

**PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES IN VIETNAM WITH THE  
IMPLEMENTATION OF POLICY ON RELIGIOUS  
EQUALITY**

***Abstract:** Protestantism currently has more than one million believers in Vietnam, operates in 63 provinces and cities of the country with more than 90 different organizations, denominations, and groups. Since its inception, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam has enacted and implemented policies on religion, which include aspects of religious equality. However, the legal framework for the activities of religions, including Protestantism, has been more effective complete since the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions in 2004; Directive N<sup>o</sup>. 01/2005/CT-TTg by the Prime Minister on some tasks regarding Protestantism dated on February 4th, 2005; Law on Beliefs and Religions in 2018, along with the Decree guiding the implementation (Decree 162/2017 ND-CP dated December 30th, 2017 by the Government). This paper presents the awareness, attitudes, and activities of Protestant dignitaries in Vietnam regarding the promulgation and implementation of policies and laws of religion and religious equality of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State in the past and at present.*

***Keywords:** Protestantism; policy; law; religion; religious equality.*

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\* Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

## **1. Awareness and attitudes of Protestants towards policies and laws on religion and religious equality of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State of Vietnam**

### ***1.1. The period from 1945 to 1975***

According to history, the relationship between the State and the religious organizations as well as the Protestant community began after the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945. After the Declaration Ceremony of Independence, in the first meeting session of the government on September 3rd, 1945, President Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the policy of faith freedom and uniting the religious and the non-religious. Those spirit and principle have been affirmed and clearly stated in the 1946 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, that was “Our people have the right to freedom of faith”. This right was firmly grasped and concretely expressed in the government documents during the French resistance war and after the North Vietnam recovered peace in 1954.

According to Protestant dignitaries, in the independence declaration ceremony, one of the three religious representatives invited was a Protestant representative, which indicated that the interim revolutionary authority respected the equality of religion, even though Protestantism was just a small community at that time. The political situation in Vietnam was quite complicated in 1945 and 1946. However, Pastor Le Van Thai - the President of the Vietnamese Protestant Church still traveled freely by the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's permission, even though he insisted the stance that the Protestant is not involved in politics<sup>1</sup>.

In 1955, the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam issued Decree 234/SL on June 14th, 1955, on religious issues that consisted of 4 chapters and 16 articles. Article 1 affirmed: “The Government guarantees the people’s right to freedom of belief and freedom of worship”. Regarding the respect of religious activities,

the Decree clearly states: “When disseminating religion, the religious have to educate believers about patriotism, civic obligations, a sense of respect for the people’s government and the laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam”<sup>2</sup>.

In 1955, after peace was restored, according to the aspirations of Protestants and the dignitaries, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam allowed the establishment of a new ecclesial body to meet the needs of the Protestant community’s operations and activities. That proved the fair treatment of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State of Vietnam towards religious communities regardless of their size.

The year of 1955 also witnessed the first General Assembly of the North Protestant community. The General Assembly approved the establishment of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) with the new constitution clearly stating the purpose of the Northern VPC: “The purpose of the Protestant Church is a gathering of Vietnamese who has a devotion to God and believe in the salvation of Jesus Christ to form a single Church” with a principle including two points: 1) Wholeheartedly worshipping God Trinity; 2) Loving the Fatherland, protect the peace, practice justice, freedom, equality, and work.

The Church also clearly declared its attitude towards society: “The Church has to educate the faithful about patriotism, the citizens’ duties, respect for the people’s administration and the laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Church unites with all people to build a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic and wealthy Vietnam”<sup>3</sup>.

Those were new points reflecting the awareness maturity of the Protestant community in the North regarding its position in the national defense and construction. The creation of a new organization, equal to other ecclesial organizations, which is autonomous and independent with a progressive path promoted and guided the Protestant community at the North participated in the

cause of national construction and defense positively. As a member of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Protestant dignitaries and the faithful from the first day of peace had actively participated in the work of building the socialist North, fighting for the implementation of the national general election.

### ***1.2. The period from 1975 to present***

Religions have changed a lot in Vietnam since the reunification of the country in 1975 and at the beginning of the cause of national construction and defense. While the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam unified in the whole country, other religions such as Cao Dai, Hoa Hao Buddhism, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), and Islam still were not recognized by the State. The 4th Communist Party of Vietnam Congress (1976) reaffirmed the consistent policy of respecting and ensuring the people's right to freedom of belief and religion and concretized this point of view by Resolution 297-CP dated on November 11th, 1977 of the Council of Ministers. The content of the Resolution is the inheritance of Decree 234/SL of June 14th, 1955 on religious issues and previously issued documents. The Resolution had some new contents, such as the regulations of religious activities of the religious and the followers; facilities of the church; the training, appointment, and transfer of people specializing in religious activities and international relations of religions. However, the regulations were still in the form of principles, and there were no guiding documents, so there was a lack of consistency to implement nationwide.

Regarding the Protestant community, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) was separated from the Protestantism world until 1975 due to the political and social context. After 1975, the Protestant community became popular in the south Vietnam provinces, but the church organizations and denominations were operating without being recognized for their legal status. Along

with the rapid development of Protestantism, the relationship between the Protestant officials and the State of Vietnam has set up many problems.

First of all, it was the need for the legal status of the church and getting the legal practice because those were necessities to solve the problems of the church.

After the 42nd General Assembly (before the interruption) in 1976 in Ho Chi Minh City (on June 13-15<sup>th</sup>, 1976), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was not recognized by the State as a legitimate religious organization. However, except for the Central Highlands region, branches and believers still had normally religious activities in provinces and cities. The role of the church leadership of the General Conference to province level and down to churches was strongly affected. Although it tried to maintain the administrative system in the illegal status, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) still fell into a state of crisis, unable to solve internal organizational problems.

The stalemate of the Protestant Church has caused the dignitaries to ponder on ways to survive in Vietnam's new socio-political context.

The inevitable needs of the situation is to adapt, integrate, and find ways to survive and develop. The Protestant officials persevered to find every convenient opportunity with the authorities to clarify and present their churches. Facing the public opinion that the Protestant is "American religion", the Protestant dignitaries cited history to show that "Reformed Christianity (Protestant) originated from Europe, and it is a true religion". On the political viewpoint before 1975, they explained their non-political stance of Protestantism meaning that "neither for the war nor against the Communist". For the claim that the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) stood out of the fight for independence and victory, they clarified that it was an unfortunate misunderstanding because

Vietnamese Protestants were not prevented from participating in political activities<sup>4</sup>.

Along with the presentation and justification for their churches, Protestant officials focused on studying and researching the State of Vietnam's policies on religious issues. They have studied in depth some problems as the general mechanism of Vietnam revolution with three principles: How the Party lead, how the State manage, and how the people control. In such a society, what principle is the relationship between the State and the Church based on? How can the Protestant adapt it without being contrary to Bible principles? (Those are very typical characters of the Protestant - NXH). The Vietnam Protestant paid attention to the process of reforming and democratizing social life, including the religious field. They researched the State policy and organization of the Protestant churches in China, Cuba, and Eastern Europe to compare with the situation in Vietnam.

The model of the Patriotic Three-self Committee of Chinese Protestantism was analyzed in terms of the similarities and differences to draw experiences for the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). The Protestant in South Vietnam also paid attention to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), with the same C.M.A origin, so that they promoted visits, and learned about this organization's way of practicing in the heart of the socialist regime to take the right steps<sup>5</sup>.

Continuously during this period, the dignitaries in the Evangelical Protestant of Vietnam (South) kept firmly to propose the aspiration of the Protestant community to authorities at all levels as follows:

- 1) Ask for permission to reopen closed churches and add, ordain, transfer pastors, missionaries;
- 2) Reopen the old training facility, that is the Alliance Evangelical Divinity School in Hòn Chông of Nha Trang to train an additional team of pastors and missionaries;

3) Ask for permission to organize the General Assembly to handle the affairs of the church, namely to amend the constitution and the regulation of the Church to be suitable with the current society;

4) Ask for permission to resume international fellowship relations with Protestant organizations in the world;

5) Ask for permission to be recognized as a legitimate religious organization.

...

A senior official of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) commented on this period with the comparison of norms on public opinion, ethics, and law with the equality of religion as follows: “After 1975, many people had an incorrect view of religion and were not fond of religion. As for Protestantism, many people thought that this was the religion of America, or more or less related to America, so they are very reserved. The point of view between theism and atheism was also not properly understood as mentioned in the State policy on freedom of belief and non-belief. There were many misconceptions about religion in general and Protestantism in particular, so preaching faced many difficulties. In the identity cards, many people hesitated to claim their religion because this was detrimental to their business and education”<sup>6</sup>.

The Protestant commented on new policies on beliefs and religions and on Protestantism as well the implementation of Vietnam Communist Party and the State of Vietnam policies on freedom of belief, religion, and religious equality as follows: “Since the 1990s, the authorities have had some more open policies toward religion (but not all of them). Moreover, some officials understood Protestantism better than before, so some Church’s activities were more relatively convenient. According to the Constitution, the State should provide the right to freedom of belief and religion, but there is a need for interpretation through sub-law documents. There were Decrees promulgated during the period of

the Military Administration (after 1975) that needed to be modified accordingly. Recently, according to the innovation, there have been decrees, circulars, directives, documents, etc. by the authorities to clarify the State's policies towards religion. Thanks to that, the Church's activities were relatively more open because of specific regulations. However, in reality, some local authorities have not implemented the policies properly, causing many difficulties for religious organization.

Until 2004, the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions came into existence, which provided more open articles<sup>7</sup>.

***The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)'s major changes in the awareness and activity after registered by the state as a legal status, with the rights to practice as other religious organizations***

The new policy of the Party and State towards Protestantism is to recognize and gradually normalize the church organization of major Protestant denominations presented before 1975 on the condition that they have a constitution (according to the law) and a progressive practice in the direction; The leader of the church has to be good citizens and has the prestige among believers at the same time.

According the above guidelines, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs issued an announcement No. 378/TB/TGCP in October 2000, which approved the list of the Advocacy Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) comprising 25 pastors. The Committee should prepare for the organization of the General Assembly and strengthen the staff and the church organization so that the State recognized its legal entity and allowed it act legally.

For believers and dignitaries of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), that was good news that they have been waiting

for a long time. After that, many activities took place vigorously in this Church.

Throughout the Southern provinces and cities, where the Protestant churches are located (legally and illegally), dignitaries and followers paid attention to preparing the upcoming General Assembly. It covered the following issues:

- 1) Drafting and collecting comments on the new draft Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South).
- 2) Electing delegates to the General Assembly of the Federation.
- 3) The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)' s leader and operational direction.

*About the new Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)*

The drafting and improving the new Constitution is a prerequisite for the General Assembly to be held. This is the requirement posed from two sides - State and Church.

On the State side: To be recognized as a legal status and to operate legally, the Church must have a progressive constitution in accordance with the law and modern social life.

On the Church side: The development of the Church over the past 20 years has raised many internal problems, and the old regulation has proved outdated, not suitable for the management and administration which must be adjusted. However, it was a complex task for the Protestant to complete in a short time because of the following reasons:

- 1) The tendency to be conservative, familiar with the principles of the old regulations was still quite popular.
- 2) Due to the interruption of the General Assembly sessions, the discussion could not be conducted. In addition, the principles of discussion and voting of the Church were too democratic making many problems not to reach consensus in one session.

Until the first General Assembly (the 43rd time in the history of the Church) in 2001, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) still complied with the old regulations. This was the regulation in 1936, amended and revised in 1952, 1957, and 1958.

Since 1966, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) has realized the need to amend the regulations to suit the growth rate of the church organization. An amendment committee was set up, but during the eight years (until 1974) it has not completed its work due to the controversy.

This work continued to be delayed until 1975 when the country was reunified and in the situation of more than 20 years of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) without the legal entity. In the writer's opinion, the development of the awareness and the expectation to be practiced legally motivated the Protestant dignitaries to complete and pass the 2001 Constitution quickly. The new Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) received the concrete requirement from the State such as the Church's attitude towards society and the country; the church organization towards the society and the country; the church organization system must be consistent with the management.

The 2001 Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) including 10 chapters, 79 articles, was passed by the General Assembly, and took effect from the date of its ratification under the law of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

In the *Introduction*, the Constitution stated: "Today, the country is building a new society in peaceful conditions. This Constitution is drafted based on inheriting the previous Regulations and Constitutions, at the same time respecting national traditions and social life, abiding by the Constitution and laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam"<sup>8</sup>.

*New points of the 2001 Constitution*

For society, the country and State-church relations:

In the old Constitution, there is only one article: The Church to the Government (Article 7 - Section III) states: “The Evangelical Church of Vietnam remains loyal to the authorities, not subject to any encouragement rebelling to the authorities. Regarding political interference or anything else that is outside the Church’s purpose, the Church insists on not discussing it”<sup>9</sup>.

This is a big problem in State-church relations, due to the conservatism of Protestants. The Vietnamese State did not accept this standpoint after the General Assembly sessions in 1975 and 1976.

The new Constitution radically changed the old standpoint. Right in Chapter I: *General Provisions*, Article 5 - *The Direction* emphasizes: “The direction of operation of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) is to Live Bliss, serve God, serve the Fatherland and the people”.

In Chapter VII: *Social Relations*, Article 51 - *Responsibilities to society* states more: “The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) operates under the Constitution and laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and complies with regulations of the authorities;

Should educate believers about patriotism, citizen obligations, a sense of respect for the law; should unite with the entire people in building the Fatherland and protecting peace”.

The section on *Social Responsibilities* is further emphasized in Chapter IX. *Dogma*:

Every Christian has a responsibility to build the society in which he/she lives.

Should participate in the local social work, keep solidarity, serve social security wholeheartedly, and pray for peace for everyone.

Every Christian should obey the authorities and respect laws<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, the Constitution also includes an article (item) on the environment protection (Article 73) for the first time.

The first General Assembly (the 43rd time, according to church history of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) occurred on

February 8th, 2001 at Saigon Protestant Church (155 Trần Hưng Đạo, District 1, Hồ Chí Minh City) in a joyful atmosphere of all believers and dignitaries. From this moment, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) has entered a new era of becoming the largest Protestant church organization in Vietnam operating legally and equally as all other religious organizations within the legal framework.

Thus, after 1975 and a period of recession and crisis, Protestantism has entered a period of recovery and development since the 1990s in Vietnam. It is worth noting that the new socio-political context has had many impacts on the perception and attitude of Protestant dignitaries. From the desire of organizing the church, being recognized legally with religious activities and equal status as other religious organizations in the framework of the Constitution and law, the Protestant dignitary has integrated into the social life. Protestants adjusted their behavior through their presentation in life, learning about principles of operating political, social, cultural, and non-religious persons. Those are new features confirming the cognitive maturity of Protestant dignitaries in the direction of development and equality with other religions in Vietnam.

## **2. Protestant dignitaries with the implementation of policies and laws on religious equality at present**

The policy and law on belief and religion were implemented the 2004 Ordinance on Belief, Religion by the 11th National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and guided for implementation with Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22 issued in 2005 and Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 92 (replace Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22) becoming on January 1st, 2013 by the Government, and Instructions N<sup>o</sup>. 01 on works to Protestantism issued in 2005 by the Prime Minister.

Law of Belief, Religion was approved on November 11th, 2016 by the 14th National Assembly of Socialist Republic of Vietnam and came into effect on January 1st, 2018. After that, Decree N<sup>o</sup>.

162/2017 ND-CP was issued on December 12th, 2017 by the Government implementing the Law of Belief, Religion. Hence, the legal framework for the activity of religions, including Protestantism, became clearer and more complete.

So how are policies and laws of religion and religious equality relating to the Protestant community being implemented? What remarkable points are there in the past and the present?

***2.1. Equality of rights and obligations between religious citizens and non-religious citizens, equality between citizens of different religions***

Article 3 of the Law on Belief and Religion stipulates:

1. The State respects and protects everyone's rights to freedom of belief and religion; to ensure that all religions are equal under the law.

Article 6 of the Law on Belief and Religion stipulates:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of belief, religion; following or not following a religion.

2. Each person has the right to express their beliefs and religion; to practice religious rituals; to join the festival; to study and to practice dogma, canon.

Article 5 of the Law on Belief and Religion stipulates the prohibited acts:

1. Discrimination for belief or religion.

2. Forcing, bribing, or obstructing others to follow or unfollow a belief or religion.

3. Offending a belief and religion.

4. Religion or belief activities which:

a) Infringe the national defense, security, sovereignty, social order and safety;

b) Infringe social ethics, body, health, life, and property; offend the others' honor and dignity;

- c) Obstruct the exercise of citizen's rights and obligations;
- d) Divide ethnicity and religion.

Thus, the discrimination of religion is now officially prohibited by law in Vietnam. For Protestants, this is a fundamental turning point when Directive 01, Ordinance on Beliefs, Religion, and now the Law on Beliefs and Religions have been implemented. A foreign dignitary who has been a missionary in Vietnam for a long time admits: "The most notable change and progress is the 2004 Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions and the Prime Minister's Directive 01 on some Protestant work in 2005. These documents allow the registration of legal status for Protestants and registration of religious groups of believers. There are 10 recognized Protestant organizations and thousands of groups registered. The change in the religious life in general and Protestantism in particular will be recorded when the Law on Beliefs and Religion 2016 comes into effect from January 2018. It is important that the authorities has officially accepted that religion is and will remain a demand for a part of people and can contribute to building society"<sup>11</sup>.

However, in reality, in residential communities, especially in ethnic minority areas, cases of discrimination still occur and the main reason is the reaction of their families, clan, and community towards the mission of Protestantism, especially when new believers exercise their faith which collides with other beliefs and religions. A pastor wrote: "In Vietnam, traditional religions and beliefs have existed for a long time in history and are attached to social life. Family members and clan have the same objects of worship, not according to personal beliefs. So when a person decides to convert the Protestantism, it often causes fierce conflicts within the family and clan. Many believers have lost their jobs, husbands or wives; some were beaten by parents, kicked out of their homes and lost inheritance rights ..."<sup>12</sup>.

These above cases are now less common. This is a domestic matter in the family, clan and community in which very few people want the law to interfere. Therefore, it needs the attention, the recognition, and the appropriate behavior, especially for Protestants when evangelizing, converting, and training believers.

### ***2.2. Equality in recognition of religious organizations***

The recognition of religious organizations is of particular importance to legal status, to the existence and regulation of the Protestant denominations and churches. Due to the diverse organizational characteristics and the outbreak of the “House Church” movement in Vietnam since the 1990s, most Protestant denominations exist without legal status.

As for Protestant dignitaries, after the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was recognized as a legal person in 2001, 08 Protestant denominations were registered. Those were as follows:

1. The Vietnam Christian Mission on October 22nd, 2007;
2. The Vietnam Adventist Church on December 5th, 2008;
3. The Vietnam Evangelical Baptist Convention (An Dien-Nam Phuong) on May 7th, 2008;
4. The Vietnam Baptist Convention (Nam Phuong) on October 3rd, 2008;
5. The Presbyterian Church of Viet Nam on February 5th, 2009;
6. The Mennonite Evangelical Church of Vietnam on February 5th, 2009;
7. The Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam in June 2010;
8. The Pentecostal Church of Vietnam; The Representatives Board of the Church of Latter-day Saints of Vietnam (the international name is The Church of Latter-Day Saints, abbreviated as LDS, often called the Mormon Church in Vietnam) on May 30th, 2014.

According to the Law on Beliefs and Religions, the registration and recognition of religious organizations are based on the actual operation situation of religious organizations in Vietnam, as follows:

1) On the registration of religious activities: the religious organization must meet all the prescribed conditions.

2) On the recognition of the legal status of a religious organization (non-commercial legal entity): this is the second step after the religious organization has registered its operation and if all the conditions are met, including the charter and other related documents.

After the Law on Belief and Religion came into effect, there were 02 Protestant denominations registered for religious activities, that is: the United Gospel Outreach Church of Vietnam registered for religious activities in December 2018 and the Full Gospel Church of Vietnam registered for religious activities on September 11th, 2018.

Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22 by the Government in 2005 set the time of 20 years for a religion changing its status from registration to recognition. Now, according to the Law on Beliefs and Religion, it is only 5 years since receiving the certificate of religious registration. In addition to operating continuously and stably for 5 years, a religious organization must meet some other conditions such as having a charter; Having an organizational structure according to the charter; Having property separate from other individuals and organizations, and being self-responsible with its own property; Participating in legal relations in the name of the organization independently.

According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Vietnam currently has more than 40 recognized religious organizations, including 12 Protestant organizations. Therefore, regarding the registration and recognition aspect of religious

organizations, Protestant denominations are treated completely and lawfully equal to other religions in Vietnam.

***2.3. Equality in religious operating conditions: religious property, worship institutions, religious schools, religious international relations, publishing and importing religious scriptures and articles***

For the churches having a long history of indoctrination such as the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), and the Vietnam Adventist Church, they have had many worship facilities (attached to the property) before 1975. The rest, which was the majority of church organizations, new denominations appeared from the 1990s and later, has less property and they practiced at a private house as “House Church”, or rented office as the headquarters for religious activities.

For the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) from 1975 until now, the above problems have always been of concern. After being recognized as a legal status by the State in 2001, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) set the following goals:

1. Establishing the Representative Committees of Provinces and Cities;
2. Restoring the branches not having usual activities;
3. Building churches and chapels for places with large numbers of believers located far from the main church;
4. Applying for the opening of Biblical academy and local Bible classes to train servants of God;
5. Applying for the ordination of a true pastor and assign chairperson for churches not having an official chairperson;
6. Applying for the transfer of pastors;
7. Applying for the publishing of Christian literature;
8. Houses for retired pastors, widows of pastors, and ministers;
9. Researching and promoting the direction of church development;

10. Actively contributing to enrich society<sup>13</sup>.

***Regarding religious property and religious worship sites***

Before 1975, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) had more than 500 churches and training, social, and charity institutions. After 1975, the situation changed a lot. According to church statistics, by the time it was recognized as a legal person, more than 200 churches and facilities were no longer operating because of being closed or requisitioned for other purposes. “Most Protestant schools in the churches precinct were requisitioned by the State, so the activities of those churches were greatly affected. It was worth noting that all churches and facilities were built in the 1950s and 1960s, so after 1975 they also slowly deteriorated. At the same time, because of the increasing number of members, there was not enough room for worshipping and other work”<sup>14</sup>.

Maybe because of the above reasons, right after the 44th General Assembly in 2005, the Board of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) sent “a petition to the Prime Minister and the authorities at all levels to ask for the return of 265 churches and institutions”<sup>15</sup>.

In fact, after 1975, the churches of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) still have been in use for religious activities in big cities and towns. Most of the rest institutions were small (made of wood, roofed with corrugated iron,...), destroyed by war or degraded by the disintegration of followers, no longer in use, or used with different purposes. Several institutions of culture, charity, relief, and medicine were requisitioned under the policy of the State to serve the public interests. The period from 1976 until 2001, when the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was not officially recognized by the State as a legal status of a church organization, the management, maintenance, and conservation of the facilities faced difficulties. There have been occupations and concessions from dignitaries within the Church. After more than 30 years, these facilities are virtually useless (except for a few large ones), and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)’s demand was the essence

of the “land use right” of those facilities. However, many other problems (such as ownership, compensation, relocation) made it difficult for the government to solve quickly. Currently, the authorities of Ho Chi Minh City and many other provinces, including the provinces in the Central Highlands, have returned some religious institutions borrowed by the State, or granted land, permission and supporting many registered religious organizations to build worship sites.

Really, Protestantism just had a small amount of religious facilities concerning the land compared with other religions in Vietnam before 1975 and all of them were affected by the State’s policies. It could not ascribe the authorities’ discrimination and inequality for Protestantism. The problems related to the religious properties; however, still are complex and the authorities are not able to solve thoroughly.

#### ***About opening a school for dignitaries***

Due to running without legal status, not allowing to open schools for training dignitaries for a long time, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was short of the number of dignitaries and ministers seriously. The process of propagating has led to an increasing demand for dignitaries in recent years.

This demand was fulfilled in the direction of the Prime Minister’s Directive N<sup>o</sup>. 01. The Protestant dignitary was excited, but they immediately had challenges because of the administrative requirements, such as degrees of professors, regulations, and the approval of the Ministry of Education and Training.

However, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was licensed to reopen the Alliance Evangelical Divinity School with the support of the authorities at the beginning of 2003. The first course of Alliance Evangelical Divinity School started in 2003 with 50 students from all over the provinces and cities, of which 08 students from the Central Highlands provinces are ethnic

minorities. The head Pastor of Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) wrote: “After 27 years since the closure (1976), Nha Trang Alliance Evangelical Divinity School has been re-established with the joy of the Church. This opened up a new phase in the formal training of pastors and preachers that were in short supply”<sup>16</sup>.

Although it just returned to work in 2003, Nha Trang Alliance Evangelical Divinity School trained many personnel with many different programs up to 2017; for example, the program of Bachelor of Theology trained:

Course I (2003-2006) with the first 50 students graduated and are slave for the Lord in churches.

Course II (2005-2009) with 100 students graduated in March 2009.

Course III (2007-2011) with 115 students were practicing in churches.

Course IV (2009-2013) with 100 male and female students graduated.

Course V (2011-2015) with 100 students including 19 from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) graduated and were working in the pastoral ministry.

Course VI (2013-2017) with 48 students graduated.

Course VII (2015-2019) with 101 students were studying.

Course VIII (2017-2021) with 107 students are studying.

Apart from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) has also been allowed to open and enroll students in middle theology programs, night-school theology, and training personnel, including young dignitaries of ethnic minorities.

***Regarding equality on the needs of scriptures, scriptural publications, and religious supplies***

According to the Law on Beliefs and Religion, Article 54 on “Publishing, producing, exporting and importing cultural products”

states that religious organizations are allowed to publish scriptures and other religious publications; to produce, export and import cultural products of beliefs, religions and religious items according to the provisions of the law on publishing and other law provisions.

This was a matter of great concern by Protestant authorities before the law. They stated as follows:

“Christian writings such as the Bible, hymns, biblical explanations, ecclesiastical books, magazines are spiritual nourishment for the spiritual development of the Church members, which will be paid special attention by the General Church board and they will ask for permission to publish widely in the Church”<sup>17</sup>.

Until 2001, the State still permitted Protestants to import and print scriptures to serve dignitaries and believers.

“The period from 1992 to 1994: The Vietnamese Bible Publishing Program was authorized to import 33,000 Bibles and 20,000 Hymns (book). From 1994 to 2000: printing 65,000 new Old Testament Bibles, 85,000 New Testament books, 25,000 Hymns, 80,000 books, and 120,000 Bible stories”<sup>18</sup>.

According to the Religion Publishing House in 2004, a total of 45 Protestant publications with many pages were printed and published.

Besides the Bible and books, the need for permission to republish the internal magazine was also set by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). Up to now, 02 internal newsletters of two Protestant organizations have been periodically published. In the coming time, the demand for publications among Protestant dignitaries will increase over time. Also, it is important to understand that publications and scriptures not only satisfy the needs of believers but are also crucial tools to indoctrinate Protestantism.

Currently, printed publications such as the Bible and Hymns have met the demand. With more than a dozen Bible translations of

organizations and individuals, supported and subsidized from international Protestant organizations, the source of Bibles and hymns has never been as abundant as today. Besides, there are other Christian writings, such as Protestant books, research, Bible exposition, Sunday School lessons, evangelistic leaflets, pamphlets. With this number of publications, it can be said that Protestantism is not only equal but also stands out from other religions, and this is not necessarily good, as the following statement of the Head of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South): “On the contrary, since books have been popular, there are also harming because some of them do not come from orthodox sources. This is the time when wrong doctrines have a chance to interfere and make the bad influence for God’s children”<sup>19</sup>.

### ***International religious relations***

Article 48 of the Law on Belief and Religion states religious activities and international religious relations of foreign organizations and individuals in Vietnam as follows: During the preaching, the foreign dignitaries and religious must respect the regulations of religious organizations, affiliated religious organizations, organizations that are registered in Vietnam and comply with the provisions of Vietnam law.

Along with global integration and relations, religious organizations, including Protestantism, are allowed to expand their relationship with international Protestant organizations through aid, support, training, and more recently, missionary support. It can be said that this is a great resource to help Protestant denominations work and the lives of dignitaries and believers have been improved; For example, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam in both the South and the North has built, restored, and upgraded most of its facilities (churches, institutions) thanks largely to help from the international Protestant resources. Besides, the demand for the Bible and hymns for believers was also met as mentioned.

On the other hand, the expanding international relations of Protestant dignitaries, apart from the positive factors mentioned above, has also shown some aspects that are lacking legal control, for example, some Protestant denominations and groups do not build the church to support its community of believers but rely on external resources and are dominated by external churches which lead to the infiltration of extremist sects (in Protestant dignitaries often called “heresy”) into the Protestant community in Vietnam as often mentioned in the news.

***2.4. Equality in participation in secular activities (education and training, vocational training; health care; social protection; charity; social management)***

The Law on Belief and Religion, Article 55 states: Religions are allowed to participate in activities of education, training, health care, social protection, charity, humanitarian in accordance with relevant laws.

The two largest Protestant church organizations in Vietnam (the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South, North)) have been active in charity, health, and humanitarian activities for many years, that is the Medical and Social Committee. The Medical and Social Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) has carried out the following tasks:

*Emergency relief and recovery assistance* are conducted annually in many residential areas, which are hit by natural disasters, floods, storms, crop failures. In the four years from 2014 to 2017, the Committee organized 11 bailouts with a total of more than 4 billion VND.

*Health care* activities such as organizing medical teams to go to remote areas, mountainous areas, and islands to give medical examinations, free medicine to the sick, and gifts to the poor. In 4 years from 2014 to 2017, 45 charity visits were organized for 21,000 people with a budget of up to 1.7 billion VND.

In addition, other specific jobs such as calling for and implementing small projects to provide clean water, activities to help poor children, and developing household economy are also carried out by the Church.

Aggregated data in the most recent term (2014-2017) of the Medical and Social Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) is as follows: “The total operating costs of the related projects are nearly 46 billion VND, in which funding from foreign organizations and churches accounts for nearly 70% (nearly 32.5 billion VND), from individuals and churches in the country accounts for nearly 26% (about 12 billion VND)”<sup>20</sup>.

The Medical and Social Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) also implements projects with similar activities, such as free medical examination and treatment, medicine bags, medicine cabinets, clean water, house construction - repair, scholarships for students, support heart surgery, flood relief in Central Vietnam. The Medical and Social Committee has organized free medical examination and treatment in many places such as Nam Định, Thái Nguyên, Hà Nam, Hải Phòng, Bắc Sơn, Bắc Giang, Thanh Hóa, Thái Bình, Đồ Sơn,... with a total of 3,721 visits for medical examination and treatment in 2010, 5,148 in 2011, and 5,323 in 2012. The General Association and the Committee also actively participated in the relief of floods in Central Vietnam through the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and cooperated with the local authorities at all levels in the past term.

In addition to the activities of the two largest Protestant organizations in recent years, other Protestant organizations, denominations, and groups have also had several activities. Some denominations and groups also made use of their strengths, such as drug addiction treatment (Pentecostal denominations and groups), wheelchairs for the disabled (Baptism groups, Mennonite groups).

Hopefully, in the coming time, there will be more specific and open regulations to take advantage of these resources from the

Protestant churches and denominations so that they can mobilize more resources to contribute more to society.

Recently, there has been active participation of Protestant dignitaries in activities of building institution and social management. Both the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) actively participated in discussions (organized by the Fatherland Front at all levels) to the Draft Law on Beliefs and Religions in 2016, especially those directly related to the approval and election of dignitaries and works of religious organizations that are not consistent with the democratic electoral characteristics of Protestantism. This shows the maturity and responsibility of Protestants in building social institutions, their equal status, although the Protestant religious community is still a minority.

### ***2.5. Equality in religious presence in public spaces***

The Law on Belief and Religion stipulates in Article 46 regarding “A ceremony, preaching outside of religious grounds, legal place”, or in other words the presence of the direct influence (evangelization) in public spaces. Accordingly, before holding the ceremony outside the religious establishment or the registered legal place, the religious organization, affiliated religious organization, the organization that is granted a certificate of registration of religious activities is responsible for sending documents clearly stating the content and format for permission. If accepted, the event will be held.

Many authorities have allowed Protestant dignitaries to organize events and preaching in public before the Law on Belief and Religion, with the spirit of openness and integration, especially after the normalization of the Vietnam-US relations.

Pastor Thai Phuoc Truong, President of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) commented on these events: “It is a delightful breakthrough for the Church which we have long

awaited since 1975. Finally, preaching Protestantism in public is allowed as the previous Protestant campaigns. By 2005, the government had allowed two preaching nights at the Van Don Harbor stadium”<sup>21</sup>.

From 2009 until recently, during the Christmas and Easter occasions, Protestant organizations and denominations continued to ask for permission, or sometimes voluntarily held mass missions in public places in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and invited famous missionaries from around the world to preach.

However, public presence or preaching raised many questions regarding the rights of other religious communities, easily causing complex reactions and consequences. For example, during the preaching night of December 20th, 2009 at My Dinh Stadium Square, a speaker declared a “Spiritual Declaration” with the following words: “The Vietnamese people must belong to God. All chains of sin and curses of previous generations were declared cut off; the image of the dragon meaning the old snake being the devil from now on no longer continues to influence the Vietnamese people. Vietnam belongs to God; from now on the Vietnamese people will be blessed; the Church of Vietnam will enter an unprecedented revival in unity before God”<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, the preaching in public spaces sometimes contained extreme messages, easily mistaken with propaganda to contradict other beliefs and religious communities which require adjustment and sanctions accordingly.

### **Conclusion**

In short, from 1975 until now, over a period of crisis, Protestantism has entered a period of recovery and development from the 1990s onwards. It is worth noting that social circumstances have affected many aspects of the awareness and attitude of Protestant dignitaries. With the desire of being recognized as a legal entity, the Protestant dignitary confirmed the integration into the

political and social life of the country. Through learning about the aspect of secular society, the Protestant dignitary has removed old conceptions and rules, affirmed the new direction of the Church, that is accompany the people and build a rich and civilized country.

New guidelines and policies on beliefs and religions issued by the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State of Vietnam, which affirmed equal rights among religions, were welcomed by a large number of Protestant dignitaries and believers. Last time the Protestant dignitary have actively participated in all fields of social life and have made practical and remarkable contributions in the fields of culture, morality, lifestyle, social security, and community development.

In the future, there is a positive and progressive path towards the harmonious development between religion and society which should be promoted./.

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**Notes:**

- 1 See: Lê Văn Thái (1971), *Bốn mươi sáu năm trong chức vụ* [Fourty Six Years in Implementing My Function], Hồi kí, Cơ quan xuất bản Tin Lành, Sài gòn .
- 2 Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 234/SL on June 14th, 1955 by the President of Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
- 3 The constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), Hanoi, 1963, p. 3.
- 4 Pastor Lê Văn Thiện (2001), “Phương hướng phát triển Hội Thánh” [the Direction of the Church Development], *Người Chấn Bậy*, N<sup>o</sup>. 9, pp. 13-20.
- 5 Pastor Lê Văn Thiện (2000), *Hướng về Đại hội Tin Lành toàn quốc* [Towards the National Protestant Congress], Nha Trang.
- 6 Pastor Thái Phước Trường (2011), *Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam 100 năm hình thành và phát triển* [The Evangelical Church of Vietnam - 100 Years of Establishment and Development], Hồ Chí Minh City, p. 102.
- 7 Pastor Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 130.
- 8 Hội Thành Tin Lành Việt Nam (miền Nam), *Hiến chương* [the Constitution], Pub: Tôn giáo, Hanoi, 2002, p. 1.
- 9 *Điều lệ của Hội Thành Tin Lành Việt Nam* [the Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam], Printer: Tin Lành, Sài gòn, 1958, p. 25.
- 10 Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam, *Hiến Chương 2001* [the Constitution 2001], Pub: Tôn giáo, Hanoi, 2002.

- 11 Reg Reimer, “Động thái mới tôn giáo và xã hội” [New Movements in Religions and Societies], trong *Đạo Tin Lành những dấu ấn lịch sử và hiện tại (Tọa đàm kỷ niệm 500 năm cái cách Tin Lành)* [Protestantism - the Stamp of History and Present (the Celebration Seminar: 500 Years of Protestantism)], Pub: Tôn giáo, Hanoi, 2019, p. 270.
- 12 Mã Phúc Thanh Tươi (2019), “Những thách thức cho công việc truyền giáo của đạo Tin Lành: Phản ánh tích cực và tiêu cực tại một số khu vực” [Challenges for Evangelization: Positive and Negative Responds in Regions], trong *Đạo Tin Lành những dấu ấn lịch sử và hiện tại (Tọa đàm kỷ niệm 500 năm cái cách Tin Lành)*, [Protestantism - the Stamp of History and Present (the Celebration Seminar: 500 Years of Protestantism)], Pub: Tôn giáo, Hanoi, 2019, p. 225.
- 13 See: Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (miền Nam) [the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) (2011), *Kỷ niệm 90 năm Tin Lành đến Việt Nam (1911-2001)* [the Celebration of 90 Years the Good News comes Vietnam], Ho Chi Minh City.
- 14 Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 180.
- 15 Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 180.
- 16 Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 170.
- 17 Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (miền Nam) [the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) (2011), *Kỷ niệm 90 năm Tin Lành đến Việt Nam (1911-2001)* [the Celebration of 90 Years the Good News comes Vietnam], Ho Chi Minh City, p. 26.
- 18 Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (miền Nam) [the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) (2011), *Kỷ niệm 90 năm Tin Lành đến Việt Nam (1911-2001)* [the Celebration of 90 Years the Good News comes Vietnam], Ho Chi Minh City, p. 26.
- 19 Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 125.
- 20 *Sống trong lẽ thật* [Living in the Truth], Tài liệu Đại Hội Đồng Tổng Liên hội Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam lần thứ 47 [the Document of the 47th General Assembly of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), Ho Chi Minh City, 2017, p. 69.
- 21 Thái Phước Trường (2011), *ibid*, p. 187.
- 22 [www://giaopham.com](http://giaopham.com) update on December 30th, 2010.

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5. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam (2001), *Kỷ niệm 90 năm Tin Lành đến Việt Nam (1911-2001) - những sự kiện và hình ảnh* [the Celebration of 90 Years the Good News comes Vietnam (1911-2001) - Events and Images], Ho Chi Minh City.
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7. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam (2005), *Khai trình của Ban Trị Sự Tổng Liên Hội nhiệm kỳ 2001-2005 tại Đại Hội Đồng Tổng Liên Hội lần thứ 44 (1-4/3/2005)* [the Opening Speech of the Board of the General Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) at the 44th General Assembly (on March 1st-4th, 2005)], Ho Chi Minh City.
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13. Lê Văn Thiện (2001), “Phương hướng phát triển Hội Thánh” [the Direction of the Church Development], *Người Chăn Bầy*, (9), pp. 13-20.
14. Thái Phước Trường (2011), *Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam 100 năm hình thành và phát triển* [the Evangelical Church of Vietnam - 100 Years of Establishment and Development], internal document, Ho Chi Minh City.