

# Report on a visit to Vietnam

## May 2015

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#### Aims

- To get to know the cultural, social and religious context for the Church in Vietnam
- To evaluate the potential for a Mission Partner placement
- To explore possible living and working conditions in Ho Chi Minh City



#### Vietnam

Vietnam is a rapidly growing country of about 90 million people in south-east Asia. Formerly a French colony it was the setting for a vicious war between the North and the South enflamed by the intervention of the US. Vietnam was part of Imperial China for over a millennium, from 111 BC to AD 938. It grew as a kingdom, expanding geographically and politically into Southeast Asia. The whole peninsula was colonized by the French in the mid-19th century. The country was briefly occupied by the Japanese during the second world war, and the French were finally expelled in 1954. Thereafter, Vietnam was divided politically into two rival states, North and South Vietnam. There was ongoing conflict between the two and intervention from the United States began what we now refer to as the Vietnam War, which is all most people know about the country. The war ended with a North Vietnamese victory in 1975. The unified Vietnam had a communist government which eventually set the country on the road towards a viable economic system and integration into the world economy. In recent years Vietnam's economic growth rate has been among the highest in the world.

Vietnam is the 8<sup>th</sup> most populous country in Asia. Hanoi is its capital city while Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) is the largest city (about 8m people) and the country's commercial hub. There are 54 officially recognised ethnic groups in this rich and varied country. The language is a fascinating member of the Austroasiatic family a tonal language influenced in modern times by Chinese. The French replaced characters with Latin letters at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. English is now taught in all schools.

The state officially acknowledges the right to belong to any religion, though only recognised organisations are allowed. The official statistics in 2014 give 24 million as identified with one of the recognised religions. Of these, 11 million are Buddhists (12%), 6.2 million are Catholics (7%), 4.4 million are Cao daists (a Vietnamese folk religion, 5%), 1.4 million are Protestants (1.6%).

#### Methodist Mission

In 2002 an ordained husband and wife returned from the US to the country they had left during the war years and began Methodist work there with the support of the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) of the United Methodist Church (UMC). They have build up a team of workers and planted 320 congregations with a target of 1,000 by 2020. There is also a theological college in HCMC, largely dependent on visiting lecturers, but offering bachelor and masters degrees.

Clergy are not paid, they are either 'bi-vocational', supported by their congregations or make use of the micro-finance system to develop a church-based business.

The Vietnam UMC hopes to be granted a government 'Registration Certificate' this year, effectively an operating license, one step on the road to being officially 'recognised', a goal it hopes might be reached in 2016, but which is dependent as much on developing trust with the government as on satisfying objective criteria.

### **A Mission Partner?**

Conversations between WCR and GBGM are well advanced about stationing a British Mission Partner with the UMC in order to join the work in Vietnam. A newly appointed MCB Mission Partner, joined me on this visit and is keen to be stationed in HCMC. While he would be recognised by both churches as a Mission Partner, he will train as an English teacher at one of the language schools in HCMC and work there when he is qualified. There will be developing opportunities to assist the church work as trust and relationships develop.

### **The Visit**

I was able to spend time with a variety of local people in HCMC, getting to know this very interesting and complex communist country. Religion itself has its complexities as traditional understandings and practices are in many ways seen as things to be encouraged, since they are part of the Vietnamese identity. Organised religions are treated with a certain amount of suspicion by the authorities, not least as they seem to be controlled from outside the country. There are only two recognised protestant churches so far and as in many Asian contexts, externally funded evangelistic missions are making life difficult for those Christians, like the Methodists, trying to develop in a culturally sensitive way.

Conversations in the language school resulted in a realistic possibility for work in late 2015 and a conversation with the Dean of the theological school was very positive. If we can complete the administrative processes in MCB and GBGM the prospects look very exciting indeed for this new initiative into a new mission area.

*Steve Pearce May 2015*