

R. Lanier Britsch and Richard C. Holloman Jr., "The Church's Years in Vietnam," *Ensign*, Aug. 1980, 25

## The Church's Years in Vietnam

To most Americans, the word Vietnam merely recalls unhappy memories that are best forgotten. The decade of the 1960s, during which the Vietnam War was at its height, was a time of domestic turmoil and discontent in the United States as well as in Southeast Asia. But woven through "the dark tapestry of war," as Elder Gordon B. Hinckley described it, was a "silver thread, small but radiant with hope" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1968, p. 24). That silver thread was the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Early Missionary Work in Vietnam

While the war grew in intensity during the early 1960s, a few Latter-day Saint servicemen were sent to Vietnam to act as advisers to the South Vietnamese forces. Thus, 30 June 1962 President Robert S. Taylor of the Southern Far East Mission organized the first LDS servicemen's group in Saigon, with Cecil L. Cavender as group leader. The work of this small group of a little over fifty Saints was impressive. They shared the gospel not only with American service personnel, but also with their Vietnamese associates. Before the end of 1962, one American and two Vietnamese sisters, Duong Thuy Van and Nguygen Thi Thuy, had joined the Church. Sister Van later translated Joseph Smith's Testimony, the first Church publication in the Vietnamese language. 1

The buildup of American troops continued during the next three years. In May 1965 President Jay A. Quealy, who succeeded President Taylor, set Harper K. Morris apart as LDS servicemen's coordinator in South Vietnam. Soon after his appointment, Brother Morris organized a servicemen's group at Bien Hoa, fifteen miles from Saigon. The Bien Hoa Group, the first of many similar groups outside Saigon, constructed its own chapel before that year ended.

By December 1965 there were 1,500 LDS servicemen in Vietnam. President Keith E. Garner, succeeding President Quealy, made South Vietnam one of the four zones of the Southern Far East Mission, and divided it into three districts. At the same time, the president of the Southern District called six men to act as district missionaries. They had success with other Americans, as well as with the Vietnamese. By February 1966, thirty Vietnamese were numbered among the Saints.

After February 1965, the buildup of American troops was rapid. By May 1966, there were an estimated 2,200 LDS military people in the country, organized into twenty groups and one branch (Saigon). Although the number of Vietnamese Saints was growing, far more women than men joined the Church. Many Vietnamese women,

employed by the United States military or government as secretaries, receptionists, cooks, or housegirls, were brought into the Church by LDS personnel for whom they worked. Vietnamese men, on the other hand, frequently worked away from home or in the Vietnamese armed forces, and so were not easily available to those who carried the gospel message.

On 2 October 1966, Nguyen Cao Minh, the first Vietnamese elder, was ordained. He had been converted to the Church in Biloxi, Mississippi, while training for a military assignment in 1963. In the estimation of some, Brother Minh "had the most far-reaching good effect on the Church in Vietnam of any Vietnamese member of the Church. In spite of military assignments that often kept him away from Saigon, Brother Minh gave over ten years of leadership to the Vietnamese priesthood holders and continually encouraged the translation and missionary work." 2

The Dedication of South Vietnam for Missionary Work

Church leaders in Salt Lake City and Hong Kong kept a careful eye on the LDS servicemen in Vietnam. As their numbers grew, General Authorities, particularly Elder Ezra Taft Benson, Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, Elder Marion D. Hanks, and Bishop Victor L. Brown, visited South Vietnam to encourage them to remain faithful to their families and the Church. On such a visit in October 1966, Elder Hinckley and Elder Hanks arrived in Vietnam with instructions from President David O. McKay to dedicate South Vietnam for the preaching of the restored gospel if they were impressed by the Spirit to do so.

There were several reasons Vietnam looked so promising as a mission field. One was that ten or eleven percent of the people were already Christian—possibly the highest percentage of Christians in any Asian nation except the Philippines. A high percentage of the people were not followers of Buddhism or other Eastern religions.

Thus after visiting with servicemen at conferences in Da Nang and Nha Trang, the visiting authorities met on October 30 with 205 Church members and friends in the Caravelle Hotel in downtown Saigon. As he spoke, Elder Hinckley informed the congregation that President McKay had authorized him to dedicate South Vietnam for missionary work. He offered a beautiful, exceptionally appropriate dedicatory prayer: "We have seen in other parts of Asia," he prayed, "the manner in which thou hast turned the hand and the work of the adversary to the good and the blessing of many of thy children. And now we call upon thee at this time that thou wilt similarly pour out thy Spirit upon this land." He pleaded with the Lord that there might be peace, and that freedom-loving men might be allowed their free agency. He asked that an added measure of the Lord's Spirit might be poured out upon both the nonmembers and those who already had the gospel, that the people might be more willing to listen to the message of the Savior, and that the members would be more eager to share the gospel. He also asked the Lord to "open the way for the coming of missionaries, and make their labors fruitful of great and everlasting good in the lives of the people" (In Conference Report, Apr. 1968, pp. 22–23).

Dedicating a land during a time of war for the preaching of the gospel is not the Church's usual practice. Traditionally the Church has dedicated countries when missionary work is about to commence or shortly after it has started—and the usual pattern is to remove missionaries from areas of active warfare, not to send them in. Nevertheless, Elder Hinckley, along with the mission president over the area and the servicemen who led the Church in Vietnam, felt that this was a different situation. Somehow, notwithstanding the grim horror of war, they expected the gospel to be established in Vietnam. In Elder Hinckley's general conference address of April 1968, he said:

"I make no defense of the war from this pulpit. ... I seek only to call your attention to that silver thread, small but radiant with hope, shining through the dark tapestry of war—namely, the establishment of a bridgehead, small and frail now; but which somehow, under the mysterious ways of God, will be strengthened, and from which someday shall spring forth a great work affecting for good the lives of large [page 27] numbers of our Father's children who live in that part of the world. Of that I have a certain faith" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1968, p. 24).

Elder Hinckley visited Vietnam in 1966, 1967, and 1968. He was torn inside by the pain and suffering he observed. But in the midst of the misery, he observed true manhood. In 1966 he said, "No more faithful members are found anywhere in the world than among our servicemen." 3

American involvement in the Vietnam War reached its peak in 1968. In that year over five thousand LDS servicemen were assigned to Vietnam. They made up sixty groups and branches. Six LDS chaplains were assigned there. In order to help and supervise Church activities, President Garner, and later Presidents W. Brent Hardy and William S. Bradshaw, who also served as mission presidents over the area, visited the war zone at least every other month, and usually monthly. (South Vietnam was part of four missions during its history: Southern Far East, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong—Taiwan, and Hong Kong.) All three men found the work exhausting because of the intense pace that was required, but also highly rewarding as they met and counseled with servicemen, local Saints, and investigators.

Saints living in wartime South Vietnam remember the Church's efforts to serve them: "There were many evidences of deep concern for the Saints among the leaders of the Church on all levels. Elder Hinckley arranged for special Church films and films of conference sessions to be sent regularly to the servicemen. KSL conducted special interviews with LDS servicemen geared specifically for Utah audiences. The zone presidency arranged for a special Christmas message to come from the First Presidency of the Church to the servicemen. District meetings were often held to plan ways to incorporate Vietnamese members into the full workings of the branch. There was a

continual concern for helping the Vietnamese Saints become more capable of leading themselves.” 4

Church activities among the servicemen were conducted in a manner remarkably similar to those at home, especially considering the circumstances of war. Home teaching visits were made, family home evenings were held, and church services were conducted.

When the U.S. government began removing troops from Vietnam in 1971, the Church increased its efforts to prepare local leaders to operate the Church. With this in mind, on 24 May 1971, Southern District President Myrne R. Riley called Nguyen Cao Minh, the first local elder, to be the first Vietnamese president of the Saigon Branch. Minh was released several months later because of a new military assignment, but his successor, Ralph Kurihara, selected two other Vietnamese elders, Nguyen Van The and Dang Thong Nhat, as his counselors.

#### The Era of Full-time Missionary Work in Saigon

William S. Bradshaw became president of the Hong Kong Mission, which included South Vietnam, during the summer of 1971. From the time of his first visit to Vietnam, he recognized the growing need to bring full-time missionaries into the country, largely to take the place of the departing servicemen. He met with Phan The Ngoc, an attorney who had obtained legal recognition for the Church in 1967, and gained assurance that the Church still had the right to exist and own property. On obtaining this assurance, President Bradshaw wrote in March 1972 to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to ascertain whether there were any problems or obstacles from an American point of view. Finally, in November, President Bradshaw received a reply from Ambassador Bunker. It contained much legal information that was of worth, but more important was its positive tone, which led President Bradshaw to believe that there was nothing in particular to worry about. Saigon was quite secure, even though there were sometimes battles only fifteen or twenty miles away.

In early 1973, the warring powers announced a cease-fire and the forthcoming withdrawal of all American military personnel. Soon afterwards, President Bradshaw began receiving notes from Church leaders in Salt Lake City, asking what the status of the Church and particularly the Saigon Branch would be when the withdrawal of the LDS servicemen was complete.

With these questions on his mind, in late February 1973 President Bradshaw went to Vietnam. He asked again the questions he had been asking for over a year: What's the prognosis for the war? Are the Vietnamese going to be strong enough to hold? Within the Church, what are the prospects for good housing for missionaries? What about medical care? How many LDS American government people will be on hand to lend stability to the branch and the work of the missionaries? What about missionary security?

Before President Bradshaw left Saigon on February 26, he was satisfied that all conditions were positive or at least satisfactory. Before leaving for Hong Kong, he pleaded with the Lord for a confirmation of his positive feelings. "What came," President Bradshaw later said, "was an affirmation of our feelings and a very sweet peace concerning the future of the Church in South Vietnam." 5 This feeling removed all reservations from his mind. He wrote to Elder Hinckley the day after returning to Hong Kong and firmly recommended that missionaries be sent. He also mentioned the high quality of the branch facilities and the housing that was available for the elders, and he described the American brethren who would be remaining in Saigon—men such as Dr. Lester Bush, a physician who was connected with the U.S. embassy, and several others.

President Bradshaw described the events of the next two weeks: "A few days intervened ... and then I wrote on March 7 a formal letter to the Missionary Committee restating all the things that I had written Elder Hinckley privately. On March 13 I received this letter from the Missionary Committee over the signature of Elder Hinckley: 'Dear President [page 28] Bradshaw, Your letter ... concerning the work in Saigon was read to the First Presidency and the Twelve. After consideration of the matter, it was determined that you might be permitted to send four missionaries to Saigon.' That's as far as I got in the letter when I literally shouted for joy. I really did, and the missionaries who were in the office came running to see who had shot me."

After President Bradshaw calmed down, he read the rest of the letter, which included some precautions. Among other requirements, the Brethren suggested that he obtain the written approval of the parents of the missionaries who were to go to Saigon.

The letters from the parents were obtained, and on 6 April 1973, President Bradshaw, in company with Elders James Christensen, Richard Holloman, David Posey, and Colin Van Orman, flew to Saigon. The elders began formal study of Vietnamese the next day, and on April 8 President Bradshaw reorganized the Saigon Branch presidency. Nguyen Van The was set apart as branch president, with Dang Thong Nhat and Lester Bush as counselors. The membership was around ninety-five, including four active Melchizedek Priesthood holders and six or seven Aaronic Priesthood bearers.

With only a few exceptions, the elders followed the normal proselyting procedures of LDS missionaries. They learned the language quickly and associated freely with the people, even though the evidence of war was ever present in the rolls of barbed wire along most streets and the armed guards at every corner of the city. Occasionally they heard sniper fire, and acts of sabotage destroyed buildings. The sky was sometimes black with smoke of burning oil and other material, but the elders were hampered little in their work.

They did not tract. It wasn't considered wise—and was unnecessary: the missionaries had many referrals from local members and from servicemen who had returned to the

United States. They had no trouble meeting people in public places, on buses, or in English language classes that they organized and taught.

Unlike Indonesia, where the elders began translating Church books and literature after entering the country, local Vietnamese members and American government personnel, who had formerly served missions in Hong Kong and had learned the Vietnamese language, had begun translating Church materials into Vietnamese as early as 1963. By the early 1970s, a number of tracts, pamphlets, and other items were in print in Vietnamese. In 1970, President Hardy had established an official translation committee and set apart Sister Cong Ton Nu Tuong Vy as head translator. Sister Vy, a former university professor of aristocratic heritage, translated the Book of Mormon into Vietnamese, a project that was well under way by 1972. President Bradshaw had also assigned members in Saigon to translate the six-lesson missionary plan before the elders entered the country.

The elders soon recognized a need to adapt the standard missionary lessons to the Vietnamese audience. Not having a Judeo-Christian background, most Vietnamese could not understand references to prophets, apostles, revelations, angels, God, and Christ, all of which are referred to in the first discussion. The elders created special lessons or explanations to supplement the regular lessons. Until they mastered the Vietnamese language, however, it took the elders three or four hours to deliver each lesson. At first, they needed six months to teach the full set of discussions.

During 1973 and 1974, Sister Vy completed her translation of the Book of Mormon, and the translation committee approved the final manuscript. President Bradshaw made fifty copies of the manuscript and distributed them to the members and missionaries in May 1974. This was an unusual procedure, but it proved to be wise in the long run. During 1974 the translation committee also [page 29] completed Vietnamese versions of the Doctrine and Covenants, and Elder LeGrand Richards's *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*.

In July 1974, Jerry D. Wheat, new president of the Hong Kong Mission, toured Vietnam for the first time. Over one hundred and fifty members attended a conference at that time. A significant fact was that adults outnumbered youths, and males and females were nearly equal in number. A year before, when the missionaries were first in Saigon, youths and females had considerably outnumbered adults and males. The emphasis the elders had placed on working with families had borne fruit.

Tension in the war began to mount during the fall of 1974. The South Vietnamese government regularly reminded Saigon residents of the atrocities committed by the Viet Cong. The evidences of war came ever closer as rocket fire seriously damaged Bien Hoa Air Base and word of skirmishes in the countryside reached the elders and members. On November 1, the U.S. embassy issued a warning to all Americans to stay off the streets of Saigon because of large demonstrations, violence, and political disturbances. By this time, however, the elders knew the streets of the city better than most

Americans, and by avoiding large crowds and trouble spots they were able to continue their work.

In mid January 1975, three new elders arrived in Saigon. They brought to fifteen the total number of missionaries to serve in Vietnam. About the same time, however, the public transportation system began to fail. This made proselyting more difficult, but by giving more lessons at the branch chapel, the elders increased the number of people they were teaching. Ironically, as the threat of a Communist takeover grew, the number of Vietnamese who desired to learn of the restored gospel also grew rapidly. During February and March 1975, proselyting success was at its height. New converts were joining the Church regularly. There were close to three hundred members in Vietnam by the end of March.

#### Withdrawal from Vietnam

On March 31, however, Louis Eldredge, an active and helpful Saint who worked for the U.S. government in Saigon, called President Wheat and strongly suggested that the missionaries apply for re-entry visas into Hong Kong. President Wheat, who had plotted the movements of the Communist forces on a map, had made a previous decision to remove the elders from Vietnam as soon as the Communists were within one hundred miles of Saigon. Two days later, after considerable difficulty, he was able to make airline reservations for seven of the elders on April 3 and for the other two on the following day. Concerning these events, President Wheat wrote:

"If I was not on the phone, I was on my knees, giving deep consideration to what this would do to the morale of the missionaries, to the members, and everyone concerned. I felt very sick inside to think that we would have to move our missionaries out when they had thirty or forty people ready to be baptized in the next three weeks. The missionary work had never prospered as it had the last three or four weeks. Yet I knew the feelings of the parents having their missionaries there under such conditions." 6

In Saigon the elders were, in a sense, unaware of the seriousness of their circumstances. They believed that the current problems would blow over and that they would be able to continue their work. Had it not been for the visit of an LDS civilian, who ran into the chapel and yelled, "Elders, get out of here!" and a call from Sister Eldredge, saying, "You had better prepare your visas and get out of here," the elders might have questioned President Wheat when he called and ordered them from the country. Almost miraculously they were all able to complete the necessary paper work in time to leave the country on their scheduled flights. The last two elders to leave, Elders Bowman and Oviatt, destroyed all American-influenced materials and brought the branch records with them to Hong Kong. By the end of April, Saigon fell to the Communists.

From April 4 on, President The devoted almost full time to the needs and concerns of the members. By phone calls, President Wheat and Elder Richard T. Bowman kept him informed about changes in the war and plans for the evacuation of the Vietnamese members. On April 16, President Wheat and Elder Bowman flew to Saigon and held a brief conference with the branch. Over one hundred and fifty members showed up on short notice, verifying the effectiveness of a communications network President The had formed among them.

But President Wheat's visit was hard on him and the members. He was under strict orders from the U.S. embassy not to discuss evacuation plans with anyone but President The. Some members thought the mission president was trying to make them feel overly secure. Others asked why the elders had not stayed and risked their lives to save them as many other Americans were doing for their friends and congregations.

Although their actions were largely unknown to the members, President Wheat, along with Elder Bowman and President The, had been spending almost every waking hour working on membership lists and lists of investigators who were closely aligned with the Church. These lists, accepted by the U.S. government, became the basis for evacuation priority ratings. Government priorities were as follows: (1) U.S. citizens and their families, (2) high echelon officers in the Vietnamese military and government, (3) Vietnamese employees of the U.S. government and of U.S. contractors, and (4) individuals who had been working with any U.S. organization and could obtain affidavits for evacuation. Most of the Saigon Branch members fell into the fourth category. 7

A few members got out of the country during the week prior to April 27, the last Sunday LDS services were held in Saigon. But most of the Saints gathered on that day to receive instructions and make plans for leaving their native land. The confusion caused by several [page 30] desperate members finally urged Nguyen Cao Minh to stand and chastise the congregation and to plead with them to humbly support President The. The meeting proceeded in reverence, and the sacrament was administered for the last time.

Several families went directly to the airport after the meeting. Spaces on the planes were extremely limited because of the low priority assigned to the members of the Church, but at least five LDS families made their way into the airport just before the April 28 Communist massive shelling of the air base and the resultant twenty-four-hour curfew. President The and several other prominent LDS families were trapped in the city because of the unexpected rapidity of the Communist takeover. Saigon fell on April 30.

Only a little over one hundred Vietnamese Saints are known to have left the country during the evacuation. Among the Saints who remained with President The in Vietnam were Nguyen Cao Minh, Sister Vy, Le Van Kha (second counselor in the branch presidency), Brother Pho and his family, and Nguyen Hai Chau and his family. Brother

Thinh, one who escaped, asserted that among the group left behind were many of the most faithful and most deserving members.

Those Saints who were evacuated were taken to refugee camps in the United States, generally to Camp Pendleton, California, where the Church established a branch. Before many months passed, they found their way into the stream of American life by obtaining new jobs and places to live. The Church found sponsors for eighty-three Vietnamese members, and other agencies helped a few others.

But what of those who remained behind? After 30 April 1975 it was as though a light went out, leaving everyone in darkness. By April 1977, Sister The, who had settled in Provo, Utah, had received only one letter from her husband. Although Sister Vy was more successful in getting letters out of Vietnam, she was unable to say much that cast light on the situation.

Since then, however, some remarkable things have happened. Following many months of political indoctrination and re-education, President The, Brother Minh, and many other Saints have managed to escape from Vietnam. They, like hundreds of other Vietnamese who could not endure life in Communist Vietnam, took to the sea in overloaded boats. They became part of the so-called "boat people" who continue to cause so much humanitarian concern for the international community. Brothers The and Minh are now living in Utah. It is estimated that ninety percent of the active Vietnamese Saints are now in the United States.

Some members have wondered why Vietnam fell to the Communists, particularly since it had been dedicated for the preaching of the gospel. Actually, the question is naive. Dedicatory prayers are just that—prayers, not commands. Such prayers do not impose the Lord's will on mankind; rather, they bless the efforts of the Lord's servants. Consider how many decades passed before Elder David O. McKay's dedication of the Chinese realm in 1921 was fulfilled to any degree.

The Church has continued its interest in the Vietnamese people since the fall of Saigon. In April 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball visited the refugees at Camp Pendleton, California. Around 1,000 Vietnamese, mostly nonmembers, have settled in Utah. According to President The, almost 80,000 Vietnamese are residing in California. There are almost as many Vietnamese in California as there are Tongans in Tonga. Three native Vietnamese have been assigned as full-time missionaries to their own people in the California Los Angeles Mission.

On 23 March 1980, the Salt Lake Stake organized a Vietnamese branch with Minh Cao Nguyen as President, and Luc Pham and Dung Nguyen as counselors. The twenty-five members have found themselves outnumbered by as much as three-to-one by investigators. Missionaries of the Utah Salt Lake City Mission are assigned to work with the nonmembers. A Vietnamese branch has also been approved for the Provo area.

Currently around twenty Utah Valley Vietnamese investigators hold a Sunday School class as part of the Asian Branch at Brigham Young University.

The Church has continued to produce Vietnamese language material, even though the country was closed to active missionary work. Seventeen tracts, a hymnbook, Selections from the Book of Mormon, and Gospel Principles are in print. The Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, plus three leadership manuals, are translated and are ready for typesetting. Other manuals have been approved.

Perhaps we should think again about the parable of the sower, or the parable of the soils, as it is sometimes called. To the list of soils the Savior mentioned might be added another kind, that which is initially rich but is destroyed through the misdeeds of evil stewards. Perhaps that is the situation in Vietnam. How much time will be required for the Lord to restore the soil for another planting of the gospel seed is known only to him.