have all delegates at the next General Assembly sign a petition against the government and circulate this widely.

True to form, the government completely ignored the letter. During the week of September 16, a representative of the executive committee hand-carried a strong one-page reminder to the offices of the Party General Secretary, the Prime Minister, the President and the Speaker of the National Assembly in Hanoi.

Once more the authorities were requested to pay attention to the request of the ECVN(S) *to avoid the distress of receiving a petition signed by all the believers of the ECVN(S)*. This letter is signed by the entire 22-member church board and is copied to all churches *for information and prayer*. This indicates the church leaders are developing means of applying pressure from the grass-roots.

In another ECVN(S) development, the government in Pleiku City in Gia Lai province announced the building of a cultural centre on the property confiscated from the church in 1975. One half of the church property has long been used for a government school, but the church was still contesting the vacant half. The announcement was made in September while a senior Gia Lai church leader was abroad for meetings. When informed by phone, the leader ordered his colleagues to immediately file a protest, and to tell authorities if they did not stop they would organize a march on city hall. Immediately

upon his return to Vietnam, the Gia Lai leader was summoned by authorities who asked him to “cool it” because they were sure “something could be worked out.”

These situations demonstrate that even the official legal recognition of the largest and oldest Protestant body six-and-a-half years ago has not meant that the government deals openly, fairly and respectfully with it. In these property matters the church reports its experience is just the same as it was prior to it achieving legal recognition.

5.3 A Sharp Reprimand

The ECVN(S) received a sharp reprimand from the Ho Chi Minh City Bureau of Religious and Ethnic Affairs (BREA) because of the association of some of its pastors and members with a prominent former American missionary to Vietnam and the “Evangelism Explosion” program he represents. In a letter to church leaders dated September 12, 2007, the Bureau *recommends* the church’s leaders “*be more pro-active in informing violators that participation in the Evangelism Explosion program violates the Ordinance on Religion and Belief and the Decree on Religion 22’2005/NP-CP*”. They were further told that participants “*must cease this activity immediately*”. The church leader called in by the government on this issue, denies that he agreed it was an illegal activity as the bureau’s letter says he did.

The irony is that the missionary, named six times in the letter, is the only missionary to have returned to Vietnam for an official ECVN(S) function with the permission of the BREA; furthermore, he believed he had good relations with the government and thought he had been granted explicit permission to run this program. This is a strong cautionary tale that Vietnam’s current regulations regarding relations between indigenous and foreign religious organizations will really only allow the barest ceremonial contacts. Authentic fraternal working relationships become much more difficult after legal recognition. Reflecting on this event, one senior ECVN(S) leader remarked that he envied the unregistered house churches *because they do not have to seek government permission for everything*.

5.4 Back To Square One

The General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) and several of his colleagues on the executive committee have become so discouraged in their attempts to work with the authorities that they have stopped trying and are now operating as they did prior to the re-recognition of the church in December 2004. Though it seems unlikely, they accuse the president of the ECVN (N) of having been completely co-opted by the government. This means they do not deal with him, nor do they consult with the Bureau of Religious Affairs or ask for permissions. Knowledgeable observers suspect government contribution to this dysfunction.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vietnam's continued and expanded policy of "Religious Freedom" through administrative control is slowly and selectively extending various levels of "legality" through registration to certain groups. But Protestant congregations and organizations coming under this regime are often experiencing new complications, rather than markedly increased freedom. The majority of Vietnam's Protestants, still "illegal", are being given reasons to wonder about the benefits of being "legal". Some ask if registration, as it is currently experienced, is really progress toward freedom.

Following are some recommendations for various stakeholders in religious freedom/human rights in Vietnam.

We reproduce here a set of specific recommendations for states and regional actors formulated by the UK-based organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide after an extensive visit in 2007 (see Appendix 2).

For religious believers the following are matters for concerted prayer. Pray for:

- Wisdom and discernment for:
 - Vietnamese officials to understand that:
 - Christians are not a threat to social stability and love their country.
 - Christians will serve the local community if given the chance.
 - Vietnamese Christians to know:
 - What is actually bureaucratic inertia and what is willful harassment of Christians by the government, and how to respond to both.
 - How to love their neighbor and government.
 - How to build unity among themselves as the Body of Christ.
 - Diplomats and governments, in order that they:
 - Present a common and productive advocacy voice.
 - Promote religious freedom effectively by working with the Vietnamese religious groups and the government.
 - Christian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam:
 - That, having spent many years and many millions of aid dollars working directly and only through the government, they may press Vietnam to allow them to work with and through local churches as Christian NGOs do in all other countries.
 - That they will act as, and be seen as part of "the Church" and the good it brings to Vietnam.

- Advocacy Groups
 - That they may press on thoughtfully and accurately in a changing situation, affirming progress but not skirting problems.
 - The pioneering work of the Institute for Global Engagement as it sponsors the second annual seminar on Religion and the Rule of Law in Hanoi in November 2007, and other ongoing dialogue. The November event is a workshop intended to bridge the gap between government and religious leaders through a deeper understanding of the role of government and the role of religion in society.
- Solutions that begin to institutionalize the changes the government has allowed or brought about; specifically:
 - Training seminars that bridge the gap between government and religious leaders through the laws established by the government
 - Additional national laws that helpfully clarify how existing ordinances and regulations are administered at the local level
 - That all of this will move toward true religious freedom.

Appendix 1 - VIETNAM GOVERNMENT FORMS CURRENTLY IN USE FOR SURVEYING UNREGISTERED RELIGIOUS GROUPS

These two forms provided by house church leaders are considered by some to be highly intrusive. Considering their experience with the government’s use and misuse of information, this is quite understandable. While ostensibly for all unregistered religious groups, these forms are thought to be in use only for Christian groups.

Viewed another way, these forms could be evidence of the government’s grappling clumsily with understanding the religion phenomenon, especially Protestant Christianity of which it has long been particularly suspicious. While the true intent is unknown, the tone of the questionnaires is actually somewhat engaging. It would be highly instructive to look at these instruments if they were actually completed by a large number of people.

FORM 1

DISTRICT.....
Commune, ward, town.....

SURVEY/INFORMATION FORM
(For top leaders of religious organizations not yet registered)

In order to have information concerning the need for religious belief and religion, please Mr. (Ms.) be willing to give your response to the question on this form.

1. Concerning you as an individual

- Name
- Date Of Birth
- Details of your family register
- Year you joined with the religion
- What form did you training take?
- Name of your position
- Your position in the hierarchy
- Geographical area of responsibility
- Level of proficiency in foreign languages
- Graduate of how many universities – masters degrees, doctoral degrees, what schools, where, years of graduation, form of training
- How many times have you been abroad?
- What were the dates?
- What were the countries?
- How long you were abroad?
- Why were you abroad?
- Are you involved in social work?

2. Concerning you organization

- Name of organization and address
- Where do you yourself worship?
- Number of congregations/meeting places
- How many of these have you applied to register?

Number not yet applied to register
 How many places have received registration approval?
 Current total number of believers _____ Men _____ Women _____
 Members by age groups
 Above 50 _____
 18-49 _____
 Under 18 _____
 Status of members who participate in meetings
 Number of people who lead meetings
 Number of people who attend meetings
 Status of members who work with the Party, the government, the Fatherland Front, and other mass organizations. How many
 Work with the Communist Party
 Work with the government
 Work with mass organizations

3. Any proposals you might have for the state and for local government officials concerning religion policy.

FORM 2

DISTRICT.....
 Commune, ward, town.....

SURVEY/INFORMATION FORM
 (To be used by believers of religious organizations not yet registered)

In order to have information concerning religious belief and religion, please Mr. (Ms.) be willing to give your response to the questions on this form.

Please Mr. (Ms.) respond by marking a + sign beside the statement you agree with.

1. Mr (Ms.) concerning your participation in religious services, is it
 Enough _____ Not enough _____
2. Mr. (Ms.) concerning the frequency of your participation in religious services.
 Regularly _____ Once of twice a month _____
3. Mr. (Ms.) in which congregation/place do you worship?
 Please give detailed address _____
4. Mr. (Ms.) do you participate in the leadership of your congregation? If so please specify the role and its place in the hierarchy. _____
5. Mr. (Ms.), do you considered the day and hour for the following activities important/auspicious?

Starting to build a house	Yes _____	No _____
Engagement ceremony	Yes _____	No _____
Funeral ceremony	Yes _____	No _____
To go out of the house on New Years Day	Yes _____	No _____

6. Do you worship your ancestors? Yes_____ No_____
7. Do you believe in astrology and the horoscope? Yes_____ No_____
8. Concerning your material and spiritual well-being Mr. (Ms.), has it improved in recent years? (Choose one)

Improved alot_____

Improved moderately_____

Improved average_____

Declined_____

9. Do you participate in the activities of the Communist Party, the government, mass organizations. If so, name the organizations_____.

Communist Party (mass organizations) Fatherland Front_____

Propaganda Branch_____ Other organizations_____

The government_____

City_____ District_____ Ward, commune_____ Neighborhood group_____

10. Do the Fatherland Front and mass organizations (such as farmers' groups, women's organizations, veterans' groups, youth organizations, elders' groups.....) have an affect in improving your material and spiritual (moral) well being?

Providing loans Yes_____ No_____

Guiding in production, helping find jobs Yes_____ No_____

Helping you with family life Yes_____ No_____

According to you. Mr. or Ms., which of the above mass organization helps your family when in need_____. By what method do they help? _____

11. Please Mr. or Ms., give us some personal information:

Male_____ Female_____

Age Under 25 _____

From 25 – 45 _____

From 45 – 60 _____

Above 61 _____

Ethnic Vietnamese_____

Other Ethnic group_____

Educational level

Basic elementary school_____

Basic High Scholl_____

Specialized High School_____

College, University_____

Post-graduate, doctoral level_____

A sincere thanks to you Mr. (Ms.)

APPENDIX 2 - FROM A CSW 2007 VIETNAM BRIEFING PREPARED FOR DIPLOMATS AND ADVOCATES

The following recommendations have been formulated in consultation with a range of Christian leaders in Vietnam, representing recognized Protestant denominations, unregistered house church movements and the Roman Catholic Church.

It is recommended that states and regional actors should:

1. Call upon the government of Vietnam to undertake the following actions, as immediate next steps in improving the level of religious freedom:
 - a. Ensure that the procedures for the registration of churches are standardised across Vietnam, with no differentiation between provinces;
 - b. Expedite the registration of Protestant house churches, particularly those among the ethnic minorities, and ensure that local authorities are obliged to facilitate this process;
 - c. Expedite the recognition of as yet unregistered house church organisations;
 - d. Ensure that, from a national to a village level, Communist Party and security officials are trained and held accountable to the legislative provisions on religious activities, as stipulated in Article 7(2) of the *Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organisations*;
 - e. Enforce measures to prevent any attempts to force Protestants to renounce their faith;
 - f. Permit the construction and operation of facilities required by religious organisations, including places of worship and training centres;
 - g. Return or provide land in lieu of confiscated properties to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) and the Catholic Church;
 - h. Take measures to empower social and humanitarian activities undertaken by religious organisations;
 - i. Expedite the printing and production of religious materials, especially in ethnic minority languages.
2. Urge and encourage the government of Vietnam to establish and implement a comprehensive legislative framework for religious groups to engage in peaceful activities, both religious and humanitarian, which is fully consistent with international standards on religious freedom and free from ill-defined caveats;
3. Seek assurances that the provisions for forcing renunciations of Protestant faith in the 2006 *Training Document: Concerning the Task of the Protestant Religion in the Northern Mountainous Region*, are withdrawn;
4. Urge the government of Vietnam to fully investigate all allegations of religious freedom infringements by officials, including forcible renunciations of faith, physical assaults, incidents of discrimination in the dissemination of government

- benefits and attempts to incite tensions between Protestants and animists; and, where appropriate, to seek the conviction of the perpetrators;
5. Continue to monitor and raise issues of religious freedom in all appropriate fora, including bilateral and multilateral human rights dialogues;
 6. Advise their embassies in Vietnam to develop relationships with key religious leaders and, where appropriate and in consultation with such leaders, to visit villages where religious freedom is infringed;
 7. Pursue the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Vietnam, including religiously-motivated human rights defenders Fr Nguyen Van Ly, Mr Nguyen Van Dai and Ms Le Thi Cong Nhan.

It is recommended that the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief should raise the above-mentioned issues with the government of Vietnam, in particular pursuing the registration of Protestant house church congregations and the recognition of Protestant house church organisations.