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Chapter 21

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PARALLEL STRUCTURES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BRUCE L. BAUER

This article presents a case study of the Vietnam house-church movement, looking at the challenges and opportunities that often exist when security concerns and governmental persecution force the creation of a parallel structure through which God can work. The article suggests ways to maintain administrative linkage and supervision between parallel structures and gives several reasons why parallel structures may be necessary in our present sinful world.

Introduction

From time to time in the history of the expansion of the Kingdom of God, anomalies occur in the way the people of God go about mission in this world. The sinfulness of human beings, ethnocentrism, people blindness, evil governments that seek to control conscience and church life, and a variety of other human factors often subvert the ideal will and purpose of God. Most would agree that it is God's perfect will that in a given location believers be united and work together within a disciplined structure. However, for a variety of reasons,

the Seventh-day Adventist Church has often seen its work divided between two or more parallel structures.

During the Cold War era, the Adventist Church in Hungary and the Soviet Union split between those who were more willing to cooperate and work within the framework of the governmental system and those who felt that any cooperation with the communist government was a denial of one's faith. The disagreement between the two types or groups of people resulted in parallel churches or structures, with Seventh-day Adventists in good and regular standing found in both bodies of believers.

More recently, in countries with predominantly Muslim populations, the Adventist Church has experimented with a contextualized ministry approach that encourages faith development from within the Muslim community. For security purposes it is vital that the Adventist Church members remain separated from the remnant believers who have grown in their faith within the Muslim context. Danger and the necessity for a safe place within Islam where interested people can explore the truths in Scripture have created a situation in which parallel structures exist side by side, with both groups sharing many similar beliefs.

The term "parallel structure" is commonly used to describe these types of situations within Adventism. Parallel structures are a present reality, not a distant possibility. How the Adventist Church chooses to relate to this present situation will make a great deal of difference, especially in those regions of the world where security issues impact the work of the Adventist Church.

This article will look only at the parallel structure that exists in Vietnam as an example of a structure that has developed because of security concerns and the limitations placed on the work of the church by the government. This case study has implications for similar situations that exist in many Muslim areas of the world. This paper will not deal with parallel structures that have arisen out of doctrinal disputes such as happened in Hungary or Russia. The Vietnam situation will be analyzed in an attempt to discover both the challenges and opportunities that the Adventist Church faces when a parallel structure exists within geographic borders.

Case Study: The Vietnam Adventist Mission and the House-church Movement

Seventh-day Adventists began work in Vietnam in 1929, utilizing the usual denominational structure, with the Vietnam Mission working under the Southeast Asia Union Mission. During the formative years foreigners guided the development of strategy that resulted in strong institutional development, but with very little buy-in from local leadership. By 1974 there were twenty churches with 3,238 members and 137 active workers. There were sixteen elementary schools with 2,915 students, a 132-bed hospital employing 310 people, and a publishing house with twenty-five workers (General Conference 1974). But radical changes impacted the Vietnamese Adventist Church when the country was united under the communist government of the north in April of 1975.

The statistics for 2001 are quite different, with only seven churches, four ordained ministers, and seventy-six active employees. The schools, hospital, and publishing house are gone; many churches have been closed; and the Adventist Church can do active evangelism only in the remaining seven churches that are presently recognized by the government. Membership is officially listed as 6,992 (General Conference 2001).

The present government in Vietnam severely restricts religious activity and evangelistic outreach. Pastors assigned to officially recognized Adventist churches are not allowed to travel to other cities to conduct evangelistic work or to start new groups (Johnson 2003:3, 4). When officials from the Southeast Asia Union Mission visit the Vietnam Mission offices in Ho Chi Minh City, it is not unusual for those who visit with the foreign Christian leaders to spend several hours at the police station undergoing interrogation concerning what was said and done.

Under these conditions the Adventist Church in Vietnam is unable to evangelize in the cities and villages where there is presently no Adventist work. The best that can be expected of those working with the seven officially recognized Adventist churches in Vietnam is that they will do what they can under very difficult situations.

However, the evangelistic mandate to present the truths of the Three Angels' Messages to every kindred, tongue, and people drives the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church to find whatever means are available to preach Christ in those areas of Vietnam where the local branch of Adventism is unable

to operate. This was the driving force that gave birth to a parallel structure in Vietnam.

That parallel structure took the form of a house-church movement that began as a result of many people and situations coming together under the leadership of Isaiah Duong, pastor of the Loma Linda and Westminster Vietnamese church groups in southern California.

In 1994, Akinori Kaibe, communication director for the Far Eastern Division of Seventh-day Adventists, approached Pastor Isaiah Duong to encourage him to begin radio broadcasts for the Vietnamese from the Adventist World Radio (AWR) transmitters in Guam (Nguyen 2003:62).

A year earlier, Lynn Mallery, president of the Southeastern California Conference, had also challenged the Vietnamese members to begin evangelistic work among the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in Orange County (*ibid.*). In response, members from the two congregations produced the "Peace and Happiness" TV program and broadcast it for twenty-one months, from July 1993 until April of 1995. But the cost of production and the purchase of airtime were too expensive for the two local congregations to bear, so the project was discontinued (*ibid.*, 40).

Early in 1995 Robin Riches, who was then president of the Southeast Asia Union Mission (SAUM), visited the home of Isaiah Duong to discuss with him the possibilities of beginning a radio ministry that could impact the country of Vietnam by transmitting from Adventist World Radio in Guam (*ibid.*, 52).

In May of 1995 Pastor Duong met with his church board and discussed the possibility of launching a new "Peace and Happiness" initiative, but this time as a radio ministry for southern California. The board approved the recommendation and began radio broadcasts in September of the same year. By 2003 "Peace and Happiness" programs were being aired in Washington, DC, Atlanta, New Orleans, Austin, Tampa, San Diego, Sacramento, and in the Midwest of the United States (*ibid.*, 54, 60-62).

However, even before the first broadcast in southern California, Adventist World Radio transmitters beamed the "Peace and Happiness" programs to Vietnam for two hours a day beginning in August of 1995 (*ibid.*, 64). Within three weeks, letters from listeners in Vietnam were received, indicating that the broadcasts were being heard. Letters were also received from Vietnamese living in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Middle East, Australia, Russia, and Cambodia. It was encouraging to note that all types of people in Vietnam were tuning in to the broadcasts. Letters were

received from the major cities, from remote villages, from the north, south and highland regions, from university students and farmers, from professional people, and from day laborers (*ibid.*).

Isaiah and his team of workers had thought that it would be five years before there would be much response from Vietnam. The quick response caused all types of challenges. Literature sent to listeners was often intercepted by the government and thrown away. With the restrictions placed on the officially recognized Adventist churches in Vietnam, the pastors of those congregations could not visit the new groups to encourage and nurture them. Isaiah wondered who would train and work with the leaders of the groups that were forming (Duong 2003b).

Not too long after the first broadcast into Vietnam, Pastor Duong was visiting the Vietnamese Bible Book Store in Orange County. He overheard a conversation that recent visitors to Vietnam had reported that people were taping the “Peace and Happiness” broadcasts and inviting friends and family over to their houses to listen. Many such groups were being formed in several regions (*ibid.*).

Pastor Duong’s church members who visited Vietnam reported that when they visited their relatives, they saw people gathering around a short-wave radio to listen to the “Peace and Happiness” broadcasts. Two visitors from Vietnam who were visiting in Orange County also reported that they had visited many towns and villages and had observed many groups among Catholics and Protestant believers gathering around the radio and listening to Adventist World Radio (*ibid.*).

Isaiah was faced with a dilemma. The officially recognized Adventist Church in Vietnam was restricted to meeting in only seven church buildings. Adventists could not evangelize in new territories, nor could they follow up the many new groups that were forming throughout Vietnam. Isaiah e-mailed Robin Riches, SAUM president, to seek his counsel and advice. Riches encouraged Isaiah to start radio churches that would meet in people’s homes. Thus was born the Adventist house-church movement in Vietnam (*ibid.*).

God’s providential leading was seen in another area. In 1993 a prominent Vietnamese church leader from another denomination became a Seventh-day Adventist and moved to southern California. He had led out in the development of a house church movement in his denomination and willingly shared many details on how house churches could operate effectively in Vietnam (*ibid.*).

Over the past five years an estimated 40,000 Vietnamese have joined the Sabbath-keeping house churches in Vietnam. During October of 2002 a survey was carried out to ascertain the weekly average Sabbath attendance in the house churches. Even though six of the reporting regions were unable to respond, there were 29,130 people in attendance on the survey Sabbath (Duong 2003c:20). A similar survey was carried out in July of 2003, with all except one district responding, that indicated a weekly Sabbath attendance of 33,119 (ibid.).

The most recent report for October 2003 listed a weekly attendance of 43,126. There were 4,273 baptisms in 2003 and an additional 8,791 people waiting for baptism who were already prepared. Over 300 pastors, evangelists, literature evangelists, and teachers are presently working full-time with the house-church movement. In addition, there are 100 volunteer evangelists who work without any support in the various provinces in Vietnam (ibid.).

Another report was received late in October of 2003 that indicated that of the 300,000 Christians in some of the northern provinces of the country, 100,000 had recently begun to keep the Sabbath as a direct result of the radio broadcasts. In September a "Peace and Happiness" worker had visited that area, meeting with the various church groups, and he also confirmed that "at least 100,000 people" were listening to the radio broadcasts and begging for teachers and leaders (ibid.).

Parallel Structures: Challenges

Any time a denomination begins to function as a church in new or innovative ways, many challenges emerge that demand creative responses and solutions. For example, how does a denomination maintain administrative links with a parallel structure? Who authenticates leadership selection? How are church leaders in the parallel structure evaluated, nurtured, and developed for ordination? How does the denomination play its role as a check and balance in decision-making, budgeting, and policy with the parallel structure? How is orthodoxy maintained with a parallel structure that is often only loosely tied to the denomination? These are the types of challenges that the Seventh-day Adventist Church faces in Vietnam and with many of the faith-development-in-context situations in Islamic countries.

Maintaining Administrative Linkage

The leaders of the Vietnamese house churches have had minimal denominational oversight or linkage with the usual decision-making processes. The Southeast Asia Union has always been supportive of the radio work, has contributed financially toward the broadcasts and the training of leaders, and has maintained good relationships with Adventist World Radio (AWR), Adventist Southeast Asia Projects (ASAP is a major funding source for the Vietnamese house church movement), Global Mission, and the Southeastern California Conference (Isaiah Duong's employing organization). However, until October of 2003 there was no committee to give oversight to the overall program, to set priorities, to approve a yearly budget, or to place the denomination's seal of approval on the house-church movement.

Since it appeared to some that the house-church movement lacked official status within the Adventist Church, the Vietnam Mission and their supporters among Adventist Vietnamese in the United States began to level accusations that Isaiah Duong was not working with the church, and that the SAUM Committee did not support the radio work. Some even went so far as to ask that the radio work stop, since it was an obstacle that the communist government continued to use as an excuse for not granting additional privileges to the Adventist Church in Vietnam (Riches 2002).

There is no question that the Vietnam Mission leaders face intense pressure from the Vietnamese government to unify all Adventist work under the control and authority of the Vietnam Mission. The Vietnamese government cannot understand why there are two branches of Adventism in Vietnam. Governmental pressure and perhaps other factors have led to deep suspicion and mistrust between the Mission and the house-church movement. Adventist leaders, both in America and in Vietnam, have even suggested that the house churches should either merge with the official work of the Vietnam Mission or cease their separate operation (Watts 2004).

To give a stamp of legitimacy to the house-church movement, a supervisory committee was established for the Vietnamese house-church movement in October of 2003 when the SAUM Committee approved a "Peace and Happiness Coordinating Committee" consisting of the President of the SAUM as chair, Isaiah Duong as secretary, the AWR executive director, and representatives from the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, the General Conference, and ASAP.

This committee has the following terms of reference:

- To meet at least once a year at the time of the General Conference Annual Council
- To approve an annual financial budget
- To discuss strategies and approve training schedules
- To maintain a liaison with Adventist World Radio and the Southeast Asia Union Mission
- To work toward eventual integration of the Peace and Happiness house-church movement with the Vietnam Mission (Townend 2003)

As parallel structures develop in various regions of our world, it would seem that a similar type of supervisory committee would be helpful in approving a yearly budget, developing strategy, scheduling leadership training, authorizing ordinations, and giving administrative oversight. An additional level of administrative linkage may also be helpful. In the case of Vietnam, it could prove helpful if the next higher level of organization (the Southern Asia-Pacific Division) would also vote to recognize the Peace and Happiness Coordinating Committee as the official supervisory body for the Adventist house churches in Vietnam. By having at least two administrative levels of documented committee approval showing clearly the terms of reference and clearly linking the parallel structure to the denominational structure, future misunderstandings should be minimized.

Leadership Selection and Ordination

One of the challenges of merging a parallel structure with the denominational structure will involve the issue of whether or not to recognize the leaders and their ordination. Most Adventist parallel structures exist because of safety or political situations. If those situations would change, it would most likely be the will of both parties to integrate the separate structures under one organization. If an officially recognized coordinating body has approved the ordination of individuals, has been working with the parallel structure, and has set up guidelines and procedures for leadership selection, nurture, and training, it would be much easier in such situations to merge the leadership in the parallel structure with the leadership within the denomination.

Another area of concern is the level of formal education that the leaders of the house churches are able to obtain. Will informal education methods suffice for training workers for the big cities where large numbers of highly educated

Vietnamese live? Should some of the house-church leaders be encouraged to attend Mission College and then return to Vietnam to work for the house-church movement?

Accountability

One of the functions of the universal church is to maintain orthodoxy and to ensure that things are done decently and in order. Whereas most parallel structures develop as a result of people movements in which the Spirit of God is moving in powerful and direct ways, it is possible that situations might arise in which charismatic leaders or rogue elements might hijack a parallel structure. Independent or freestanding projects and structures can easily stray from orthodox practice and beliefs. By establishing supervisory and oversight committees, the emerging parallel structures would have some level of accountability.

Maintaining Orthodoxy

Without administrative linkage that allows for input in leadership selection and training and the oversight of ordination criteria, the fear is that maintaining orthodoxy may prove difficult. Without larger and broader input on what constitutes acceptable belief and practice and without the normal check and balance that an international body of believers contributes to an understanding of biblical faith, local leaders may allow heretical beliefs to remain unchallenged in the parallel structure. In Vietnam many of the house-church leaders have come from a Pentecostal background. What safeguards have been put into place or even can be put into place to ensure that all levels of leadership have an adequate understanding and commitment to Adventist doctrines and beliefs?

Maintaining doctrinal unity and orthodoxy is among the greatest concerns when parallel structures are allowed to grow and develop in isolation from the larger body of Adventism. One possible way to help ensure unity in faith and practice would be for the denomination to provide budgets for personnel to write, teach, and train those coming to faith in parallel structures. Too often the attitude has been that if a person is not entered on the membership rolls of the denomination and is not part of the organized Adventist Church, then the denomination has little if any responsibility. This is one of the greatest dangers that presently threatens parallel structures. Without denominational funding

for teaching, training of leadership, and the production of literature, the parallel structure is left to struggle on its own in these vital areas.

SAUM has provided some funding for the training of the house-church leaders in Vietnam, but Isaiah Duong has had to find other sources of funding for literature development. The situation among the many Muslim outreach projects is much more critical. Even though the Adventist Church has done some work in this area, no team of literature developers has been assembled to assist in the contextualized approach that encourages faith development within an Islamic context. Without literature and without denominational monies to support a massive training and teaching ministry for this new and encouraging approach, the result could be less than orthodoxy in belief. In most situations, what prevents syncretism and promotes orthodoxy is good biblical teaching. If the denominational structure cannot find the will or the means to help the parallel structures with the expenses of teaching and training, then doctrinal unity could come into jeopardy.

Additional Areas of Concern

An additional area of concern is the question of honesty and integrity. Money that is given to the house-church leaders in Vietnam by church entities is not money that flows through normal banking channels. While many overseas Vietnamese use such channels to remit monies to family members in Vietnam, what are the ethical implications for the Adventist Church to bypass government controls and restrictions? While the church is driven by an evangelistic mandate, how many government laws can be ignored or broken before God's law is broken? What ethical considerations should guide the Adventist Church in areas such as moving people across borders for training purposes when those individuals have no passports or government paperwork? Can literature be produced and distributed in direct opposition to government rules and regulations? It would be good for a major paper to be prepared on the ethics of parallel movements that operate in hostile areas of the world.

Some Adventists are also concerned that those entering the parallel structure are not informed that they are joining the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Vietnam the house church believers do know that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the sponsor of the broadcasts that they listen to, but in most Muslim countries those coming to faith in Christ within the Muslim context often do not know they have any connection with the Adventist Church. Again, this

is an issue that is often impacted by security concerns. In those areas of the world where identification with the Adventist structure would not place believers in jeopardy, the information should be shared. However, where the safety and security of believers would be compromised by any identification with the Adventist Church, it would seem that safety for the believers would outweigh the concern that the believers in the parallel structures be labeled officially as Seventh-day Adventist members or listed in church statistics. This is based on the assumption that building the Kingdom of God is more important than numbering believers for denominational statistical purposes.

Parallel Structures: Opportunities

Parallel structures also offer unique opportunities in situations where the usual system of church administration is not a possibility. First and foremost, a parallel structure allows for the expansion of the Kingdom of God in areas of the world where there is hostility and animosity toward organized Christian work. A parallel structure gives some guidance and direction to people movements without compromising the safety and security of those coming to faith. A parallel structure could also minimize the impact of cultural and social barriers within a region of the world so that people can more readily give the gospel a hearing.

Maximizes Evangelistic Potential

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Vietnam has been in existence since 1929, so it is a recognized religious institution in the country. When the communist government took over the south in 1975, the activities and institutions of the Adventist Church were severely impacted. Three-fourths of the churches, all the schools, and other institutions were closed. Government restrictions did not allow evangelization in unentered villages or towns. But the creation of a parallel structure in Vietnam has allowed the Adventist message to continue to spread throughout the country, even to those areas where Adventism had never existed prior to the communist takeover.

Without a parallel structure in Vietnam today, the Adventist Church would be severely limited in its outreach activities. However, with the house-church movement, the Adventist faith has been able to spread to every corner of Vietnam. Presently the house-church membership is five times the membership of the officially recognized Adventist churches in Vietnam; and if the recent

report of 100,000 potential believers in the northern part of the country proves to be true, then the membership will swell to sixteen times larger than the official membership.

Provides Safety

In places such as Vietnam where governments persecute believers for their faith, an informal parallel structure provides more safety than would the typical denominational model, with membership lists, organized and recognized levels of administration, institutions, and paid personnel. If the government closes a house church, it is not difficult for those meeting in that home to find another house in the area where they can meet. A house church typically has fewer than fifty members. House church members usually know only the names of those who meet with them in their village or section of a town, so are less apt to reveal sensitive information to the police when they are interrogated.

Persecution from the government in Vietnam has been severe. In many and various ways the government has applied pressure against those who become members of the Peace and Happiness house churches. Members of house churches often lose the privileges of citizenship. When a natural disaster strikes, believers are unable to receive government aid, and their children are often denied entrance into college. College graduates who become members of the house churches are denied government jobs and find it difficult to find other types of employment. Believers are often isolated from their communities, and new members are threatened and told not to join the house churches. In some regions where the persecution has been most severe, two to three soldiers have been quartered in believers' homes, not only to watch their every move, but also as a financial burden, since the believers are forced to feed the soldiers living with them.

A more loosely defined organization is better suited to these types of situations in which there is government persecution. The house church movement in Vietnam has hundreds of unpaid house church leaders who know only a few of the district leaders. District leaders know only a few of the regional leaders. By limiting knowledge of the leaders in various areas of Vietnam, safety is increased and risk is minimized.

Minimize Barriers to the Gospel

The parallel structures that are developing in Vietnam and in Muslim areas of the world rarely are hampered by cultural baggage from other cultures. It is unfortunate but true that missionaries often brought their cultural ways and practices with them when they introduced Christianity to the world's peoples. Most parallel structures are led and directed by indigenous believers who have become deeply committed followers of Jesus Christ and who are led by the Holy Spirit as they struggle to establish norms and patterns for the life of the believing community. People movements that have indigenous leadership create indigenous church groups with few of the cultural barriers that often hinder those churches planted and nurtured by missionaries from outside the culture. Instead of a committee of outsiders deciding church building styles, Sabbath dress, hymnology, wedding and funeral formats, church ceremonies, order of worship, and all the other many things that are vital to a faith community, indigenous leaders are forced to decide. And in deciding, the models most often chosen are those that "fit" the local customs and culture of their people. By allowing the church groups to look like "home-grown" religious organizations rather than foreign organizations, barriers that could keep people from investigating the claims of Christ are minimized.

When barriers are minimized, the church is in a better position to grow rapidly within a culture. People who begin to investigate the claims of Christ are not confronted with foreign music, foreign worship styles, or foreign ceremonies. Those investigating the faith cannot easily charge that the new faith is foreign. So instead of struggling with foreign leaders, foreign methods, and foreign ways of communicating the gospel, they are confronted with the claims of Jesus and are faced with deciding whether or not to place themselves under the Lordship of Christ.

Summary and Conclusion

Parallel structures offer both challenges and opportunities. Most likely, parallel structures will continue to be part of Adventist Church life until Christ returns. Perhaps the largest challenge will be to the denominational leadership to find ways to deal creatively with the fluid and less structured situations of the parallel structures. Present policies have little to say about how to deal with a parallel structure. Some church leaders want nothing to do with a structure

that is not directly under their supervision or that is not accountable to the next higher organization.

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not willing to creatively lead and supervise the parallel structures that are growing and developing in Vietnam and in Muslim countries, then it will share responsibility for future failures in the areas of accountability, leadership selection and training, and in maintaining orthodoxy. Parallel structures are often left to fend for themselves in finding sources of funding for leadership training and literature development. Adventist Church funding is vital in these areas, for without denominational funding and support, the potential for an erosion of an orthodox belief system is greatly increased.

Much more study is needed in this area of parallel structures. Additional case studies need to be developed, a task force of church leaders and mission practitioners could further explore these issues, and guidelines could be suggested for the various levels of the denomination.

Parallel structures have existed in the past, exist now, and will exist in the future. The issue confronting the Adventist Church is how the denomination will relate to them for the glory of God and for the building of His Kingdom.

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