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Pentecost in Vietnam

Maureen Fiedler | May. 23, 2010 NCR Today

I write this on Pentecost Sunday, an auspicious day to be in Vietnam? but an appropriate day. t

Last night, I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). I am part of an interfaith delegation investigating the lingering effects of Agent Orange and dioxin on the civilian population and the environment of Vietnam. This morning, I went to a Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of Notre Dame in the city. Unexpectedly, the Mass was in English. In his homily, the priest talked about the importance of not being silent when speech is required. That message fits the work of our delegation.

tThe delegation is led by Bob Edgar, President of Common Cause and funded by the Ford Foundation, the leading NGO involved in providing aid to investigate the effects of the poisons, clean up the toxic ?hot spots? and promote a high level US/Vietnamese dialogue on the issues.

tFor me, this journey resurrects issues from the past: Vietnam was the first war I protested. But I am reminded that wars seldom ?end? on the day that troops leave and guns are silent. The toxic effects of modern conflicts linger for generations. So it is with Agent Orange and dioxin, which were sprayed over an area of Vietnam the size of Massachusetts.

Our own Vietnam veterans suffered from exposure to these toxins, and the effects have been felt in new generations afflicted by severe birth defects. The same is true of tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians, and the effects are being felt into new generations. Not only that, contaminated ?hot spots? remain near former U.S. military bases. Poison leeches into nearby rivers and streams and farmlands. Clean-up has barely begun, 35 years after those last U.S. helicopters left from the roof of the US Embassy in the old Saigon.

Although aid is available today for Vietnam veterans and a small amount of aid has gone to Vietnam to begin dealing with the ?hot spots,? the U.S. government has never admitted a connected between the toxins and the illnesses, and has never accepted formal responsibility for any of this.

So, this is a journey of reparations and truth-telling. Thus, it is also a journey of the Spirit. Like the disciples on Pentecost, our delegation will not be huddled in an upper room, but rather visiting victims and ?hot spots,? listening to the Vietnamese people. Hopefully, we will ?understand people speaking in their own language? in the sense that we will grasp at a profound level the meaning of the stories we hear. And then, there are those Pentecost ?tongues of fire.? In colloquial terms, I hope that means we will be ?fired up? and ready to raise the profile of this often-forgotten issue in the United States when we return.

If God and the Internet are willing, I will be sending more reports on this journey as the week progresses.

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