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The Emergence and Growth of Protestant House Churches in Vietnam since the Reforms of 1986[1]

Abstract. One of the most striking features of the religious landscape in post-Renovation Vietnam is the dramatic rise of Protestantism, with house churches as a crucial component. However, there is no consensus on the precise number of Protestants among policymakers, religious institutions, and scholars. Large-scale surveys are rare and often fail to capture the mechanisms behind the explosive growth of Protestant house churches. Based on 49 in-depth interviews and participant observation, this article seeks to explain what led to the emergence and subsequent explosive growth of Protestant house churches in the context of limited religious space in Vietnam. We argue that the growth of house churches in Vietnam can be partly explained by its socio-historical context, organizational structure, and strategies for recruiting new members, promoted by aid from foreign organizations.

Keywords: Protestantism, house churches, post-Renovation, converts, Vietnam

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Возникновение и рост протестантских домашних церквей во Вьетнаме после реформ Доймой 1986 года[2]

Аннотация. Одной из наиболее ярких особенностей религиозного ландшафта Вьетнама периода реформ Дой мой является стремительный рост протестантизма, важной составляющей которого являются домашние церкви. Однако среди политиков, религиозных учреждений и ученых нет единого мнения относительно точного числа протестантов в этой стране. Крупномасштабные исследования

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редки и обычно не позволяют выявить механизмы, лежащие в основе взрывного роста протестантских домашних церквей. На основе 49 углубленных интервью и наблюдений за участниками автор данной статьи пытается объяснить, что привело к появлению и последующему взрывному росту протестантских домашних церквей в условиях ограниченного религиозного пространства во Вьетнаме. Утверждается, что рост домашних церквей в СРВ частично объясняется социально-историческим контекстом, организационной структурой конфессии и стратегиями привлечения новых членов, продвигаемыми иностранными организациями.

Ключевые слова: протестантизм, домашние церкви, период Обновления, новообращенные, Вьетнам

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Introduction

Although Protestantism was officially introduced to Vietnam in 1911, the adherents numbered merely 200,000 as of 1975 [Tôn giáo và chính sách... 2015]. Existing scholarship highlights a significant expansion of Protestantism following the Doimoi (Đổi mới) Renovation of 1986 [Tâm Ngô 2016; Chung Van Hoang 2017]. It is plausible that the number of Protestants had already reached 1,400,000 by 2014 [Phan 2014]. This growth was marked by the rise of the Protestant House Church Movement, in which the number of such congregations surged from four in the late 1980s to 2,500 by 2009, encompassing 250,000 adherents [Reimer 2011: 71]. These house churches were estimated to constitute approximately one-fourth of Vietnam's evangelical Protestant demographic [Vietnam Observer 2001].

The introduction and growth of Protestantism in Vietnam have extensively captured scholarly attention. Nguyễn Thanh Xuân [2002, 2020a] offers foundational insights into Vietnamese Protestantism, Đoàn Triệu Long [2012] examines its introduction, and Nguyễn Xuân Hùng [2017] details its organizational development from 1911 to 1975. Further research by Nguyễn Hồng Dương [2014], Reimer [2011], and Phan [2014] focuses on the expansion of Vietnamese Protestantism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Studies by Tâm Ngô [2016] and Rumsby [2023] examined the development of Protestantism among ethnic minorities in the Vietnamese highlands. A few scholars have examined the emergence of the House Church Movement, which separated from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECVN-S) since the 1980s, but attributed its

growth either to foreign influence [Nguyễn Xuân Hùng 2011] or to the agency of the Holy Spirit [Reimer 2011]. Additionally, the rise of Protestant house churches and their strategies for recruiting new members were only briefly examined by Chung Van Hoang [2017]. Current scholarship, therefore, lacks a detailed analysis of the emergence of house churches and the reasons for their growth.

To advance the existing literature, this article first examines the history of the emergence of house churches, then analyzes their evangelical strategies and religious activities. It then explores the organizational structures of these congregations to illustrate why the model of small house churches may be more effective at attracting new converts than larger, traditional churches. On the one hand, we argue that the emergence of house churches in Vietnam can be understood within the socio-political context in which they emerged. On the other hand, we demonstrate that the success of Protestant house churches in Vietnam is also largely attributable to their organizational structures, religious practices, and evangelical strategies that resonate with new adherents. Additionally, because many house churches operate outside state oversight, practices deemed unorthodox by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), such as performing miracles and divine healing, may be perceived as important factors contributing to the success of Protestant house churches in Vietnam.

The data for this study were collected primarily through the examination of church materials and interviews with pastors, religious scholars, and believers from house churches, conducted both online and in person. These interviews were conducted from July 2022 to September 2023 and were semi-structured, lasting between 45 minutes and three hours, in Vietnamese. Forty-nine interlocutors comprised four religious scholars, one religious freedom activist, 20 pastors (primarily male, with one female pastor, aged between forty and sixty on average), and twenty-four believers from Protestant house



Fig. 1. Worship hall at Phan Thế Hiển House Church in Ho Chi Minh City. *Photo* by Le Van Tuyen.

churches in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Of the interlocutors, 37 were male, and 12 were female, with varied educational and professional backgrounds. All interlocutors provided informed consent, agreeing to the use of their information publicly while requesting anonymity in the final analysis.

The Emergence of House Churches in Vietnam: A Historical Perspective

Protestantism was officially introduced to Vietnam by the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1911. The first Vietnamese Protestant association, the Evangelical Church of French Indochina, was established in 1927. However, Protestantism did not receive support from the colonial government, and its following grew slowly [Hoang Phu Le 1972]. During the First Indochina War (1946—1954), members of the association remained politically neutral. The original name was changed to The Evangelical Church of Vietnam in 1950. After the Geneva Agreement of 1954, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, like the country itself, was divided into Southern and Northern branches. This division created a unique situation. Approximately 1,000 Protestant believers from the North migrated to the southern Republic of Vietnam, where Protestant communities were represented by various organizations, including the French Reformed Church, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, and the Seventh-day Adventists. While the largest Protestant association in Vietnam, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam—South (ECVN-S), was not officially recognized until 2001, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam—North (ECVN-N) had operated with official recognition from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam since 1958 [Phan 2014: 15].

During the Second Indochina War, spirituality and religion were leveraged to mobilize the people in the Republic of Vietnam against the Northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam [Nguyen Phi Van 2018]. With international support, the number of Protestant believers in the South surged from 13,155 in 1953 to 250,000 in 1975 [Chung Van Hoang 2017]. However, following reunification in 1975, southern Protestant associations were dissolved, foreign pastors were expelled, and Protestant properties, including the seminary in Nha Trang and hundreds of churches, were confiscated and destroyed. Consequently, the number of baptized Protestants in Vietnam potentially declined to 180,000 [Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2020b].

Simultaneously, the government sought to exert control over the ECVN-S. With central government support, a deacon from Gia Dinh Church, Nguyễn Thành Long, established the United Protestant Church (Hội thánh Tin lành thống nhất), intended as an umbrella organization for all Protestant associations and churches. However, Deacon Nguyễn Thành Long was not particularly popular among Vietnamese Protestants, and most churches hesitated to join such a centrally established organization with a political agenda. The association dissolved after the deacon's sudden death in 1976. Since then, only the ECVN-S has officially operated, while other denominations and churches have continued their practices in private homes.

In the early 1980s, two Protestant churches and their pastors gained prominence in the south: Pastor Nguyễn Hữu Cương and his An Đông Church in District 5, and Pastor Hồ Hiếu Hạ and his No. 7 Trần Cao Vân Church in District 1. Pastor Nguyễn Hữu Cương, with a strong formal education, had previously served as a teacher at the

Protestant Seminary in Nha Trang and was renowned for his exceptional oratory skills. When the seminary was confiscated in 1975, he moved to An Đông Church in District 5, Ho Chi Minh City, where he organized a dedicated group of believers and celebrated Holy Communion twice a week. This, along with his oratorical skills, attracted a large number of people, both regular believers and new converts. The growing number of followers at the church drew the attention of the local administration, leading to its closure. Subsequently, the church's followers moved to the No. 7 Trần Cao Vân Church led by Pastor Hồ Hiếu Hạ.

Pastor Hạ and his wife were highly successful in evangelical work in the Central Highlands before 1975. After 1975, the couple returned to Ho Chi Minh City, where he was appointed as pastor at the No. 7 Trần Cao Vân Church. This church, officially part of the ECVN-S, originally served as an international congregation. However, with the departure of most foreigners in 1975, it was nearly abandoned. After welcoming the believers from An Đông Church, the situation improved significantly. During the socio-economic and political challenges of the 1970s and 1980s, Pastor Hồ Hiếu Hạ's preachings provided people with a sense of tranquility, support, and hope. This was particularly appealing to those suffering under the new regime, and the church gained increasing popularity. For instance, women whose husbands were sent to re-education camps found consolation at the church. They would then visit their husbands and encourage them to believe in God and convert to Protestantism (In-depth interview, pastor, male, 72 years old). Between 1978 and 1983, up to 1,000 people were converted to the ECVN-S [Nguyen Huu Cuong 1995; Reimer 2011]. The growing number of followers and the popularity of the No. 7 Trần Cao Vân Church attracted the attention of local authorities, leading to severe restrictions on the church's activities and its closure in 1983.

Following the dissolution of the An Đông and No. 7 Trần Cao Vân Churches, the Tuy Lý Vương Church has experienced significant growth under the leadership of Pastor Đinh Thiên Tứ. Although Tuy Lý Vương Church was located in District 8, Hồ Chí Minh City, which was a less convenient location compared to the two aforementioned churches, Pastor Tứ's teaching message, which carried the popular characteristics that people readily understood, was able to fulfill the need to ease the uncertainty, anxiety, and worries of many people at that time. Moreover, he employed effective strategies to encourage church members to witness, focusing on presenting the Protestant faith to unreached people (In-depth interview, pastor, male, 72 years old).

On the one hand, this growth led the leadership of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) to worry that the explosive growth of the Tuy Lý Vương church would result in its closure, as had the An Đông and Trần Cao Vân churches. Additionally, Pastor Đinh Thiên Tứ and other pastors exhibited signs of influence from Pentecostal and charismatic ideas and worship styles introduced to Vietnam in the early 1970s, which were forbidden under the CMA's theological and organizational stance. On the other hand, in 1984, with the agreement of Reverend Ông Văn Huyên, the president of the ECVN-S at that time, and the support of the government, Pastor Nguyễn Văn Quang, as the head of a new committee, proceeded to abolish the ECVN-S constitution and prepared to enact a new one. This quickly led to disagreement and division within the ECVN-S, and many young and capable pastors lost confidence in some ECVN-S leaders, feeling they had been betrayed. All of this led the ECVN-S leadership to expel

Pastor Đinh Thiên Tứ for insubordination on March 3rd, 1988. Many members of the thriving Tuy Lý Vương church left with Pastor Tứ. Their activities and worship continued in private houses, which quickly formed a network of house churches. Within a short period, this became the biggest house church group. It was the first group of Protestant house churches in Vietnam and became the forerunner of the present-day Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam.

Within the same year, three ECVN-S pastors — Trần Đình Ái, Võ Văn Lạc, and Trần Mai — were also expelled due to their allowing and practicing speaking in tongues, among other things. Pastor Trần Đình Ái reconnected with the Assemblies of God, a group he had been part of before 1975, which led to the founding of another house church, the Vietnam Assemblies of God. Even though the Vietnam Assemblies of God was founded on April 30th, 1989, it did not hold its first meeting until January 1990, and did not elect the official executive Board of the General Assembly (Ban điều hành Tổng hội) until January 1990. Pastor Trần Đình Ái was selected as the president, Phạm Phú Á nh as the general treasurer, and other pastors, including Bùi Thanh Sê, Lý Xuân Hòa, and Dương Thành Lâm, were elected as board members. But in June 1990, due to internal conflicts, Pastor Vơ Văn Lạc split from the Vietnam Assemblies of God and founded the Vietnam Full Gospel Church (Hội thánh Phúc Âm Toàn Vẹn Việt Nam) [Tọa đàm lần 1... 2016]. In addition, Pastor Trần Mai, based at the Trương Minh Giảng church, founded the Inter-Evangelistic Movement as a house church.

Following its inception in 1988, house churches experienced rapid growth in the 1990s but slowed down in the 2000s. By 2009, approximately 250,000 adherents worshiped at least 2,500 home-based groups in the country [Reimer 2011]. House churches also had international relationships with the Assemblies of God, the Mennonite, the Methodist, and the Presbyterian denominations. There were also some other independently organized house churches, but they still received foreign aid. In



Fig. 2. Sunday morning service at one House Church in Hanoi.
Photo by Le Van Tuyen.

1994, to maintain and develop under difficult circumstances, some house churches were connected to establish the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (Hiệp hội thông công Tin lành Việt Nam). By 2009, this fellowship comprised 29 southern house churches that were cooperating effectively in their shared activities [Ibid]. However, some other house churches did not participate in the associations as previously mentioned; instead, they promoted independent activities.

In short, the practice of worshipping in private homes among Vietnamese Protestants may have existed before 1988, given the political context after 1975 reunification. However, it could only grow into a large movement with the appearance of the four Protestant house churches mentioned above. The emergence of these house church groups should be regarded as a significant milestone in the history of Vietnamese Protestantism. To some degree, until this moment, Vietnamese Protestantism can be divided into two segments: the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (both North and South), known as the traditional churches, which adhere to the theology of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Protestant house churches. In general, Protestant house churches were characterized by Pentecostalism and a strong emphasis on spiritual gifts, with many believers prioritizing speaking in tongues and divine healing.

Reasons for the Thriving of Protestant House Churches in Vietnam

In this section, we examine the reasons for the thriving of Protestant house churches since their emergence. First, we agree with previous scholars that the collapse of the socialist system worldwide paved the way for the resurgence of Protestantism and other religions. As part of the political, economic, and social transformation under Doimoi, the Vietnamese communist state acknowledged the spiritual needs of the population and permitted greater religious freedom [Nguyen 2017]. Consequently, Vietnamese individuals were no longer hesitant to participate in religious activities, leading to an increase in conversions to various religions, including Protestantism [Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2020b: 365; Le Thi Lien 2024].

We secondly argue that Protestantism is particularly successful in helping individuals face the diverse challenges posed by a free-market economy. Protestantism introduced a sense of community and friendliness among its followers, instilling trust and hope to help them navigate challenging circumstances. It also laid a moral foundation for members to extend care and compassion to others, particularly those facing adversity [Mã Phúc Thanh Tươi 2013, Vũ Thị Thu Hà 2018]. Since 1986, Vietnam has undergone rapid socioeconomic changes, compelling its people to seek new socioeconomic identities and life goals [Salemink 2010]. In response to this evolving landscape, Vietnamese Protestant Churches organized myriad outreach programs, even including entrepreneurial classes that focused on the intersection of religious life and the economy. These initiatives helped people navigate the challenges posed by the new reality of the market economy. This is considered one of the primary reasons for the rapid growth of Protestantism in Vietnam during the Doimoi era.

We, however, argue that the mentioned factors were merely foundational prerequisites for the prosperity of Protestantism and its house churches in Vietnam since

1986. To truly comprehend the success of Protestant house churches, it is crucial to delve into their organizational structures, evangelical strategies, and religious practices, as these are instrumental in attracting Protestant believers and converting new adherents.

Our data indicates that many conversions occurred due to challenging life circumstances or severe illnesses among new converts, as reported by 36 out of 45 interlocutors. Individuals facing serious illnesses or difficult life situations often turn to God for assistance and healing. As C&MA traditional churches do not practice divine healing, potential converts usually opt for smaller groups, such as house churches. If one is fully healed through so-called divine healing, or if one's difficult situation is suddenly resolved by a miracle-like event, he usually converts to Protestantism. At the same time, he [and the other members of the group who witnessed the change] became living witnesses of divine healing (or miracle story), encouraging others to join the faith. 31 of our interlocutors mentioned being attracted to those stories or having direct experience of divine healing, speaking in tongues, or miracles.

It is clear that information about divine healing, speaking in tongues, and miracle stories is more readily accepted when shared by trusted people, ideally in smaller groups where the story can be explained more fully [rather than in large, formal settings in traditional churches]. In this process, the individual networks proved crucial for building trust and sharing those stories. The individual networks are also crucial in missionary activities, which frequently employ anthropological research methods such as snowball sampling. Believers practicing in a particular house church usually introduce their family members, then their friends, and others they trust to the church. Because of pre-existing trust, the invited people are easier to convert, and after conversion, they continue introducing their family members, friends, and others who may be suitable for conversion.

As Vala and O'Brien [2008] explained, in the case of political and religious movements, prospective converts participate in religious activities not because they believe its messages, but because they are often enticed by friends or family members. Our in-depth interviews show that the majority of the interlocutors (37 out of 45) first visited the Church with family members and close friends. Individual relationships help increase newcomers' feelings of trust and safety.

At this point, it is possible to apply social network theories to explain how Protestant house churches spread through pre-existing personal networks, thereby creating a sense of familiarity, facilitating discussion of unfamiliar beliefs, and addressing potential doubts about the religion. As in Snow et al. [1980], our data suggest that social networks account for a substantial amount of new members in the Protestant house churches in Vietnam. In other words, in Vietnamese Protestant house churches, followers' social networks are the richest sources of religious conversion.

Our findings are also consistent with those of Gerlach and Hine [1970] and Lofland and Stark [1965], who argue that outdoor evangelism proved ineffective in Pentecostal churches because newcomers tend to be confused when they go beyond the network of members [Snow et al. 1980]. As one of the interlocutors from Hanoi indicated, "if the success rate of personal evangelism and networks is 1/20, then the success rate of massive evangelism in traditional churches has a very low success rate, only about 1/100"

(in-depth interview, deacon, 29-year-old male). We observe that a new house church is usually established by a few families meeting together to worship God. The social capital of house churches is built on family, friends, and co-workers. Its activities usually start with Bible study. Then, the people are invited to participate in common prayers and community activities. The house church usually operates under the leadership of a pastor or a trained house church leader, often a family member of the house church followers. Over time, the group cultivated good relationships with other potential converts. At the end, the church may consist of 20—30 believers, led by one or two most active or trained members.

These small groups are ideal for evangelistic activities, such as Bible reading, collective prayer, and singing hymns. The intimate environment of small house churches also makes the believers (30 of 45) feel more comfortable when sharing personal experiences or making public confessions. We observe that after the worship services, the house church leader invites participants to share their problems and asks the house church followers to pray for help (Fieldote data). Most interlocutors indicate that it is easier for them to confess their own shortcomings and discuss sensitive issues (such as conflicts in one's marriage, unemployment, etc.) in a small group. Many interlocutors (25 of 45) clearly stated that they would not be able to do so in the big Church in front of several hundred people.

The appeal of house churches also lies in their ability to provide space for various forms of leisure, entertainment, and socialization. As a pastor shared: "Today, there are many forms of impersonal entertainment, such as watching TV, discussing on social media, or searching for information online. But in the past, attending church was an important form of socialization ... Many people who felt alone at home came to church just to be in contact with others" (In-depth interview, pastor, 51-year-old male).

The appeal of Protestant house churches to local people is enhanced by the fact that they are often founded to fill the gap left by the absence of large traditional churches in geographically remote areas. This means not only a substitution for the low density of Protestant churches in the Vietnamese countryside but also an alternative to overcrowded churches in big cities. For instance, the Hmong people from the Bắc Sơn Evangelical Church in the North had to travel more than 14 kilometers through the forest to reach their main church to celebrate the regular Holy Communion and worship God. The formation of house churches in their area immediately led to much higher local participation in Protestant activities.

Also, the other interlocutors (25 of 45) indicate that the time and spatial accessibility of the house churches are important factors in helping them participate actively in religious activities. As a female pastor shared: "My church's believers are mostly women. They have to travel up to an hour to reach our Church. But, they are usually in charge of domestic work, and the house church group saves their time, and they can take better care of their children and family."

To ensure the proper functioning of house churches, a relatively large number of religious leaders at various levels is needed. To ensure a sufficient number of leaders, house churches offer a range of educational programs to train and then ordain pastors. According to our interlocutors, it is relatively easy to provide training for various religious activities in small groups. Future pastors or leaders of house churches can learn

from their more experienced colleagues and immediately apply what they learn in their own house church group. As an interlocutor puts it: "It is very easy; we are learning by doing... but we would never be able to do it in big churches" (In-depth interview, pastor, 64-year-old male; deacon, male, 29-year-old male).

Finally, the limitation of traditional churches also contributed to the rapid growth of the Protestant house churches. Since its introduction by C&MA, following the church-based hierarchical model has revealed limitations, such as more formal, ritualistic worship. In contrast, house churches with a worship style that better addresses emotional needs through spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues, and divine healing, could gain new appeal.

Conclusion

More broadly, this article examines the religious transformation in post-Reforms Vietnam through the case of Protestant house churches. In doing so, it delves into the historical conditions that led to the emergence of the house church movement in Vietnam. Evidently, the movement originated with the expulsion of young pastors, including Đinh Thiên Tứ, Trần Đình Ái, Võ Văn Lạc, and Trần Mai, from the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) in 1988. However, the rapid expansion of Protestant house churches can be attributed to several other factors. This article contributes to the existing scholarship by arguing that the breakdown of the centrally planned economy and the post-socialist ideological void created space for the resurgence of religion in Vietnamese society. The growth of Protestantism can also be linked to its ability to provide solace to those navigating the challenges of the free market. Yet these were merely socio-economic and political prerequisites for the growth of religion since Vietnam's socio-economic transformation. The primary reasons for the success of Protestant house churches in Vietnam lie in their organizational structure and evangelical strategies.

The article argues that the close-knit nature of small-house church groups is highly effective at attracting new converts. This effectiveness stems either from the foundation of trusted family and friendship relationships or from the conducive environment within house churches for expressing and witnessing practices such as speaking in tongues, divine healings, and miracle stories — elements identified as particularly appealing to new converts. Additionally, factors such as the ease of access to house churches and a relatively robust system of religious training for leadership are recognized as contributors to the rapid growth of Protestant house churches in Vietnam since 1986.

This article, however, has some limitations. It has not yet exhaustively examined the relationship between house churches and traditional churches, nor the similarities and differences between these two forms of church organization. The ongoing development is bringing these two forms of church organization closer together; thus, there are overlapping reasons that could explain the growth of both. Moreover, this article has not yet explicitly defined whether this relationship is complementary or antagonistic, or how these two forms of religion complement or limit each other. Equally important, it is necessary to delve into the limitations of Protestant house churches. In addition, the thriving of house churches could be explained by their

participation in social activities to attract the community's attention or by aid from foreign organizations, as several studies noted. More importantly, future research should examine the rationale behind this aid.

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