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WISCONSIN  
LUTHERAN  
SEMINARY

## WALKING THE STEPPING STONES OF FAITH



The Transitioning Vietnamese Ministry in Boise Idaho from 2003 - 2007  
Jeremy Cares

## A Brief History of the Ministry to the Vietnamese in Southwest Idaho from 1990 - 2003

When someone thinks of Idaho they probably usually think of potatoes, cowboys, and a place where no one lives, not a place to which any foreign culture would immigrate. In the early 1990s many Vietnamese families immigrated into the country.<sup>12</sup> It was almost as if these families didn't know where they were going and ended up in Idaho. Many families around the Treasure Valley received the Vietnamese families into their homes with open arms. In return, the Vietnamese became contributors to the rapid growth of Southwest Idaho.

Not only did they contribute to the growth, but some also became participants in a ministry that they had never known before. In the early 1990's there was only one Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Church present in Southwest Idaho, Messiah Lutheran Church in Nampa, Idaho. When the large influx of Vietnamese was arriving, some members of Messiah were intrigued and wanted to get involved. They decided to sponsor some of the Vietnamese families who had emigrated from Vietnam. The Vietnamese were impressed with the love and kindness that the members had shown them. It wasn't long before that love <sup>resulted in</sup> ~~stemmed into~~ the Vietnamese families coming regularly to Sunday services at Messiah.

The need to share God's undying love with the Vietnamese became ever more apparent. The Vietnamese were showing interest and wanted to learn more. In December of 1992, weekly Bible classes were held using a Vietnamese interpreter, Mr. Robert Vinh Phan.<sup>3</sup> Pastor Kramer said about him, "He is very supportive of our work. He is also a wise and intelligent man,

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<sup>1</sup> "Although the city of Boise is unable to give specific, current information about the size of the Vietnamese community, after contacting several sources, we estimate the size of the Vietnamese community in Boise to be between 1,000 and 2,000. The specific figures are difficult because the last census was in 1990, and because of "secondary migration" where many Vietnamese move around from house to house and even city to city." Pastor Kramer's notes on Word Document, "vietplan," p.1

<sup>2</sup> "Due to immigration reform in 98 much of the pipeline of Vietnamese coming in has slowed down to a drizzle. There are many more families sponsoring Vietnamese families, but the refugee strain has stopped." Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer on Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Pastor Kramer's notes on Word Document "Staff Position," p.1

having served as an interpreter during the Vietnam War, taught at the university level in Hong Kong, and is fluent in four languages. Of great importance, he is one of the most highly respected men in the Vietnamese community.”<sup>4</sup>

In May of 1995, Daniel Kramer was assigned as a Vicar to Messiah. His service to the Vietnamese grew throughout the year and because of the growing need to minister to the Vietnamese he was called to serve for a second year. Throughout the two years Vicar Kramer learned much about the Vietnamese language and culture. When his two years had come to an end, he returned to complete his final year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. On assignment day of 1998, he was called to serve as the full-time missionary to the Vietnamese community in the Treasure Valley (the Boise, Idaho area). In August of 1998, he was commissioned as the missionary and now began the official exploratory work for Peace in Jesus Lutheran Church.<sup>5</sup>

In 1999 Pastor Kramer wrote,

A good foundation has been laid. There has been growth in the Vietnamese understanding of God's Word, in the number of Vietnamese we are in contact with, and our opportunities to reach Vietnamese in the Boise area. A wonderful opportunity lies before us. Mr. Vinh is a tremendous asset for a number of reasons: his prominence in the Vietnamese community; his extraordinary language skills; his personal spiritual growth; and his eagerness to help us bring God's Word to his people. May God bless us as we strive to “make known among the nations what He has done.” --Isaiah 12:4<sup>6</sup>

The foundation had been laid. All the hard work paid off and the Lord definitely blessed Peace in Jesus with a rented storefront for worship and ministry opportunities. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1999 Peace held its first service.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Peace In Jesus has enjoyed a facility that mostly accommodated their needs through 2007 and going into 2008.

The members of the staff have been another blessing for Peace in Jesus. In 2001, the

<sup>4</sup> Pastor Kramer's notes on Word Document “Viet. Ministry History,” p.1

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.messiahnampa.com/site/cpage.asp?cpage\\_id=8940&sec\\_id=2106](http://www.messiahnampa.com/site/cpage.asp?cpage_id=8940&sec_id=2106), visited December 7, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Pastor Kramer's notes on Word Document “Viet. Ministry History,” p.2

<sup>7</sup> Pastor Kramer's Word Document, “2000 BIR,” p.1

congregation was blessed to add a Staff Minister position. The Board of Home Missions decided in favor of subsidizing the salary of the staff minister. Staff Minister, Dave Malnes, accepted the call and began his ministry in November of 2001.<sup>8</sup> Immediately Dave and Pastor Kramer began working together to develop a team ministry not only on a staff level, but also developing the entire congregation to work as a team. They met on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002, to discuss their strategy of moving forward as a team. Dave’s main emphases would be ESL classes, youth ministry, and building relationships. Pastor Kramer’s main emphases would be worship services and writing and organizing Bible Information Classes.<sup>9</sup> They both moved forward carrying out the ministry together by following through on their emphases and most importantly encouraging one another through this cross-cultural ministry.

**Moving Forward on the Stepping Stones Laid Down in the Past**

It is no surprise that challenges are not unusual in a ministry such as this. In any cross-cultural ministry, many challenges arise. Peace’s ministry to the Vietnamese has not been any different. One major challenge has been the learning of a new language and culture for both the Vietnamese and for Pastor Kramer and Staff Minister Malnes. Another challenge has been reaching out to a Vietnamese culture that is not familiar with the Christian faith. The most difficult challenge has probably been building up the Vietnamese spiritually to know how to share their faith with others and to make God more of a priority in their lives. Pastor Kramer has seen these challenges develop and has arranged programs that have encouraged the Vietnamese and himself in these areas.

Learning a new language is never an easy thing and Pastor Kramer has found this to be an opportunity to lay down the first “stepping stones” for the Vietnamese to hear about God.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry Plan, Word Document, “October 01,” p.2

<sup>9</sup> Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “Strategy Meeting Notes1,” p.1

Pastor Kramer refers to these as “concrete helps” (ways we strive to help people in their day-to-day lives).<sup>10</sup> He used these “concrete helps to establish and maintain trust with individuals and the community (help with INS papers, translation help w/ doctors, etc.), ESL classes and Citizenship classes.<sup>11</sup> Early in his ministry Pastor Kramer also identified certain “stepping stones” to effectively witness to the Vietnamese: “1. Language (speak “good Vietnamese” to get attention—they will treat you differently, the youth will be impressed the most), 2. Patience (in the Vietnamese language this is described as “sip and digest”), 3. Love the people (in order to endure all things), and 4. Develop friendships.”<sup>12</sup> These “concrete helps” and “stepping stones” have become significant outreach tools and have opened the door to share more about Jesus Christ with the Vietnamese community.

Most Vietnamese have rarely heard of Jesus and if they have, they do not really understand what he really has done. Christianity is quite foreign and new to the Vietnamese culture. Buddhism is the norm in Vietnam. It is common to hear people refer to the Vietnamese as Buddhists. In Vietnam, Buddhism, ancestor worship, and Tri-religion compose about 85% of the population’s belief system. Pastor Kramer has identified reaching the Vietnamese with God’s Word is “vitaly important, but that there are two main obstacles that they must overcome.”<sup>13</sup> He explains the first obstacle as overcoming the “deeply ingrained tenet” of those who have a Buddhist/<sup>a</sup>Ancestor worship background as: “Whatever religion is good.”<sup>14</sup> The second obstacle he explains that is hard to overcome is the expectation of members that conversions to Christianity are so rare that it is not even worth their time to reach out to those

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<sup>10</sup> Pastor Kramer’s notes on Word Document, “Staff Position,” p.1

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Pastor Kramer’s notes on Works Document, “Ministry notes3,” p. 3

<sup>13</sup> Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “evaluation year 1, outline year 2,” p.1

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

who are not Christian.<sup>15</sup> This number also includes the nominal Buddhist who may only participate in the religion once or twice a year.<sup>16</sup>

Learning how to specifically reach the Vietnamese culture has taken Pastor Kramer some time. He has developed strong relationships with the Vietnamese community over the years. First he found, as in most cultures, that you need to have something to open the door to build on those relationships. Peace has worked on doing this in many ways: they have offered several English as a second language classes (ESL), they have offered citizenship classes, including special tutoring for those who need the encouragement, and ultimately they have helped out with the Vietnamese in the community with anything else that they have the means to do. Pastor Kramer addressed these opportunities when he wrote, "Offering ESL and Citizenship classes as well as assistance with INS forms, reading and understanding their mail, translating, etc. is demanding at times. While this relationship building takes time and effort, this important outreach arm has aided us in establishing trust with individuals and the community as a whole."<sup>17</sup> Pastor Kramer enthusiastically emphasized their 95% graduation rate of those who have taken the citizenship courses on their citizenship tests.<sup>18</sup> Through these classes Pastor Kramer elaborated:

We are able to show that we are here to help people with the most important need (Jesus), and we also help people in everyday lesser needs (ESL, Citizenship). These classes are helpful to build bridges in order to take the Gospel across. Through these classes, we have had several individuals enter into the 7-Steps program, some into BIC, and many other witnessing opportunities.<sup>19</sup>

Peace has accepted the title as "the church that helps people."<sup>20</sup> Pastor Kramer explained

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>17</sup> Pastor Kramer's Word Document, "evaluation year 2," p. 2

<sup>18</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>19</sup> Pastor Kramer's Word Document, "evaluation year 1, outline year 2," p.3

<sup>20</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

by saying, “It has been heard consistently from Buddhists and others, who somewhat rag on the Buddhist nun at the Buddhist temple in town that they don’t even help, but Peace In Jesus does.”<sup>21</sup> Originally Pastor Kramer had made contacts with some local Vietnamese leaders around the Treasure Valley to understand the Vietnamese culture in the Boise area. These leaders are no longer accepted as leaders and have actually lost much of the trust of the Vietnamese people.<sup>22</sup> Now Peace has somewhat fallen into some of the Vietnamese leadership positions in the community. They have not done this formally, but it has come with the territory of being known as “the church that helps people.”

Along with being known as “the church that helps people,” Peace has also created new ideas that seem to have resulted in the title, “the friendly church.” Pastor Kramer and Staff Minister Malnes developed the plan of monthly “come events.” In the summer of 2005, they began to put these events into action. The events included: picnics, barbeques, holiday celebrations, including the Lunar New Years celebration, ping pong tournaments, etc.<sup>23</sup> Pastor Kramer wrote in review of the first six months of “come events,” “Scheduling these events at a rate of about one per month has proved beneficial for attendance. The use of picnics during this past summer and fall has also been quite successful.”<sup>24</sup> In the Fall and Winter of 2006 the attendance <sup>at</sup> ~~to~~ these events shows how well they have worked.<sup>25</sup>

Using many of these open door techniques Pastor Kramer began developing a Bible <sup>5</sup> study program which incorporated the Vietnamese culture. He came to the conclusion that reaching the Vietnamese through Vietnamese proverbs would help them more understand

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>23</sup> Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “evaluation year 1, outline year 2,” p.2

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 3

<sup>25</sup> “Fall Festival—77, Thanksgiving—94, Christmas—132, Vietnamese New Year—81.” Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “evaluation year 2,” p.2

Biblical principles in their own culture.<sup>26</sup> He developed the “Seven Steps on the Way” Bible study incorporating known Vietnamese proverbs. By the beginning of 2003 the Bible study was complete.<sup>27</sup> I asked him, why he thought that this was the best way to go and he responded, “Culture. It’s just culture.”<sup>28</sup> Pastor Kramer believes in this Bible Study and has seen it work for many Vietnamese people and said that it has, “communicated clearly both Biblical truths and cultural truths and many more are hearing about Jesus rather than not.”<sup>29</sup>

Pastor Kramer has gained the trust <sup>of</sup> from several Vietnamese people, although a cultural barrier still exists, many have turned to him as their spiritual leader. He became more of a “fatherly” type figure to many of the Vietnamese at Peace. This was his goal in order to be an encourager as well as one who leads by example. He writes in his evaluation of 2005 that a “More direct, “fatherly” style of pastoral leadership has resulted in members getting back into BIC, addressing areas of weakness, and stewardship. We will continue this style of leadership while encouraging members to respond to the Gospel motivation in their Christian freedom.<sup>30</sup> It seems to be typical among the Vietnamese to show trust in leaders like Pastor Kramer. “Many Vietnamese, especially the youth, are much more receptive to an Anglo teaching them religion and education in America than to a Vietnamese man.”<sup>31</sup>

The relationships among Pastor Kramer and the Vietnamese grew and at this point it was time to focus on the future of Peace and the Spiritual growth of the congregation. In July of 2005 the leadership of Peace unveiled an eye appealing chart at their Fourth of July picnic

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<sup>26</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>27</sup> Ministry plan Word Document, “November December 2002,” p.3

<sup>28</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “evaluation year 1, outline year 2,” p.2

<sup>31</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007



revealing a 10 year ministry plan.<sup>32</sup> “There was a notable excitement which carried through the summer as the vision was enhanced through a sermon series on teamwork. Members have been talking about our vision in several areas (Hoa Sen newsletter article, fellowship time, playing soccer).”<sup>33</sup> The vision including many aggressive steps forward such as: developing a prayer calendar that would include a Vietnamese proverb for the month as well as a Scripture passage, developing a citizenship tract that would help lead into the 7 steps program, and a video that would be able to relate Jesus to the Vietnamese culture.<sup>34</sup>

Peace furthered their ministry plan the following year of 2006 and emphasized how important member involvement would be. By the end of the fiscal year of 2006 to 2007 the Staff Minister position would no longer be funded by the District Mission Board of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod.<sup>35</sup>

July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006 was a major event in the history of our church. During this service we clearly communicated the message "Stepping Forward," a continuation of our long-term vision at Peace In Jesus. This Sunday marked the beginning of Year Two of our 10-year plan. The Staff Minister communicated the change in his ministry responsibilities, allowing members of Peace In Jesus to "Step Forward" in areas of service. We clearly communicated that this is not a step backward, but a step forward for the growth and maturity of our congregation. After the reading of the announcement in Vietnamese, the Staff Minister also shared in English what was happening.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the Vietnamese members realized that it was time to really step up and to begin to carry out the ministry load of the Staff Minister's position. One member, Tao Nguyen, who helped work up the plan stated, "I believe in this," which had really taken a ripple effect down to the

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<sup>32</sup> Pastor Kramer's Word Document, "evaluation year 1, outline year 2," p.3

<sup>33</sup> Pastor Kramer's Word Document, "evaluation year 1, outline year 2," p.3

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> "One of the goals of our advanced planning is to help Peace In Jesus become a self-supporting congregation. In order to accomplish this plan, we do not consider it reasonable to expect the membership of Peace In Jesus to be able to support two full-time called workers by the year 2016 (the conclusion of our 10-year plan). Because of this fact, our ten-year plan includes phasing out of the Staff Ministry position at Peace In Jesus." Pastor Kramer's Word Document, "evaluation year 2," p. 6

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.7

members.<sup>37</sup> “Overall the people have really stepped up, the challenges have increased, but we were able to prepare well in advance”<sup>38</sup> Pastor Kramer noted.

In July 2007, Staff Minister Malnes’ position was dissolved. His ministry at Peace <sup>had</sup> ~~took~~ an amazing effect over his 5 years of ministry there. His departure brought some sadness but also brought many of the Vietnamese to now focus on their involvement in the future. He and his family visit every once in awhile because he is now serving as a part-time Staff Minister for the Truth in Love Ministry in Nampa, Idaho only 15 miles away.

Although losing an important ministry member in Staff Minister Malnes, Peace in Jesus focused its attention on stepping forward. This was not a time for Peace to slow down or take a step backward, but rather step forward with heads up and eyes forward looking at new opportunities for service. “The people have really stepped up in being in God’s Word, being in worship, and in their offerings. Every category has been up since Staff Minister Malnes has left,”<sup>39</sup> Pastor Kramer said. Peace established a Leadership Group that meets monthly. It was comprised of three male leaders, Thong Nguyen, Thang Ho, and Tao Nguyen.<sup>40</sup> “This has become a real positive point in driving the ministry plan for the congregation.”<sup>41</sup> Pastor Kramer has taken it on himself to find special areas of service for those who have the ability. He has become the encourager to introduce members to new tasks by organizing, planning, and matching people’s skills to areas of ministry.<sup>42</sup>

Emphasizing stewardship has not been an easy task. “This is an area where there hasn’t been as much effort as there will need to be in the future, but when dealing with the Vietnamese

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<sup>37</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>40</sup> Pastor Kramer’s Word Document, “evaluation year 2,” p.4

<sup>41</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

culture, one must be wise and careful around the subject of money.”<sup>43</sup> Although this is a struggle, there still has been work on this area and many of the Vietnamese members have responded. On average in 2007, communicants were giving \$350 every Sunday and Thanksgiving was \$1000.<sup>44</sup>

In areas of service the members of Peace have really stepped up. When the Malnes family left there were questions on who would take over the areas of Sunday school and Music. Two talented members stepped up to teach Sunday school. One in particular, Fred Payne, has an interesting background. He is an Anglo who is married to a Vietnamese woman and Pastor Kramer said that he is a “self-described Job.”<sup>45</sup> He is very solid when it comes to his knowledge of the Scriptures and Pastor Kramer feels very comfortable with him teaching the youth. The other teacher is a teen, Thuy Do, who is just finishing up high school. She is great with the children, but needs more help with her preparation of the Bible lessons. In the summer of 2007 many of the areas of ministry had been filled by Vietnamese members of the congregation: 3 in the Leadership Group, 2 cultural consultants, 1 event coordinator for every major event, 5 involved with outreach, 5 involved in altar care & facility care, and 4 involved in almost every worship service, 2 for music and 2 for reading the Scripture readings.<sup>46</sup> Tao Nguyen, a member of the Leadership Group, re-located to Manassas, Virginia, in the early fall of 2007. Peace began looking for another man to fill this role and they found it in a man by the name of Toan Doan. The members of Peace certainly grew in their involvement of its entire ministry and the fruits of their labors were beginning to take effect.

Peace in Jesus has grown both in numbers and spiritually over the course of the years. In

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

May of 2004 Peace had 17 communicants and 33 souls. By the end of June 2007 Peace had 30 communicants and 48 souls.<sup>47</sup> The Lord has truly blessed this ministry in numbers. Spiritually, it is much harder to gauge growth. Pastor Kramer informed me that Bible class is not a part of the Vietnamese culture. It is downplayed in Vietnam and carries over into their practice in America.<sup>48</sup> Numbers in Bible class have not seen large increases, but the expression of faith has picked up. Members who have an occupational test, or are having relationship problems will come into pray.<sup>49</sup> “People who have actually seen that the Lord has answered their prayers have really taken effect.”<sup>50</sup> Most of this culture of looking for spiritual advice and praying to God for help is very new to the Vietnamese.<sup>51</sup> The members at Peace have shown that their involvement in church and Bible class as well as through their spiritual fruits of prayer that they are spiritually growing as children of God. God is truly working faith in these people.

Peace in Jesus Lutheran Church is an example of God’s Word working, to His glory. Through God’s grace, Peace continues to display beautiful Asian fruits of faith even through the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. Even through difficulties and disappointments, God has worked through the ministry of Peace to reach many lost souls. Cultural boundaries have been challenging to overcome, but with Jesus on their side, Peace is walking forward on the stepping stones of faith. They know that God’s Word is powerful and it will work. They know that their mission is aggressive, but not too aggressive for the perfect all-powerful God who saved them from the chains of hell. Peace is walking forward, not on the sinking sands of their own works, but on the sure foundation of God’s Word, trusting that his Word will not return to them empty.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Phone Interview with Pastor Kramer, Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

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