

PROTESTANTISM IN THE SOUTHWEST PART OF VIETNAM: HISTORY, CURRENT SITUATION, AND PROBLEMS

Abstract: *The Southwest part of Vietnam is a new land, where many different ethnic groups live, so the cultural and religious life is also very diverse. In the cultural and religious diversity, Protestantism, a branch of Christianity, was introduced into Vietnam. Research on the history of introduction and existence of Protestantism in the Southwest region in comparison with other regions and current issues is an interested topic. This paper indicates the history of the Protestant missionary process in the Southwest region from the beginning to the present day. It also shows an analysis and comparison with other regions on missionary achievement, reception as well as cultural and religious reactions and problems.*

Keywords: *Protestantism; Southwest; Missionary.*

1. Evangelization of Protestantism in the Southwest region from its beginning until 1975

1.1. *The period from the beginning until 1945*

In 1911, three missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) established their headquarters in Tourane (Da Nang), the Protestant evangelization for the indigenous people formally began. In 1914, the missionaries of CMA officially established the Vietnam missionary district with 09 missionaries. In 1916, six missionaries were sent to Hanoi, Hai Phong to open missionary offices.

After a period of vigilance, deportation, the French authorities, in 1918, officially allowed missionaries to operate in 03 concession cities

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

such as Hanoi, Hai Phong, Tourane, and the colony of Cochinchina. Other places in Tonkin and Trung Ky (French protectorate) were nominally protected region so they were more tightly controlled.

Thus, Cochinchina included the Southwest region was not the first place where Protestant missionaries arrived; however, there was a relatively favorable legal status for missionaries.

Between 1921 and 1927, the missionaries and the native missionaries established missionary headquarters from the South to the North, such as Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long, Sa Đéc, Cần Thơ, Rạch Giá, Biên Hòa, Sài Gòn, Nha Trang, Đà Nẵng, Vinh, Thanh Hóa, Hà Nội, Hải Phòng. The number of missionary locations increased 24 locations in 1924, 37 locations in 1925, 87 locations in 1927.

Number of followers: there were 180 people in 1921, 1.571 people in 1924, 2.939 people in 1925 and 4.236 people in 1927 of 74 local churches¹.

In 1927, in Da Nang, the first official General Conference established the local church of *the French Protestant Church of the East (Hội Tin Lành Đông Pháp)*. The Constitution of 1928 stipulated the operating institutions of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam which included Local churches, Districts, and the General Assembly.

After the approval of the first Charter by the General Conference (in 1928), the delegates took the vote on division of 3 regions into 2 districts, namely *Trung - Bắc Kỳ* and *Nam Kỳ*. Thus, *the French Protestant Church of the East* had two districts, the Southwest region was belonged to the Southern District.

In 1932, according to the vote of the annual General Conference (Đại Hội Đồng thường niên), the *Trung - Bắc Kỳ* district was split into two, that are the Central and Northern districts. Since the Evangelical Church of Vietnam had 3 districts (Cochinchina was an ancient district, including Binh Thuan).

By the end of 1934, organizational growth was account for a total of 119 local churches: 38 in Tonkin (Bắc Kỳ), 34 in the Centre (Trung Kỳ) and 47 in Cochinchina (Nam Kỳ).

The General Conference of the General Assembly in 1934 presented the total number of followers of each region (district) as follows:

“The Southern district: The number of official believers (baptized) is 5.268 people; The number of unofficial followers is 1.405 people.

The Central district: The number of official believers is 1.545 people; The number of unofficial believers is 652 people.

The Northern district: The number of official believers is 421 people; The number of unofficial followers is 187 people.

Total: 7.234 official followers and 2.244 unofficial followers”².

Results of evangelization in the Southern District in the period from 1932 to 1942³

Year	Official believers	Baptized Believers of a year	Pray and believe in God	Main local districts	Branches of local districts
1932	4876	854	2069	34	22
1934	5185	377	1069		
1936	5692			40	21
1938	6313	474	2116		
1939	6500	628	1479		
1940	7065	581	1783	50	25
1941	7455	566	1763	51	34
1942	8159	449	1322	56	34

Sources: *Statistics of Thánh Kinh báo*.

Analysis of the data showed that there was a great difference in the proportion of official believers on the total number of believers among districts.

In 1935, there were only 164 baptized believers (official believers) among 1.000 neophytes in the North (Bắc Bộ); there were 722 baptized believers among 1.069 neophytes in the South (Nam Bộ); there were 346 baptized believers among 576 neophytes in the Centre (Trung Bộ)⁴. The cause came from the cultural collision of the prohibition of ancestor worship prescribed by Protestant missionaries.

In the traditional northern villages, the institutions of community such as family, village, and lineage were very sustainable which led to difficulty in evangelizing. Protestant evangelization was more effective in new lands, the South in particular.

1.2. The period from 1946 to 1954

Vietnam's political and social situation during the resistance war against French colonialism strongly influenced the missionary work, especially in the North and Centre. However, the situation in Southern Vietnam was different. It was the most stable and growing area of Protestantism during this period. Because the local churches had good financial resources, the war did not spread there. The psychological and social instability created a chance for evangelization of Protestantism. Thus, the number of local churches and followers increased.

During this period and especially from 1950 to 1952, the churches were consecutively built. Five churches were built in 1949; 25 churches were restored and repaired in the following year. The number of new believers baptized were 450 in 1949 and 397 in 1950; the local church of Can Tho had more than 500 believers⁵.

Thus, in the early missionary period, the Southern district including the Southwest region was the place where the evangelization of Protestantism obtained the most positive results compared to other missionary areas. The statistics showed that the number of followers, the rate of being baptized on the total number of followers, the number of local churches, facilities ranked first. According to figures of the Southern District in 1942, there were more than 8,000 official believers and compared with the number of 13,000 official followers of the South and Centre after 1954; the Southern district, mainly the Southwest, was accounted for more than 50 percent.

1.3. The period from 1955 to 1975

After the Geneva Agreements in 1954, according to Le Hoang Phu, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam only operated in the South and the Centre, had about 13,000 official believers. It began a new period of missionary activity with support of many international Protestant

organizations and denominations. In keeping up with the growth of the Church, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam rectified and reformed the administrative system from the General Assembly to the District, for example, in 1959, the Thuong Du District was under the management of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (This district had been formerly held by the CMA).

In 1962, the Central District was divided into 02 new districts such as the Central Centre and Southern Centre district (Trung Trung hạt, Nam Trung hạt). The decade of 1955-1965 was the decade in which the missionary activities of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam were promoted to a climax.

The growth in the number of followers as a result of missionary efforts was summarized by Le Hoang Phu as follows:

Data on the growth of believers of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam during the period between 1955 and 1965

Year	Number of followers	
	Baptized believers	Believers in general
1955	13,935	
1957	24,430	
1959	24,708	51,819
1960	27,296	
1962	32,823	
1963	37,222	
1964	40,214	81,079
1965	41,733	100,000

Sources: *Lê Hoàng Phú*⁶.

The period from 1965 to 1975 was the period that the Evangelical Church of Vietnam cooperated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Evangelical Association to implement missionary activities with the most modern means.

In Hau Giang region, there were Protestant ships, boats on the rivers, and Protestant vehicles on the roads. Evangelisation was conducted by radio, Bibles, books, newspapers everywhere, every time.

The period between 1965 and 1975 was also the period when the Evangelical Church of Vietnam developed and perfected its structures, organizations and executive agencies. In 1969, the Thuong Du District was split into 02 new districts, the Trung Thượng (Middle Upper) and Nam Thượng (Southern Upper) districts. The Southern District was also divided into Đông Nam (Southeastern) and Tây Nam (Southwestern) Districts.

In 1971, Southwestern District divided into Tien Giang District and Hau Giang District; the total number of districts was seven.

Thus, like the previous period, there was no specific statistics of the provinces in the Southwest (belonged to the Southern District) even in the following decades. However, in my opinion, this region had been the most stable development of Protestantism, then the Central Highlands had an increase the number of ethnic minority believers.

It can be said that until 1975, with the number of followers of about 160,000 (Baptized believers were about 55,000), the Protestantism had not a great influence in Vietnamese society.

2. Protestantism in the Southwest region from 1975 to present

2.1. The period from after 1975 to 2001

After the withdrawal of the foreign missionaries, international aid was stalled; many dignitaries, believers evacuated; Protestantism in the South in general and in the Southwest in particular was in a crisis.

In addition, after the 42th General Conference (Đại Hội Đồng) in Ho Chi Minh City (June 13-15, 1976), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)⁷ was not recognized by the State as a legal religious organization. Therefore, the regular organizational activities were impossible such as organizing the General Conference at all levels, training and ordination, transferable of dignitaries; printing Scriptures, use various missionary means, etc.

However, exception for the Central Highlands, the provinces and cities in the delta, the Southwest region in particular, the local churches and followers normally maintained their activities. In many places, local authorities still helped the churches to transfer managers, train dignitaries, etc.

The trend and necessity of the situation was to adapt, integrate, find ways to develop. Especially, in the process of innovation, opening, democratizing social life, the religious field was opened.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the recovery and promotion of missionary activities of Protestantism has begun, especially in ethnic minority communities of the Central Highlands.

There have been many changes in the dimension of denominations and organizations. There have been many new denominations, organizations and groups of Protestants through the “house church movement”. In the Southwest region, before 1975, there was the presence of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Currently, dozens of new organizations and denominations have been appeared.

The number of Protestants in the southern provinces in 2000, before the State allowed the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) to organize the General Conference and to be recognized the legal status, as follows:

Numerical order	Province, city	Number of followers	Numerical order	Province, city	Number of followers
1	An Giang	1,904	13	TP. HCM	22,570
2	Bạc Liêu	961	14	Khánh Hòa	8,262
3	Bình Dương	800	15	Kiên Giang	3,908
4	Bình Định	1,693	16	Kom Tum	1,020
5	Bình Thuận	8,450	17	Lâm Đồng	64,324
6	Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu	4,166	18	Long An	3,698
7	Cà Mau	1,900	19	Phú Yên	2,866
8	Cần Thơ	5,786	20	Quảng Nam	13,130
9	Đà Nẵng	8,515	21	Quảng Ngãi	2,097
10	Đắk Lắk	120,000	22	Sóc Trăng	1,621
11	Đồng Nai	12,362	23	Tây Ninh	271
12	Gia Lai	94,215	24	Vĩnh Long	4,404
Total: (24 Province, city): 388,523⁸					

Sources: *The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, Vietnam*

After being allowed by the State to organize the 1st General Conference (43th according to church history), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) published the 2002 Yearbook of the General

Assembly: In April 2001, this organization had 898 local churches, 798 dignitaries (pastors, missionaries including retiree), 149,551 official followers out of a total of 367,687 followers in general⁹.

It can be said that the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) had 50,000 baptized believers out of 160,000 believers in general in 1975; after 25 years, the number of followers has grown nearly three times; the ratio of ethnic minority believers to those of the Kinh people was one third (15,000/50,000 baptized believers) before 1975. The number of ethnic minority believers has reached 300,000 people in 3 provinces of the Central Highlands and Binh Phuoc province. The growth rate of the ethnic minority believers was 6 times on average, more than 10 times in some localities such as Dak Lak and Gia Lai. Data of some provinces in the Southwest did not show a sudden development.

2.2. The period from 2001 to the present

In 2001, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), the largest Protestant Church, was recognized as a juridical person. Then, the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions in 2004, and Directive 01 of the Prime Minister on *Some work in regard to Protestantism* was promulgated.

Protestantism was officially recognized and operated within the framework of the law. Next, 09 denominations and other organizations were also recognized as a juridical person. The relationship between the State and the Church has had many positive changes, proving that the Party's and State's guidelines and policies towards Protestantism are correct.

However, the granting of religious recognition as well as religious activities to Protestant organizations and denominations is also a long-term job. Currently, in addition to 11 recognized denominations as mentioned above, there have been more than 70 Protestant denominations or groups have had no legal status.

In the provinces of the Southwest region, after the process of implementing new policies on Protestantism, the situation of this

religious community in general has been harmonious, stable and developed. However, there has been a new phenomenon known as “conversion” in the area of the Khmer Theravada Buddhism.

Many researches on culture and religion have mentioned this problem. Tran Hong Lien in the article “The religious transformation of the Khmer in Tra Vinh at present” (Sự chuyển đổi tôn giáo trong người Khmer tại Trà Vinh hiện nay) found that the number of the Khmer converted to the Protestantism in districts such as Trà Cú, Duyên Hải, Tiểu Cần, Châu Thành, Càng Long... was 430 people (out of 1,286 Protestants here)¹⁰.

This is a very remarkable phenomenon because Theravada Buddhism is a tradition of the Khmer people. It is a cultural adhesive that is vital for the community. If it is broken it will lead to complicated consequences for sustainable development. Through analyzing and explaining, the author indicated the causes of the economic, social changes in the community life of the Khmer people; degradation, reducing the role of religious leaders, the main monk (Sư Cả) in caring the community; the missionary benefit, using the methods to attract by material benefits of the illegal Protestant denominations, groups.

Tran Huu Hop in the study “The conversion of a part of the Khmer in the Southwest region” (Sự cải giáo của một bộ phận người Khmer vùng Tây Nam Bộ) showed that: Although the Buddhist temple, for the Khmer, is a religious and a cultural center of the community, the conversion has taken place in recent years. Firstly, they converted to Catholicism, with 3,202 followers/715,054 Catholics in 13 provinces in the Southwest region (accounting for 0.45 percent).

For the conversion to Protestantism, according to the data of the Southwest Steering Committee and the author, there are some notable issues.

The figures of the Khmer Protestants in the Southwest
(The data of the Southwest Steering Committee in 2015 and the author)

Numerical order	Province	Protestants	Khmer Protestants	percentage (%)
1	An Giang	2,195	91	4.14
2	Bạc Liêu	961	128	13.31

3	Bến Tre	5,300	0	
4	Cà Mau	4,532	41	0.90
5	Cần Thơ	10,979	26	0.23
6	Đồng Tháp	7,284	0	
7	Hậu Giang	3,366	46	1.36
8	Kiên Giang	6,209	754	12.14
9	Long An	5,773	0	
10	Sóc Trăng	3,695	650	17.59
11	Tiền Giang	8,658	0	
12	Trà Vinh	1,286	430	33.43
13	Vĩnh Long	7,399	29	0.39
	Total	67,637	2,195	

“According to the statistics table above, there are Khmer Protestants in 9 out of 13 provinces and cities of the region. The total number of Khmer Protestants is 2,195 people, accounting for 3.24% of Protestants and 0.18% of the Khmer in the region. The largest number of Khmer Protestants is in Kien Giang province, 754 people (accounting for 12.14% of the province’s Protestants); Soc Trang province has 650 Khmer Protestants (accounting for 17.59% of the province’s Protestants); Tra Vinh province has 430 Khmer Protestants (accounting for 33.43% of the province’s Protestants); Bac Lieu province has 128 Khmer Protestants (accounting for 13.31% of the province’s Protestants); the remaining provinces have no Khmer Protestants or a small number of Khmer Protestants”¹¹.

According to the author, the number of the Khmer’s conversion to other religions was little but was not rare. Conversion to Catholicism has happened for a long time ago. The Khmer people converted to other religions account for a small proportion: Catholicism is 0.27%, Protestantism is 0.18% compared to the Khmer population in the region.

The author believed that the conversion of a part of Khmer people is normal and their choice. However, the evangelization is also a issue for management. Finally, cultural conflict or reduction of traditional religious influences is complex problems and it needs to have a serious research.

Through recent data and issues related to Protestantism in the Southwest region, the author indicates analysis as follows:

As regards the data of Protestants of 13 provinces in the Southwest region: With the community of 67,637 believers, the

largest number is Can Tho with 10,979 believers; Bac Lieu has 961 believers, more than 5,000 believers on average in each province. It showed that the Southwest is the place where the Protestantism is developing naturally and strongly among the Vietnamese people. Although Protestantism does not have a sudden development like the area of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands or Northwest it has a strong internal vitality.

Research on the history of evangelization showed that Protestantism was rigid in the strict application of the ritual and lifestyle of the believers, the prohibition of idolatry (ancestors, other gods) so the cultural collision was natural obstacles to the religious conversion of Vietnamese people. The proportion of people who was baptized/believe in God has never exceeded 10%. In the new land, the opened communities in the Southwest, the response is higher than other regions.

In the past, despite trying to infiltrate and evangelize, Protestant missionaries did not achieve any significant results among the Cham and Khmer people because of the strong reaction of these communities that considered keeping their ethnic religion as the community's survival.

In terms of motivation and missionary methods, all Protestant churches and denominations consider the "preaching the word of God, conquering sinners to God" as the God's command and they must follow. Moreover, with the missionary tactics of "witnessing" or the "oil spill" tactic, they easily circumvented the law. Thus, the Khmer as well as all other ethnic groups have been their missionary objects. Obviously, there have been legal organizations and denominations. There have been a number of denominations with short-term motivation, disbursing missionary grants, so they have operated despite all social consequences.

Thus, the evangelization and conversion among the Khmer may lead to a potential risk of conflict in the community. However, this problem will not be easy to solve if the process of recession of

community institutions, traditional culture and religion of the Khmer continues to take place.

Conclusion

The Southwest region has been evangelized early by missionaries of CMA since 1918. The Protestant local churches have had a small number but they have been stable, the followers have consciously donated money to the Church. The local churches have generally developed in harmony and have been a steady resource of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South). However, in a multicultural region, Protestantism had to compete with many other religions as well as a variety of traditional religious beliefs, so its development has had no mutation.

Protestantism is a world religion, the process of evangelization has conveyed the progression of Western culture and civilization. Contributions of lifestyle, culture, humanitarian charitable activities, education of healthy lifestyle, thrifty, hardworking life are the cultural resources needs to be promoted. On the other hand, it is necessary to guide Protestant denominations the need to integrate into the national culture, to respect and cherish, as well as behave in accordance with the common cultural values of the community, with other religious faith. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Lê Hoàng Phu (1974), *Lịch sử Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (1911-1965)* [*History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (1911-1965)*], Trung tâm Nghiên cứu Phúc Âm, Sài Gòn, p. 55.
- 2 Statistics from *Thánh Kinh Báo* in 1935 - 1936.
- 3 Statistics from *Thánh Kinh Báo* in 1932 - 1943.
- 4 Lê Hoàng Phu (1974), *ibid*, p. 55.
- 5 Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam, *Khai trình công việc Chúa - Địa hạt Nam hạt năm 1952* (Evangelization in the Southern District 1952), Nhà in Tin Lành, Sài Gòn.
- 6 Lê Hoàng Phu (1974), *ibid*, p. 152.
- 7 Since the Evangelical Church of Vietnam added the word (South) to distinguish the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North).
- 8 Statistics from the Government committee for religious affairs
- 9 The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), *Niên giám năm 2002*, (Yearbook of 2002), lưu hành nội bộ.

- 10 Trần Hồng Liên (2014), “Sự chuyển đổi tôn giáo trong người Khmer tại Trà Vinh hiện nay” (The transformation of religion in the Khmer in Tra Vinh at present), *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, số 05 (131), p. 47- 52.
- 11 Trần Hữu Hợp (2017), “Sự cải giáo của một bộ phận người Khmer vùng Tây Nam Bộ” (The conversion of a part of the Khmer in the Southwest), *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, số 3&4 (161), pp. 98 - 107.

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6. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam (2001), *Niên giám năm 2002*, (Yearbook of 2002), lưu hành nội bộ, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh.
7. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam (2002), *Hiến Chương*, (Charter), Nxb. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
8. Hội Thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam miền Nam (2005), *Kỷ yếu 2005*, (Proceedings of 2005), lưu hành nội bộ, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh.
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10. Trần Hồng Liên (2014), “Sự chuyển đổi tôn giáo trong người Khmer tại Trà Vinh hiện nay” (The transformation of religion in the Khmer in Tra Vinh at present), *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, số 05 (131), pp. 47-52.
11. Nguyệt san Thánh Kinh Báo, Cơ quan ngôn luận chính thức của HTTLVN, xuất bản từ năm 1931 tại Hà Nội, đình bản do chiến tranh (1945-1950), sau xuất bản lại tại Đà Lạt. Từ 1962 đến 1975 xuất bản tại Sài Gòn, sau năm 1968 đổi tên là Thánh Kinh Nguyệt San.
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