

VIETNAM PROVINCE

Official Language: **Vietnamese**

Vision Statement

Inspired by the Holy Spirit and joyfully responding to the call of the Incarnate Word, we, as missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word, witness to God's Kingdom among the people of Vietnam and the world.

Mission Statement

Drawing from the source of the Word and the Blessed Sacrament, we strive to develop a holistic and life giving intercultural community of brotherhood as a sign of the joy of the Gospel.

We earnestly seek to live the missionary spirit of Fr. Arnold Janssen, Fr. Joseph Freinademetz and Bishop Jean Sion as our models.

We commit ourselves to serving and living the spirit of prophetic dialogue with the Church, society, especially with the minority ethnic people and the poor.

1. Societal Setting

Vietnam is a multi-religious and multi-faith country. The Vietnamese people have a time-honored tradition of practicing their beliefs. Different ethnic groups in Vietnam have different beliefs linked to their own economic and spiritual life. The current population of Vietnam is 95 million.



According to the government's Committee for Religious Affairs, approximately 95 percent of the population professes religious beliefs. More than half of the population identifies as Buddhist. Within that community, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant affiliation by ethnic majority Kinh (Viet); almost all from the ethnic minority Khmer group practice Theravada Buddhism. Roman Catholics constitute 7% of the total population; Cao Dai, 2.5 to 4%; Hoa Hao, 1.5 to 3%; and Protestants, 1 to 2%.

Smaller religious groups that together comprise less than 0.2% of the population include 50,000 ethnic Cham, who mostly practice a devotional form of Hinduism in the south central coastal area. There are approximately 100,000 Muslims scattered throughout the country.

Ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14% of the population. Based on adherents' estimates, two thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including groups in the Northwest Highlands (H'mong, Dzao, Thai, and others) and in the Central Highlands (Ede, Jarai, Sedang, and M'ngong, which include groups also referred to as Montagnards, among others). The Khmer Krom ethnic group overwhelmingly practices Theravada Buddhism.

In recent years, religious freedom has been gradually expanding. However, the Law on Belief and Religion approved by the government still continues to focus on the control and management of religious activities rather than the protection of religious freedom. Religious groups must register with the local government for routine events like annual religious festivals, conferences, as well as the investiture and transfer of clerics. Authorities have the right to approve or refuse requests.

Vietnam today is coping with the negative effects of rapid industrialization and economic growth. The environmental pollution is becoming a serious matter in the country. The cross-country demonstrations recently taking place in Vietnam to protest massive fish die-offs along the central Vietnamese coast are truly remarkable. The Taiwanese Formosa - Ha Tinh steel factory is widely suspected as the principal cause of the fish die-offs. However, the government has been slow to respond and unable to provide convincing explanations.

While environmental issues may currently be the most visible manifestations of crisis, what ties all of these disparate confrontations together—including the corruption, social inequality, and religious freedom, etc.—is the public's demand for better government, better leaders and, ultimately, a more transparent, accountable and effective political system.

2. Ecclesial Setting

In Vietnam, the Catholic Church is always on a “journey with the nation”. It means that the local church always makes consideration for people including the poor and marginalized that form the Vietnamese people and their cultural and spiritual heritages. In April 2017, throughout the annual meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, the Bishops raised their common voice in defense of justice, religious freedom, and the environment in the present situation.

They also criticized the new law on Belief and Religion because it continues to strengthen the “asking-and-granting mechanism”. The new law still demands religions to inform government authorities about their activities, and authorities may or may not approve.

The local Church also called attention to Vietnam's environmental catastrophes linked to Formosa, a steel factory that hurt the livelihoods of more than 200,000 people in Central Vietnam. The Bishop of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam urged parishioners to light candles and

pray for the environment and to press the government to take better care of the earth, invoking Pope Francis' *'Laudato si'*.

Buddhism and Catholicism are the largest religious groups in Vietnam. Their followers cooperate in caring for people with HIV/AIDS, providing food to people in poor communities, and promoting harmony and peace among communities. The interreligious collaboration efforts among religious leaders maintained their good relationship and traditions.

While the situation for Vietnamese Catholics has improved in recent decades, threats of violence, coercion, and harassment still exist. Throughout these challenges, the Catholic Church is still growing steadily. In 2016, the Catholic Church in Vietnam had 43 bishops, 5,386 priests, 2,671 seminarians, 23,196 male and female religious, and 6,756,303 lay people.

3. Intercultural Mission – *Ad Extra*

Those in Final Vows

IN ACTIVE MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Parish	26	29.6	35.3	22.2
Education	4	4.6	1.5	5.6
Schools	0	-		
Universities	4	-		
Formation/ SVD Vocation	11	12.5	16.9	18.1

Administration/ Support	28	31.8	12.5	22.2
Other Apostolates	11	12.5	15.3	1.4
JPIC	1	-		
Bible	2	-		
Communication	2	-		
Mission Animation	1	-		
Others	5	-		

Those in Final Vows

NOT IN MINISTRY	Personnel	2018 (%)	2012 (%)	2005 (%)
Studies/ Orientation	2	2.3	12.5	11.1
Retired/Sick	5	5.7	6.0	19.4
Others	1	1.1	0	0

Parishes: Our confreres work in 8 dioceses, both in rural and urban settings. However, we give preference to parishes remotely located in rural or mountain areas where indigenous and ethnic people live. Some projects for ethnic communities include: building the clinics to diagnose disease and supply medicine for them; establishing systems of filtered water and supplying fresh water to protect community health; supporting the poor from a socio-charitable fund to repair their dwellings and to help them earn their living by farming, gardening, and stock-raising. The Bishops and the people are happy with our availability and commitment in the parishes.

The challenge is how we can introduce the SVD charism in “SVD parishes” in the future.

Other Apostolates: We are also running two centers for orphans and vulnerable children: Huong Duong (Sunflower Children House) and Dai An (Great Peace Children House). In recent years, we have developed the leadership team and everyone is working together. Some SSPs joined us in looking after the children at Dai An house and some sisters who belong to the Society of Apostolic Life help children at the Huong Duong house.

We also have maintained a traditional medicine clinic with acupuncture and other traditional medical treatments to serve the poor and patients in Nha Trang city. Recently we started to work among the lepers in the mountain areas in the diocese of Gialai – Kontum.

Characteristic Dimensions

Biblical Apostolate: We have offered basic biblical courses to catechists, lay groups and formation houses. Bible sharing and reading are guided and practiced in families and basic ecclesial communities.

Communication: The province has set up a website to provide updated information and activities for confreres working at home and abroad. The Newsletter is published on a monthly basis to keep our confreres updated and interested in the matters of common concern.

Mission Animation: With the help of some active lay people, the mission secretary has recently begun fundraising to support the missionary activities in the province. The response of lay people and benefactors has been surprisingly generous. In the future, we will establish a SVD Lay Partners group to have more collaboration in this ministry.

JPIC: Expressing concerns about the social justice for migrants; looking after abandoned children; implementing some projects for the poor, the lepers and victims of HIV/AIDS; and hospital ministry as chaplain are some of the efforts that the province has made in the recent years.

Priorities among Congregational Directions

Since the last General Chapter offered a preferential action plan for *ad extra* mission, the province has chosen two priorities that are appropriate in the context of the social, cultural and religious situation in Vietnam: a) Indigenous and Ethnic Communities, and b) Social Justice and Poverty Eradication.

Some ethnic minority groups that have become a big concern for us include the K’hor ethnic group living in Ninh Thuan province, and Bahnar and J’rai ethnic groups living in Gialai province, a central highland region. Most of these ethnic people earn their living by cultivating rice, maize, cassava, sugarcane and fruit trees. However they produce agricultural products on a small scale. Many ethnic minority families have little home-

grown food to eat and lack the economic means to buy food. They often suffer from lack of food at home.

In addition, most ethnic parents are unaware of the value of education for their children. They are also in difficulties when they must pay for school fees and school supplies. Therefore minority children have less access to education, higher drop-out rates, and delayed school enrollment.

Concrete projects: Our projects are executed through the following activities: i) making a commitment to education for ethnic minority and poor children; ii) raising public awareness on health care and providing free diagnosis and treatment for the poor; iii) supporting with food, clothing and homes some poor households in extreme difficulties.

At SVD parishes and mission regions where ethnic minority groups are living, we realize that a large number of children drop out of school because they face challenges from language learning barriers, poverty, and the neglect of their parents. We encourage and support children's school attendance by giving annual scholarships and providing school supplies, such as notebooks, books, uniforms and stationery. In addition, we also donated bicycles for children so that they can travel long distances to schools. Every summer, our seminarians are sent to SVD parishes and ethnic minority communities to teach children basic learning skills.

We collaborated with the community social workers to address the problems of malnutrition among children, educating parents, especially mothers, to be able to observe and identify anomalies in child development. We also built up clinics to diagnose disease and supply medicine freely for ethnic minority people. To protect community health and prevent illnesses related to stomachaches and gastric pains, we established 15 systems of filtered water to provide fresh water for people.

Supportive policies for the poor in extreme difficulties have been implemented since 2014. Accordingly, mission and socio-charitable funds have been given directly to the poor households to buy plants and animals and to cover the expenditure for immediate needs such as food, blankets and mosquito nets, clothes and production equipment. In addition, housing support for poor households is paid special attention and considered as an important issue in improving the quality of people's lives. In recent years, there have been 215 houses repaired or reconstructed for poor households.

While implementing these two chosen priorities, we have achieved encouraging results. It was observed that with our support, the ethnic and poor children have had a good chance to attend school more regularly. It also shows positive development of parents' awareness and involvement in their children's education. Community health has been significantly improved in the mountainous and remote areas where our

confreres have been working for ethnic minority groups. For poor households in extreme difficulties, nowadays they can be happy with their accommodations and improve their incomes from stock-raising, farming and gardening.

Challenges: Although we have achieved some significant results regarding to the poor and ethnic groups, many difficulties and challenges lie ahead. Poverty eradication is not fully achievable in the current situation. The poor have limited access to assistance policies. Environmental hygiene and food safety are not fully under control. Health insurance and hospital fees for the poor have not been adequately provided. Ethnic and poor children in rural and mountainous areas often drop out from schools because they face difficult challenges such as school fees, language, poor teaching methods, etc. Religious and socio-charitable activities in the ethnic minority communities are often under control of local authorities. Nevertheless, we hope that our projects can help them in overcoming their difficulties and improving their material and spiritual life.

4. Intercultural Life – *Ad Intra*

MEMBERSHIP	2018	2012	2005
Clerics	79	52	22
Brothers (final vows)	8	9	14
Brothers (temporal vows)	2	3	3
Scholastics	53	69	66
Novices	13	11	16
Total	155	144	121

AGE AND COUNTRY	2018	2012	2005
Average age	47.4	47.4	38.0
Nationalities	4	2	3

Spirituality: The communities are very regular for all prayers and daily Mass. Bible sharing is also done in some communities. Recollections are organized from local (house and district) to provincial level. An Arnold Janssen Spirituality Team (SVD & SSpS) was established but they need to do more to guide the province.

Community: Local communities and pastoral districts hold regular meetings. They discuss the action plans and the directives of the provincial council. They also share the successful and difficult stories in their mission. Sometimes conflicts in the community life or in the working place still happen and we need to overcome these challenges.

Leadership: In recent years the leadership of the province has been carried out with collegial teamwork and in dialogue. The workshops on leadership are conducted once a year at a provincial level. Sometimes the rectors, district superiors and counselors were invited to take part in the important meetings in which we need their ideas for common projects.

Finance: In recent years, we have implemented auditing and developed a plan of financial self-reliance. Some of the steps taken by the province for the financial self-reliance are contributions by the confreres from their

Mass stipends, renting of land, and appealing to local benefactors. Confreres are encouraged to lead a simple lifestyle in solidarity with the people whom they serve. Transparency and accountability are fostered through open and regular reporting of the local treasurers to their communities.

Formation: Our seminarians have been taking courses at Dominican and Franciscan Institutions in Ho Chi Minh City. After finishing the philosophical program, we encourage them to take part in the OTP to learn the language and

the culture of another country. Every summer we send our students to the remote places to live and work among the poor and ethnic communities. Some seminars on ongoing formation are conducted in the province. In recent years, vocations for the brotherhood are going down drastically. We will pay more attention to this issue and hope that the situation can be turned around.

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