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Meeting The Challenges Of The Latter-day Saints in Vietnam

DESMOND L. ANDERSON*

For millions of people throughout the world, "Vietnam" is the most complex and misunderstood issue ever encountered. There are no easy answers. It is baffling and frustrating and its successful resolution requires infinite patience, mature judgment, and wise statesmanship. Some of us even dare hope that it may become that moment in history when mankind finally realizes that war is an outmoded and ineffectual instrument of international diplomacy. For thousands of Latter-day Saint men and women who serve here, "Vietnam" is also an experience in apprehension, danger, temptation, and brotherhood. Their lives are precious and their service will not be overlooked by the Creator.

VIETNAM MEETS THE MORMONS

No one knows for certain how many Latter-day Saints serve in Vietnam during any one given period of time. Estimates range from 2,000 to 7,000. They are scattered across the length and breadth of South Vietnam, from the City of Hue and the DMZ in the North, through the Central Highlands, to the extensive rice paddies of the Delta region in the South. They are Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Australian, and European, but preponderantly American—both men and women. The Americans are primarily military personnel, but there are many civilians serving in a variety of capacities.

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For most of these people, foreigners in a strange land, Church means contact with the familiar, the meaningful, the enduring values which have become a major part of their lives. Accordingly, there are groups and branches of the Church organized throughout Vietnam wherever one or more Latter-day Saints are located.

There are three major geographical regions of the Church in Vietnam—the Northern, Central, and Southern Districts of Vietnam of the Southern Far East Mission which is headquartered in Hong Kong.¹

In the Vietnam Southern District, which includes Saigon and the largest number of Church members, there are twenty branches and groups, each presided over by a president, two counsellors, and clerk, under the direction of the Vietnam Southern District Presidency and twelve District High Councilmen. The district is similar to a stake in the built-up areas of Zion and the branches and groups are similar to wards. A program of priesthood, Sunday School, Relief Society, MIA, home teaching, missionary activities, and sacrament meeting is carried on in some of these branches and groups; priesthood and sacrament meetings, home teaching, and missionary work are carried on in all of them.

There have been Latter-day Saints in Vietnam since the Americans became involved in the 1950's. As they arrived in increasing numbers, appropriate Church programs and organization began to evolve to meet their peculiar and unique needs. Over the years, occasional baptisms of Vietnamese and Chinese have occurred so that today there are approximately fifty Vietnamese and Chinese members of the Church in Vietnam. A genuine concern for the welfare of each member, both Vietnamese and foreign, prompted the early and continuing undertaking of home teaching activities.

NEW AND UNIQUE HOME TEACHING APPROACH REQUIRED

The uniqueness of Vietnam as a beleaguered nation has a special impact on home teaching. In a country beset with insurgency for many years, surely the citizenry must be both more weary and more wary than any of us who have come to help.

¹On November 2, 1969, at the Vietnam Southern District Quarterly Conference, the Southern Far East Mission was divided, with Hong Kong remaining as the headquarters for the new Hong Kong-Taiwan Mission and Singapore becoming headquarters for the new Southeast Asia Mission, which includes Vietnam.

Following the major Tet Offensive in February 1968, with the resulting restrictions on mobility and the limited curfew hours, the Home Teaching Program in the Vietnam Southern District was given a new challenge which led to a new direction. Although most groups and the Saigon Branch were able to maintain some contacts with members, for several weeks organized Church activities were in disarray. Vietnamese, Chinese, and other Orientals had their lives threatened by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army if they were seen in the presence of Americans. Accordingly, for several months, the welfare of most Vietnamese and other Oriental members was unknown, and the welfare of American members was in a continuing state of jeopardy with the launching of the Second Offensive in May and the continuing periodic rocket and mortar attacks on Saigon and other urban areas.

The situation was urgent and action imperative. The normal Home Teaching Program was not effective enough. Accordingly, on June 2, the District Presidency and High Council adopted recommendations for a new and different Home Teaching Program based on what is important, here and now.

THE NATURE OF "HERE AND NOW"

Abnormal conditions and the unusual nature of service in Vietnam generate differences in behavior which may sometimes become tragic and are often perplexing. Military men, frequently impressed into service against their own personal desires, are often disposed to condemn the land and location of their servitude, irrespective of where it may be. This normal tendency is compounded when the service is rendered in Vietnam, where they fight an unpopular war which is called "illegal and immoral" by a vociferous minority at home.

For military men, as well as civilians, both men and women, the joys and pursuits of a normal life have been interrupted; there is a separation from loved ones and the things which have become familiar and dear in their lives; they are subjected to the rigors of doing daily—even momentarily—that which someone else tells them to do. They are exposed to the dangers of warfare; and anxieties are kindled in an environment of doubt and dissension. They never know, from one moment to the next, whether they will ever return to the presence of those people and things whom they love and in which they find

repose. Although they may return, there is no assurance that they will continue to be whole and sound of body and mind and spirit. They are cast—most of them—against their will, into the presence of people who seem to be different, whose language they don't understand, and whose customs are strange. For the military men especially, like soldiers of all times and places, that place where they are called to serve becomes the bottom land of all creation. But even though they may disdain the people and the land, they become lonely and hungry for the warmth of human personality.

Within this setting, there are clearly two major temporal concerns: (1) danger of physical injury and death from insurgency, and (2) infringement of personal chastity.

CONCERN FOR PHYSICAL DANGER

For those directly involved in military engagements with hostile forces, the physical danger is obvious. For all others, however, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army maintain a constantly high harrassment level. The rocket, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire on cities and military bases is seldom if ever directed at normal military targets. There is, no doubt, a deliberate strategy by the VC and NVA to shell the urban areas somewhat aimlessly. Thus, no one who lives within those populated areas can ever be confident that he will not be targeted because his life is of no military significance. Anxiety is, thus, widely diffused among the people. Every urban resident is in continuing jeopardy because of such VC and NVA strategy.

THE DANGER OF INFRINGEMENT OF PERSONAL CHASTITY

Longing for the warmth of human personality is easily satisfied here. Person-to-person friendships fill the void. Vietnamese women are quite generally pretty while many of them reveal an incomparably delicate and fragile beauty. And they are friendly. For many of these women there is the simple mutual attractiveness inherent in human nature. Others reach out to the opportunity for companionship, especially with the many Vietnamese men removed from home on military service. Still others yield to the temptation to accumulate a small fortune to free themselves from their abject poverty. And, common to all societies, there are the professional and social prostitutes. Nor are women of other nationalities, notably Chinese and

Americans, without their own special charms and loneliness. Loneliness and charm compensate each other. For nearly all, men and women alike, the temptation to infringe one's personal chastity is severe.

OBJECTIVES OF THE NEW HOME TEACHING IN VIETNAM

The objectives of the Home Teaching Program in the Vietnam Southern District are basically compatible with objectives of the Home Teaching Program Church-wide. In addition to a concern for the spiritual welfare of the members, however, home teachers are concerned primarily with two major aspects, both of which are temporal but which have their spiritual implications: *physical security and personal chastity*. This applies to all members: men and women, military and civilian, Vietnamese and foreign. Wherein circumstances permit, however, because there are so many recently baptized members of the Church in Vietnam, especially among the servicemen, the home teacher gives due consideration to teaching gospel doctrine to members assigned to him.

Because the objectives of home teaching in Vietnam have such immediate and continuing significance, all other elements of the program were devised to maintain constant focus on those objectives. Accordingly, the bureaucracy of home teaching has been minimized while contact and reporting have been simplified in order to emphasize the substance of home teaching, namely, concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of every member. Branch and group presidencies make every effort to locate initially and maintain contact with all members made known to them. All such members of groups and branches are assigned to a home teacher so that there is 100% coverage of known members.

Only completely reliable and responsible brethren are assigned as home teachers. If necessary, to implement this goal and to make the kind of contacts indicated below, priesthood bearers may be assigned as single teachers with the obvious requirement that female member assignments are made only to two-man home teaching companions.

Because of insurgent conditions, contacts are made preferably once every week and as soon as is humanly possible during or following every emergency. In no case should anyone fail to make at least one contact every month with every mem-

ber assigned. Contacts may be made by letter, telephone, or personal visit. Contacts in meetings are acceptable, provided they are actually made and are not simply visual contacts or casual greetings. Initially, under existing conditions, such home teaching contacts are primarily to ascertain that everything is all right, not necessarily to teach the gospel. However, as circumstances permit, gospel doctrine is taught by the home teacher to members assigned him. Where members are Vietnamese or Chinese or Filipino or Korean, or other Orientals, contacts of such members are made by other Oriental members because of possible repercussions by VC and NVA, unless a Caucasian may make such contact without incurring jeopardy.

Within each group and branch there is sufficient latitude in the administration of the Home Teaching Program to permit local leaders to use the most effective means possible. The group or branch presidency may administer the Home Teaching Program directly; they may call a Home Teaching Clerk to perform this function; or they may assign the function to Melchizedek or Aaronic Priesthood Group Leaders.

All contacts made are reported once per month by each home teacher to the Home Teaching Clerk of the branch or group by letter, telephone, or orally, whichever is most convenient and conveys the information most effectively. Compiled group and branch reports are submitted to the District Presidency once each month in specified form.

APPROVAL BY GENERAL AUTHORITIES AND NEW MISSION PRESIDENT

The Vietnam Southern District Presidency and High Council authorized the new program on June 2, 1968, but because the program departs substantially from the one in general use throughout the Church, a member of the District Presidency was requested to clear it with the General Authorities during a trip to Utah in the latter part of that month. Accordingly, a few weeks after the adoption of the program, it was discussed with President Hugh B. Brown, Elder Gordon B. Hinckley—then supervisor of the Asian missions of the Church and presently of the Servicemen's Committee—and Elder Marion G. Romney of the Home Teaching Committee. Elder Romney indicated that the formalized Home Teaching Program applies to the wards and stakes in the built-up areas of Zion

and that whatever we are able to do in Vietnam on our own initiative, consistent with the gospel, is acceptable to the Brethren.

W. Brent Hardy, then newly assigned President of the Southern Far East Mission replacing President Keith Garner, was receiving direction and counsel from the Brethren in Salt Lake City at the time of this visit. He also endorsed the program a few weeks after his arrival in the Orient. The significance attached to this program was emphasized when three of the District High Councilmen were assigned the responsibility for the Home Teaching Program under the direction of a counselor in the Vietnam Southern District Presidency. Accordingly, Navy Captain Louis Payne, Army Lieutenant Colonel Paul Madsen, and Army Major Lidge Johnson were assigned the Home Teaching Program as their sole and specific responsibility when visiting the branches and groups.

HOME TEACHING APPLICATIONS

Although there are many faith-promoting incidents occurring daily in Vietnam, one which illustrates the imperative of maintaining constant vigilance and care involves a young Latter-day Saint soldier who arrived in the country shortly before Christmas 1967. He experienced the kind of bitterness which destroys. Assigned immediately to the field, his unit became involved in hostile action with the enemy, which resulted in their taking several Viet Cong prisoners. Driven by the brutality of war, other men of his unit atrociously cracked the skulls of the VC with the butts of their rifles and kicked and in other ways tortured to death all of the prisoners of war they had taken. Immediately, the young Latter-day Saint broke, mentally and spiritually, and lapsed into a coma. His entire being suffered severe trauma, but he was able to recover satisfactorily several weeks later. Surprisingly, however, he was returned to the field in January and again became involved in hostile action. At dusk one evening, he was manning a machine-gun bunker. Sometime during the night the enemy were engaged and throughout the night repeated bursts of machine-gun fire from his bunker raked the battlefield. As dawn swept away the darkness, he saw before him dead bodies of VC and NVA strewn across the field. Agonized by the realization that he had been the direct cause of their death, again he broke. The re-

sulting coma and trauma were so severe that his life was endangered. Army medics did not expect him to recover and planned for evacuation and long hospitalization. Brethren from the Cu Chi Group administered to him and maintained close and constant vigil. Through the power of the priesthood he did recover completely after which he was assigned administrative duties in the military. Sometime later, he taught the priesthood lesson in his group and with excellent decorum and depth of human understanding. At the November 1968 conference of the Vietnam Southern District, he offered the benediction, and the sweetness of his spirit was an inspiration to all of us.

Not all crises turn out so well. The majority of Latter-day Saints maintain their virtue and sanity while here, and are able to rejuvenate and reactivate many who were inactive at home. But many who were active at home become lost here because of the severity of the temptations and circumstances and *because we are not able to contact them*, both civilians and servicemen.

INADEQUACY OF RECORDS

While endeavoring to implement the new Home Teaching Program, we discovered that we are woefully inadequate in terms of names, addresses, and current places of assignments for both LDS servicemen and civilians who are here. Because of the inadequacy of records, we sought special action by the Presiding Bishop's Office through the bishops of the Church in providing names of all civilians and servicemen who are in Vietnam. It was not possible to honor this request, but a map of the districts in Vietnam and the names of district presidencies were published in *The Church News*. Every member of the Church in Vietnam, through clippings sent from loved ones or friends at home and through contacts and information available in the country—whenever he encounters any information on a Latter-day Saint either in the country or coming—is urgently requested to submit such information immediately to a branch or group president, to be forwarded to the District Presidency. In spite of the continuing problems with names and addresses of members, branch and group presidencies have been instructed to maintain high priority on the Home Teaching Program to insure that the known members are contacted once per week and as frequently as possible during insurgency and emergency.

None of us need ever long for the opportunities of our pioneer forebears. The frontier will forever be with us if we but look for it. Those of us in Vietnam face a unique challenge and opportunity equally as demanding of our stamina, fortitude, compassion, and service to our fellows as the American frontier was for our ancestors.

The homes to which we have become accustomed as Latter-day Saints are sanctuaries wherein may be shared heartache, disappointment, and shortcoming, as well as joys and achievements. It is that sanctuary in which one finds repose. But home is wherever loved ones are, and where they are wanted and understood.

With all the power, humility, and respect of which we are capable, the District Presidency and High Council of the Vietnam Southern District have admonished both members and responsible officers in the branches and groups to assume personal responsibility for implementing the specially-tailored Home Teaching Program. This is surely one of the most significant ways enabling the Church to better meet the challenges facing its members in Vietnam.

Most Mormons who serve in Vietnam have been separated from those family loved ones and hence from the major bulwark in their lives, the sanctuary of home. Fortunately, however, they are not here without their capacity to love and be loved, understood, wanted. The warmth of the gospel and the power of the priesthood bind them together in joy and heartache, in happiness and tribulation. The Church *must* provide the sanctuary of home in Vietnam, for all non-Vietnamese members especially. In this challenge, no role is more critical than that of the home teacher. Our opportunity is to foster that wholesomeness which helps us to understand the proper place and relationships of all things.

One of the most important things to be placed in proper perspective is sex. There is nothing wrong with sex with its "fresh, evanescent, natural blossoming," to use Justice Douglas' apt description.² There is nothing wrong with atomic energy,

²We agree with this description taken from a recent Supreme Court minority decision, but his implied argument and conclusion that sex should be unrestrained and that restraint is an unnatural and unwholesome intercession are both faulty in logic and inconsonant with reality. The antidote to his position is not, however, the traditional and ultimately faulty charge that sex is unwholesome and immoral, and thus should be suppressed. Sex is of divine origin, and to that extent it elevates the physical expression of married love to its highest and most wholesome level.

either, but it doesn't belong in a bomb. Man is both animal and divine and man's destiny is to develop and direct the animal instincts through the power of his divine capabilities. Sex is beautiful and exhilarating and uplifting when confined within the orbit of marriage and family, although burgeoning magazine stands the world over, no less in Vietnam than elsewhere, seductively try to convince us to the contrary.

A major aspect of the concept of the Church as a sanctuary in this country may be expressed in the form of a caveat or caution. If we as home teachers should have any reason to believe that a member's chastity has been infringed upon, it is not only prudent but imperative that we *remember the severity of the temptation here and the application of the law of repentance and forgiveness*. As home teachers, we are simply not capable of judging the complex motivations and ramifications of another person's life. But we are capable of extending a hand, of opening our arms, of providing sanctuary, of encouraging our brethren to seek the Lord's help.

We need the hope, the reassurance and strength of the gospel principles—we need the Lord—most in our hours of greatest challenge and temptation. If we are being tempted, if we have yielded to temptation, if we have erred, it is a natural tendency to believe we are not worthy either of the Lord's help or of seeking it. The hours of transgression are the times of greatest need. If we have any reason to believe transgression has occurred the night before or even the hour before a Church meeting, there is all the more reason for the extended arm and encouragement to attend the Church meeting, to mingle with others who too are sorely tried, and who know the values of the gospel, who together assist one another in maintaining high standards.

THE MEASURE OF OUR FULFILLMENT

When we who are foreigners leave Vietnam, what will we have left behind—what will be our legacy to this people and this land? What will be the evidence that we have given of ourselves while here? Will it be satisfying to us only to know that we are finally leaving here, that in reality we weren't here at all, that our year—or two or three years—here was a time only of passing through and not a time of sharing, giving, building, nurturing?

No matter how humble we are or how limited our opportunities and capabilities, there is something all can give. We can give of ourselves. We can share temptations with our brothers and sisters and make them easier to resist. We can be alert to their physical security and we can comfort them in their suffering. We can share our understanding of the gospel with however many Vietnamese and Chinese we come to know. We can plant the seed of the Restored Gospel in the hearts and minds of those among whom we associate and even though our time here may be short, that seed will be nurtured by those who remain and who shall follow. Through exhibiting such concern for the welfare of the people of Vietnam we will secure for ourselves a measure of happiness.

This, then, is the challenge—the opportunity—for every Latter-day Saint who comes to this embattled place and these beleaguered people: Let this land be a blessed land because you walked here!