

The building was not grand or magnificent, in fact it was far from it. It was only about 12 feet wide and maybe 60 feet deep. It had three floors, the second reached by a narrow staircase with one turn, where it was easy to bump your head on the low ceiling. You had to carefully negotiate an even smaller spiral staircase to reach the top level. To get to the building, you left the main road walking down a narrow alley. We walked by homes mostly, and a few businesses. One lady was sitting in the alley selling fried food. Kids ran around playing soccer. Dogs barked. Motorbikes beeped. And everyone stared with obvious surprise at the foreigners walking into the neighborhood. Take the first left and it's halfway down on the right.

The first two floors appeared to be space for a family—bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and so on. The top floor was just an open space, and that's where the church meets. Packed out, the room could hold 75 people by Vietnamese standards, less than 50 if Americans set it up. The chairs were short and plastic, uncomfortable after about three minutes and suitable for shorter—and narrower—Vietnamese bodies, but we squeezed in. Everyone inside was barefoot.

We began with music, energetic spirit-filled music. The guitar was out of tune and the voices were off-pitch, but looking around the room I saw eyes closed and hands raised; it was obvious this was a time of worship. Between songs were prayers, with the entire group often speaking quietly at the same time, each person communing with God. A few of the songs were familiar and we sang along as our hosts sang in Vietnamese, but most were not, so we simply clapped and smiled and knew that we were making a joyful noise and that God was pleased.

We began the teaching time with introductions, every word translated by our friend Debbie. We taught from John MacArthur's "The Book on Leadership," a study of leadership lessons from the life of Paul. Donnie, Gary, and I each taught three chapters. Then Gene taught about principles of biblical counseling and Ann and Katie met with the ladies, discussing ministry to women and children.

The people we spoke to were house church pastors, some from the city but most from out of town. It is illegal for them to meet with their congregations, and they had taken risks to be at the meeting. Had we not helped them with their travel expenses, they would not have been able to attend. We talked about how a leader needed to have integrity and honesty, and one person asked "what about when I have to lie to the authorities about what we do or to whom we minister?" They could register their churches with the government, but doing so would mean losing most of their congregations, people who feared the state's intrusion into their lives. It is not illegal to be a Christian but it is illegal to gather without permission, and by seeking permits each church member would be subject to scrutiny and harassment. I have heard people say Christian growth in Vietnam is coming from these house churches, and that the registered or "legal" church is more stagnant. I don't know if that is true or not. I have attended registered churches and have heard joyous singing and great preaching. It is legal to be a Christian and there is no "official" persecution, but employers are "encouraged" to not hire Christians and it is "suggested" to landlords that they should not receive the use of buildings or apartments. There is no doubt that being a believer here means life is much more difficult.

Here's the most profound statement I heard during our meetings, and it was said by one of the men as he prayed: "Father, unchain us so we can be free." These people live with restrictions and fear and always act cautiously. On the second day, we ate lunch in the building then wanted to go for a little walk, but they asked that we stay inside. The police had been in the neighborhood, asking questions about the foreigners, who they were and why they were here.

In America, Christians are not chained. Yes, we fuss about people who say "happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" and about people who ignore the religious aspects of the Pilgrims' journey to the New World. But, really, we have no chains. No one questions us or mistreats us if we worship God. Our jobs and families are not threatened. It is easy, perhaps too easy, for us to be believers. This is simply not true in Vietnam.

Later in the week, Manh took us to a university, one of the campuses he serves through the Campus Crusade for Christ. He said the school has 80,000 students. That number led me to recall my college options as a high school senior, and I remembered rejecting the University of Texas because it had 40,000 students—that was as big as my city and was far, far too big a place for me. We went to the 15th floor of one of the buildings and looked over a very small campus and very large city. As far as we could see in every directions were multi-level homes, ranging from dilapidated to very nice. We were told there were about 9 million people registered in the city, with at least 3 million more unaccounted for in the urban sprawl.

Like first century Christians, our Vietnamese brothers and sisters know struggle and hardship. I want to help them. It is a privilege and a joy to be able to share and serve here. I guess that's one of the reasons I like coming here. I have a seminary education and easy access to plentiful resources, including a personal library full of books about Christian living, while the pastors with whom we met have only their own copy of God's Word and sharp, inquisitive minds. Those, of course, are the first things a preacher needs, but it's nice to have more options in the toolbox. I hope you will join me in praying for them as well as this very populous nation, and I hope one day you will join me in traveling to this beautiful land.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.