

## GUIDELINES AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM IN THE CURRENT YEARS

***Abstract:** Entering the period of “Doi Moi”, “opening the door”, choosing and affirming the direction of “Living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and the Nation” of Protestant organizations and denominations is the motto to lead the dignitaries and Protestants to integrate into society, comply with the law, actively participate in charity and social activities. This article indicates the aforementioned topic and analyzes the recent activities of Protestant organizations, denominations, and their charitable and social activities in Vietnam.*

***Keywords:** Protestantism; credo; charity; Vietnam.*

### **1. Operation motto of Protestant organizations and denominations in Vietnam**

Since its establishment in 1955, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)- the first Protestant church operated under the regime of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam - has clearly stated in its Regulations that “The purpose of the Evangelical Church is a gathering of Vietnamese people who worship God and believe in the Salvation of Jesus Christ to form a single church” with the motto included 2 points as follows:

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1) Wholehearted devotion to the Trinity.

2) Love the Fatherland, protect the peace, practice justice, charity, freedom, equality and labor.

The Church also stated its attitude towards society that “The Church has the duty to educate its followers on patriotism, civic duties, a sense of respect for the people’s government and the laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Church unites with the whole people to build a peaceful, unified, independent, democratic, rich and strong Vietnamese Fatherland”.<sup>1</sup>

Entering the period of recovery and development since the 1990s, in order to keep up with the trend of the times and the situation of the country, to be equal and consistent with the direction of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North),<sup>2</sup> the church has continued to affirm its operating motto: “Living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and Nation”.<sup>3</sup> This is also an innovative and modern change, with new words and expressions in the new context of the country and society to suit, and similar to the Protestant community in the South and the whole country.

The 2001 Charter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) and the 2013 Charter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)- the two largest Protestant organizations in Vietnam clearly stated the contents of their social orientation as follows:

Chapter VII “*Responsibilities to society*”, Article 53 of the Charter wrote that “The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) respects the Constitution and laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Educating believers about patriotism, civic duties, a sense of respect for the law, and solidarity with the whole people to build the country and protect the peace.

Participating in activities in the fields of health, education, charity, and social security as prescribed by law”.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam, which was recognized as a legal entity by the State in 2008, is currently the denomination with the third highest number of dignitaries and believers in the country. Its Charter stated the principle of “Faithfully worshiping the Triune God in accordance with the Bible and loyalty to the Fatherland of Vietnam”, along with the direction: “Faithful to Biblical truth, accompanying with the nation, compliance with the Constitution and the Law”.<sup>5</sup> In Chapter III “*Social relations*”, Article 16 “*Relationships of the Church to the Government*” states as follows: “The Church obeys God’s teachings, loves, and regularly prays for the rulers” and “take virtue and honesty to live a peaceful life”, “Compliance with the law and fulfilling the duties of a citizen”.<sup>6</sup>

The Baptist Convention of Vietnam (BCV), Section 5 “*Directions*” of the Charter clearly stated that “The direction of operation of the Baptist Convention of Vietnam: Living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland, attachment to the nation, and compliance with the law”.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding “*Social relations*”, Chapter VII of the Charter, Article 49 “*Responsibilities towards society*” wrote that: The Baptist Convention of Vietnam operates in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and complies with regulations of state agencies.

Educating believers about patriotism, national pride, civic duties, a sense of respect for the law, solidarity with the whole people to build the country and protect peace”.<sup>8</sup>

The United Presbyterian Church in Vietnam (UPCV) is a Protestant denomination that was recognized as a religious organization by the State in 2008. The Charter of the United Presbyterian Church in Vietnam has 9 chapters and 64 articles, showing the attachment of the Church to the nation, loyalty to the Fatherland, and observance of the law. The direction and principle of operation is “Wholeheartedly worshiping the Triune God; respect God, love people, serve God, serve the Fatherland and the nation, and obey the law”.<sup>9</sup>

The Pentecostal Christian denomination in Vietnam affirms to operate according to the following principles and purposes: “Living according to God’s word, serving God, serving the Fatherland, the Nation, and compliance with Vietnamese laws”.<sup>10</sup>

The United Gospel Outreach Church of Vietnam is an organization belonging to Protestantism, established in Vietnam in 1997, registered for religious activities in 2018 with the motto and purpose as follows: “Loving God, loving people; worshiping God; church building; living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and the Nation; compliance with the Constitution and the law”.

The Vietnam Full Gospel Church, which was granted a certificate of registration for religious activities by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs in 2019, identifies its operating principles and purposes as follows: “Worship God, love people, live the gospel, obey the law, and attach to the nation”

Thus, most Protestant organizations and denominations in Vietnam have a positive attitude toward the relationship between the State and the Church. They have the directions of operation such as social integration, actively directing believers and dignitaries to obey the government, and participating in social works: charity and humanitarianism.

## **2. Charity and social activities of Protestant organizations and denominations in Vietnam**

Based on the doctrines, nearly all Protestant organizations and denominations have the same principle, the purpose is “*Love God and Love People*” (*Kính mến Chúa và Yêu Người*), therefore, social activities, charity, social security about essence are the natural, educated actions of believers.

In addition, the charitable and social works to help the poor, victims of natural disasters, and epidemics of the Protestantism have met religious piety and are useful means of gaining sympathy with the community, an effective method of evangelization.

This is even more important when Protestantism is a young religion, conducting dynamic and active evangelization with all believers participating. Moreover, they are still a minority religious community among other religions.

In the Law on Belief and Religion, Article 55 regulates education, health care, social protection, charity and humanitarian activities “Religious organizations may participate in education, training, health care, social protection, charity and humanitarian activities in accordance with relevant laws”.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Protestant community in Vietnam currently has only about 1.2 million people, ecclesiastical organizations and Protestant denominations have actively participated in this field.

The two largest Protestant churches in Vietnam have been active in the fields of charity, health care, and relief through two agencies such as the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) and the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North).

The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) regularly has relief work for people in areas affected by natural disasters such as floods, storms, and crop failures. In addition, there are medical activities such as organizing medical teams to go to remote areas, mountainous areas, and islands for medical examination, giving free medicines to the sick, and gifts to the poor. In 2011, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) cooperated with Korea's Vision Care organization to provide free eye surgery for 125 patients and cooperated with delegations from Taiwan, and Australia to examine and treat teeth for 6,000 people in the central provinces. From 2009 to 2013, the Health and Social Affairs Committee organized medical consultation and treatment for nearly 30,000 people with an expenditure of 2,6 billion VND. There are also programs such as free medicine cabinet, dental examination, heart surgery.

For the term from 2014 to 2017, the Committee organized 45 medical consultation and treatment trips for 21,000 people which cost 1.7 billion VND. In addition, specific jobs such as organizing projects to provide clean water, activities to help poor children, and developing household economies were also implemented by the church. The Health and Social Affairs Committee provided relief in many places in the country and abroad with a budget of more than 4 billion VND. To sum up the data, in the four years from 2009 to the end of 2013, the total

budget of the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) was 32 billion VND, twice as much as for the term from 2005 to 2009. For the 2014-2017 term, the total budget of the Health and Social Affairs Committee was 46 billion VND, of which nearly 70% of the funding came from foreign organizations and churches, 26% came from within the Church.<sup>12</sup>

The Health and Social Affairs Committee of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) has also implemented similar projects such as free medical consultation and treatment, medicine bags, medicine cabinets, clean water, construction and repair of houses, scholarships for students, heart surgery, relief for flood victims in the Central region.

The Health and Social Affairs Committee of the General Church (Tổng hội) has organized free medical consultation and treatment and distributed medicines in many places such as Nam Dinh, Thai Nguyen, Ha Nam, Hai Phong, Bac Son (Lang Son), Bac Giang, Thanh Hoa, Thai Binh, Do Son (Hai Phong). The total number of people coming to medical consultation and receiving medicine was 3,721 in 2010, 5,148 in 2011, and 5,323 in 2012.

The General Church and the Committee also actively participated in relief for victims of flood in the Central region through the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front and cooperated with local authorities at all levels during the last term. At the 35th General Assembly in Hanoi, the Church Leadership Board reaffirmed its status as a member of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front with 3 pastors currently members of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front Committee. The General Church has always guided believers to do well in social

works, actively build a new life in residential areas, and participate in movements launched by the Vietnamese Fatherland Front such as “The program of hunger eradication and poverty reduction”; “All people unite to build a new life in residential areas”; “Vietnamese people prefer to use Vietnamese goods”.

The Church actively participates in charity works such as helping the poor, giving scholarships to poor students who overcome difficulties, giving warm clothes and warm blankets to compatriots affected by natural disasters, building charity houses, free medical consultation, etc..

The Church also participated in blood donation at the National Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion; gave 8,500 Christmas gifts to children in mountainous provinces; donated land, funds, and 1,300 man-days to build 16 concrete roads in Thai Nguyen province. These activities are a concrete manifestation of the religious lifestyle in the spirit of “Loving God, loving people”, which is the result of the implement the Church’s progressive spiritual practice of “Living the gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and the nation”.

#### *The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vietnam*

As a Christian church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has had a presence in Vietnam for over 100 years. The Church always actively participates in the implementation of the policy launched by the Vietnam Fatherland Front and promotes the role of religion in environmental protection and response to climate change. The Church professed its operating principles in the Charter as follows: “Worship of the living Triune God; Respect God, love people, serve the Fatherland and the nation, act according to the law”.

Local churches participated in the campaign “All people unite to build new rural and civilized cities” to contribute to “Cultural residential areas of the urban ward”.

In community activities, the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church has implemented the following works: guiding churches to respond to the call of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, actively implementing specific actions such as preserving the green- clean- beautiful landscape at the premises of the worship places; printing 12 books on environmental protection; organizing summer Bible week; health counseling for the elderly and the poor; participating in activities of social security, environmental protection, response to climate change.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vietnam has 3 models in Phu Nhuan district (Ho Chi Minh City), R’Chai (Lam Dong), and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Hanoi. Outstanding activities of these models include a healthy lifestyle through Sabbath lessons, mobilizing the community to help the poor, building sustainable agricultural livelihoods, management of disaster risk, clean water programs, and cow banking projects. The churches in Lam Dong, Dak Lak, and Gia Lai advocated for the practice of not cutting down watershed forests and not polluting the environment; educating youth to practice environmental protection and climate change response; supporting the poor to improve their material and spiritual life through various activities.

Besides the activities of the Church, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), headquartered at 02 Me Tri Thuong, Nam Tu Liem district, Hanoi) also carries out many useful activities for the community according to the spirit

of the Adventist. Each year, the ADRA provides financial and technical assistance to the Government's social security programs. Over the past 27 years, ADRA has supported 200 projects. From 2014 to 2018, each year ADRA supports 3 million USD, equivalent to 69 billion VND/year, totaling about 345 billion VND/5 years.<sup>13</sup>

*Baptist Convention of Vietnam (Southern)*

Since being recognized by the State, the Baptist Convention of Vietnam (Southern) has held two General Assembly sessions, all religious activities comply with the law, with the direction of "Living gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland, sticking to the nation, and obeying the law". During the last term, the Church has built 165 loving shelters, mobilized 35 tons of rice, 2,300 gifts for children, hundreds of blankets, mosquito nets, and millions of VND to support charity programs and funds and other social protection associations.

*The United Gospel Outreach Church of Vietnam*

It operates with the principle and purpose of "Loving God, loving people; worshipping God; building a church; living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and the Nation; complying with the Constitution and the law". During the ceremony to receive the Certificate of Religious Activities in 2018, the Church Governing Council gave 50 electric scooters worth 30,000,000 VND to people with difficulties and 100 wheelchairs for disabilities cost 160,000,000 VND.

*The Vietnam Full Gospel Church*

In 2019, when the Church had just received registration for religious activities, it donated 100 million VND to support people affected by natural disasters, storms, and floods in the

northern provinces through the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front in Ho Chi Minh City.

*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon Church)*

It is a religious organization that has been present in Vietnam since the 1960s. In 2016, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs issued a decision on the official establishment of the Representative Board of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of Vietnam with nearly 2,500 believers living in 11 sites. This church operates mainly in Hanoi City, Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, An Giang, and Dong Nai.

Besides religious activities, the Board of Representatives and groups have joined hands with the community to participate in environmental protection and response to climate change in recent years. The results include coordinating with the Fatherland Front Committee of Hanoi in disseminating and propagating environmental protection work to the believers at 11 groups, sending members to participate in training sessions and conferences in the City; teaching believers to follow the doctrine to protect their health, families, and the surrounding environment (do not drink alcohol, tea, coffee, smoke, etc.); coordinate with the Red Cross and the Central Women's Union to go to remote areas to study ways to support local people to stabilize their lives and raise environmental awareness.

*Social and charity activities, drug addiction treatment of inter-denominations*

With help from many sources, Pentecostal groups are a force with extensive experience in supporting addiction treatment with physical and psychological therapy centers to care for drug

addicts. The model of Rehabilitation class in the *Protestant detoxification ministry (Phục hồi trong mục vụ Tin Lành cai nghiện)* of the Evangelical Church and the group of Pastor Nam Quoc Trung were officially allowed to test for 3 years (from 2014 to 2016) at the Center for Healing - Labor Education No. II under the approval of the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Religious Affairs of Hanoi City. Preliminary results of the three-year period are relatively positive. From the success of this model, combined with the previous model of the Rehabilitation Center of Grace in Thai Binh of Pastor Nguyen Van Cam, this work has been replicated in localities, one of which is the establishment and operation of the Aquila Center in Phu Man Commune, Quoc Oai District, Hanoi in 2018. In addition to the Aquila Center, there are more than 70 addiction treatment centers in Vietnam, most of which belong to the Pentecostal denominations, more than 50 centers belonging to the Vietnam Full Gospel Church and 20 centers belonging to the United Gospel Outreach Church of Vietnam chaired by Pastor Pham Dinh Nhan.

This activity has been responded by other churches and denominations of the Protestantism in the North, including the role of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), the Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam.

### **3. Protestant organizations, churches and the community to fight the Covid-19 epidemic**

Recently, during the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic, following the call for all people to prevent and control the Covid-19 epidemic of the General Secretary, the President, the Prime Minister, and the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front. National Steering Committee for Disease

Prevention and Control, with the spirit of “love your neighbor as yourself”, and “obey the authorities”, Protestant organizations and denominations have joined hands to prevent and control the Covid-19 epidemic with many meaningful and practical activities, specifically as follows:

During the first months of the outbreak of the disease, according to the incomplete statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, April 3, 2020, the organizations such as the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), the Vietnam Christian Mission, The United Gospel Outreach Church of Vietnam, The Vietnam Full Gospel Church, the Mennonite Church in Vietnam, the Assemblies of God in Vietnam (AGVN), Protestant community in Hanoi (Word of Life Vietnam Church and some foreign Protestant groups), European-American Protestant group, Bethel Protestant groups in Ho Chi Minh City donated 1.5 billion VND in cash, 90,820 masks, 1,180 medical protective suits, 1,500 bottles of antiseptic solution, 12.5 tons rice and many working days through Fatherland Front Committees at all levels.

There are many touched stories about the effort of the Protestant communities to prevent epidemics such as the careful preparation of 1,000 gifts dedicated to the medical staff, soldiers, and policemen on the front lines of epidemic prevention and control of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (southern); the savings and donation of every change of money of the Dao and Hmong believers in Bac Son district, Lang Son province (17,880,000 VND), ethnic minority believers in Cao Bang province belonging to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North) with the amount of 82,620,000 VND transferred to the

Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front; an initiative to call for believers to change their working days to help each other harvest crops, maintain production to provide local wages and donate labor days to clean villages and hamlets according to the government's call of the Vietnam Christian Mission.<sup>14</sup>

By the present time (November 2021), through 04 violent outbreaks, there have been active support and relief activities of the Protestant communities as follows:

*The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)*

According to data from the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the General Union - the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the Committee has provided financial support for nearly 380 families with infected or isolated people with a budget of more than 500 million VND, 300 gifts (500,000 VND) and medical masks to thank and encourage the working spirit of sanitary environmental workers of the City during the epidemic. When receiving 100 oxygen machines by Protestants in Hong Kong, on July 18, Pastor Phan Vinh Cu, Vice President I, of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), in charge of the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the General Union and members of the Committee gave 20 oxygen machines to the No. 1 field hospital for Covid-19 treatment in the National University of Ho Chi Minh City, and the remaining machines will be distributed to other field hospitals.

In order to join hands with the Government in the effort to vaccinate the people, from May 28, the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the General Union issued a *Letter* calling on Christian churches, believers, and businessmen to contribute to

the *Vaccine Fund*. On July 21, a delegation of the Health and Social Affairs Committee of the General Union visited the headquarters of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front Committee in Ho Chi Minh City and donated 1.1 billion VND to the Government's Covid-19 vaccine fund.<sup>15</sup>

*The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)*

Although there are no comprehensive statistics about donations and support from the churches through the local Fatherland Fronts, according to the General Union's Announcement, over the past time, the churches and groups have actively participated in epidemic prevention and control, supporting the epidemic prevention and control fund, the Government's vaccine fund. Many churches have implemented programs to help the community in different programs such as the love rice bags of Hanoi Church, meals, gifts, and vegetables for the poor, the homeless, and unemployed workers of the Community Church.

The General Union commends and calls churches to promote this spirit. Responding to the program "Million gifts of great solidarity to support the Southern people to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic" of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, the Standing Committee of the General Union calls on the children of God throughout the Church, with the spirit of loving your neighbor like yourself, continue to support this meaningful program.<sup>16</sup>

*The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vietnam*

The Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vietnam made the donation at the call of the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front with 1 million gifts to people in

the southern provinces affected by the Covid-19 epidemic. The Church called on the believers to contribute to help lonely households, workers in motels, isolated households, F0 and F1 families in Phu Nhuan and Binh Tan districts, Thu Duc and Can Tho cities, Long An province, etc,... and contributed to the Vaccine Fund in 07 times since the 4th outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic with a total amount of 746,988,000 VND.<sup>17</sup>

*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon Church)*

Through the Charity organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the church has had outstanding relief activities during the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic such as in March 2020: Donating 5,000 masks worth 300 million VND through the Fatherland Front of Hanoi City in the prevention of the Covid-19 epidemic; in September 2020: Donating 1,000 Covid-Test kits worth 400 million VND to Hanoi City; in May 2021: Support 1,230 essential food gifts worth 575 million VND for poor and disadvantaged women and children affected by the epidemic in Bac Giang in cooperation with the Central Women's Union of Vietnam; in June 2021: Donating 3,000 Covid-Test kits worth 735 million VND through the Fatherland Front of Hanoi City in the fight against the Covid-19 epidemic; in July 2021: Donating 35 tons of rice worth 23,000 USD (estimated at 517 million VND)- supporting poor workers affected by the epidemic in Bac Ninh province; in August 2021: Support 10 respirators worth 56,000 USD (about 1,3 billion VND), for Covid-19 patients at the Military Hospital 175 and Thu Duc Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City; in August 2021: Through the Women's Union of Ho Chi Minh City implemented social security activities, supported 2,400 gifts, 1,350 protective suits, 11,450 N95 masks

for disadvantaged women and children affected by the Covid-19 epidemic and the total value of the gifts is 95,000 USD (about 2,19 billion VND); in August 2021: Support medical equipment and respirators for the hospital for Covid-19 patients treatment in Dong Nai province with an estimated budget of 96,638 USD (2,223 million VND); in August 2021: Support medical equipment and respirators for Son La and Quang Ninh provinces with a total value of 231,265 USD (5 billion 273 million VND); in August 2021: Support respirators for Binh Phuoc and Dak Lak provinces with a total value of 205,429 USD (4 billion 684 million VND); in October 2021: Support 3,000 Covid-19 test kits to An Giang province with a value of 12,180 USD (278 million VND).

From March 2020 to early September 2021, the charity organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has implemented 15 projects with a total cost of 1,08 million USD equivalent to 25 billion 82 million VND. All of the aforementioned funds came from the fasting and humanitarian work donations of Church members around the world.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, the State's policy of religious equality and solidarity, directing religions to accompany the nation and unite in diversity has received the response of a large number of religious dignitaries and followers including Protestantism. It has aroused the resources of solidarity and social construction, building a better country.

In that trend, most Protestant organizations and denominations have had a harmonious and positive attitude toward the relationship between the State and the Church. Therefore, they

have determined the direction of activities, actively guided believers and dignitaries to comply with the law, and participated in social works such as charity and humanitarianism.

Although the scale of social and charity activities of the Protestant communities has been modest compared to some other religious communities, however, it is a religion with nearly 1,2 million followers, most of them are ethnic minorities, and its contribution is very precious. In addition, it has shown the consensus of many dignitaries and Protestants with the common cause and future of the country. This is a remarkable bright spot of religious and social life in Vietnam at present./.

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**NOTES:**

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8. Charter of the Baptist Convention of Vietnam. Amended in 2016, p. 11.
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  17. Pastor Trần Thanh Truyền, “Vai trò của Cơ đốc Phục lâm trong các nỗ lực ứng phó của người Việt Nam với các vấn đề mà xã hội đang đối mặt” (*The role of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of Vietnam in response to the social problems*), Tham luận Hội thảo *Đời sống tôn giáo Việt Nam hiện nay (Presentation on Seminar on religious life in Vietnam today)*, 2021.
  18. Information provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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