

Dear John,

Thanks for your thought-provoking memo (no objection about sharing it with Julian!). Many of your ideas I agree with, some I disagree with. Here are some reactions:

Values and goals. The impetus for our getting together in the first place was Kerry's reaction to the depressed circumstances of the Kontum Montagnard community compared with BanMeThuot and --- in his words --- a hope of 'returning some friendship' to that community. At our Indianola meeting we decided to go beyond this and named ourselves 'Friends of the Viet Nam Highlands' --- a fortuitous choice I think, because while you can't be 'all things to all people' it does imply a broader concern than being simply pro-Montagnard. Accordingly as far as goals are concerned I would think that all the objectives in your paragraph (2) are valid with the exception of 'personally rewarding former co-workers' (which in my opinion is a matter of individual choice and circumstance rather than a function of FVNH).

Our assets. We will certainly have very limited funds at our present stage of development, and I agree whole-heartedly that our most worthy contribution at this point will be to serve as a liaison between concerned NGOs and local constituencies. (My own approaches to Church World Service and Catholic Relief Services since my visit to Kontum last spring have been unsuccessful, but Mennonite Central Committee has shown some interest and I am still pursuing this.) These of course are all recognized agencies that have been certified and approved by the government in Hanoi. I share your concern about choice of partners, and I would be particularly leary about associations with evangelical or veterans' groups --- no matter how pure their intentions they might be perceived by the local people as having a hidden agenda, which would do FVNH no good. On the other hand I don't have any reservations about a close working relationship with the Catholic Church. With their long presence in Viet Nam they shouldn't have image problems as a 'non-indigenous religious group' (I don't believe there are any non-Vietnamese clergy or staff, but I could be mistaken). While I think FVNH support of Church-operated schools and orphanages is appropriate, I also believe we should try to extend ourselves eventually to other constituencies, and establish contacts with the People's Committee, Women's Union, perhaps even local Buddhist groups --- the UNDP representatives in Kontum might have some helpful advice about this.

Projects. Again, we can't be all things to all people but I think that even small-scale projects should be seriously considered. Handicrafts exports might be a possibility. The Mennonites already have a distribution center in Hanoi. I believe they are part of an international network too ('A Thousand Villages') but I need to explore this further. Immunizations and clean water --- certainly these are worthy projects. What can FVNH do to help? Distributing school supplies (or providing funds to offset increased school fees, which amounts to the same thing) does not seem lightweight or naive if it helps to keep kids in school who otherwise would have to drop out for financial reasons. Montagnards and non-Montagnards alike need to be literate and fluent in Vietnamese to be successful citizens, and I would think (especially in rural villages) there will be more dropouts as school fees increase.

Strategic guidelines. Openness, long-range vision, credibility are certainly basic requirements. I would hope we already have a measure of credibility with the Montagnard community and with the Church. Perhaps we need to work on establishing it with the local (and national) government, as well as with populations which have come to the Kontum area after the war years.

I don't think the fact that FVNH has not reached a formal consensus on values and goals should prevent us from undertaking or supporting small projects. Far as I'm concerned, Hilary's summation in the initial newsletter should be enough to get us rolling philosophically:

'Ultimately our hope is to assist in improving the health, happiness and standard of living of the poor of the Central Highlands (logistically, politically, and indeed humanely we saw no way to limit our efforts to the Montagnards although they remain our first concern). We would like to support competent medical care and/or training in the area, support any existing organizations helping the Kontum population in particular, and the Highland area in general, get medical and other supplies where they're needed, and to address the basic needs as simply and directly as possible.'

We could go on theorizing about long-range objectives indefinitely without reaching perfect agreement among ourselves, but I think that after two years of discussion and visiting and ad hoc assistance by individuals it is time that we could 'get our foot in the door', just as you suggest. If not school materials or scholarship aid, how about a purchase of medicine or hospital supplies, to be distributed after consultation with local Church and government authorities? Or funding a couple of wells, for both Montagnard and non-Montagnard villages? I agree in avoiding an 'emergency mind-set'; on the other hand if we have received donations that were given for allocation in Kontum (as opposed to monies that have been collected for our own operating costs) then I think we have an obligation to put this money to use rather than holding it till we've worked out a satisfactory mission statement.

As you may already know, I anticipate making a trip to Viet Nam to visit in-laws during the month of November and would certainly plan to spend some time in Kontum --- so it would be helpful to have a set of 'marching orders', or at least some sense of the Steering Committee's thinking on certain issues:

- disburse some of FVNH's assets now, or hold back until we are in full agreement about our objectives?
- what projects to support (see above suggestions)? If there's no consensus on this we can at least try to set up a mechanism to convey funds at a later date --- e.g. via the Church or a commercial service such as VINAFAX.
- do others on the Steering Committee have reservations about an alliance with the Church?

Any comments, suggestions, warnings, constructive criticism will be appreciated. If we are in disarray among ourselves about long-range goals, strategy, tactics, then I think it might be well to set up a meeting of the Steering Committee (and all others who might wish to participate) to get things sorted out.

Let's hear from you!

Sincerely,  
Bill P.

Copies to: Pat  
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