



Saigon Adventist Hospital, 1955.

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Saigon Adventist Hospital (1955–1975)

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Saigon Adventist Hospital was a small hospital established in Saigon, Vietnam, 1955. It carried the name Binh-Vien Co-doc (Saigon Adventist Hospital) and provided medical care until late 1975, when the Adventist work in Vietnam ended abruptly in late 1975. The Saigon Adventist Hospital, the Vietnam Adventist Publishing House, and all the 16 Adventist schools were taken by the government.

Overview of Vietnam

The country of Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia and is often considered part of Indochina. It neighbors China, Cambodia, and Laos. Vietnam has been under the Chinese empire for about ten centuries, and the latter has influenced its culture and dominated its political enterprise. In 1883, the French took over Vietnam, and the country became a colony of the French Empire. Vietnam stayed under French rule until the revolt of the Indochina countries, which led to a war against France. France governed Indochina until World War II in 1945. The war against the French Empire “resulted in the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu on May 1, 1954.”¹ The Geneva Council, however, divided Vietnam into two autonomous regions: “The communist North and the national South.”²

The two opposing autonomous regions could not get along, and as a result, they engaged in a war against each other, which reached its pinnacle in 1965. Due to the war’s aggressiveness, the intervention of foreign countries became necessary. Countries such as Australia, Korea, and the United States came to the country. However, their presence did not quench the strife, as in April 1975, the communist North defeated South Vietnam.³ It is in this political crisis that Adventist pioneers worked.

Vietnam is a multicultural country. It holds people from different ethnic backgrounds, such as “Vietnamese, Chinese, Montagnards, and Khmer.”⁴ The large ethnic groups in Vietnam include: “Tay, Thai, Muon, Hoa, Khmer, and Nung.”⁵ According to the statistics, Vietnam holds “54 ethnic groups.”⁶ A considerable portion of the population is considered Buddhist, with others identifying as followers of Daoism, Confucianism, and Islam. Concerning Christianity, “the Roman Catholics with some three million adherents in 1975, form[ed] the largest Christian group.”⁷

Birth and Development of the Saigon Adventist Hospital

The Adventist work had grown despite the difficulties that the war brought.⁸ Following the 1975 civil war, the rehabilitation of Church properties began.⁹ The societies were torn apart, and families were fragmented. Thus, the Church needed to care for people and rebuild their hope. To respond to the well-being of the population spiritually, physically, and emotionally, the Seventh-day Adventist Church established its first Adventist hospital in 1955, and it was named “Saigon Adventist Hospital.”¹⁰ Initially, “a clinic was conducted in a house. When the house was finally purchased the small group of medical workers converted it into a small hospital.”¹¹ The hospital had a capacity of 38 beds at its initial stage. As the days passed, the hospital grew significantly, and the desire to expand it emerged.¹² In 1956, a large compound was purchased for the hospital on the outskirts of Saigon city. The project to build and expand the work of the hospital on the purchased plot was initiated and implemented.

During its initial stages, the hospital faced challenges, and it seemed the devil was at work to extinguish the impact that the latter had on the community. On October 5, presumably in 1965, “the Vietnam mission office” and “the Saigon Adventist Hospital providentially escaped destruction ... when a gasoline truck burned in the

street between the two buildings.”¹³ The fire disrupted the wedding reception, which was held in the Mission office yard, where gasoline had spread, causing flames to blaze around the mission office. Fortunately, neither the workers, attendees of the ceremony, the Mission office, nor the hospital was burned.¹⁴ God had protected His own. Another challenge was the war. The above-mentioned was caused by the small hospital overflowing, which meant it no longer had the capacity to accommodate patients who were coming to seek treatment.¹⁵ The need for a new larger facility was inescapable.

In March 1972, construction of the new hospital began, but unfortunately, it was never completed. Instead, “in 1973 the Saigon Adventist Hospital was transferred to a 325-bed army leased by the U.S. government.”¹⁶ The contract was a one-year renewable lease.¹⁷ The use of this new hospital would end as soon as the one under construction was finished, and the hospital would then relocate to it. The positive impact of this hospital is evident in the number of patients it accommodated. Roth argues that “on the first day after the takeover [the transfer of the hospital to the American army base] there were more than 300 outpatients who showed up at the new facility [and] five days after the takeover ... they had 65 inpatients.”¹⁸ The official handover of the Saigon Army Hospital to the Saigon Adventist Hospital was organized by “Colonel William McIlroy of Tacoma, Washington ... [who] handed over the keys to Vernon Small of Denver, Colorado, [who was acting as an] administrator of the Adventist Hospital.”¹⁹ As Roth points out, the subdivision of the hospital was organized as follows:

One large ward of the new hospital has been provided for Vietnamese medical-surgical cases. A section has been provided for obstetrical patients. As the need arises other wards will be opened for Vietnamese patients, according to Mr. Small. In accordance with the contract, 40 beds are being reserved for Americans and other Europeans in Vietnam.²⁰

God's Work Through the Hospital

God, through the Saigon Adventist Hospital, brought hope to the desperate patients. The hospital organized and conducted heart surgeries to improve the welfare of the patients.²¹ For instance, [Ellsworth Wareham](#) and his heart surgery team, “of the school of medicine at Loma Linda University, California, performed sixty-three surgeries ... during their first visit in the 70s. They returned the following year and performed forty operations.”²² Such services enhanced the work of the hospital and propagated the message that the Adventist Church carried. These operations were performed at no cost to the patients.²³ These benevolent acts contributed to the building of people's hope and lives.

In addition, the hospital had a school of nursing that trained nurses from 12 different nationalities. Students of Nursing could do their internship in the hospital and gain training for their future careers.²⁴ Huu Le asserts that these nurses and “other medical workers played their role well as the ‘right arm of the message.’”²⁵ The medical staff were dedicated men and women to caring for the Vietnamese people and those living in Saigon in

particular. One report pointed out: “A highly dedicated staff constantly works overtime to help thousands of Vietnamese who need medical help. Besides treating over 50, 000 outpatients each year at the hospital, the staff devotes much time to various welfare projects.”²⁶

The work of the nurses and medical workers did not focus solely on the city of Saigon; it also reached remote areas. These dedicated workers began visiting villages and remote offshore islands in 1975 to provide dental treatment to the people. These dedicated workers not only attended to the physical needs of the patients but also fostered the health evangelism programs of the hospital. For instance, the hospital devised plans that included “health education and evangelism [which were to be delivered] in the form of taped sermons and talks in the waiting room and showcorder programs.”²⁷ These forms of witnessing the gospel yield impacts in connecting the physical well-being to spiritual formation and growth. In this hospital, people who visited it met God, knew who He is, and His love for them.

Fall of Saigon and the End of the Saigon Adventist Hospital

The collapse of South Vietnam temporarily halted the work of the Seventh-day Adventist. The open evangelism and other church-related work stopped officially functioning as North Vietnam imposed, being communist, banned religious (Christian) activities. In April 1975, with the capture of Saigon, the mission headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist church stopped, as well as the Saigon Adventist Hospital.²⁸ The Seventh-day Adventist church's properties were taken by the newly established government after 1975. The old Saigon Adventist Hospital was occupied by the “Phú Nhuận Red Cross Association (Hội Chữ Thập Đỏ Quận Phú Nhuận).”²⁹

Legacy of the Saigon Adventist Hospital

The Saigon Adventist Hospital contributed significantly to Vietnamese society in general and to the city of Saigon in particular. It provided care to patients, regardless of their religious affiliations or ethnic backgrounds. Its presence was felt as it restored lives. The hospital's significant contribution lies in the heart surgeries it operated and caring for the casualties of the 1975 war.³⁰ For instance, recently, a patient who had undergone heart surgery reunited with the Loma Linda University Heart Surgery Team after 35 years.³¹ Even amid political instability and war around Saigon, the medical personnel still conducted surgeries.³² Besides treating the patients, the hospital became a place of refuge for people fleeing the war.³³ The hospital stood as a beacon of light and hope amid chaos, but unfortunately, it was never reopened.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially recognized again by the Vietnamese government as a legal denomination in 2008, after several decades.³⁴ As of June 30, 2025, the Vietnam mission has 21 churches with a membership of 15, 956 in a population of 101,150,000. While it remains a challenging territory, there is hope that the church in the country will thrive again, and a new hospital will be established.

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NOTES

1. Huu Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia: Adventism's Story in the Far Eastern Division 1888-1988*, Ed., Gil G. Fernandez (Cavite, Silang: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, 1990), 262.

2. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 262.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. "Ethnic Groups in Vietnam," para. 10. . Accessed on April 28, 2026.
6. Ibid., para. 9
7. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 262. See also Peter C. Phan, "Christianity in Vietnam Today (1975-2013)," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 14 (2014): 3-21. .
8. There had been different phases of the war which affected the advancement of the mission in Vietnam, among which are the World War II (1941-1947) and the war of liberation for Vietnam (1947-1954). This war of liberation of the country turned into a civil war in 1954-1975 which exacerbated the situation. Most of the Church properties were destroyed (school buildings and churches). See Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 264-65.
9. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 265.
10. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 265. Saigoneer argues that the inauguration the hospital took place on May 22, 1955. The hospital was housed in a "former villa of a departing French planter at 2 Rue Lacaut/Đường Chi Lăng (modern Hoàng Văn Thụ), right next to its Phú Nhuận headquarters," and this was a result of contribution of "\$2, 500 from the Bangkok Adventist Hospital and donations from supporters in the United States and Vietnam." See Saigoneer, "Old Saigon Building of the Week: Former Saigon Adventist Hospital," November 02, 2015. .
11. Jess Holm, "'Tet' Offensive Emphasizes Medical Needs in War-Torn South Vietnam," *Outlook* (September 1969): 3.
12. "This Is Vietnam," *Messenger Magazine* 20 (1970): 3. . The project had begun and "A 70-144 foot steel building was erected and ... [was to] be shared by the hospital and school, housing a chapel and two classrooms for the school; a laundry room and other facilities for the hospital" (p. 5).
13. Ralph Neall, "God's Protection from Fire," *The Messenger* 15(September-October 1965): 3, 6.
14. Ibid., 6.
15. Holm, "'Tet' Offensive Emphasizes Medical Needs," 3.
16. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 265.
17. S. A. Roth, "Saigon Hospital Moves," *Outlook* (March 1973): 5.

18. Roth, "Saigon Hospital Moves," 5. The equipment of the new facility left by the Americans worth more than one million U.S. dollars for the use of the Saigon Adventist Hospital. See Roth, "Seventh-day Adventists Take Over Saigon Army Hospital," *The Messenger* 23 (March-April 1973): 12.
19. Roth, "Saigon Hospital Moves," 5.
20. Ibid., 4-5.
21. "Hear Team Perf[ormed Surgeries]," *The Messenger* 24 (July-August, 1974): 8. .
22. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 265. See also Huu Lee "History of the Seventh-day Adventist [in] Vietnam," *The Messenger* (November-December 1988): 11..
23. "Hear Team Per[ormed Surgeries]," 8.
24. The report says that "nearly fifty student nurses [were] in preparation for work as full time humanitarians at the Saigon Adventist hospital ("This Is Vietnam," 2).
25. Le, "Indo-China," *Light Dawns Over Asia*, 265.
26. "Adventists Expands Efforts to Aid Vietnamese," *Watchman Magazine*, November 15, 1971, 7.
27. Ross Sinclair, "Coordinated Medical Evangelism in South Vietnam," *The Messenger* 24 (September-November 1974): 7.
28. Teresa Costello, "Adventist Young People Receive Government Praise in Vietnam," *ARH* (September 2015). .
29. Costello, "Adventist Young People Receive Government Praise in Vietnam," para. 12.
30. Bruce Branson, "Saigon Journal: The Last 15 Days," *Spectrum* 7 (1975): 35. .
31. James Ponder, "Heart patient reunites with LLU Overseas Heart Surgery Team members 35 years after they saved her life in Saigon," *Loma Linda University: Today* 22 (December 2009): 1. .
32. Branson, "Saigon Journal: The Last 15 Days," 36.
33. Jess Holm, "Emphasizes Medical Needs," *Southern Tidings*, September 1968, 4.
34. Costello, "Adventist Young People Receive Government Praise in Vietnam," *ARH* (September 2015). .

