

## Missionary Mode of Protestantism in the Community of Ethnic Minorities in Gia Lai Province

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**Abstract:** For any religion, evangelization for the development of its religion is always posed as an important self-task, a divine institution and an indispensable way of life. Each religion has its own methods of propagation and it depends on every concrete object. Basing on sources of countryside documents combined with materials published by searchers, this paper presents some features of missionary methods of Protestantism in the community of the ethnic minorities in Gia Lai, such as: Popularization of the doctrine and scriptures in ethnic minority languages, Using and promoting the role of missionary forces in place, Personal Evangelism, through charity-humanitarian activities to build a bridge between Christianity and ethnic minorities. The results of this paper contribute to the study of Protestantism in the Highlands-a matter of current scientific concerns.

**Key words:** protestantism, evangelization, ethnic minorities, Gia Lai

### 1. Some General Features of Protestantism in Gia Lai

After building the first base in Da Nang in 1911, the Christian and Missionary Alliance of the United States (CMA) had its first steps to develop the religion in the late 1920s to the community of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. In 1929, American pastor H. A. Jakson came to Da Lat to preach to the “Co Ho”, then to the “E De” in Buon Ma Thuot. In the first half of the 1930s, two Protestant centers were established in Da Lat and Buon Ma Thuot.

In Gia Lai, in 1938, Tin Pham Xuan and his wife, as evangelists, were appointed to Cheo Reo (Auynpa today) to study Jrai and Bahnar languages in preparation for the mission, but were soon expelled by the French authorities. In January, 1941, after many attempts to intervene by clergy G.H Smith, the couple Tin Pham Xuan was allowed and officially arrived in Pleiku to open missionary headquarters for the Jrai and Bahnar people around the area.

In 1942, Rev. Tin Pham Xuan compiled the first evangelical Christian book named “Tailai Adai” (The Word of God). From 1943 to 1949, Japanese troops in Indochina detained clerics and by war, the propaganda was interrupted. In 1950, Pastor Sang Truong Van was appointed to replace Tin Pham Xuan. In 1951, with the help of the CMA, the Pleiku church bought land in Nguyen Thai Hoc Street to build a church and ordained Mănggan, and a number of Vietnamese pastors were active. In 1952, the Upper Midlands Region was established, consisting of local Protestant churches, so the missionary work of the Protestant Church in Gia Lai had stepped forward. Nevertheless, until 1954, the evangelization mission in Gia Lai was limited at exploratory levels, and results were

low.

After 1954, with the arrival of American troops in Gia Lai and the development of the US military base, the time for the Protestant movement in Gia Lai was strong. In addition to strengthening the church organization of the Kinh, the CMA focuses its attention on developing this religion to ethnic minority areas, especially those located around the US military bases.

In 1956, Clergy Smith set up a missionary Christian organization and announced their resignation from the CMA (The Christian and Missionary Alliance). Along with the persistence in the development of the devotees, worshipping in this period was also emphasized. In 1958 a second missionary base was opened in Cheo Reo. Late in 1966, a Protestant church for “Jrai” and “Bahnar” was inaugurated in Pleiku. From 1966 to 1975, there were additional Protestant churches in Gia Lai. On the administrative side, the Protestant chapters of the Kinh people in the Central Part of the Central Vietnam, based in Da Nang; Indigenous Protestant chapters belong to the Midland Region (after 1969, the Midland Region split into South and Upper Midlands. Gia Lai Region is located in the Central Highlands with headquarters in Buon Me Thuot). On the missionary force, Protestantism mainly sent the number of capable teenagers from ethnic people to Nha Trang and Dak Lak for training. At the same time Protestantism focused on clerics and intellectuals who were foreigners and deeply involved in learning the speech, writing of the ethnic people to translate scriptures and missionary activities. Like Dr. Baker Sidecr, Bvee Dovw sent Dr. Kreen to develop a medical examination for the ethnic people, a leprosy eradication center run by the rabbi Holt. Beside the two centers of charity, the Protestant Church also built a primary school for Protestant children.

With the efforts of the Vietnamese Protestant Church and the CMA, until April 30, 1975, there were 45 churches, 10 pastors, 21 evangelists, 131 people are members of the Board of Deputies in 8 districts (towns), 42 communes, 104 villages, 31 churches with 27,000 followers (The People’s Committee of Gia Lai province, 2015, p. 1).

After April 30, 1975, the system of organization and dignitaries of the Protestant Church in Gia Lai was highly differentiated. Some pastors and chaplains fled the country, the rest returning home, the Christian sect in An Khe (Vui Pham Van) renounced they left their sect and shifted to the Vietnamese Protestant Church (The South). Thus, in fact, after 1975 in Gia Lai province, the Protestant Church of Vietnam (South) maintained only two systems: the Kinh and the Thuong. The Kinh system consisted of the chapters under the direction of the Central Region (Da Nang) and the Thuong, which was under the direct leadership of the High Constitutions (Dak Lak). “The Kinh people were led by pastor Khanh Nguyen Kim, who was replaced by Cam Nguyen Phu in June 1975. There were 9 churches, 7 pastors, 7 preachers, 8 churches, 36 people in the board of 1360 followers. The Thuong was supervised by Trung Dang Van with 36 churches, 3 pastors, 14 missionaries, 23 churches, and 100 members of the commission with 7105 followers” (Police of Gia Lai province, 1995, p. 3). After major events in 1975, Protestantism in Gia Lai sought to consolidate and re-appointed pastors of religious societies, strengthened the faith to the old faithful and promoted propaganda and the development of the church. Contemporaneously, FULRO (Abbreviation of “Front Unfie de Liberation des Races Opprimees”, the “United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Race”, a reactionary organization organized and nurtured by foreigners) operations thrived in the Central Highlands in general and particularly in Gia Lai, this counter-revolutionary force has relied on Protestantism to build trust in its forces. At the same time, they took advantages from the activities of the Protestantism to gather young people, motivating them to go to the forest to get involved in Fulro operations, or serve as the contactors and provision food for the Fulro facilities outside the forest. “Some of them were the old missionaries, or belonged to the committees such as Rama Trang, Siu Pek, Nyu, Siu Wing ... ran out forest and worked for the Fulro and hold relatively important positions” (Police of Gia Lai province, 1995, p. 2). In response to this situation, and in order to eradicate the Fulro and stabilize

the political situation, the authorities had dealt with a number of pastors, missionaries, and churches involved in Fulro.

At the same time, the mass movement were set up to shut the church down, put them in the service of social interests, abolish the commission, sent the religious activities return to each family, the Pastors were no longer engaged in pastoral activities. As a result, the whole system of Protestantism in Gia Lai has been shut down since 1980.

From 1985 onwards, the Protestantism began to consolidate its organization and operation, especially since 1990 due to the impact of the global movement and the renovation policies of the Communist Party and that of the State, although still prohibited by the government the revival and the development of the Protestantism took place at a rapid pace on a large scale and became a large religion in Gia Lai province. Along with the spiritual and biblical help of the Church of Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, the pastors and evangelical preachers still day and night propagated the doctrine in various forms and methods. Through daily life, words and works, Protestantism impacted to the masses and drawn their attention. Particularly, at this time Protestantism in Gia Lai also used the number of new developed believers and through which conducted missionary activities. According to the Police of Gia Lai province (1995), as of December 1993, Protestantism in Gia Lai had a great number of followers, as about 3,731 and had built hundreds of underground churches (p. 4).

Therefore, followers of Protestantism in Gia Lai at this time did not decrease, but tended to increase. As of September, 1994, “the number of Protestants in Gia Lai has grown to 34,576 people, accounting for 4% of the province's population, in 9/11 districts and towns, with 93/153 communes, wards and towns, consisting of 276 ethnic villages concentrated in the districts of Uynpa, Chu Se, Duc Co, Chu Prong, Chu Pah, Pleiku, Mang Yang” (Police of Gia Lai province, 2015, p.4) ... mainly in the “Jrai” and “Bahnar” communities. The number of believers from the Kinh people was hardly growing, with only a few of them were from other parts of the country settling in Gia Lai and some growing naturally.

Thus, “compared to 1975, the number of followers has increased to 26,132, with 51 communes, 234 villages” (Police of Gia Lai province, 1995, p. 4). The activities of consolidating and developing Protestantism in Gia Lai in this period are not only purely in religious areas, but also rapidly developing in remote and border areas, revolutionary bases such as Kon Tum, Iao, Iachim Ia Khuoi (Chu Pahr), Iabnon, Ianan (Duc Co) and so on. The majority of the believers came from labor masses, especially in some cases some of those were members of communist party.

By 2000, there were five Protestant denominations in Gia Lai: the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South Vietnam), the Christian League, the Pentecostal, the Christian Missionary and the Adventist Church. The last four sects were formed in 1998 due to the conflicts of interest and religious roles that separated themselves from the Vietnamese Protestant Church (South Vietnam).

As of November 2016, “there were 18 Protestant churches in Gia Lai with 127,248 followers” (Police of Gia Lai province, 2016, p. 1). Of them, two sects have been allowed to organize the Council for the Recognition of chapters and based churches, including the Protestant Church of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the Christian Missionary Church of Vietnam; 01 denomination being registered under the instruction No.01 of the Prime Minister is the Adventist Church.

In addition to these three religious sects have been registered for religious activities, there are 15 other Protestant sects have not been registered for religious activities such as Menonite Vietnam, Holy Khiet, Vietnam Head (Nam Phuong), Elderly Evangelical Evangelism, Evangelical Evangelism, Evangelical Menonite (Quang

Nguyen Hong), Evangelical Menonite (Trung Nguyen Quang), Evangelical Evangelism Christ, The Vietnam Union of Evangelicals, Protestant Commonwealth, the Protestant Association, the Head of the Vietnamese Ethnic Minorities, operating in 17/17 districts, towns and cities. The fundamental causes of these sects have not been registered is that they do not meet the requirements of the law, such as the head of the sect related to reactionary organization “Protestant Church”, religious followers now in this sect, the following day dropped out of the other sect and there were some sects that did not go through formal registration with the government.

## **2. Evangelical Methodology of the Community of Ethnic Minorities in Gia Lai Province**

As a religion introduced into Vietnam much later than other major religions such as Buddhism, Catholic ... so missionary has always been being interested, concerned, and promoted. Therefore, the Protestant methods used are also plentiful and diversity. Here are some of the main methods that Protestantism has used to propagate in Gia Lai:

### **2.1 Popularization of the Doctrine and Scriptures in Ethnic Minority Languages**

Early settling in the Highlands, Protestant clergy focused on learning the language of ethnic minorities, learning their culture and beliefs; and translated scriptures into ethnic languages and then brought down to the village to serve effectively for the propagation. In 1942, Rev. Tin Pham Xuan compiled the first Christian evangelical book in Jrai language titled “Adai Ooi” (God’s Word), bringing the Bible closer to Jrai inhabitants.

In particular, the production of videotapes and tapes of hymns and biblical preaching by the local ministers were widely and effectively applied. It is noteworthy that the content of catechesis in the ethnic language is always brief and concise, from the interpretation of the Bible to the instructions of ritual practice are very specific and consistent with the visual sense of ethnic. The content of the materials is usually composed in part, sequenced, lively and easy to understand. First, those who preach to the followers of the Creator, the resurrection of Jesus, then preach the general knowledge of Christ. When the followers feel the basics of religion, they will preach the doctrines and commandments that revolve around “the love of God, the love of human”, practicing the right things in life. Until believers have faith in Protestantism, they teach more deeply, more thoroughly, in relation to Scripture and logic. At this point, the believer is considered capable of receiving the sacrament of baptism (performing the three-fold ritual in the water of the stream to pray for the triptychs of forgiveness and the reception of the Holy Spirit). Therefore, in terms of evangelism, it can be affirmed that the way of teaching the doctrine to ethnic minorities in Gia Lai is a scientific method. It gives ethnic minorities the psychological follower of Jesu in simple, lively, easy-to-understand, and better-than-traditional religion.

### **2.2 Training, Using and Promoting the Role of Missionary Forces in Place**

In the early stages of evangelization in Gia Lai province, Protestantism faced obstacles from French colonial government, the limitation of personnel and financial resources, therefore the missionary activities of the early clergy took place mainly in Pleiku, which was difficult to reach to ethnic minority villages. To overcome these obstacles, Protestantism has focused on the training and deploying of core ethnic staffs, to propagate and mobilize followers in most areas of the ethnic minorities. Rev. Ksor Ghao, Ksor Titus Preacher, Mr. Rmah Cil were the first people to study the Bible with the clergy. Pastor Nay Kial, pastor Ksor Brao, pastor Grup, pastor Kpa Khoan, pastor Nay Ciom, pastor Ksor Bing are following people in learning Bible and evangelization. They have tried to evangelize in the villages of the “Jrai” and “Bahnar” communities (Vietnamese Protestant Church, 2008, p. 1).

In the years 1954–1975, the mission had mobilized the participation of many evangelical organizations with a large number of clergy, Vietnamese pastors and foreigners. However, the training of local Protestant dignitaries was not still received much attention. Many “Jrai” and “Bahnar” children were selected for training at the Buon Ma Thuot Bible School (founded in 1949) and Nha Trang Institute of Spirituality (inaugurated in 1962) made the number of religious and ethnic minorities increased rapidly. This was a workforce that has played an important role in expanding and developing Protestantism in ethnic minority areas of Gia Lai province.

This team has the advantage of being compatriot’s children, understanding the customs and habits, capturing the heart, and the circumstances of each person and family in their region, so it is very convenient for them to propagate and attract the followers. Moreover, through the kinship relationship, the mission team also mobilized the grassroots cadre, the wife and children and relatives of party members, teachers, pupils and students of the school. It can be affirmed that, with the strong development of Protestantism in Gia Lai province in past time, this is a very successful method of Protestantism.

### **2.3 Personal Evangelism**

There is a provision in Protestantism that is each believer must be responsible for preaching the gospel to those who are not religious. Hence, evangelization in general and in Gia Lai in particular is not only carried out by religious dignitaries, but also by every believer who must become a preacher of preaching the Gospel, a missionary volunteer. Consequently, the characteristic mode of evangelism is to “exchange whisperedly into each other’s ears”. In this way, when they evangelize, believers often tell stories related to their own experiences, their family such as since the following to Protestantism they have been changes in thought, religion virtue, improvement of material life, spirit, themselves or relatives get rid of smoke, drinking. Because there is God protected in the production as well as in daily activities they have no evil or bad supernatural forces harm; When they are sick, they just pray or take the medicine from clergies, God will help them to cure, not to have to sacrifice the gods as before, thus saving many buffalos, cows and properties. It can be seen that this method of expanding and developing followers similar to the oil spill phenomena is extremely effective in spreading Protestantism in Gia Lai province, especially in the “Jrai” and “Bahnar” ethnic minorities. Thanks to this method, Protestantism has overcome geographic barriers and has crept into distant corners in ethnic minority areas of Gia Lai province.

### **2.4 Following the Strategy of “Rome Wasn’t Built in a Day”**

“Say once you do not believe, say a thousand times to believe”, the retail by direct encounter is used thoroughly, the content of propaganda is simple with the method of repeating many times in the form of Q & A so that the listener is easy to remember and understand. Protestantism through the Life Stations, Asian Truths, Peace Station ... to spread the Bible, spread the bible documents, spread the faith, and increased radio broadcasts (Ngo, 2011, p.51). Protestant ministers and missionaries are interested in studying the customs and habits of the peoples, controlling and regulating prestigious people, village elders, educated people to support missionary work.

### **2.5 Through Charity-Humanitarian Activities to Build a Bridge Between Christianity and Ethnic Minorities**

Protestant missionaries always consider material as a means to reach out to ethnic minorities, especially those living in disadvantaged, backward and lowly-educated communities. Before the South was completely liberated, with funding from American religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and even from the US Government, the Saigon government ... both Catholic and The Gospel has used the money to entice the people in

many ways such as bringing relief teams to the village, distributing money, goods, food, medicine ... along with the Bible and other types of books for introducing and propagating religion, gradually making people understanding and believing in God and join the religion. Religious organizations chosen ethnic minorities' children to go to school, give free vocational training in religious establishments, combine learning culture, vocational training with learning doctrine. Therefore, during the war, many people from the place of enlightenment to solve the difficulties of life, but later found appropriate they have abandoned traditional religion and voluntarily followed Protestantism.

After the liberation of South Vietnam, there was no longer abundant material resources but Protestantism still paid great attention to this method. The Protestantism takes advantages of the resources, aid organizations, and addresses essential needs of the people in a practical, timely, specific and right places. The sick person immediately has the drug, the hungry people immediately have rice, people with difficulties or tribulation in life immediately be concerned, help, comfort ... In that way, the evangelists have attracted faith of the compatriots with Protestantism.

### 3. Conclusion

It can be seen that to develop the religion in Gia Lai, Protestantism has used a combination of many methods in a basical and flexible way. The first is from learning the language as well as learn the traditional customs and traditions of indigenous ethnic minorities in order to easily reach to the people, translating the Bible into "Jrai" — the largest ethnic group in Gia Lai, to training and effectively using ethnic minority missionaries. In addition, Protestantism has paid particular attention to the method of "personal witness with religion" and combined the preaching with humanitarian activities, social charity. Thanks to the flexible methods of evangelism with the natural geography, socio-economic development and awareness of ethnic minorities in Gia Lai, over the past 70 years, Protestantism has developed quite rapidly, becoming one of the religion that has a strong influence on the social life of ethnic minority communities in this locality.

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