

VIETNAM

Vietnam, officially the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, experienced warfare during most of the 20th century. Now it has one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies. There are few Christians and many restrictions on the church.

Population

- Population: 89 million
- Density: 268 per square km

The population of Vietnam is young: 55 percent are under 30 years of age. Around 89 percent are Vietnamese. Possibly 2 million people have left Vietnam since 1975.

Religions

- Buddhist 52.5%
- Non-religious/other 23.3%
- Chinese/Animist/New religions 14.7%
- Christian 9.4% (evangelicals ~ 1.8%)
- Muslim (Cham) 0.1%

Traditional Vietnamese religion includes elements from Indian beliefs and three Chinese religious systems: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Ancestor worship is very widely practiced.

Language

Vietnamese is the national language. There are also about 80 ethnic minorities with their own languages.

Geography

Vietnam occupies the easternmost part of the Indochinese Peninsula; a rugged, elongated S-shaped strip of mountains, coastal plains and river deltas. It is bordered by China to the north, Cambodia and Laos to the west and the South China Sea to the east.

Climate

In the north, especially in the interior, the temperatures are subtropical, with dry winters and wet summers. The south is hotter than the north, with a rain-filled monsoon climate in the southeast.

History

The early peoples of North Vietnam were perhaps the first in East Asia to practice agriculture and formed a fairly advanced civilization.

From 200 BC until 1000 AD, North Vietnam was a reluctant province of China. Chinese culture became and remains an integral part of Vietnamese life. From 1000-1800, Vietnam became a dynamic force in East Asia. After consolidating its position in the north, the dynastic leaders cast greedy eyes south to the fertile Mekong Delta. From the 15th to 17th centuries, the North Vietnamese marched south to swallow the Champa Kingdom and inhabit the lower Mekong Delta.

The North and South Vietnamese were at odds with each other through the ensuing centuries. Rivalry between them was sharpened with the arrival of the Europeans in Southeast Asia, and the country collapsed into vast rice lands controlled by feudal lords.

In 1862 the French acquired the Mekong Delta and 20 years later they extended their protectorate over the whole nation. Although there was little initial resistance, anti-colonial feeling swelled. In the 1920s, nationalist parties demanding independence were formed. In 1930 Ho Chi Minh formed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party.

It wasn't until the end of World War II that reform became possible. The Japanese occupation of the country during the war left a vacuum in 1945, which the French tried again to fill. The First Indo-Chinese War broke out between them and the Vietminh (The League for the Independence of Vietnam), ending in 1954. The settlement divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with the Vietminh in the north and the French and their Vietnamese supporters in the south.

The increasingly Communist north resumed the conflict in 1963 (the Second Indo-Chinese War). Two years later, President Lyndon Johnson sent in American troops to support the anti-Communist

south. The war continued until 1975 when the northern armies overran Saigon. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam was formed.

However, the end of the war did not signal the end of violence. Tensions with Cambodia escalated, and in 1979 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and installed a pro-Vietnamese government that lasted 10 years. A few weeks after attacking Cambodia, Vietnam was itself attacked by its Communist neighbor and benefactor, China. Troops were also stationed in Laos.

In the early 1990s the government sought to improve its foreign relations and to encourage foreign investment. The country signed a peace agreement with Cambodia in 1991 and shortly thereafter restored diplomatic relations with China. The U.S. removed a trade embargo in 1994, and full diplomatic relations were established in 1997.

Today Vietnam is an active member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in 2007 joined the World Trade Organization. It is among the world's top exporters of rice and coffee. It is becoming common to see "Made in Vietnam" on products in the West. Vietnam has set its sights on becoming a developed nation by 2020.

Christianity

European missionaries introduced Roman Catholicism into Vietnam in the 16th century. The majority of Christians in the country today are Catholic. A Protestant church has existed in Vietnam for one hundred years. Missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) began work in Vietnam in 1911. By 1929 their work resulted in the establishment of an independent



www.omf.org/us

OMF INTERNATIONAL • 10 W. Dry Creek Circle • Littleton, CO 80120-4413
303.730.4160 • 800.422.5330 • (f) 303.730.4165 • info@omf.org

OMF
OMF INTERNATIONAL
Heart for Asia. Hope for billions.

Evangelical Church of Vietnam. Other missionary societies gradually joined in the work of church planting in Vietnam and by the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 there were 154,000 evangelical Christians, many of them belonging to underground churches which had sprung up alongside the “open” Evangelical Church of Vietnam.

The government of the unified Communist Vietnam ordered all the missionaries to leave, and for the next 10 years few foreigners were able to enter the country until the change of economic policy, *doi moi* (renovation), came into effect.

Although the Communists closed half the 600 church buildings that existed when they took over, the church has grown significantly. In 1975 there were around 150,000 evangelicals, but this rose to an estimated 1.2 million in 2002. According to *Operation World*, there are approximately 1.5 million evangelicals in Vietnam today.

Approximately two-thirds of these believers are among Vietnam’s ethnic minority groups. The Hmong have been particularly responsive: in 1975 there were no known believers; today, more than 150,000 Hmong have come to believe, mainly through Christian radio broadcasts.

The growth of the church in Vietnam has taken place amidst considerable persecu-

tion, as Christians were seen as counter-revolutionary and a potential threat to the authorities. Pastors and lay people alike have been imprisoned, particularly among the minority groups and unregistered house churches. Christians tend to be treated as second-class citizens.

Government restrictions are most severe in the north, where there are still only about 15 registered churches, and in the capital, Hanoi, where there is only one. (Hundreds of minority congregations are currently awaiting registration.) In the south of the country there are fewer restrictions and now more than 1,000 registered churches and meeting places, including more than 50 in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

Bibles are obtainable in Vietnam, as is the *Jesus* film, and in the last few years it has also become possible to publish other Christian literature. However, there is still a great shortage of commentaries, children’s materials and other books. Good, quality translated material and more indigenous writing are both greatly needed.

In 2003 permission was given to re-open one Bible college (after a 27-year break) that is able to accept about 50 students



a year to be trained to become pastors. Other church leaders are trained unobtrusively through such programs as Theological Education by Extension.

The need for economic development and trade has brought opportunities for people with skills in many professions, especially English teaching. Various development and aid agencies are serving the country. Small, but growing OMF International teams are involved as professionals working in both northern and southern Vietnam.

The door is wide open and more workers are urgently needed.

Opportunities

- Church planting.
- English teaching.
- Student ministry.
- Community development.
- Missional business.
- Mentoring/leadership training.

Updated October 2012

HOW TO PRAY

- Thank God that the church in Vietnam is growing, although it is still small.
- Praise God for the rapid spread of the gospel among certain ethnic minority groups. Pray for greater growth of the church among the majority Vietnamese population.
- Through Vietnam’s rapid development, Vietnamese people have ever-increasing opportunities to interact with new ideas, including the gospel.
- In recent years, some restrictions on religious activities have eased, however, many restrictions continue. Pray for wisdom for church leaders.
- In some areas, unregistered churches continue to be harried by police, with meetings broken up, leaders arrested and believers pressured to renounce their faith. Pray for those affected.
- Leadership training is urgently needed. Many pastors are old, while younger churches are often led by those with little opportunity for theological study who are thus susceptible to error or bias in their teaching.
- Pray for more commentaries, theological study materials and children’s materials to be translated and written.
- Bibles are available in Vietnamese. Pray for increased use of modern translations. Pray for translations into many minority languages that still have no or few Scriptures.
- Christian radio programs have been remarkable in their scope and impact. Pray for provision for continued effective broadcasting.
- Pray for unity between leaders of different denominations, registered and unregistered.
- Pray that suitable people will take up the opportunities to live and work in Vietnam.
- Many sections of the community and numerous ethnic groups remain scarcely touched by the gospel. Pray for:
 - » The Muslim Cham and Buddhist Khmer of the Mekong Delta.
 - » Northern ethnic minorities, many of which still have no known believers.
 - » Twenty provinces and cities in northern Vietnam that have no registered church.
 - » Government leaders and officials.