



promoting sustainable environments for religious freedom

Chris Seiple  
President  
Institute for Global Engagement

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on

**Religious Freedom in Vietnam:  
An Update**

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## Introduction

Congresswoman Sanchez, distinguished members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC), the CHRC Task Force on International Religious Freedom, and the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam: Thank you for the opportunity to share my observations about religious freedom in Vietnam, and how we can continue to move forward.

Last month at this time I was in Vietnam's Northwest region, visiting with government officials and religious communities to get a first-hand account of the religious freedom situation there; it was my second trip to the Northwest in the past seventeen months. I also spent some time in Hanoi, meeting national leaders and attending a conference on religion and rule of law that my organization, the Institute for Global Engagement, co-sponsored with the Vietnamese Academy for Social Sciences, Vietnam's pre-eminent think-tank, and the Vietnam-USA Society.

This was my fifth trip to Vietnam in the past three years. During these trips I have had the great privilege to meet regularly with government officials and religious leaders in the Central Highlands, the Northwest, and in Hanoi. We have never been refused an interview and we have never been refused access to a region (while focusing on the evangelical church in Vietnam, which has suffered the most).

Vietnam is a country amidst serious transition and strategic transformation. Intelligent and industrious, the Vietnamese people—both the government and citizens—have made the collective decision to not only participate in the world economy, but to join the global civil society as well. In time, I am convinced that Vietnam will be a leader in each.

Vietnam's economy, for example, grew at 8+% the last two years. This is a remarkable statistic considering that Vietnam's biggest trading partners are also former enemies (the Japanese, the French, the Americans, and the Chinese). As a result, the poverty rate has decreased from 58% in 1993, to 20% in 2004, while per capita has increased from \$170 to \$620 in the same timeframe. As the World Bank states, "Vietnam is one of the best-performing developing economies in the world...It has the potential to be one of the great success stories in development" ("Vietnam: Laying the Foundation for Steady Growth," The International Development Fund, The World Bank, February 2007; available from: <http://www.worldbank.org/ida>.)

These trends and statistics indicate something beyond economic benchmarks. Most of all, they indicate a desire to not let the past—from previous military enemies to failed economic policies—influence the future. They also indicate a comprehensive and systematic desire to quickly provide the most basic of human rights—the right not to live in poverty—as the basis for strong civil society.

In other words, it is difficult to be concerned about religious freedom when there is no bread on the table. This unprecedented progress in poverty reduction therefore enables time to consider and implement equally foundational elements to a strong civil society

that participates in a rapidly deepening and expanding global civil society; namely, a religious freedom that is sensitive to culture and consistent with the rule of law.

Toward this end, there have been significant and positive developments, at least for Protestant believers. These improvements—as delineated in the October 2007 report by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, “A Slowdown and New Complications: The Protestant Experience with Religious Freedom in Vietnam”—are as follows:

- Large-scale, government sponsored programs to force renunciation of Christianity, especially among Vietnam’s ethnic minority Christians, have ceased.
- The registration of congregations, though sometimes with limited benefits, is underway. In February it was estimated that some 800 of the estimated 4,500 Protestant congregations (18 per cent) in Vietnam had some kind of registration...The number of registered churches is slowly increasing.
- Permission has been granted to print many Christian books, in addition to the Bible, and the New Testament in the languages of Vietnam’s minority groups.
- Protestant religious prisoners of conscience identified by the US have been released...
- A “legislative framework” for more enlightened treatment of religion, religious communities, and believers was developed in 2004 and 2005. The potential benefits, however, have not been fully realized because of slow implementation and the unchanged mindset of many local officials.
- Some groups have been emboldened by Vietnam’s claims to greater religious tolerance and have been more aggressive in their struggle with the government to realize those advances. Earlier they would not have dared to assert their rights (page 4).

I should also note the obvious: The U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom, John Hanford, has played an instrumental role in persistently and patiently working with the Vietnamese government to help effect these changes.

### **The Current State of Religious Freedom: Step-by-Step**

In understanding religious freedom—the cornerstone of civil society because of its inherent respect for the other—it is critical to keep in mind that values do not take place in a vacuum. They are lived out everyday amidst the messiness of life.

And as we think about other countries, we would do well to remember our own evolution toward our present state of imperfection. For example, religion was not disestablished in the U.S. until the 1830s, and African-Americans did not have the right to vote nationwide until 1870, with women gaining that same right less than one-hundred years ago. So a strong dose of practicality, not to mention humility, is required when we consider other countries... especially as we reflect on how long it takes for a law to be put in place that mirrors a change in mindset.

There is no unified and transparent framework for governing religion in Vietnam today. The government, however, has put in place a series of ordinances, decrees, and guidelines that begin to create a new framework for how religion and the state work together for society's sake. At the same time, the government has been recognizing various Protestant denominations, even as it has created and implemented training courses to explain and discuss this new framework at the local level. Far from complete, this framework has emerged in just three years. It is unprecedented in Vietnamese history, and it was unimaginable just three years ago.

To be sure, as Vietnamese officials will confirm, significant issues remain. There is much more training to do for local government officials and religious leaders. The registration and recognition process is still unclear to many local religious leaders. Church applications are ignored and/or intentionally delayed. Prayer groups and Christian leaders are, depending on the province, routinely harassed. There are many land issues regarding church property. Ethnic minority children who are Christian are sometimes denied access to public schools. New converts are too often pressured to return to their traditional religion.

But these actions do not meet the definition of “systematic, ongoing, egregious” violations of religious freedom, per the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998's definition. Rather, depending on the local leader, there is the intentional and sometimes violent harassment of believers.

Even cases of seeming bureaucratic inertia are not as they seem. For example, last year I visited an unregistered Hmong house church in the Ta Phin Commune of Sa Pa district in Lao Cai province. This church met freely in the pastor's home (it was not allowed to build a church building), had 40 members and a loving pastor (with a 5<sup>th</sup> grade education). It was not clear if the church members had a basic understanding of Christian theology. There was also great confusion about the application process to become a registered church of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam—North (ECVN-N, a denomination registered and recognized by the government).

A month ago today, I visited that same church. Everything was still the same, except now the church had 80 members. I asked about the application process and I was told that it had not yet been properly completed! Apparently, although these Hmong families had lived in Ta Phin for generations, there were translation problems (from Hmong to Vietnamese) with the application. To boot, the government wanted to make sure that this church was “comfortable with” and “understood” its faith and denominational identity because its members had only been Christian for a couple of years.

Our response to this official answer could have been immediate and American—after all, it had been over a year and the application hadn't been processed, and who was the government to check theology? Here was a confession we could write about in the *Washington Post*!

Instead, we were able to move beyond the official answer and have a non-threatening conversation with productive results. Why? Because we had a pre-existing relationship with these officials, and because we had allowed significant time in our schedule to take as long as needed to understand just this situation.

The theology, it turned out, was a real issue, not as a function of a repressive government, but as a function of a government made up of local people who cared about the culture and stability of their commune.

This church, we discovered, had been visited by representatives of another denomination (recently registered). This particular denomination, from the south (another issue in and of itself in the north), has been alleged to make converts by passing out money. Whatever the case, the competing denomination had created confusion within a young church that was led by theologically-untrained pastors.

In a group-based society in an underdeveloped region with little education, this kind of issue can become divisive, and quickly. The local government is continuing to assess the situation, still more comfortable with one registered denomination than another. Meanwhile, the church continues to meet freely in the pastor's home, appreciative of the fact that its size has essentially doubled in the past year.

I recognize that this story is but one, and that it is anecdotal. And I do not tell the story to discount the intentional stalling of church registrations that does take place.

I share this story to encourage patience. This story should remind all of us that it is always much easier to point fingers, and then find the proof necessary to fit into our own preconceptions, than to work for solutions that endure.

Life is messy. And it requires innovative persistence and programs to promote religious freedom at the intersection of culture and the rule of law.

### **Moving Ahead: Top-Down & Bottom-Up**

In the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, there are specific expectations that the U.S. government will work actively to promote religious freedom. For example, in Title V, "Promotion of Religious Freedom," Section 501 (a) (2), it says that the "United States should make a priority of promoting and developing legal protections and cultural respect for religious freedom." Earlier in the IRFA, the law states that the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom "in evaluating the United States Government policies with respect to countries found to be taking deliberate steps and making significant improvement in respect for the rights of religious freedom, shall consider and recommend policy options..."

It would be interesting to have a hearing that discussed practical policies and programs that the United States could use to promote religious freedom in countries that are clearly taking systematic steps to change their religious freedom environment. It would also be

interesting to talk about how America—through government and non-government organizations—might come alongside the steps a particular country was taking.

It has been our direct experience at IGE that promoting religious freedom is indeed possible, but only through a relational diplomacy that simultaneously works from the top-down and the bottom-up.

From the top-down, we have partnered through a written agreement with the Vietnam-USA Society to co-sponsor annual conferences with the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (the Institute for Research on Religion). We have now had two such conferences in Hanoi, working together to create a habitual space through which a practical discussion of religion and rule of law is routinized.

We should not underestimate the importance of this space and dialogue! It did not exist three years ago. Through this space Vietnam is in discussion with international and regional experts about the various and interrelated dimensions of religion, culture, rule of law, and national security. Without such a discussion, it is impossible for Vietnam to assess for itself what lessons apply to Vietnam in the near-term; let alone which lessons help Vietnam evolve toward a rule of law that allows religion and state to peacefully co-exist such that both serve society.

Also from the top-down, we engaged the Vietnamese Embassy last year regarding a “training” document that officials were using in the Northwest. This document acknowledged the reality of religion in the Northwest (itself a step forward), but was very negative in its words and tone toward Christians. We asked the embassy to take up the issue and push for the manual’s text and tone to be edited.

Last month, a new version was released. While we are now conducting a comprehensive assessment of the two versions, two excerpts illustrate the step-by-step process of progress. For example, in the 2006 version, page twenty-one records: “In recent times, the Protestant faith has been influenced by progressive tendencies in the world *and many denominations have separated themselves from the bad forces.*”

In this year’s version, however, page eighteen states: “In recent times, the Protestant faith has been influenced by progressive tendencies in the world *so many denominations have made important contributions to peace, stability and development of mankind.*”

In the first excerpt, religion is a neutral at best. Obviously it had a bad past, and now it is merely separated from that past. The second excerpt, however, demonstrates that religion can actually be positive, contributing to the solution.

Words make a difference. And while I’m sure this second version needs many more revisions, as most documents do, this simple edit is a critical step toward a better understanding; something that is absolutely imperative when considering that it usually takes a generation of training and education to change a mindset.

From the bottom-up, IGE and our Vietnamese partners have worked hard to include Glocal Ventures Inc.,—a church-based development NGO from Dallas, Texas—in the promotion of religious freedom. Glocal Ventures has been working in Vietnam’s northwest for several years, serving the ethnic minorities. Through a long series of discussions, all parties have developed a framework through which the Glocal Ventures “model” can be expanded to other provinces. Why is this so important?

First and foremost, Glocal Ventures provides development assistance to people who need it. But because Glocal Ventures is not only faith-based, but church-based, its efforts demonstrate that faith and church are positive factors. Vietnamese officials appreciate the positive impact that communities of faith have made toward the socio-economic development of Vietnam’s rural areas. They also appreciate the opportunity to let more Americans see for themselves what Vietnam is like as Glocal Ventures facilitates the expertise of church members from across America to serve the Vietnamese.

Also from the bottom-up, we are in discussion with our Vietnamese friends about how we might assist religious freedom training for government officials and religious leaders, as well as theological training for pastors. If government officials and religious leaders are trained together, not only will both know more about religious freedom, both will be more comfortable with the other as stereotypes are ameliorated, even eliminated.

In addition, theological training for aspiring pastors not only helps faith communities to better understand their religion and its requirements to serve society, theologically-trained pastors also prevent local congregations from being politically manipulated by those seeking their own, non-religious, purposes (e.g., separatism). At the end of our visit to Ta Phin commune, for example, the provincial deputy minister for religion and ethnicity suggested that we work with them to explore these very possibilities.

These ideas were confirmed in subsequent meetings in Hanoi with the National Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), the Ministry for Public Security, and President Triet. As one CRA official said in response to my trip report and suggestions for how we might move ahead: “You strike the right notes in your summary. The reality is that we have good policies but the implementation is not perfect. The education level is low at the local level, but local officials have to face the reality of something new.”

## **Conclusion**

Vietnam is a country in serious transition amidst strategic transformation. It is tackling several challenges head-on. It is working to develop its economy and reduce poverty—a fundamental human right. It is also working to develop a religious freedom framework and therefore enable an even stronger civil society.

Despite continuing issues of harassment at the local level, the government has affirmed and demonstrated that religious freedom is not just an abstract value that it indirectly assents to, but that religious freedom is important to its national security and governance (not just its foreign policy). Otherwise, religion and rule-of-law conference would not

take place, access to sensitive regions would not be granted, security documents would not be revised, and Protestant Christianity—still a minority religion—would not have been addressed.

The above developments don't negate the still-existent challenges. Clearly, however, significant internal political forces are at work, forces that seek to affirm rule of law in the context of religion and religious freedom.

In the context of this internal evolution and our bilateral relationship, the U.S. government and its citizens should continue to exercise vigilance in supporting openness to reform. We need to enhance our communications in order to correct misperceptions and investigate and address the abuses that do take place. We need to work toward a national law regarding religion; for increased registrations; and for greater opportunity for churches to construct buildings. But, we need to promote religious freedom *together*—with the Vietnamese government and people—in a way that honors the genuine paradigm shift that is now taking place.

This kind of progress does not come easy. In fact, it is the direct result of the difficult and long-term work of building relationships of trust and respect. Through a relational diplomacy that operates simultaneously from the top-down and the bottom-up, it is indeed possible to understand one another and, as a result, develop solutions that are sustainable, if only because we've developed them together.

Thank you again Congresswoman Sanchez for inviting me to participate in this vital discussion.

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#### **About the Institute for Global Engagement:**

The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) promotes sustainable environments for religious freedom worldwide. As a faith-based organization, IGE believes firmly in universal human dignity and is committed to the protection of all faiths through the rule of law. IGE pursues this mission with a balanced approach, encouraging governments to protect religious freedom (*top-down* engagement) and equipping citizens to exercise that freedom responsibly (*bottom-up* engagement).

#### **About Chris Seiple:**

Chris Seiple, Ph.D., is the president of the Institute for Global Engagement. Before coming to the Institute, Seiple was an Earhart Fellow at the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University, where he wrote his dissertation on "U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations," receiving his Ph.D. in 2007. Seiple served as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps from 1990 to 1999 and was assigned to the Strategic Initiatives Group. Seiple

serves on the board of Wycliffe Bible Translators, USA. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Philadelphia), a member at the Council on Foreign Relations (New York), a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), and is Founder of IGE's Council on Faith & International Affairs and publisher of *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*. His book, *The U.S. Military/NGO Relationship in Humanitarian Interventions*, is a seminal work in the field. In the past year Dr. Seiple has spoken to various audiences on religion and realpolitik in Doha, Peshawar, Bannu, Moscow, Vladikavkaz, Hanoi, Urumchi, Oslo, and Beijing.