people, and neglecting to practice justice. On the flip side, the texts also express the trust that the people and the church have in God; God hears the people's cry, knows their sufferings, and frees them from their anguish. These texts also place a demand on the people—that of wisdom (which is essential during protests). They also place a demand on the church—to not be silent in the face of injustice. Finally, the challenge remains for everyone—that of conversion.

Most of the biblical texts included in the churches' statements refer to the Old Testament. On the one hand, this selection of texts highlights the churches' awareness that as long as there is no justice there can be no peace. It also indicates that although the church and the people fervently yearn for peace, it seems that the ruling classes do not.[49] On the other hand, reliance on Old Testament texts makes it difficult for the churches to find texts in the New Testament that can be applied to the current critical situation in Colombia. In particular, biblical texts referring to reconciliation and forgiveness are absent.

In addition to authoring public written statements regarding the country's current situation, the churches, especially the young people, have taken to the streets with banners and chants for peace and justice. The actions of two religious leaders in particular—one in Bucaramanga and the other in Cali—have garnered significant attention.

The first of these leaders, Álvaro Prada Vargas, is an Anglican priest who intervened when members of the Anti-Riot Police Squad pursued several protesters and used excessive force against the young people. When the young people sought refuge in the Industrial University of Santander (UIS) in Bucaramanga, the police closed them in and did not let them leave for several hours, even though some of them needed medical attention. Faced with this situation, Vargas led a "humanitarian corridor" so that the young protesters could receive assistance.[50]

The second leader is Luis Miguel Caviedes, a Methodist pastor. In addition to being in the "front line," he has accompanied people in legal and human rights issues together with the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace and other collectives of lawyers. He has also assisted threatened youth and people who have been injured or captured by the police. In addition, he has provided humanitarian, psychosocial, and psychospiritual assistance.[51] Because of

49 The benefits granted to the ruling classes through the war in Colombia have served as a disincentive for making peace.

50 Miguel Ángel Espinosa, "El sacerdote que logró mediar entre el Esmad y estudiantes en la UIS," *El Tiempo*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 1, 2021, https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/santander/paro-nacional-sacerdote-que-medio-con-el-esmad-en-bucaramanga-589768.

51 Julieth Narváez, "Entrevista—Es necesaria la reconciliación frente a lo que está sucediendo," *La palabra*, June 10, 2021, accessed August 2, 2021, http://lapalabra.uni-

his involvement in such matters, he has received threats and been the target of multiple assassination attempts.

The National Strike Committee

The National Strike Committee,[52] which speaks on behalf of the labor organizations, announced reasons[53] for rejecting the proposed Tax Reform. "This reform," they stated, "threatens the economic stability of workers, pensioners, the middle class and low-income people."[54] They also observed that a reform is needed in which "those who have the most, pay the most, and that, in the end, benefits in a real and palpable way the most needy social class in the country."[55] In the broader context, Colombia's social struggles have been fueled by economic measures, human rights violations, and the lack of implementation of previous agreements.

On April 28, the committee called a national strike (supposedly following the biosafety protocols in place for COVID-19). The demands of the strike agenda included two reforms: (1) the "Reform to the Health System," aimed at consolidating the privatization of health services,[56] and (2) the Labor Reform.[57]

valle.edu.co/entrevista-es-necesaria-la-reconciliacion-frente-a-lo-que-esta-sucediendo/.

52 Made up of the following labor organizations: Central Unitaria de Trabajadores-CUT, Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia-CTC, Confederación General del Trabajo-CGT, Federación Colombiana de Educadores-Fecode, and Confederaciones de Pensionados CPC y CDP.

53 To read these reasons in detail, see "Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales para oponerse a la Reforma Tributaria," Agencia de Información Laboral-AIL, April 16, 2021, accessed August 5, 2021, https://ail.ens.org.co/noticias/las-11-razones-de-las-centrales-sindicales-para-oponerse-a-la-reforma-tributaria/.

54 For more information, see "Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales."

55 "Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales."

56 Jennifer Restrepo de la Pava, "Nueva reforma a la salud en Colombia, ¿Maquillaje de la Ley 100?," *Universidad de Antioquia*, May 10, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, https://www.udea.edu.co/wps/portal/udea/web/inicio/udea-noticias/udea-noticia/!ut/p/z0/fYyxDsIwEEN_haUjuqOUAGPFgIQYGBBqs6BTE-CgzbVJQHw-LQyIhcXys2yDhg-K0owefKbI4qnsutToulqt0kme4RZUpzNUum83T9XR_QNiA_l_oH_jadToHXYm-L9hmhaMVHqu_GUoIUfukijf34QUdOIldMIcH32rGRofWNg1RsDZkEvT2Jb2gch-jNob7p8Ad3BxC0!/.

57 Carmen Menéndez, "Paro Nacional en Colombia: El Congreso retira la polémica reforma sanitaria," *Euro News*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, https://es.euronews.com/2021/05/20/paro-nacional-en-colombia-el-congreso-retira-la-polemica-reforma-sanitaria.

Several weeks after the start of the protests, the National Strike Committee[58] met with the national government and presented the following list of demands:

> Withdrawal of bill 010 on health and strengthening of a massive vaccination; basic income of at least a monthly legal minimum wage; defense of national production (agricultural, industrial, artisanal, peasant); subsidies to MiPymes [Micro-, Small- and Medium-scale Enterprises] and employment with rights and a policy that defends food sovereignty and security; free tuition and no to hybrid learning; a non-discrimination policy regarding gender, sexual and ethnic diversity; no privatizations and repeal of decree 1174; stop forced eradications of illicit crops and aerial spraying with glyphosate.[59]

Due to past excesses of the police force against the protesters, the committee also asked for guarantees regarding the protest: "Stop the violence against the protesters, refrain from declaring the State of Internal Commotion, withdraw the Army and the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) completely and that President Iván Duque unequivocally condemn the abuses by the police force."[60] The committee also urged the government to not only not tolerate but also identify and prosecute the perpetrators of violent acts, including members of the police who violated human rights.[61] However, further mistrust was generated because the president announced a plan to unblock the roads using the police[62] and because not all the protesters felt represented by the National Strike Committee.[63]

Despite these obstacles, the National Strike Committee achieved demands such as the withdrawal of the first Tax Reform proposal and free public higher education. The latter is considered an achievement of great magnitude within the broader history of accomplishments in Colombia. In addition, the commit-

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58 Made up of "la Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), la Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC), la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CGT), la Confederación Democrática de los Pensionados (CDP), la Confederación de Pensionados de Colombia (CPC), la Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación (FECODE), la Cruzada Camionera, la organización Dignidad Agropecuaria, la Asociación Colombiana de Representantes Estudiantiles (ACREES) y la Unión Nacional de Estudiantes de Educación Superior (UNEES)." See Karen Sánchez, "¿Qué es, qué pide y a quiénes representa el Comité del Paro en Colombia?," *Voz de América*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 8, 2021, https://www.vozdeamerica.com/america-latina/que-es-que-pide-y-quienes-representa-el-comite-del-paro-en-colombia.

59 Sánchez, "¿Qué es?"

60 Sánchez, "¿Qué es?"

61 Sánchez, "¿Qué es?"

62 Sánchez, "¿Qué es?"

63 Sánchez, "¿Qué es?"

tee recently filed ten bills before Congress to benefit the majority of Colombians affected by COVID-19 and the economic crisis.[64]

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

After several weeks of insisting to the Colombian government that they be allowed to enter the country, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) paid a visit to Colombia and confirmed what at first the government had denied—that during the protests beginning on April 28, human rights were violated. This is mentioned in the report "Observations and recommendations of the IACHR's working visit to Colombia, held from June 8 to 10, 2021."[65]

The report refers to police abuse, gender violence, ethnic-racial discrimination, violence against journalists and medical organizations, illegal arrests, reports of disappearances, military interventions, use of military jurisdiction in the face of human rights violations by the police, violations of fundamental rights, and damage to the property of third parties, among other issues. For each of these issues, the report also includes recommendations, which the IACHR expects the government will implement.

Between Memory and Oblivion

The results of this brief study show us that the crisis in Colombia, manifested in the strike that began on April 28, 2021, reflects a tension between *memory* and *oblivion*. *Memory* is necessary not only of those in recent times who have been victims of the decisions and actions of the government and the state apparatus but also of those who have been victims since the "cry of independence" from the Spanish yoke on July 20, 1819. These victims, past and present, are demanding their rights. *Oblivion*, alternatively, is the path of the ruling classes and other sectors of society—included among them a certain sector of the church—which have not become conscious of what independence from coloniality means. As de Sousa Santos states:

> Our societies are normally divided between two types of people: those who do not want to remember and those who cannot forget. . . . Those who were and are victims of suffering, genocide, oppression, violence. . . . But the

64 For more information, see "Conozca los proyectos de ley que presentó el Comité Nacional de Paro en el Congreso," Agencia de Información Laboral-AIL, August 9, 2021, accessed August 15, 2021, https://ail.ens.org.co/noticias/conozca-los-proyectos-de-ley-que-presento-el-comite-nacional-de-paro-en-el-congreso/.

65 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, "Observaciones y recomendaciones de la visita de trabajo de la CIDH a Colombia realizada del 8 al 10 de junio de 2021," June 2021, accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_SPA.pdf.

> other side of critical thinking is anticipation, the idea that we deserve a better society and that we should fight for it. That is why we must see the impact of these movements and these organizations and uprisings in critical thinking, as well as their impact in our own countries.[66]

We must remember human rights violations, but these abuses are not what originally generated the social protests. Rather, the protests are grounded in a people's indignation in the face of the historical and ongoing coloniality that refuses to give them free passage to live a dignified life within a country that provides equal opportunities for all, respects people's rights, and complies with agreements.

Despite their outrage, however, not everyone seems to agree on the country's vision. Instead, people seem to be pulling their own way. De Sousa Santos highlights this concern.[67] People know what they don't want but not what they do want for everyone. They are aware that they can have another world, but they are unable to define it. And although they hold some aspects in common for a vision of the nation, it seems that each movement wants something different. Hence, although the protests start with a small demand, within a few days the demands often radically expand. For instance, protests in Colombia that began against the Tax Reform evolved into a great number of demands.

What *is* clear is that there are two enemies against which everyone is fighting: immense social inequality and the dictatorships of the financial markets, combined with the absence of representative democracy. These enemies are the octopuses through which coloniality navigates, and whose tentacles reach all areas of the life of our people. Therefore, it is not enough to be independent from the oppressive domination of a foreign nation; it is also necessary to make epistemological breaks with the forms of knowledge that have captivated the minds of our people. We must break from what made us increasingly individualistic, insensitive, competitive, and disrespectful of otherness to the point of believing that taking the lives of others is something natural—a belief that is reflected in the moment of electing those who govern and in how those elected leaders use their power.

Within this destructive milieu, an epistemology for peace is urgent. As Muñoz states: "A epistemological turn is needed: to think with new elements of judgment, which implies deconstructing and reconstructing our thinking; changing the epistemological (knowledge), axiological (values), anthropological (culture), and ontological (philosophy) presuppositions."[68] In other words, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to build other forms of knowledge that

66 De Sousa Santos, "Las revueltas mundiales de indignación," 20.

67 De Sousa Santos, "Las revueltas mundiales de indignación," 20–24.

68 Agustín Angarita Lezama, *Epistemología para la paz. Ensayo* (Ibagué, Colombia: Caza de Libros, 2016), 34.

resist the dominant colonialist thought. The South must be allowed to speak after so many years of silence imposed by the thought generated in the North.[69]

In a crisis like the one Colombia is experiencing in the post-agreement period, it is important not to idealize peace as a state without conflict or violence, because this expectation would bring even more frustration to the table. For this reason, we agree with the concept of *imperfect peace*,[70] which is an alternative to the traditional conceptions of peace, usually termed as negative, absence of war; or positive, total peace, without violence, perfect, utopian. In contrast, imperfect peace is a way of recognizing the diversity and complexity of human beings in all areas, which, in turn, makes conflict inevitable. Imperfect peace includes "all these experiences and instances in which conflicts have been peacefully regulated; that is, in which individuals and/or human groups have chosen to facilitate the satisfaction of the needs of others, without any cause beyond their will preventing it."[71]

In this way, peace should be understood not only from diverse perspectives but also from diverse spaces where conflict is expressed. Therefore, it should be understood that what is done in Colombia by indigenous communities, young people, students, social movements, human rights commissions, churches and other religious movements, the National Strike Committee, international entities, and even the government itself, among others, contributes in one way or another to an imperfect peace. Of course, amid all this complexity there are peace initiatives, many of them made invisible by the mass media. Hence, an invitation and challenge for us is to identify those signs of peacebuilding in the midst of social upheavals. Social aid, support for victims, demands of the government, requests for international support, the formation of dialogue committees and agreements are all efforts to build peace, even if it is an imperfect peace.

Thus, social protest as part of decolonization processes is not disconnected from peacebuilding. Protest is necessary because it reveals the injustices that exist in society and the violence that these injustices generate. It also makes the victims visible, brings to mind the events that led to independence, and keeps alive the struggles to decolonize thought and build new epistemologies for peace in the South.

In the midst of social protest, churches have played an important role, although a faction of them (as noted earlier) have opted to align themselves with

69 Pablo Gentili, "Inventar otras ciencias sociales," in *Construyendo las Epistemologías del Sur: Para un pensamiento alternativo de alternativas*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), 14, http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/se/20181203040213/Antologia_Boaventura_Vol1.pdf.

70 Francisco Adolfo Muñoz, ed., *La paz imperfecta* (Granada, España: Universidad de Granada, 2001).

71 Muñoz, ed., *La paz imperfecta*, 38.

the government. This indicates that religion and theology have been instruments of coloniality of our people. In other words, religion and theology have served to strengthen epistemologies that promote the elimination of cultural, religious, and thought diversity in an attempt to homogenize the people. So it is that social protest also challenges the church.

Among the *epistemologies of the South* are also included the *theologies of the South*. Juan Tamayo[72] considers these theologies to be part of what has been called the *decolonizing turn*, and he views them as not only emergent but also postcolonial. He argues that with the conquest of Latin America came a paradigm shift that eliminated cultural and religious plurality while imposing Christianity—along with political domination and social order—which occurred by means of the *sword and the cross*. The shift was so complete that for four centuries an "illiberal, counterrevolutionary, patriarchal and colonial"[73] Catholic Christianity prevailed. Therefore, a first challenge for the church is to assume a mission without the character of conquest.

Within the theologies of the South are emerging theologies that develop with new subjects—the poor and oppressed, women, indigenous peoples, black communities, queer people, and the earth itself—that break with systems of exclusion. This results in the emergence of liberation theologies, feminist theologies, Indian theologies, Afro-descendant theologies; gay, lesbian, and queer theologies; and ecotheology, among others.

Within these emerging theologies are *postcolonial theologies*, which have tended toward the deconstruction of paradigms imposed throughout history and have attacked the entire way of life and thought of the original communities; that is to say, they are theologies that analyze the repercussions of colonialism and aspire to decolonize theological thought in relation to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual identity. In addition, they are in close relationship with social movements and questions, including, among other missiological aspects, the mandate of Matthew 28:19 to "make disciples of all nations."[74]

The church, then, as it participates in the protests, faces the existing coloniality. The church cannot forget the history of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression of our people. This means that it cannot be neutral in the face of the violence suffered by the victims, whatever the origin of that violence. Neither can it favor a *status quo* or the *establishment* under the colonial hermeneutic of unconditional obedience to state authorities. The church, however, should also be a peacebuilder, given the essence of its foundation, which is Christ.

This tension between standing with the victims and being a peacebuilder is the great challenge facing the church in contexts of conflictual protests. It is

72 Juan José Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur: El giro descolonizador* (Madrid: Trotta, 2017).

73 Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur*, 42.

74 Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur*, 66–68.

a challenge because, on the one hand, there is no peace without justice, and the victims cry out for justice. On the other hand, ethical implications of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes call for perpetrators to offer reparation, restitution, and clarification of the truth of their actions, among other obligations. In other words, the challenge for the church is to be a bridge between one and the other, in such a way as to fulfill what the Scripture says about Christ as the builder of peace: "In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (Eph 2:14–15).

The actions of the church in contexts of social protest lead to an affirmation that the peace it proclaims—and seeks to build—oscillates between memory and oblivion. Jesus and the early church took this memory into account in their proclamation of the good news (Luke 4:16–21, Matt 23: 29–31, Acts 2:36, 1 Thess 2:14–15, among others). In other words, if the church does not take the side of those who suffer, it can easily forget the reasons for the people's struggles and demands. It can also forget the way of the cross and walk in a *cheap grace*. If the church does not take the side of the victims, it becomes vulnerable to the temptation to serve the gods of power and money. Thus, this article begins with the premise that the church must build peace. To do otherwise would lead to a false peace.

Decolonizing through Social Protests: Reaching for Imperfect Peace

Two questions generated this writing about social protests in Colombia: 1) How is social protest related to decolonization and peacebuilding in Colombia? (2) What challenges does social protest present for the church?

This article affirms that social protest in Colombia and the Global South is an expression of the decolonizing struggle that the people are facing as they strive to regain their autonomy and recognition in their own aspects of culture, thought, and way of living in peace—albeit what will always be an imperfect peace. The political situation in Colombia has mobilized various sectors of civil society, especially young people, students, indigenous people, human rights defenders, social movements, unions, neighborhood organizations, and churches. The resulting demonstrations have been visible in critical moments related to governmental decisions affecting the dignity and rights of the people. The positive impact of such mobilization in Colombia can be seen in the accomplishment of the people's health and labor reforms resulting from protests against the government's Tax Reform proposal.

Protests of such great magnitude challenge the churches to rethink theologically and praxically what it means to build peace in these contexts. Some

churches have taken ambiguous positions regarding the promotion and defense of life and the construction of peace. Others remember alongside the victims while still others are tempted to forget the history that is at the root of the people's demands. This forgetting is an accomplice to the injustices that people have experienced ever since the declaration of independence from Spain. Hence, the churches must opt for the victims, side with them, and accompany them in their search for truth and reparation. When this is not materially possible, it can be done symbolically, especially in the context of the Peace Accords after a prolonged armed conflict.

The role of communities of faith in the construction of imperfect peace should be to serve as a bridge between victims and perpetrators, without neglecting the ethical implications and risks that this entails. This bridge-building role should also include seeking international solidarity.

Facing the challenges of the recent three-month period of social protest in Colombia should also prompt the churches, their pastors, their leaders, and their members to learn how the state is organized and how it works, as well as what the duties and rights of the citizens are. In other words, churches would be well-served to acquire civic competencies that give them the tools to face moments such as those experienced in Colombia where fundamental rights written in the Political Constitution of Colombia[75] have been violated. In this way, they will leave indifference aside, recover the memory that is generating the outcry of the victims, and strengthen their work for peace with justice.

75 These fundamental rights include the right to protest, the right to life, the right to peace, and the right to freedom of worship, among others. See the Political Constitution of Colombia of 1991, Title II: Rights, Guarantees, and Duties, Chapter I, "Fundamental Rights," https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Colombia/colombia91.pdf.

Mennonites in Vietnam during the American War

Luke S. Martin

North American Mennonites who went to Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century under the auspices of service ministries inevitably became embroiled in the issues related to the all-encompassing American political and military involvement in Vietnam. The Mennonites' ongoing presence in Vietnam gave them a unique platform from which to view and critique the development and expansion of the American war. This article describes how these Mennonites, though initially hesitant to speak publicly to national and international issues, found a voice to speak out against the overwhelming horrors of the war and its violation of the basic tenants of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[1] Rather than remain silent, they chose to address the violence of the American military policies in Vietnam and to call for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Mennonites Arrive in Vietnam: The Pre-Vietnam War Years

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was the first Mennonite organization to send personnel to Vietnam; in 1954 they entered South Vietnam following the signing of the Geneva Accords that brought the French Indochina War to an end.[2] MCC coordinated its aid programs with the Vietnamese government

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1 Since numerous published papers have already focused on MCC's response to the war (see Perry Bush, "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 1 [Spring 1999]: 5–27; David E. Leaman, "Politicized Service and Teamwork Tensions, Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam, 1966–1969," *Mennonite Quarterly Review 71* [October 1997]: 544–70), this article gives primary attention to the responses of Vietnam Mennonite Mission personnel, of which I was one.

2 The area comprising Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos came under the control of the French colonial government in the late nineteenth century. The early twentieth century saw many Vietnamese independence movements, with the communist-dominated Việt Minh prevailing. After Germany seized France in 1940, Japanese forces occupied Viet-

in Saigon and with US Operations Mission (USOM)—later the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Three years later, in 1957, the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC)[3] sent missionary personnel to Vietnam. Representing Vietnam Mennonite Mission (VMM), missionaries saw their task as evangelism and establishing churches. They engaged in evangelistic ministries, student work, and community services in Saigon—and later in Cần Thơ.

MCC began by distributing emergency relief aid to displaced persons. Soon after, while continuing limited aid assistance, the organization developed a medical program at a leprosarium of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA)[4] in Vietnam's Central Highlands. In 1960 MCC established a hospital in central Vietnam in partnership with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN), the CMA-founded church.

Personnel from both Mennonite agencies interacted significantly with one another. During an extended Vietnam visit in 1959, MCC's Executive Secretary William Snyder and EMBMC's Secretary Paul N. Kraybill clarified a relationship that would enable two separate Mennonite agencies to work together in Vietnam with overlapping concerns, vision, and goals.[5] Except from 1966 to 1972, when MCC was part of the large Vietnam Christian Service, MCC personnel often met together with missionaries in weekly fellowship meetings in Saigon.

MCC administrators and personnel were not unaware of the political implications of their Vietnam ministries. However, there is no indication that the central office in Akron, Pennsylvania, anticipated the major warfare that would break out in Vietnam a few years after MCC began its ministries there. MCC executives had been told by their Washington contacts that they were "needed"

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nam. After Japan surrendered, the Việt Minh leader, Hồ Chí Minh, proclaimed independence on September 3, 1945. French refusal to accept their independence led to warfare in 1946, ending with a cease-fire agreement in July 1954 (Geneva Accords) that provided a temporary division between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North) and the State of Vietnam (South) until nationwide elections within two years. The State of Vietnam was under the weak control of Emperor Bảo Đại, who named Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister. The following year, Diệm defeated the emperor in a referendum and proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) with himself the president.

3 Now Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM).

4 Christian & Missionary Alliance (CMA) entered Vietnam in 1911, leading to the formation of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN). In 1940 there were 123 member churches. In 1975 there were 54,000 baptized members in 510 churches. See Scott W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 277–78.

5 William. T. Snyder to MCC Board Chairman Christian. N. (C. N.) Hostetter, Jr. and MCC Akron staff Robert W. Miller, J. N. Byler, and Willis Detweiler, June 8, 1959.

in Vietnam to help the new government care for displaced persons.[6] Delbert Wiens, the leader of the first MCC team in Vietnam, was told by Vietnamese government personnel of the importance of their presence in the country. James Stauffer, before going as the first Mennonite missionary, observed that southeast Asia was a "battleground" between the various forces of nationalism, communism, and Christianity.[7] When asked to describe the contributions of the Protestant Christian church to Vietnam in 1958, MCC representative Willard Krabill noted that the church was "one of the major bulwarks against the spread of totalitarian communism" in the country.[8] In spite of all this, neither MCC nor VMM personnel viewed their work in Vietnam in political terms.

Just prior to this, the United States had fought an ideological war against communism in Korea that had ended in 1953 with an uneasy truce. American political sentiments were not well-disposed toward an atheistic communist ideology of the Soviet Union or the recent People's Republic of China. Yet the Mennonite church's peace stance did not view Vietnamese communists as enemies. The spirit in which MCC administrators, field personnel, and the tens of thousands of its supporting constituency were responding to physical needs followed MCC's motto—"In the name of Christ."

The United States had provided most of the war matériel during the latter part of the French Indochina War and continued providing military and political support to the new government in the South. President Ngô Đình Diệm's refusal to permit general elections led to guerilla military activity against his government in 1957 by a communist-led coalition of forces, pejoratively called Việt Cộng. This led to the establishment of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960. When the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was formed in 1962 to direct the war, there were already 3,200 US military advisors there.[9] Increased military activity and internal turmoil precipitated a coup d'état against the president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in November 1963 and the installation of a military government. Following the Tonkin

6 Snyder to Orie O. Miller, June 23, 1954, saying that William McCahon of Foreign Operations Administration (FOA) "definitely wants voluntary agencies to help." A Snyder letter to Joan Kain, Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, September 16, 1954, states that Orie O. Miller was told in Saigon that MCC's assistance was important because "Vietnam needs visible signs of foreign interest and concern."

7 Stauffer, "The Challenge of Viet-Nam," *Missionary Messenger* (March 1957), 8.

8 "The Work of the Protestant Churches in Viet Nam," a 1958 report requested by Richard W. Lindholm, a researcher from Michigan State University. Willard Krabill wrote that their objective was "to serve the needs of a suffering people regardless of creed, . . . to strengthen the Vietnamese church for the tasks it faces, . . . and to acquaint the Vietnamese . . . with the essence of the Christian gospel." Krabill became a critic of US policies.

9 John S. Bowman, ed., *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bison, 1985), 54–55, gives an excellent chronology of the war.

Gulf incident[10] in August 1964, the US Congress adopted the Southeast Asia Resolution and US forces began bombing North Vietnam.[11]

During the late fifties and early sixties, Mennonite personnel in Vietnam, through interacting with Vietnamese colleagues and reading local newspapers, had been quite aware of the growing guerrilla activity, the military responses of the American and South Vietnamese governments, and the implications of this for their ministries. Letters home and reports were filled with descriptions of the expanding war. Yet both MCC and VMM personnel believed that it was inappropriate to comment publicly about American-Vietnamese political issues from Vietnam. In giving MCC permission to begin a program in 1957, President Diệm had stipulated that the organization not "incite or make propaganda for anything against the Vietnamese laws."[12] And in 1964, the Mennonite Mission was authorized to be "active only in purely religious activities."[13]

The Vietnam War Commences: How Should American Mennonites Respond?

In 1965 the war in Vietnam expanded rapidly. After NLF attacks on US military advisors' barracks in February, the United States responded with sustained bombings over North Vietnam and, in March, introduced combat-ready Marines into central Vietnam. By mid-year, B-52 saturation bombings had begun on suspected insurgent areas in the South.

When General William Westmoreland took command of US military forces in 1964, he adopted a strategy of attrition against the Viet Cong, and "body count" became the measure of the conflict. Villages in the countryside were bombed and napalmed; noncombatant men, women, and children were dying.[14]

We missionaries did not subscribe to a "just war" doctrine articulated by philosophers and embraced by many religious bodies, that spells out when and how political entities may engage in military activities. However, as the brutal, inhumane American weaponry continued raining down death on Vietnam's

10 The United States claimed that Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) forces had attacked US naval ships in the Tonkin Gulf.

11 There are many excellent histories of the war: see Frederik Logevall's *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012) and *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Another is Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983).

12 Order No. 165-YT of The President of the Republic of Viet Nam, April 20, 1957.

13 Letter from Premier Nguyễn Khánh, September 18, 1964, in Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 150.

14 Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013).

countryside, affecting noncombatants, including families and friends of our staff, we missionaries decided in August 1965 that we needed to issue a public statement concerning the war. We asked James Metzler to prepare a draft.[15]

Metzler had written several essays published in the EMBMC journal, *Missionary Messenger*, criticizing the American involvement in Vietnam and explaining how our country's actions were complicating our sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the May 1965 issue, Metzler declared that the Mennonite position of conscientious objection to war was untenable unless we resisted the atrocity the United States was perpetrating on the Vietnamese people. "Silence can only mean consent—where there is opportunity to speak," he wrote.

We still had questions. For example, to whom should we address the statement? We missionaries had been schooled in a two-kingdom theology—the kingdom of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of the world. Most Mennonites understood this to mean that the church should stay out of the political arena; it certainly should not attempt to speak to government, which had a God-given duty to maintain order in an imperfect world. While we affirmed the more recent Mennonite statements that the church might speak to the government on moral issues,[16] we knew that not everyone in our supporting constituency embraced those views. It did not seem appropriate for us, as aliens, to speak publicly against the Vietnamese government. But we could speak to what the United States was doing. Our Christian faith obligated us to speak out against the immorality of the war. Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) clearly taught us to care for victims of tragedy; certainly it was incumbent on us to try to prevent others from being harmed.

Reviewing James Metzler's draft statement, Mission Council members decided that our statement would be addressed to the church in the United States.[17] VMM secretary Everett Metzler corresponded with Paul N. Kraybill, EMBMC Secretary, about our decision to issue a statement. While Kraybill was sympathetic, he counseled: "To make a statement is a rather precarious proposal unless . . . you are in a position of being publicly misunderstood. . . . One has the feeling that when you begin to make statements, you are almost forced to continue that pattern or your silence will be construed to mean something that you had not intended."[18]

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15 Minutes of the Vietnam Mission Council (VMC), August 11, 1965; the VMC included ordained missionaries James Stauffer, Everett Metzler, James Metzler, Luke Martin, and Donald Sensenig.

16 See Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

17 VMC Minutes, September 8, 1965.

18 Paul N. Kraybill to Everett Metzler, September 10, 1965.

We continued working on a statement. When Kraybill learned that the Peace Problems Committees of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church were planning a special joint issue on Vietnam in both *Gospel Herald* and *The Mennonite* papers, he asked us to send the statement, noting that it "could have a very meaningful contribution."[19]

The "Statement of Concern" released in early December 1965 was quite mild. Addressed to "Christians everywhere and especially with the Mennonite fellowship," it described the suffering of the Vietnamese, who had no voice in choosing their fate, and it questioned the legitimacy of the American military intervention. It expressed concern that "the communication of the Gospel [was] made more difficult" because Asians identified Christianity with Western nations.[20] The statement asked for prayer that the church in Vietnam would "be faithful in suffering." It was clear that we did not support American military policies—even if many missionaries of other agencies did.[21]

The most opportune time for making statements, however, had likely already passed. What is now known is that "by the early spring of 1965 the last chance to prevent another full-scale war in [Vietnam] had passed."[22] Positions on both sides had hardened. President Johnson had conducted a thorough review of the conflict and decided to send more combat troops in an effort to defeat the NLF forces.[23]

With the expansion of the war and the increased violence against the civilian population, Church World Service (CWS), the service agency of the National Council of Churches—the largest ecumenical body in the United States—proposed working with MCC, which already had a decade of experience in Vietnam. This led to the formation of Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS) in January 1966, a joint agency of CWS, MCC, and Lutheran World Relief, with MCC as the administrative leader. By year's end, MCC had assigned forty of the sixty-four VNCS international volunteers in South Vietnam—doctors,

19 Kraybill to Metzler, November 27, 1965.

20 Vietnamese generally associated Protestant Christian faith with the United States and Catholicism with France.

21 "Statement of Concern by Vietnam Mennonite Mission Council—December 1965," A Vietnam Presence website, Appendixes A 2–3, http://www.avietnampresence.com/.

22 Logevall, *Choosing War*, 335.

23 On June 2, 1965, William Snyder, MCC's executive secretary, wrote to President Johnson expressing concern for "human suffering" and urged a negotiated settlement. Both the General Conference Mennonite Church (July 15, 1965) and Mennonite Church (August 25–27, 1965) adopted statements on Vietnam at their summer conventions.

nurses, social workers, agriculturalists, and other personnel—working alongside Vietnamese staff in refugee camps and other areas of need.[24]

The decision to form VNCS was not easily made. MCC Vietnam director Paul Longacre had attended meetings with US officials in Saigon who emphasized that assistance to refugees is part of psychological warfare—popularly called "winning the hearts and minds" of the people.[25] Longacre feared that a large joint service program would rally American Protestants to support US goals in Vietnam and do little to stop the cause of human suffering. In helping the refugees, he said, "we will be making it more palatable for the US and South Vietnam to create more of the same."[26] While Robert W. Miller, MCC's Asia director, shared Longacre's concerns, he also noted the view of Stephen Cary—with American Friends Service Committee—who said it was important to place civilian service personnel to show that there are Americans other than military forces.[27]

Just two weeks before signing the Memorandum of Understanding with the two other bodies, Snyder expressed reservations about MCC leading Vietnam Christian Service:

> Frankly, I am somewhat apprehensive whether we can, as an historic peace church, lead the Protestant forces as we have been asked to do in Vietnam. If we pull out all the stops in our criticism of US government foreign policy by asking withdrawal of United States from Vietnam, I think we will likely pull apart from the larger body of Protestants who presently want to work through us. On the other hand, if we are somewhat moderate in tone, I believe that we may have an opportunity to influence these denominations on a scale that we have not hitherto had opportunity to do. It is clear to me that our words and our deeds in Vietnam must go together and that the acid test of what we say . . . must be what we do in Vietnam and in our own communities.[28]

MCC related closely to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) from the beginning of its Vietnam ministry. Consultations with *Tin Lành*[29] Church leaders and CMA officials had indicated a strong preference for having MCC

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24 The VNCS story is briefly told in Midge Austin Meinertz, ed., *Vietnam Christian Service: Witness in Anguish* (New York: Church World Service, 1975).

25 Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 193.

26 Longacre to R. Miller, October 6, 1965.

27 R. Miller to Longacre, September 28, 1965.

28 Snyder memo to the Special Task Force, December 22, 1965.

29 *Tin Lành* means "Evangelical." It is considered the main "Protestant" church in Vietnam.

administer a joint program rather than having the US National Council of Churches initiate a separate program through Church World Service.[30]

A few of us missionaries with good language skills gave part-time assistance to VNCS. Everett Metzler set up a program for new personnel to receive two months of introductory language study. Atlee Beechy, college professor and MCC board member who had extensive relief experience in Europe after World War II, became the first director of Vietnam Christian Service. Longacre served as his associate. Beechy widely voiced his concerns about the war. In a memo to the head of USAID Vietnam, Beechy said that VNCS had "a responsibility to work toward peace."[31] He wrote regularly to the congressional representative from his home district, calling attention to the many civilian casualties, expressing concern that the US Administration was following a hard line against North Vietnam while saying it was prepared to negotiate.[32] In a conversation with an up-country veteran missionary who thanked God for good weather to help "our boys blast those Viet Cong," Beechy asked, "How will the Viet Cong who are killed in the raids hear the Good News?"[33]

We missionaries had opportunities to interact with hundreds of students every year—high school and university students as well as civil servants. Though aware that teaching English could be seen as cultural imperialism, missionaries were able to help those eager for language skills to seek employment or pursue higher education.[34] Students were invited to Bible classes—taught in English or Vietnamese—where teachers focused on the life and teachings of Jesus, sharing their faith in a gospel of love and peace. Among advanced students, teachers often discussed current affairs, including the ever-present war. While not criticizing the Vietnamese government, we discussed the implications of military service with those who committed to following the way of Jesus.

By the end of 1966, the United States had stationed 280,000 US military troops in Vietnam with 95,000 additional soldiers on ships or stationed in Thailand.[35] When the news came out that evangelist Billy Graham was planning a Christmas visit to the US soldiers, Paul Leatherman, the VNCS executive

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30 R. Miller in early April spoke with Rev. Đoàn Văn Miêng, President of the ECVN, and with Grady Mangham, CMA Vietnam chair. Later, Miller and his father, Orie Miller, met with CMA leaders in New York. (R. Miller to Longacre, June 8, 1965.)

31 Beechy memo to Charles Mann, March 28, 1966.

32 From March 26, 1966, letter to John Brademas, representative from Indiana's Third Congressional District.

33 Beechy, *Seeking Peace: My Journey* (Goshen, IN: Pinchpenny), 82.

34 Some classes used the simple stories of Jesus created by missionary linguist Frank C. Laubach; see, for example, Laubach, *The Master Speaks: Jesus Tells His Own Story* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2013).

35 Bowman, *World Almanac*, 158.

director who had replaced Beechy, arranged with the head chaplain at Saigon's "Pentagon East"—the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—for a meeting with Graham.

Graham met with the VNCS group on December 21.[36] At that meeting, Leatherman described VNCS's philosophy of service. Longacre then expressed our concern at what the overpowering military and economic might of America was doing to the moral fiber of the people, what it was doing to the conscience of Americans, and how it was hindering the work of world evangelism insofar as American Christians were supporting this policy. Neil Brendon gave several illustrations of what was happening in Vietnam and how Vietnamese felt about what the United States was doing there.

Graham said it was clear that America "is not a Christian nation," implying that no one should confuse American policy with Christianity. He said that during his student days he was "nearly a pacifist." After seeing how Nazi Germany treated Jewish people, he now agreed with those who were saying that Communism must be stopped in Vietnam or it would spread to the whole of Southeast Asia. The responsibility of the church, he said, is to evangelize, then instruct the believers in Christian living and in serving the needs of others

Graham claimed that he had never made a public statement on American Vietnam policy. He also said that he had come to Vietnam to minister to GIs in the same way that he was conducting his evangelistic campaigns.[37] While we were disappointed that Graham was not sympathetic to our perspective, we had presented a concern that he would not hear from US military officers—the plight of an innocent suffering people.

The year 1967 was intense for VNCS. Amid increased fighting and VNCS personnel gaining experience in assisting the tens of thousands of displaced people, many personnel were raising serious questions. MCC Executive Secretary Snyder and William Keeney (MCC Peace Section) visited Vietnam in May of that year. Six months earlier the United States had consolidated all the field operations of USAID, CIA, and the Joint US Public Affairs Office into the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) to facilitate their "pacification program." Now at the time of their visit, President Johnson further militarized American operations by ordering that OCO be placed under the military command of General Westmoreland as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development.[38]

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36 The group consisted of Paul Leatherman, Paul Longacre, Luke Martin, Lance Woodruff, and Neil Brenden.

37 Paul Leatherman, *A Full and Rewarding Life: A Memoir* (Lititz, PA: P. Leatherman, 2006), 33; L. Martin memo to P. N. Kraybill, "VNCS interview with Dr. Billy Graham, December 21, 1966," December 24, 1966.

38 "The Office of Civic Operations and Rural Support (CORDS)," National Archives, Military Records, https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/

To work closely with USAID under military control was fraught with moral challenges. Snyder and Keeney met with OCO deputy director, L. Wade Lathrum, who told them that he was "unhappy" with the Mennonite position on the war but felt that VNCS was "doing a service the government cannot do and so [he] tolerate[d] the dissent."[39] He declared that the new governmental structure would not negatively affect voluntary agencies like VNCS. His argument was not very convincing, however.

VNCS work in Quảng Ngãi Province included a feeding program for thousands of displaced persons, using supplies provided by USAID. Team members, led by Canadian David Neufeld, met regularly with local provincial officials to brainstorm possible developmental programs. In a May report to the Saigon office, Earl Martin wrote: "Identities continue to trouble us. Who are we as a Christian presence here? Who are we in relation to other governmental agencies working in Vietnam?" With USAID intent on coordinating all refugee programs, he suggested that VNCS might focus on medical, educational, and agricultural programs rather than on feeding programs.[40] Aware that USAID was pleased with the VNCS feeding program and had proposed that VNCS develop a countrywide program, most team members signed a letter to Paul Leatherman expressing "misgivings" about "a contract with CORDS which would identify VNCS with the total military effort."[41]

MCC's Executive Committee did reject USAID's proposal in order to "maintain a VNCS identity and integrity to the greatest degree possible in the face of strong military control of South Vietnam by the United States forces."[42] Yet two of the Quảng Ngãi team held another view. One wrote: "To me it is a sad day when our primary concern is our 'identity' rather than meeting the needs of the people. As long as people are in need and there is someone to help, I don't care who gets the credit for the job. My primary concern is not to further the political position of VNCS or to spend a great deal of time establishing our 'image' if it detracts from the job of meeting and helping those in need."[43]

James MacCracken, the executive director of CWS, the largest VNCS partner, would have agreed. Although the National Council of Churches, CWS's

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civil-operations.html.

39 Keeney Report to MCC Peace Section, "Trip to Vietnam: May 1–16, 1967," May 22, 1967.

40 E. Martin Program Report, June 19, 1967.

41 July 12 letter regarding a "VNCS-CORDS Feeding Contract," signed by Pat Hostetter, Earl Martin, Tharon McConnell, David Neufeld, Sue Neufeld, and Sanford Stauffer.

42 MCC Executive Board Minute 12f, May 26, 1967.

43 Fred Gregory, July 28, 1967, report to Jerry Aaker. The other person was Robert L. Miller.

parent body, opposed American military intervention in Vietnam, MacCracken said it was not appropriate for CWS to associate with either a hawk or dove stance. He said that CWS endeavored to minister to acute human need without regard to "the accident of geography, race, or religion." When VNCS was formed, he noted, they already recognized that they would have to rely heavily on the American government for logistical support.[44]

Doug Hostetter, MCC's volunteer in Tam Kỳ, just a bit north of Quảng Ngãi, was also making waves. Hostetter had developed an educational program using high school students to teach village children who were unable to go to school. His friendships within the local community and visits to villages under partial NLF control attracted the attention of the local CORDS colonel, who asked US Deputy Ambassador Henry Koran to remove Hostetter from Tam Kỳ. Leatherman met with Ambassador Koran, who charged that Hostetter was criticizing US policies in contacts with local USAID personnel and subversively working against US policy and objectives in his relationships with area Vietnamese.[45] Leatherman asked Hostetter to come to Saigon for consultation and possible reassignment. However, in an unpredictable turn of events due to the illness of a team member, Hostetter returned to Tam Kỳ.

The nonsectarian International Voluntary Service (IVS) was facing similar pressures. Fully funded by USAID, their staff were now working under the umbrella of the US military command. VNCS Director Leatherman, IVS Chief of Party Don Luce, and the head of another agency met with US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker at the embassy on September 14, 1967, to protest the pressure to become part of the American "team." They insisted on freedom to determine their own programs in consultation with Vietnamese authorities. Bunker told them that voluntary agency personnel did not have the right to oppose US or Vietnamese government policies, and said that no aid could be given to the Viet Cong. Leatherman made it clear to the ambassador that the Christian church did not have enemies.[46]

Within a week of this meeting with the ambassador, Luce—together with many other IVS staff members—wrote to President Johnson, calling the war "an overwhelming atrocity." He stated that they were "finding it increasingly difficult to pursue quietly [their] main objective: helping the people in Vietnam. . . . Thus, to stay in Vietnam and remain silent is to fail to respond to the first need of the Vietnamese people—peace."[47] They presented their letter to the embassy

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44 Quoted by Longacre in a letter to Sam Hope, September 6, 1967.

45 Leatherman confidential report, August 10, 1967.

46 Leatherman, *A Full and Rewarding Life*, 31; Leatherman to Longacre, "Meeting with Ambassador Bunker," September 16, 1967.

47 Don Luce, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 19–20.

and sent it to *The New York Times*. Four top IVS personnel resigned, including Luce and two Mennonite volunteers—area team leaders Gene Stoltzfus and Willy Meyers.[48]

MCC's Executive Secretary Snyder also told the Southeast Asia USAID administrator in Washington that transferring USAID's program to CORDS put "subtle and indirect pressure for voluntary agencies to gear their programs toward military goals."[49] Clarification came with a CORDS response in early November, saying that US policy is "to respect the sovereignty and independence of operation of all voluntary agencies. . . . Although CORDS personnel are responsible for assisting the [government of Vietnam], . . . such *coordination should be carried out in such a way as to preclude charges of interference in and control of Volag activities*."[50]

During our year's home leave from mid-1967, Mary and I were invited to speak in congregations that supported EMBMC ministries. We were generally given a receptive hearing as we described the human suffering and death and the physical destruction caused by superior American firepower. Although sympathetic to the time-tested commitment to nonresistance and non-involvement in governmental politics as generally practiced within the Mennonite Church, we were compelled by our Vietnam experience to more actively oppose US military policies. The gospel stories of Jesus required an interpretation adequate to the situation in which we had been living. The story Jesus told his inquirer who asked, "Who is my neighbor?" not only called for binding up the wounds of the injured man but also asking, "What must be done to prevent the robbers from beating up and killing others who come down the road?" We were more concerned with orthopraxis than orthodoxy (terminology we did not use at the time).

That year I traveled to Washington, DC, to join tens of thousands demonstrating against the war. Initially disturbed to see a contingent of marching anarchists, I asked myself why I was in such company. I quickly resolved this concern, however; I did not need to agree with all the views of others. Had Jesus not reprimanded John who found fault that someone driving out demons was not following them? Jesus declared: "Whoever is not against us is for us!" (Mark 9:40). I was more than willing to join with persons of other political views or faiths in trying to stop the American reign of terror in Vietnam.

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48 Luce, after a speaking tour in the United States, returned to Vietnam and worked with other agencies there. In 1970 he led an American congressman to uncover the "tiger cages" on Côn Sơn prison island. See Ted Lieverman, "The Transformation of Don Luce," *HistoryNet*, https://www.historynet.com/transformation-don-luce.htm.

49 Snyder memo to James M. Grant, October 5, 1967.

50 L. Wade Lathrum letter on Voluntary Agency Support to CORDS deputies, November 11, 1967 (emphasis is in the original).

When James and Rachel Metzler had been on home leave the previous year, James had accompanied two Eastern Mennonite Seminary professors in January 1967 to a Washington, DC, gathering of the Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam (CALC) protesting the war.[51] He was among thirty-some signers of a February 2 full-page advertisement of the CALC statement in the area newspaper, drawing criticism from some local Mennonite church leaders.

Troubled by the unrelenting violence of the American war of attrition, the Mennonite missionary team in Saigon in October 1967 prepared a statement for our local Vietnamese community that read, in part: "We are deeply moved by the tremendous suffering and grief being endured by many Vietnamese people. We believe that the military force causing most of this hardship is not in their interest and cannot solve their problems."[52]

After this Vietnamese language statement was posted in the Mission's student center, some Vietnamese staff members feared they might be questioned by authorities for involvement in political activities and asked that it be taken down. The statement was then given only to persons who asked why we missionaries had come to Vietnam.

Some who related closely to MCC, the Mission, or the developing Mennonite church did not share our perspective regarding the American military power. Nguyễn Vân Ninh, MCC's interpreter and administrative assistant for many years—who moved from the North to Saigon in 1955—surprised persons on a 1969 visit to MCC's home office in Akron, Pennsylvania, when he gave "a strong statement of support for the Saigon government."[53] As part of Vietnam's growing middle class, his family was not unusual in being concerned about the the revolutionaries potentially coming to power.[54]

A Letter from Mennonites in Vietnam to American Christians

In December 1967 the missionary team released a *Letter from Vietnam to American Christians*, which expressed concern for the suffering of the Vietnamese people caused by US military forces. We said that while we did not condone "the atrocities and terror of the other side," "the US and Allied forces

51 James Metzler diary, January 31, 1967. Metzler loaned me his diary for my research and retains it in his possession.

52 A Vietnam Presence website, http://www.AVietnamPresence.com/appendixes, E 8.

53 Longacre to E. Metzler, September 15, 1969.

54 Robert (Bob) W. Miller came to Vietnam in September 1968 as VNCS's third director. When he asked office secretaries to type Atlee Beechy's report of visits with NLF representatives, the secretaries were so upset that Bob burned all the papers; to advocate accommodation to "the other side" was considered a criminal offense (Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 343–44).

are causing most of the devastation." We expressed concern about American church leaders supporting the war and that "our president" had prayed for God to "bless 'our pilots' on their missions of destruction."[55]

Paul Kraybill affirmed the positive tone of the VMM draft statement. However, he questioned the frequent use of "our" in referring to the United States as our country, our nation, our leaders, or our president.[56] Everett responded that while we may disavow personal guilt, as Americans we cannot fully disassociate ourselves from American policy "until we no longer call the US 'our' country."[57]

During the lunar New Year on January 30, 1968 (*Tết Mậu Thân*), South Vietnam and the American military establishment were stunned when the NLF forces and People's Army from the North attacked Saigon and more than one hundred cities and towns throughout the South in a coordinated general offensive. William Snyder and Atlee Beechy had arrived in Vietnam a few days earlier to attend a planned VNCS conference. It was soon learned that several CMA missionaries were killed in the mountain city of Ban-Mê-Thuột and six MCC personnel were trapped in Hue. Though vehicles with the VNCS logo were parked outside their house, they were not harmed by People's Army troops. Only after nine days were they able to report that they were safe.[58] While the Tet Offensive led to massive casualties for the Viet Cong forces, it unmasked the false claim that the "enemy" was being defeated. It also led to President Johnson's announcement two months later to stop bombing and begin negotiations with the other side.

Virginia pastor Eugene Sauder printed twenty thousand copies of the *Letter* released by the missionaries. Five thousand copies were distributed at a second mobilization meeting of Clergy and Laymen Concerned in Washington, DC, on February 5 and 6, 1968, only days after the start of the Tet Offensive. Souder received permission from the Sergeant at Arms at the US Capitol to distribute the letter to all the congressional offices. Some legislators expressed appreciation for it.[59] Published in the January 15 *Gospel Herald* and the March *Missionary Messenger*, the *Letter* was also endorsed by EMBMC President H. Raymond Charles as he called for a "Day of Prayer" for Vietnam.[60]

In May the continuing Tet Offensive saw additional attacks that devastated a blighted area adjacent to the Mennonite community center, resulting in hun-

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55 A Vietnam Presence website, http://www.AVietnamPresence.com/appendixes, F 9. The letter is reproduced in the present issue of *Anabaptist Witness*.

56 Kraybill to E. Metzler, November 22, 1967.

57 E. Metzler to Kraybill, December 19, 1967.

58 Omar Eby, *A House in Hue* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1968); Mark Bowden, *Huế 1968* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2017).

59 Author conversation with Eugene Souder, October 15, 2011.

60 Letter to Lancaster Mennonite Conference leaders, February 27, 1968.

dreds of houses bombed to dislodge the insurgents. VNCS worked with the Mennonite Mission to assist a hundred families to rebuild. Many months later we found in an unused mailbox two undated letters, both carrying the seal of the local sector of the Liberation Front. The first letter encouraged a center staff person to treat the poor fairly. The other letter, addressed to the directors, was quite warm with praise, expressing gratitude "for the charitable work" in helping families rebuild.[61] In a letter to Kraybill, Everett Metzler wrote: "At least we are known to the other side in a way that we wish to be known."[62] We received no further NLF communication.

James Metzler, a member of our missionary team, felt that the *Letter* expressing opposition to American policy was hardly an adequate response to the American war. In a letter to Kraybill, he wrote:

> I believe the time is fast approaching, if not already here, when we must disassociate ourselves from this evil campaign—for our personal consciences' sake as well as a witness to true Christianity. . . . I already feel as though I do not belong here: the entire spirit and atmosphere which envelops us all is totally foreign to our own spirit. . . . We simply have not been able to stand apart from it. . . . Our very presence in the midst of this military-political-social struggle implicates us directly with what our nation is doing.[63]

As this conviction grew, Metzler began conversations with Kraybill about transferring to a new assignment outside Vietnam. Kraybill offered understanding to Metzler, yet encouraged him "not to take steps that [would] jeopardize the witness and conviction of others" who had not come to the same position.[64] Following the Tet Offensive, which devastated areas of Saigon, Metzler and the other missionaries joined VNCS staff in offering significant assistance to victims of the conflict. Then, in 1970 with little publicity, the Metzler family transferred to the Philippines.

In an article written after the war, titled "Vietnam: I Wouldn't Do It Again," Metzler discusses the problems associated with an American-based mission seeking to evangelize in an area dominated by US military forces. He says that we might have made a significant witness for the integrity of the gospel if our

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61 A Vietnam Presence website, http://www.AVietnamPresence.com/appendixes, H 13–14.

62 E. Metzler to Kraybill, February 18, 1969. Translated texts of the two letters are also archived.

63 J. Metzler to Kraybill, October 31, 1967.

64 P. Kraybill to J. Metzler, November 22, 1967.

entire missionary team had publicly left Vietnam in protest of the war because of our American identity.[65]

Although we could identify with Metzler in his decision to resign and leave, team members believed that staying in Vietnam enabled us to continue a Christian witness and to speak against the war's evils with greater clarity—to our friends in Vietnam, to our American church constituency, and to the American public.

This *Letter* eventually got the attention of the wider evangelical community in the United States. Several prominent leaders asked CMA for their position on US Vietnam policy. In response to one such inquiry, Franklin Irwin, CMA field director, expressed support for American policies: "The Vietnamese asked us to come and help them drive back an invader who was trying by murder, force, and war to subjugate all the peoples of South Vietnam," he wrote. For America to desert this "gallant, little nation [that was] fighting for its life and freedom" would be both immoral and unChristian.[66]

Grady Mangham, CMA Asia Director, in his response to an inquiry from Donald McGavran, Professor of Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA), supported continuing America's war policies. Although aware of the atrocities and horrors of the war, he was convinced that the alternative—a communist rule—was "frightening, almost unthinkable."[67] Earlier Mangham had written to Louis L. King, CMA Chairman, that the United States "must support the South Vietnamese people in their resistance against a Communist takeover."[68]

The Mennonite missionary team in Saigon also received responses from four other missionaries, ranging "from mild disagreement to rather violent disagreement." Some expressed appreciation while not fully agreeing. Others felt that such statements only encouraged the "enemy" and shortened the time "for Western missionaries to preach the Gospel in Vietnam."[69]

Would it have been a most faithful Christian witness for Metzler to publicly denounce the US policies and leave Vietnam in 1967? Or for the whole missionary group to do this together? Who in Vietnam, the United States, or the world community might have taken notice? How would it have been understood? How would this have affected the witness of the Mennonite missionary team? Is the gospel preached by Western missionaries a compromised gospel? Perhaps

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65 James Metzler, "I Would Not Do It Again," *Mission Focus* 6, no. 2 (November 1977): 1–3.

66 B. Violet James, "American Protestant Missions and the Vietnam War" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1989), 231.

67 James, 231.

68 James, 228.

69 E. Metzler letter to Kraybill, April 4, 1968.

rather than voluntarily leave we might have spoken more forcefully about the murderous strategy and tactics of the American military forces; this could have resulted in being denied visas by the Saigon government.

We cannot ignore the issue James Metzler raised in 1957 about the appropriateness of an all-American Vietnam Mennonite Mission team in a country dominated by the American empire. We did attempt to internationalize our personnel.[70] In previous eras much mission work was done throughout Africa and Asia in lands by missionaries from those colonial nations. We may rightly question the role of French missionary Mngr. Pigneau de Behaine in securing French political and military help to save the Nguyễn Dynasty in Vietnam in 1787, yet this assisted a persecuted Catholic Church in regaining its strength.[71] Our American citizenship gave us both advantages and disadvantages.[72] We could and did speak to Vietnamese friends and students about the devastation caused by the American military forces; if they publicly expressed those views they would have been suspected as NLF sympathizers and arrested.

When President Johnson on March 31, 1968, announced a unilateral halt on bombing North Vietnam, with preparations to "move immediately toward peace through negotiations," MCC Executive Secretary Snyder telegrammed the president, saying: "Your decision to move toward the conference table by ordering the cessation of bombing in most of North Vietnam is a step that we strongly endorse."[73]

The Paris Peace Talks did not convene until January 18, 1969, two days before Richard Nixon's inauguration. In his inaugural address, Nixon referred to possible "years of patient and prolonged diplomacy" before attaining peace.[74] There would be 27,000 additional GIs killed—along with hundreds of thousands of conscripted soldiers from both North and South Vietnam and large numbers of civilians—in the four years before the peace agreement would take effect on January 27, 1973. After building up and supplying the Republic of Vietnam military forces, the United States withdrew its combat troops. Amid ongoing warfare, Mennonite missionaries and MCC personnel continued to

70 VMM invited Arno and Jacqueline Thimm (Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 229). MCC had a more international team with Canadians, Americans, one Japanese, and two Indian team members.

71 Piero Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), 7.

72 Compare Acts 16:35–39, where Paul appeals to his Roman citizenship during his efforts to expand the church.

73 Snyder telegram to President Johnson, April 2, 1968.

74 "Richard Milhous Nixon: First Inaugural Address–Monday, January 20, 1969," Bartleby.com, http://bartleby.com/124/pres58.html.

write letters to the White House and to congressional persons, and engaged in conversations with the embassy in Saigon in an effort to end the conflict.[75]

Four missionaries—Donald Sensenig, James Stauffer, James Metzler, and Luke Martin—were among nearly fifty persons who signed *A Letter from Vietnam*[76] prior to the October 15, 1969, Moratorium Day in the United States, calling on the US government to end the war. Portions of this letter were printed in an independent Vietnamese language newspaper with names of the signers. A prominent *Tin Lành* lay leader told Stauffer that more American missionaries should have signed this letter. He claimed that the majority of persons in the *Tin Lành* Church were behind our efforts to stop the war.[77]

In May 1972, Donald Sensenig drafted a letter to President Nixon, signed by all the missionaries in Saigon as well as several MCC volunteers, calling on the president to cease "hostile action by all US military forces," which might become "the catalyst that begins the long, painful way toward change and compromise."[78] In his cover letter to the EMBMC office, Sensenig wrote that this "is only one small attempt to allow justice, mercy, and faith to contend with violence in our national life."

> "The whole gospel for the whole man" expresses the goal of our witness as Christians, as well as the desire of our hearts for our own lives. . . .
> The [attached] letter might not contain "the whole gospel"; but we believe the gospel underlies its appeal . . . to government leaders, and to the public at large, to recognize sin and unrighteousness and judgment at work in our government's actions.[79]

This letter was published in *Gospel Herald*, the Mennonite Church periodical at that time. Delton Franz, the director of MCC's Washington, DC office (established in 1968), commented on "the wide circulation" of the letter. "I think our Mennonite constituency has received considerable insight from the perspective of EMBMC mission personnel on the scene. We were able to share copies of the letter with government officials."[80]

Yet there were Mennonite critics, like the editor of a small paper who said it was unfair to criticize the United States without speaking to the other side,

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75 Several of these are in www.aVietnamPresence.com/appendixes. Sensenig drafted a May 6, 1972, letter to Nixon; James Stauffer, Donald Sensenig, Luke Martin, and Tom Spicher (MCC) met with ambassador Ellsworth Bunker on May 26, 1972.

76 http://www.AVietnamPresence.com/appendixes, I 15. Fifteen VNCSers and many Quakers also signed the *Letter (Martin, Vietnam Presence, 369).*

77 James Stauffer letter home October 28, 1969.

78 Letter to President Nixon, http://www.AVietnamPresence.com/appendixes, 26.

79 Sensenig to EMBMC Publicity Office, May 8, 1972.

80 Delton Franz to Titus Peachey, June 30, 1972.

and who implied that the South would live under a communist government if America's policies failed.[81]

One must ask what our statements of protest against the American war accomplished. Though we did not end the war our voices joined with a myriad of other voices calling for an end to the conflict. We cannot claim to have stopped the fighting, but we know we would have been unfaithful to God's call in our lives had we not spoken.

When MCC withdrew from the VNCS coalition on January 1, 1973, and set up their office in the Vietnam Mission office, our two North American Mennonite teams interacted much more with one another. This encouraged planning for a joint fellowship conference of MCC personnel, Mennonite missionaries, and Vietnam Mennonite church leaders in early February 1974 for mutual encouragement. Our Bible studies and discussions were based on John Howard Yoder's newly published (1972) *The Politics of Jesus*.[82]

A couple of months later, in April when MCC board member Robert Kreider and his wife, Lois, came to Vietnam for two weeks, the MCC team was defining "peace and reconciliation" as its primary objective. Kreider understood what team members were saying—MCC would "need to be flexible, Spirit-led, with an accent on being a friendly presence, listening, talking, and judicious reporting." MCC would "continue a diversified program sensitive to the changing political climate" of Vietnam and would include "advocacy for those who suffer in silence—the political prisoners." MCC would continue some of our medical services and attempt new programs such as removal of unexploded ordnance. We would gather stories from the people—and of war suffering. Through literature and dialogue, we would "continue to seek ways of sharing the gospel of peace and reconciliation."[83]

In late 1973, through a VNCS contact, Pat Hostetter Martin visited a paralyzed woman chained to a hospital bed. Đặng Thị Hiền had been arrested and tortured after meeting an alleged NLF agent. When Hostetter Martin later accompanied a *New York Times* reporter to meet Hiền, secret police took them to the police station for questioning. This incident inspired a series of *Times* articles on political prisoners.[84] Mary Martin accompanied Hiền's mother to visit Hiền after she was taken back to prison.

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81 Sanford Shetler in *Guidelines for Today*, July–August, 1972.

82 Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 465. See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). (The first edition was published in 1972.)

83 "Asia Africa Report, Robert and Lois Kreider," September 4, 1974, 17.

84 David K. Shipler, "Tortured Woman Bewildered by Plight," *New York Times, August 18, 1974,* https://www.nytimes.com/1974/08/18/archives/tortured-woman-

Robert W. Miller, now at MCC Akron's Asia desk, visited Vietnam in November of that same year. Two of us accompanied him to the US Embassy to speak to Ambassador Graham Martin about the large number of political prisoners being held in Vietnam's prisons. The ambassador denied that Vietnam's government held any political prisoners.[85] We submitted the detailed story of Hiền's case together with a file Max Ediger had obtained that listed 264 political prisoners who were being held in Saigon's Chi Hòa Prison—just several blocks from our office. This government document clearly labeled them as political prisoners. The ambassador never acknowledged receiving our materials.[86]

Ediger in 1973 began working with Buddhist and Catholic clergy in a small, low-key MCC program assisting political prisoners. Although missionaries had Catholic and Buddhist friends, we did not have significant relationships with leaders of their communities.[87] However, on the occasion of a visit by Goshen College professor of religion Norman Kraus in December 1974, we invited the Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, Secretary General of the Institute for the Dissemination of the Dharma, to meet with us. He emphasized the foundational need to "think peace," which would find expression in positive actions.[88]

A few months later, in March and April of 1975, as the Republic of Vietnam was on the verge of collapsing, nearly all missionaries and representatives of dozens of American voluntary agencies prepared to leave the country. When the war ended on April 30 with the surrender of the South Vietnam forces, four MCC personnel remained, delivering a loud, silent protest that they were not part of the American establishment that had sought to control

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bewildered-by-plight-a-cautionary-glance.html; Martin, *Vietnam Presence,* 460, 463, 484–85.

85 Max Ediger and Luke Martin accompanied Miller (Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 456).

86 The file was prepared by Max Ediger and Luke Martin (Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 462–63).

87 To have done so would have raised our political profile. Buddhist protests against the government of President Diệm, a staunch Catholic, had led to Diệm's downfall in 1963. Most Buddhist leaders advocated peaceful accommodation with the warring parties; opponents claimed this would only lead to a communist-controlled government. A proposed "Third Way" was rejected by the Saigon government and never gained enough strength. See Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954–75* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

88 L. Martin to home, December 21, 1974; J. Stauffer to home, December 29, 1974. After the end of the war, Thích Quảng Độ refused to become part of the government-sponsored Buddhist group and continued leadership in the United Buddhist Church well into the twenty-first century. He was arrested frequently and isolated by the government.

Vietnam for two decades.[89] James Klassen gave significant support to the young Mennonite Church during the following year.[90]

Reflecting on North American Mennonite Service in Vietnam

How do we missionaries reflect personally on the years spent in Vietnam? Certainly we tried to be faithful to our Christian calling. We taught, preached, and tried to live out the Good News of love, peace, and freedom in Jesus Christ. We did not hesitate to teach Jesus's command to love in all relationships. To young men subject to military service, we taught the imperative of love and encouraged them to embrace the way of peace, even amid suffering. Some found ways to avoid going into the armed forces. To those who were pressed into military service, we continued to give pastoral care.

Our Vietnam Mennonite Mission approach to evangelism was definitely different from the approach of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other mission agencies. Given the overwhelming American political and military presence in Vietnam, we practiced friendship evangelism rather than a more aggressive stance.[91] As part of that approach, we developed a student center and a social service center that provided much-appreciated services to many people. We tried to live out the work of Christ as that which dissolves hostility between people and establishes a community of peace such as described in Ephesians 2:11–22. After a congregation formed in Saigon's twin city of Gia Đinh, we established a congregation-based Bible school focused on biblical literacy, church history, and leadership training.

In spite of their different orientation, Mennonite missionaries formed close relationships with many *Tin Lành* pastors and church members, and VMM

89 Max Ediger, James Klassen, Earl Martin, and Yoshihiro Ichikawa. Klassen describes this in *Jimshoes in Vietnam* (Herald, 1986), and Martin in *Reaching the Other Side*, (New York: Crown, 1978). Martin left Vietnam in October 1975, Ediger and Klassen in the spring of 1976, and Ichikawa in late 1976.

90 James R. Klassen, "Walking with Vietnamese Christians," *Mission Focus* 6, no. 2 (1977): 4–8.

91 In a critique of evangelical ministries, Reginald Reimer praised Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam for "carrying on an exemplary ministry of social service. Their peace witness provided a much-needed dimension to the total impact of foreign Christians in a war-torn country. [The Mennonite missionaries] were better identified with the Vietnamese people than many missionaries of other societies." Yet he concluded that their "motivation to win Vietnamese to Christ seemed crippled by a touch of 'presence theology,'" which emphasizes "being" Christians in the world and doing good works but "hesitates at the point of gospel proclamation, and eschews 'persuading' men to become Christians." See Reginald Reimer, *The Protestant Movement in Vietnam* (MA thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1972) 162–63.

wanted to work closely with the *Tin Lành* Church. Members of the *Tin Lành* Executive Committee clarified in 1959 for EMBMC Secretary Kraybill that this meant working separately yet in close fellowship.[92] For example, Mennonite missionaries often attended *Tin Lành* Church services, even their conferences. And *Tin Lành* pastors and lay leaders were invited to preach in our meetings, often giving invitations for people to confess faith in Jesus. In 1963, the *Tin Lành* president preached at the dedication of the Mennonite student center and office, and many *Tin Lành* pastors attended. The following year, in 1964, Edgar Metzler (MCC Peace Section) gave a presentation on "The Christian and the State," and, again, many *Tin Lành* pastors attended.[93] We also arranged for several visiting Mennonite theologians and Bible teachers to give addresses to students at the *Tin Lành* Theological Training Center in Nha Trang.

From the beginning of its ministries in Vietnam in 1954, MCC carried out relief programs with the *Tin Lành* Church and, in 1960, began a joint medical program with the church at Nha Trang in central Vietnam. MCC staff members generally held deep respect for the commitment of *Tin Lành* Christians, whose church claimed to adhere to a strict non-involvement in political issues. In a 1971 newspaper interview, the church president, Rev. Đoàn Văn Miêng, expressed a hope that the country's two sides would soon come to a peaceful agreement.[94] However, many urban *Tin Lành* pastors supported the American military policies, fearing that an American defeat would mean a communist government with restricted religious freedom.

After becoming independent from VNCS in 1973, MCC worked less closely with the *Tin Lành* Church.[95] In 1975, a small number of *Tin Lành* pastors fled Vietnam. When several of these pastors were interviewed in the United States a year later they indicated little understanding of Christian pacifism as expressed by Mennonites. Most of them strongly disapproved when they learned that the Mennonite missionaries and MCC staff were opposed to US political and military policies in Vietnam; they equated this perspective with a pro-communist stance.[96]

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92 Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 86–89.

93 Several younger pastors at the event expressed agreement with the biblical interpretation that Christians could not participate in military service.

94 Luke S. Martin, *An Evaluation of a Generation of Mennonite Mission, Service and Peacemaking in Vietnam 1954–1976* (unpublished report, July 1977), 123. The Evaluation was written as the final report for the Vietnam Study Report, which had been commissioned by MCC, MCC Peace Section, and EMBMC in March 1976. The Vietnam Study Report is available in the MCC Archives.

95 Martin, *Vietnam Presence*, 454–56.

96 Reg Reimer, "Report on Interviews with Several Former Evangelical Church of Vietnam Leaders–June 1976," quoted in Martin, *Evaluation,* 124.

An additional layer impacting American responses to the Vietnam War was the sea change of American culture that rolled into the United States in the sixties and seventies. Some Mennonites remained committed to a way of living anchored in the traditions that had shaped them in past generations. Others became allied more with an American Evangelicalism. For many Mennonites, an evangelical Christian faith meant living as disciples of Jesus, calling others to faith and good works. This included finding a public voice to speak against the violence of the militarism, racism, and materialism.

Mennonite missionaries and MCC personnel came to realize that being Americans in Vietnam during this era held political implications that compelled us to speak out for peace and justice. We recognized that as committed citizens of God's eternal kingdom we had both an opportunity and responsibility to address societal issues when people were being harmed. We viewed Jesus responding to the critical needs of the people he met and saw that his call to love was paramount. Persons emerged out of the Vietnam-era crucible giving leadership to various ministries nationally and internationally: they networked and lobbied in Washington, DC, and at the United Nations; worked with Christian Peacemaker Teams; joined restorative justice programs; cleared landmines; and served in pastoral ministries.

From our time in Vietnam we learned that a church faithful in missions will want to adequately prepare messengers with a clear understanding of and commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they can take that commitment into whatever social and political environment they go. In an era of American dominance throughout the world, the American Mennonite church does not need to declare a moratorium on missions. To the contrary, there are many examples today of multiethnic international teams proclaiming the Good News of Jesus. As with the Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam, this frequently involves partnering with Christians in their local communities, where the mission could well include speaking to "the principalities and powers" that oppose the gospel's call to love, justice, and peace.[97]

97 The Vietnam Mennonite Church is itself a good example of mission, including in its partnerships with MCC (until 2021) and Eastern Mennonite Missions (ongoing since 1997). See Luke Martin, Nguyen Quang Trung, Nguyen Thanh Tam, and Nguyen Thi Tam, "The Mennonite Church in Vietnam," in *Churches Engage Asian Tradition*, eds. John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2011), 315–36.

Addendum:
Letter from Vietnam to American Christians

December 1967
Dear American Christians:

We, the Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam, have been engaged in church and service programs in the Saigon area since 1957. In recent years we have seen the suffering of the Vietnamese people increase incredibly. As Christians, we too feel compelled to declare our concern for the moral issues involved in our country's action here.

It is not our aim to speak as political commentators or final authorities. Even statistics often seem misleading in this divided, confused situation. We wish rather to share our impressions gathered from what we have seen and heard while working with Vietnamese people. For we sense that American Christians are not aware of the feelings and dilemma of the general population here.

The Nature of the Conflict

Perhaps the most crucial issue lies in understanding the nature of this struggle. To speak of supporting a free, independent people in their fight against external communist aggression does not describe the conflict we sense. The more we learn of its historical development and social dimensions, the more troubled we become with this assumption.

A century of Western colonialism, an eight-year battle for independence, a temporary partition of the country, a national election never permitted: these are but a few of the historical facts which lie in the background. From their perspective it is possible for the other side to feel they are fighting a second time for what they won from the French, but were denied through a treaty which was never carried out.

Another decisive factor is social reform for the peasant people, the 80 percent who have the least but suffer the most. They know that many who now are supporting U.S. policy also sided with the French earlier in the war. They associate the Saigon government with maintaining aristocratic and Western interest. And the United States is viewed as preserving the privileged minorities who attract little support.

Thus despite our government's stated intentions, most Vietnamese apparently see America as only replacing France; the feeling of being used still pervades their life and spirit. The growing presence and power of foreigners once more causes the spirit of nationalism to burn brighter among the opposition elements. Even many who earlier favored America's assistance are now fearful of domination and destruction, feeling the "medicine" is worse than the "disease."

The Means to the End

But all these basic issues become overshadowed by the war itself and the way it is being conducted. Our leaders acknowledge that the key to victory is winning the loyalty of the country people; yet most of America's energy and resources is expended in massive destruction of their life, property, and social order. We believe that such primary reliance on military force is insuring defeat of the goals being sought.

It is obvious to the Vietnamese that U.S. and Allied forces are causing most of the devastation and disruption. This side has thousands of planes plus warship, tanks, etc., while the VC have none of these. Even most Americans have seen and heard enough of forced evacuations, bombed villages, defoliated fields, burned people, prostitution, inflation, corruption, etc., to sense the cumulative impact of all this in a country more populous than California yet not half as large. As a Vietnamese friend summarized it: "Vietnam is dying."

We do not condone the atrocities and terror of the other side. But can these acts justify a multiplication of them many times over by the Western forces? For three years the U.S. military has capitalized on its overwhelming, superior firepower to destroy guerilla fighters living among the people. Yet the most apparent result—besides the dead and maimed—is increasing hostility and resistance. As fast as they are killed, others rise up in their places. Victory for our leaders seems dependent on killing off enough people to crush all opposition.

According to the Saigon government, nearly one-fourth of the South Vietnamese people have been uprooted, many of them forced into inhumane existence. While this removes their support from the guerrillas and creates convenient free-bombing zones, it also is a mortal blow to the whole society. For today millions of Vietnamese are dependent on American handouts even for their daily rice. The assumption that one can build while destroying the very structure he must build upon appears fatal.

The Impact on Our World

We are also concerned because the country people being disregarded here represent the tragic plight of many Asians. What are the 250 million people of India who live in breadlines on four dollars a month concluding about America's concern? Our nation's expenditure of billions of dollars and thousands of young lives for destructive purposes will be judged in light of such appalling need. They are asking for justice and progress; we send troops and bombers. To whom will they turn?

Moreover, the world gets the impression that the Christians' God is behind our country's action in Vietnam. They see pictures of church leaders and chaplains with the U.S. troops and hear that our president prays to God to bless

"our pilots" on their missions of destruction. Since we are generally regarded as a Christian nation, Christianity itself is entangled in America's military ventures and political policies.

This is a call to all Christians to become aware of the image being given to our faith. We sense a continuing rejection of this religion of the wealthy, white, warring West, for which we all bear responsibility. We fear that nations may close their doors and multitudes will be deaf to God's call because of the American Christians' participation in and support of this war.

Conclusion

In light of these serious offenses against social justice, human life, and the Christian faith, we therefore plead for:

- A true consideration for the interests and needs of the Vietnamese majority.
- A change of heart which will not only admit but also accept the consequences of past failures and mistakes against these people.
- A change of policy and tactics which will show [the Vietnamese] that our primary concern is for their own well-being, self-respect and independence.
- A tolerant spirit which would not force others to line up with us, but rather seek to understand their feelings and views.
- A fresh demonstration of our confession that in Christ there is no East or West.

Signed: James K. Stauffer, Everett G. Metzler, Luke S. Martin, James E. Metzler, Don M. Sensenig, S. Luke Beidler

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