

**SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CHURCH  
ORGANIZATION - A MAIN REASON MAKING A PART OF  
ETHNIC MINORITIES CONVERTING TO PROTESTANTISM  
IN VIETNAM**

***Abstract:** Protestantism has been spreading to Vietnam for more than a century. Until the 1980s, this religion developed “evenly”, but gradually appeared in many places, concentrated in the provinces and cities of the South, and also experienced ups and downs, sometimes falling in followers as the first decade after the unification of the country. However, in the last three decades, Protestantism has evolved, especially in large urban areas and ethnic minorities. Based on the analysis of some of the characteristics of the evangelical organization spreading in the Hmong ethnic area, the article provides an answer to the question of why not other religions but Protestantism has a significant increase in membership of ethnic minorities in recent decades.*

***Keywords:** Catholicism; Protestantism; ethnic minority; Hmong people; Vietnam.*

**1. Specific characteristics of Protestantism’s church organization**

In 2017, Protestant denominations celebrated 500 years of religious reform in Germany by Martin Luther (1483-1546), it did not only opened a new period in the religious life of the West but it also led to many major changes in social and political life in Europe in general. Protestantism was spread to Vietnam in particular, to the East Asia in general for 3 or 4 centuries later than Catholicism. However, the current number of Protestants amounted to several tens of millions in

---

\* Asst.Prof. Dr., Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

East Asia region and it can be said that the number of believers is not less than Catholics. Regardless of the case of South Korea where the spread of Protestantism has been more successful, in Vietnam, the recent increase in membership of this religion has led its status in Vietnamese society, especially among ethnic minorities where accounted for one third of the nation's Protestants. Although Catholicism has been introduced into the ethnic minorities for a century why it did not have a success like Protestant denominations?

In the case of the Hmong, it is obviously that the weakness of the traditional religions is a premise for the Hmong's conversion. But the conversion to any religion depends on many other factors.

To return to this issue in Vietnam, it should not be forgotten that as soon as Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam, there were changes in the religious map of the country with the spread of Christianity to ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and in the Northern mountainous provinces. The presence of Catholicism in the ethnic minority areas served as a forerunner during colonial times, paved the way for the introduction of Protestantism into these areas. In recent decades, why the Hmong in particular, many ethnic minorities in general have predominantly converted to Protestantism?

It should be affirmed that for the majority of the Hmong, the conversion to Catholicism or to a denomination of the Protestantism is not very important because they did it in following their feelings. Except for some leaders of church or team leaders who have a certain understanding of the doctrine through short-term training courses, most believers do not understand much about Christian doctrine. Moreover, they do not know the differences among Protestant denominations or the difference between Protestant and Catholic theology. Followers mainly learn by heart the hymn, attend church, listen to preach, link the basic ethical, canonical provisions of Christianity with their daily life practicality. Therefore, in many cases, they have converted from Catholicism to Protestantism or from this Protestant denomination to the other one without having perturbation. A believer in Yen Bai province told that she converted from

Catholicism to Protestantism because she could sing much more in following this group and everyone there sang better.

Therefore, some believers even do not know what Protestant denomination they belong to. Our research team had an interview with a Protestant in Cat Thinh commune, Tram Tau district, Yen Bai province, who had converted to Catholicism in 2010 then converted to Protestantism in 2014. He did not know what denomination he was following but there was a pulpit, the Bible, the calendar of Vietnam Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian in his house. The interview as follows:

Question: When did you convert to Catholicism?

Answer: I converted to Catholicism in 2010. Then, my mother also converted because my father had died, my mother followed me.

Q: What was the reason led you converted to Catholicism?

A: Both my mother and me had illness. I was cured but my mother's illness could not be cured so we converted.

Q: Do you believe that Christ will help your mother recover from illness?

A: I believe.

Q: Why did you switch to Protestantism?

A: Because believers sang [the hymn] better when I attended church services.

Q: Who preached weekly to Protestants there?

A: Everyone could preach depended on his/her knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the interview with believers showed a vivid reality. The cause of their conversion to Protestantism is simple. However, if we explored this problem more deeply, it is not difficult to realize the significant differences in the church's organization between Catholicism and Protestantism's denominations. The issue is not only the difference from Catholicism in terms of clergy hierarchy, but it is also the simple ritual of the Protestant denominations.

*Firstly*, the training of Protestant dignitaries is much simpler than that of Catholicism in terms of theology. The conditions of selection, educational level and the requirements of religious life are also much lower than those of Catholicism.

**Table 1: Comparison of the dignitaries' training between Catholicism and Protestantism**

<b>The process of training a priest</b>	<b>The process of training a pastor</b>
- The conditions of selection: Male only, graduated a university, having a bachelor's degree.	- The conditions of selection: Male and female, graduated a high school, the priority is given to mountainous and remote areas, candidates in grade 7 or even lower.
- An entrance examination of the seminary three subjects: catechism, Vietnamese and foreign language.	- An entrance examination of the Bible School.
- Attended the seminary for six years, the program includes philosophy, theology, sciences and social sciences.	- Attended the Bible School for four years, the program includes 120 credits of philosophy, theology, sciences and social sciences.
- Performed pastoral work for 2 years, ordained deacon during this time, finally, ordained priests, taken a vow of celibacy.	- Do not take a vow of celibacy, recognized pastor.

*Source:* Union University International (Viện Thần học Tin Lành Việt Nam). [www.vn.uui.us/cu-nhan-than-hoc](http://www.vn.uui.us/cu-nhan-than-hoc)

The aforementioned comparison showed that the criteria for becoming a pastor are much simpler than a priest.

Q: Are you a pastor?

A: Not yet, I am a preacher, a group leader.

Q: Every year, you come Hanoi to study. Can you tell about your study?

A: I studied there for three years from 2011 to 2013. My study ended last year. In 2014, I had an internship for one year. Since this year, I have had two seminars a year.

Q: What grade were you in?

A: I was in grade 4. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to study higher.

Q: What is the standard for becoming a pastor? Can you become a pastor?

A: According to the Church's regulations, I must graduate the grade 12. However, it is difficult to have a high school student among the Hmong. So after years of serving the church, I can come Hanoi to learn doctrine then will be ordained<sup>2</sup>.

It should be noted that the provision of accessing the theological study to be a pastor is different among Protestant denominations. For example, students must be educated in Grade 12 for the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North and South). But for other denominations, such as Christian Fellowship Church, Pentecostism, etc., the requirement may be lower. In addition, there is not only the difference in the training program of the Catholic Seminaries and the Bible schools of the Protestant churches, but it is also the strict religious life of the Catholic seminarians in comparison with the student's life of the Bible schools such as taking a vow of celibacy, limited using the Internet, etc.,

*Secondly*, the Protestant church's structure consists of flexible groups gathered a dozen of Hmong household. Pastors, missionaries of Protestant denominations are mostly young H'mong. They are dynamic, creative, married and they frequently visit their relatives. In the context of scattered villages with poor transport infrastructure, it is a great advantage of the Protestant churches. Meanwhile, Catholics only can attend church services with the presence of a priest or a deacon, and they must go half a day to the church for the religious activities. For Protestant denominations, a group leader who can sing hymns and has knowledge of catechesis has been able lead the religious activities. It is clear that the Protestant churches are much more flexible. In fact, we have found that the Hmong can have religious activities in the house of the group leader or of a believer though there is no church or chape in many places.

*Thirdly*, in term of theology, Protestants can directly communicate with God without mediation while Catholics can only do through an intermediary such as a bishop, a priest, a deacon. Is this also an advantage of Protestantism? It should be noted that in the mind of the Hmong, the Hmong king is also an invisible figure in the myth.

A Protestant group leader told the research team as follows:

Q: Ghost and God, who are you afraid of?

A: I am never afraid of God. I can talk to God such as today, I go to work... God comes with me. I am never dare to talk to ghost. I knew that ghost is a liar and it kill people. The origin of murder is from ghost so I was scared. The person who is close to the ghost will be sick. I get closely to God, I feel better<sup>3</sup>.

In order to clarify the H'mong spirituality when they converted to Christianity, it may be necessary to continue study. It can be said that the Protestant denominations have several advantages in the ethnic minorities' area.

## **2. Advantages of Protestantism in propagating in the Northern Mountainous region.**

As mentioned above, Protestantism has been introduced later in comparison to Catholicism among ethnic minorities in the North. However, Protestantism has some advantages: it has been introduced into this area when the inhabitants are no longer strange to Christianity because the European missionaries who have been leading the way for more than a half of century.

In fact, the Catholic Church has had many efforts to overcome this situation. The State Administration of Religious Affairs in Dien Bien province noted that "The Diocese of Hung Hoa is increasingly interested in Catholic activities in the province. The Diocese sent dignitaries to the districts to visit and organize the masses on the major annual Catholic holidays such as Christmas, Confirmation. In recent years, the diocese of Hung Hoa has repeatedly proposed and sent representatives to meet and greet the Dien Bien provincial government and proposed the establishment of religious organizations (02 parishes: Dien Bien, Muong Nhe) and built worship facility to stabilize religious activities" (People's Committee of Dien Bien province, 2014).

However, there is a difficulty that the Catholic Church can hardly overcome: the Hmong generally live on the high mountains, craggy terrain, and they do not fluently speak official language. The Catholic

priests, including those who are superintending in the Hmong area, are mostly Kinh people. Although, these priests have knowledge of the Hmong language and customs, they have difficulties in the conversion of the Hmong to Catholicism. First, there is an issue of language. The Catholic priests can not preach in the Hmong language, while many Hmong are not fluent in official language. Next, the Catholic priests manage a parish in a large area, craggy terrain. The vicars are changed in rotation so they can not be attached all their life to the religious activities of ethnic minorities as European missionaries did in the previous century. Whereas, religious activities of Protestant denominations can take place weekly at the group leaders. Through the field study, we found that a larger space compared to many traditional H'mong houses is enough for a few dozen or hundreds of people can practice weekly religious activities. Catholicism's religious activities, especially on important occasions, require Masses be performed in churches. In fact, many Hmong Catholics often have to cross tens of kilometers to be able to attend Mass in the North West.

Why the Protestant denominations attracts many followers of ethnic minorities. In fact, the H'mong people in particular and ethnic minorities in general are not aware of differences in the doctrinal system, theological views, they just follow the Protestant denominations because they are appropriate for their circumstances. The way of propagation as well as the church organization is an important element. Due to strict regulations on the theological training process and the doctrine, there have been the Hmong Catholic priests in the United States, while Vietnam hasn't got any Hmong Catholic priests.

In term of religious activities' places, these Protestant denominations take full advantages of the present condition of Vietnam. During field research, we found that in the context of low educational level of the Hmong people, people was just in grade 4 can be elected as the group leader. For Catholicism, the cost of building a church is quite expensive, and for Protestant denominations, they only need a large space gathered a few dozen people which is temporarily changed into a chapel for religious activity of Protestant households.

During the colonial period, Catholicism had two churches, one in Sapa (Lao Cai) and one in Tram Tau (Yen Bai), so far, after a hundred year of efforts to spread the region in the ethnic minorities area, there are about ten Catholic churches in the northern mountainous area. Meanwhile, according to incomplete statistics, the number of the Protestant chapels and religious activity places has been hundreds for 30 years in the northern mountainous provinces. It needs a few households, they are not even recognized by the authorities, they have been able to organize themselves, they can temporarily gather in a private house while they continue to ask the authorities to have a place for religious activities.

According to results of the survey, the forces that play a pivotal role in expanding the Christianity (Protestant churches) are not highly educated ministers, pastors but most of them are native group leaders who are closer to inhabitants. They are the bridge between the pastors and the natives. Through direct interviews, we learned that few pastors from lowland provinces were able to preach in the uplands for many reasons, most of pastors, missionaries, native group leaders sometimes come to Hanoi, Danang, Saigon to attend catechetical courses, and embrace the Church's new spirit of communicating to believers.

The research group indicate some comments as follows:

Firstly, Protestantism in ethnic minority area continues to increase and the decline of traditional religion of many ethnic groups leads to its development. Whereas, religion is indispensable in the mind of many minorities in Vietnam. When their traditional religion is weakened, they come to Protestantism or another religion to compensate for the shortage of their mind. For the Hmong, beside the decline of the traditional religion, the similarities in the cosmic view between the Hmong people and Christianity promote them convert to Christian denominations. It is the reason why the highest rate of the Hmong people converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. The conversion of the Hmong will be continued as the result of the traditional religion's decline.

Secondly, the Directive 01 validated the Protestant community of ethnic minorities. However, the implementation of this policy is a long way ahead in the socio-political context. Because the authorities believe that there is a potential for instability caused by the religious activities of the Protestant denominations as well as the Hmong community; Religious issues intertwined with the ethnic culture and psychology. Obviously, the Directive 01 should not be regarded as a “multi-functional stick” in solving the issues related to Protestantism in ethnic minority areas. It is just a solution in a period. The current problem is the relationship between the Protestant communities and the traditional religion communities. The problem is much more complicated because it is not only a political dimension that can be quickly solved by policies, but it is cultural, religious issues and ethnic psychology.

In the context of relations between the various levels of government and religious organizations in some places are not always “agreeable” (com ngon canh ngot), the advantage of the Protestant denominations are increasingly promoted. The lack of rigor of the church organizations allows the Protestant group leaders to be flexible to solve problems. For example, over thirty years ago, Dien Bien province reported that there was “no religion”, there were not any churches, chapels, pagodas, dignitaries. The majority of people worshiped ancestors or performed their traditional religious ceremonies. So far, there has been a group of Buddhist, especially Protestants. The religious life of Dien Bien is also becoming more diversified in general. Recently, Catholics have also established parishes and churches.

**Table 2: Protestants in Dien Bien before and after the Directive 01**

Year	number of villages	number of households	number of people
2004	113	3.473	22.015
2013	308	8.200	49.935
2014		8.594	51.907

*Source: People’s Committee of Dien Bien province. Department of Internal Affairs, Report on the implementation of Resolution No.25-*

*NQ/TW of the Party Central Committee, the IXth Congress on religious affairs of Dien Bien province, No.1240/SNV-TG, dated 12/11/2014 and Report on the state management of religion in Dien Bien province in 2014, No.1319/BC-TG, dated 28/11/2014.*

### **Conclusion**

The aforementioned analyzes show that Protestantism has had a widespread in the ethnic minority areas of the northern mountainous provinces in the past three decades. Obviously, the Protestant denominations have encountered difficulties. For example, there has been intolerance of cultural values in the missionary region in general, ethnic minorities in particular. Thus, the disagreement between Protestants and believers of the traditional religion will lead to conflict within the community, and destabilize national security. For example, Pa Cáu in Dien Bien was in contact with Americans, accused the authorities of killing five Hmong believed in Vang Chu. It caused contradictions, disagreement between the Hmong believed in Vang Chu and the government. Mùa Đình Cống (from the United State of America) and some people in Dien Bien and Lai Chau propagandized, strengthened the belief in the establishment of the “H’mong State” and sponsored the organization to transport people to Laos and China, gave them the phone number of Li A Ease (in China) to contact.

The “six wings” group in Myanmar actively sought the support, communicated and mobilized the Hmong in Dak Lak to escape Myanmar and intended to hold a demonstration in May 2014 in Muong Nhe, Dien Bien (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2014). It raised the question whether the spread of Protestantism in ethnic minority areas in particular, in Vietnam in general is limited. This issue is beyond the scope of the article. This paper reaffirm that the missionary advantages of the Protestant denominations are undeniable. /.

**NOTES:**

- 1 The interview with Mr. VAD on April 28th, 2016. His family's members had believed in the traditional religion. His father was a Shaman (Chí Nénh). In 2010, his father's death created a "spiritual void" for the family members. At present, the second son maintains the traditional religion. His mother and two brothers converted to Protestantism. The brothers live together side by side. So far everyone confirms there is no religious quarrel (old religion, new religion). We asked how would the family organize the funeral when the mother died (Protestantism or traditional ritual), then people would say that in whose family the mother died, the funeral will be organized according to that family's religion.
- 2 The interview with HVS, the group leader of Khuổi Hẩu, Mai Long, Nguyễn Bình, Cao Bằng, in May 2015.
- 3 The interview with HVS, the group leader of Khuổi Hẩu, Mai Long, Nguyễn Bình, Cao Bằng, in May 2015.

**REFERENCES**

1. The Northwest Region Steering Committee (2014), *Report on the implementation of the tasks of three steering committees: Northwest, the Central Highlands, Southwest since the conference on September 14th, 2013 until the present day; orientations and tasks in the near future*, Yên Bái, November 3rd.
2. Ministry of Internal Affairs (2015), *Report on the results of work in 2014, the main task of the Department of Internal Affairs in 2015 related to the Northwestern provinces*, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. North West Program, Report on the situation of the area Northwest, Reference Materials.
3. Điện Biên Department of Internal Affairs (2014), *the 2014 Report on the State Management on Religious Affairs in Điện Biên Province*, N<sup>o</sup>. 1319/BC-TG dated the 28th of November.
4. Tapp Nicolas, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: the White Hmong of Northern Thailand*, Singapore University Press, 1989. Text from Phan Tường Vân translation, archived at Library of Institute for Religious Studies.
5. The author's field work in 2015.
6. See: [www.vn.uui.us/cu-nhan-than-hoc](http://www.vn.uui.us/cu-nhan-than-hoc)