

Migrant Missionary Discipleship: Opportunities and Challenges for Catholic Vietnamese Migrants in Asia (Pre-Print)

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Abstract

Discussions on migration within the church's evangelizing mission often focus on mission "to" or "among" migrants, positioning them primarily as recipients of pastoral care. While acknowledging the significance of this perspective, this paper highlights an equally vital dimension—mission "by" migrants, or migrant missionary discipleship. It examines the role of Vietnamese migrants in Asia as missionary disciples within the Catholic church. Significant numbers of Vietnamese migrants, both documented and undocumented, reside in countries such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Thailand, many coming from devout Catholic backgrounds. While pastoral care for these migrants has been established to various degrees, migration itself has historically contributed to the church's growth and continues to do so. Given the church's relatively small presence in Asia and its ongoing challenges—including secularization and demographic shifts—this study explores the potential of Vietnamese migrants to contribute to the church's evangelizing mission. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the relationship between missionary discipleship and migration, (2) the identity of Vietnamese migrants as missionary disciples in Asia, (3) the opportunities and challenges they face, and (4) strategies to foster their missionary role. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study draws on Catholic church teachings, academic literature on Vietnamese Catholic migrants, and interviews with Vietnamese migrant pastoral agents. The analysis is further enriched by the author's 18 years of pastoral experience in Vietnamese migrant ministry in Thailand and extensive interactions with Vietnamese migrant workers and pastoral agents across Asia. Through this exploration, the paper offers insights into how Vietnamese migrants and, by extension, other migrant groups can serve as agents of evangelization and catalysts for ecclesial growth in the region.

Introduction

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis presents a vision of a church that is open and responsive to the world—one that "goes forth" in mission imbued with the sense of missionary discipleship (EG, no. 20-24). Evangelization, he insists, is not the responsibility of a select

few but a shared calling of all the baptized (EG, no. 120). Missionary discipleship defines the Christian life as a dynamic interplay of faith, witness, and mission, each inseparably woven into the other. Through the sacrament of baptism, the Christian is fully incorporated into the Body of Christ. This reality bestows upon the Christian the identity of disciple of Christ with the mandate to proclaim the Good News in the world. The Christian life is nourished and transformed by personal encounters with the love of God in Christ, and this transformation naturally overflows into mission. Every Christian, then, is a missionary—not by appointment, but by the very nature of their faith. To be a disciple is to be a missionary; the two are inseparable.

Jehu Hanciles in his book *Christianities in Migration: A Global Perspective*, asserts, “Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.”¹ According to Hanciles, “Christianity is a migratory religion, and migration movements have been a functional element in its expansion.”² Based on his research exploring crucial relationship between migration and mission in the historical development of Christianity, Hanciles argues that there is an “inextricable connection between migration and mission in the Christian experience.”³

From the journeys of the Apostles and missionaries in the early days to the mass migrations caused by political upheavals and the rise of colonialism, the history of Christianity is closely linked to the movement of people from one nation to another, from one continent to another, and from one culture to another. The history of migration in the church can be divided into a series of waves beginning with the spread of Christianity from a small sect of Judaism into a global religion, primarily due to Jewish migrations to the most recent wave of international migration due to a whole host of reasons including political violence, religious persecution, economic hardships, and climate change.^{4,5} If every Christian migrant is a potential evangelizer, then migration can offer tremendous opportunities and prospects for the church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel in the world. When Christians migrate to a new land, whether domestically or internationally, they do not only carry with them the aspiration for a better life, but also their culture and religion.⁶

Pope Francis’ paradigmatic approach of “missionary discipleship” applies thoroughly to the Christian migrant because the historical development of the church has demonstrated clearly the tremendous role of migrants in spreading the faith. In the midst of displacement, adaptation, and cultural encounters, Christian migrants embody the call to evangelization by witnessing to the Gospel through their daily lives, interactions, and perseverance. According to Pope Francis, “the arrival of Catholic migrants and refugees can energize the ecclesial life of the communities that welcome them. Often they bring an enthusiasm that can revitalize our communities and enliven our celebrations. Sharing different expressions of faith and devotions offers us a privileged opportunity for experiencing more fully the catholicity of the People of God.”⁷

¹ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 6, 296.

² Jehu J. Hanciles, “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church,” *Missiology* 27, no. 4 (Oct 2003): 149.

³ Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 1.

⁴ Peter C. Phan, “Christianity as an Institutional Migrant: Historical, Theological, and Ethical Perspectives,” in *Christianities in Migration: A Global Perspective*, ed. Elaine Padila and Peter C. Phan (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2016), 9-36.

⁵ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 16-25

⁶ VănThanh Nguyễn, “Christian Witness and Proclamation through Migration,” *Religion and Social Communication* 22, no. 2 (2024): 397.

⁷ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>.

Reflecting on Pope Francis' missiological and ecclesiological vision of missionary discipleship in the context of migration, in this paper, I will examine the notion of "migrant missionary discipleship." In particular, I will focus on the context of Vietnamese migrants in Asia with special attention to the countries of Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Thailand. Here, we will delve into the opportunities as well as challenges to migrant missionary discipleship for Vietnamese migrants in these countries. Examining closely, we will find that despite the tremendous potential of Vietnamese migrants to live out their migrant missionary discipleship, numerous challenges must also be overcome in order for Pope Francis' vision of a church that "goes forth" to become a reality.

Catholic Vietnamese Migrants in Asia

Vietnamese Catholics began migrating outside of their homeland since as early as the beginning of the 18th century, fleeing to Siam (now Thailand) in order to escape religious persecution in Vietnam.⁸ Over the next three centuries, there were successive waves of migration by Vietnamese Catholics to neighboring countries as well as to North America, Europe, and Australia due to religious persecution and political strife. The largest wave was seen in the years following the fall of Saigon to communism in 1975, which led to hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese escaping the country by land and by sea. In the new millennium, a different migration trend has emerged, including Vietnamese women marrying foreign husbands (especially in Taiwan and South Korea), international students, and migrant workers—both documented and undocumented. Today, economic factors are dominant, as many Vietnamese seek better job opportunities and higher living standards abroad.⁹ Religion plays a less prominent role in migration decisions in the contemporary context.

While Western countries do receive Vietnamese migrants that belong to this demographics, the most popular and accessible destination for this group of migrants are Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. Vietnamese nationals constitute the largest group of foreign workers in Japan, with approximately 520,000 as of October 2023. This number has grown significantly in recent years, driven by Japan's need for labor in various sectors. Along with students, the Vietnamese numbers nearly 600,000.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Taiwan government reports that in 2023, there were 110,000 Vietnamese spouses of Taiwan natives, 100,000 children of such spouses, 250,000 Vietnamese on foreign worker visas, and more than 20,000 Vietnamese students.¹¹ Vietnamese workers represent 35 percent of the 700,000 foreign laborers in the country.¹²

Beside Japan and Taiwan, South Korea has also become a popular destination for Vietnamese nationals, resulting in a substantial community comprising migrant workers, students, and spouses.

⁸ Anthony Le Duc, "Di dân, di dân Việt Nam trên toàn cầu và trong Giáo hội," in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sự Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng (Vietnamese Migrants and Mission)*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 10.

⁹ Le Duc, "Di dân, di dân Việt Nam trên toàn cầu và trong Giáo hội," 16.

¹⁰ Islamuddin Sajid, "Foreign Workers in Japan Hit Record High," January 31, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/foreign-workers-in-japan-hit-record-high/3467838>.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Growing Ties of Friendship—Taiwanese–Vietnamese Relations over the Years," November 30, 2023, <https://nspp.mofa.gov.tw/nspp/news.php?post=244875&unit=410&unitname=&postname=Growing-Ties-of-Friendship%E2%80%9494Taiwanese%E2%80%9393Vietnamese-Relations-over-the-Years>.

¹² Yumei Lin, "Southeast Asian Migrant Workers in Taiwan: Human Rights and Soft Power," CSIS, September 28, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/southeast-asian-migrant-workers-taiwan-human-rights-and-soft-power#:~:text=There%20are%20currently%20around%20700%2C000,960%2C000%20foreign%20residents%20in%20Taiwan.&text=Most%20of%20these%20laborers%20are,Philippines%2C%20Vietnam%2C%20and%20Thailand>

Presently Korea hosts nearly 300,000 Vietnamese,¹³ making this community the largest expatriate population after the Chinese.¹⁴

In Southeast Asia, Thailand is a popular destination for Vietnamese migrant workers because of favorable conditions such as convenience of travel back and forth between the two countries, and easy accessibility as citizens of ASEAN.¹⁵ Almost all Vietnamese migrant workers enter Thailand as tourists, after which they proceed to find employment. While there are no official estimates due to the undocumented nature of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, it is surmised that the number fluctuates between 30,000 and 50,000 depending on the time of year and the economic situation in the Kingdom. Beside the four Asian countries mentioned above, Vietnamese migrants are also present in other countries including China, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Macao, and Singapore, albeit in much lower numbers. Unfortunately, there are no credible or updated statistics that could be found for these countries.

As previously noted, the primary motivation for Vietnamese migration—particularly to destinations in Asia—is driven more by economic factors than religious ones. However, faith remains an integral part of migrant identity, as people carry their religious beliefs with them wherever they go. According to Vietnamese government statistics, approximately six million Vietnamese currently live and work across more than 130 countries and territories.¹⁶ This includes the *Viet Kieu*—Vietnamese migrants who left the country before or after 1975 and have permanently settled in their new homelands. The largest Vietnamese diaspora is in the United States, home to 2.1 million Vietnamese. Notably, 700,000 are Catholic,¹⁷ which represents a significantly higher proportion than in Vietnam, where Catholics constitute about 8 percent of the total population. This discrepancy is largely due to the exodus of Catholics following the communist takeover. A similar pattern is observed in Australia, where Catholics make up roughly 20 percent of the nearly 300,000-strong Vietnamese community.¹⁸

Estimates suggest that the global Vietnamese Catholic diaspora numbers over one million. This figure is based on the number of Vietnamese Catholics in the US (700,000 individuals) added to the 10 percent of the remaining four million overseas Vietnamese (i.e., 400,000 individuals). In Asia, the combined number of migrant workers, students, spouses, and their children in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Thailand totals nearly 1.5 million. Assuming a similar Catholic representation of 10 percent within this Asian migrant population, approximately 150,000 Catholic Vietnamese migrants reside in these four countries. Following the view that migrants can be considered potential missionaries, or “missionary disciples” as termed by Pope Francis, these 150,000 individuals represent a substantial cohort of potential evangelizers within their respective host countries.

¹³ Korea Info, “Số Người Việt Nam Cư Trú Tại Hàn Quốc Khoảng 271.712 Người,” October 21, 2024, <https://www.korea.info.vn/2024/10/so-nguoi-viet-nam-cu-tru-tai-han-quoc.html>.

¹⁴ Ivan V. Small, “Assimilating Southeast Asian Migrants into South Korea: Expanding the Meaning of Being ‘Korean,’” *Fulcrum*, February 5, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/assimilating-southeast-asian-migrants-into-south-korea-expanding-the-meaning-of-being-korean/>.

¹⁵ Anthony Le Duc, “The Role of Social Media in Community Building for Illegal Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand,” *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016): 4–21.

¹⁶ Duy Linh, “Việt Nam đang có khoảng 600.000 nhân lực chất lượng cao ở nước ngoài,” *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 14/12/2023, <https://tuoitre.vn/viet-nam-dang-co-khoang-600-000-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-o-nuoc-ngoai-20231214182037416.htm>

¹⁷ Susan Klemond, “From Surviving to Thriving: Once Refugees, Vietnamese Catholics Make Up Vibrant Part of US Church Today,” NCR, August 25, 2022, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/from-surviving-to-thriving-once-refugees-vietnamese-catholics-make-up-vibrant-part-of-us-church-today>.

¹⁸ This number only counts Vietnamese-born individuals. Department of Home Affairs, “Country Profile – Vietnam,” <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/profiles/vietnam#>

Opportunities for Migrant Missionary Discipleship

In this section, we discuss why the number of 150,000 Catholic Vietnamese migrants in the four countries of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand are significant within Pope Francis' vision of missionary discipleship.

State of the church within host countries

In Japan, Catholics comprise a small minority, estimated at approximately 431,100 individuals, representing roughly 0.34 percent of the population.¹⁹ Taiwan's Catholic population, as of 2022, is 226,589, amounting to 0.7 percent of the total population.²⁰ In Thailand, Catholics represent a small minority, with an estimated 388,000 members, constituting approximately 0.58 percent of the population.²¹ Compared to the other three countries, South Korea boasts a much larger Catholic community, estimated at around 5.9 million adherents, or approximately 11.3 percent of the total population.²² However, by all standards, it is still a relatively small church.

In addition to the small size, the churches in these countries are also dealing with the aging population within the church. The Catholic church in Japan is experiencing a noticeable aging of its congregations, mirroring the country's overall demographic trends. This aging is coupled with a declining birthrate, which further exacerbates the issue. As older members pass away and fewer young people join the church, the sustainability of local parishes and communities becomes a concern.²³

The church in Taiwan faces a similar problem as Japan. Pham Trong Quang, SVD reported that at Cathedral Parish of the Diocese of Chiayi (嘉義教區), where he used to serve, of the over 2,000 registered parishioners, only around 200 attend Sunday Mass. Pham commented, "A very common issue in Catholic churches in Taiwan today is that the majority of attendees are elderly, while there is a significant absence of young people."²⁴ This reflects the low birthrate in Taiwan. Data from the Department of Household Registration of Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior shows a consistent decline in the island nation's total fertility rate for women aged 15-49, falling from 1.06 percent in 2018 to 0.865 percent in 2023.²⁵

While the Catholic church in South Korea has seen growth in recent decades, it is not immune to the aging trend. As the population ages, the church must find ways to engage younger generations and ensure their continued participation. This is crucial for maintaining the church's vitality and its role in Korean society. Similar issues concerning aging within the church can be seen in South Korea, which reflects the overall trend in society. A CNA article in 2020 reported that about one in five South

¹⁹ *Statistics of the Catholic Church in Japan*. "Catholics in Japan", Tokyo: Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, <https://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/statistics2021.pdf>, 1.

²⁰ Pham Trong Quang, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sứ Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng (Vietnamese Migrants and Mission)*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 231.

²¹ Asaree Thaitrakulpanich, "Here's Pope Francis' Schedule for His Thailand Visit," *Khaosod English*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2019/10/02/heres-pope-francis-schedule-for-his-thailand-visit/>.

²² ZENIT, "South Korea: statistics show vitality of Catholicism, 11.3% of the population," May 7, 2024, <https://zenit.org/2024/05/07/south-korea-statistics-show-vitality-of-catholicism-11-3-of-the-population/>.

²³ Andrés Henríquez, "Archbishop of Tokyo: An Aging Society like Japan's Will Not Survive," *Catholic News Agency*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260647/archbishop-of-tokyo-an-aging-society-like-japans-will-not-be-able-to-survive>.

²⁴ Pham, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," 241.

²⁵ Pan Tzu-yu and Wu Kuan-hsien, "Taiwan's Declining Birth Rate Difficult to Reverse: Official," *Focus Taiwan*, October 24, 2024, <https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202410240013>.

Korean Catholics are over the age of 65, and only 8.5 percent of Catholics are age 19 or under.²⁶ South Korea's 2023 fertility rate of 0.72 births per person is the lowest on record, well below Japan's 1.2 and the 2.1 replacement rates.²⁷ The situation in Thailand is equally worrisome. According to data from Chulalongkorn University's Sasin School of Management, Thailand's birth rate has experienced a significant decline of 81 percent over the past 74 years, placing it third globally in this metric. Only South Korea and China have witnessed steeper declines, at 88 percent and 83 percent, respectively, during the same period.²⁸

In addition to the problem of aging, the church in the host countries is experiencing various degrees of secularization.^{29,30} In their book *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*, Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun argue that while South Korea experienced a period of Christian growth intertwined with its rapid modernization and Westernization from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the country is now demonstrably experiencing secularization. Initially, this growth, particularly from 1982 to 2005, where religiously unaffiliated numbers decreased while Catholic and Protestant shares increased, was interpreted by some as contradicting secularization theory. The adoption of Christianity was, for some, linked to aspirations for Western prosperity. However, recent trends indicate a sharp decline in religiosity, especially among younger generations who find religious institutions ill-equipped to address contemporary issues. Among those born after 1990, only 17.6 percent attend religious services at least once a month. This decline is further evidenced by the stagnation of megachurches and diminishing trust in religious organizations following scandals. South Korea stands out globally with a high percentage of convinced atheists (54.9 percent in 2018) and those who do not believe in God (59.4 percent in 2018).³¹ Religious affiliation is not a central aspect of identity for many South Koreans, and belief in traditional religious concepts, such as life after death, has significantly decreased—from 52.2 percent in 1982 to 33.7 percent in 2018.

The initial rise of Christianity appears linked to the desire for a Westernized identity during modernization, and with widespread modernization achieved, Christianity is now in decline.³² The assertions made by the authors have also been corroborated by the research of Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, noting that “since the 2000s, those with no religious affiliation tend to be younger, male, and urban residents typically embracing individualistic lifestyles.”³³ This reality of secularization has been cited as a reason for observed declines in religious vocation in Korea in recent years.³⁴

²⁶ CAN, “Church in South Korea Growing, Slowly.” Catholic News Agency, April 27, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44334/church-in-south-korea-growing-slowly>.

²⁷ Christopher Hamill-Stewart, “South Korea’s Fertility Rate Should Be a Warning to the World,” *Salzburg Global*, September 30, 2024, <https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/south-koreas-fertility-rate-should-be-a-warning-to-the-world#:~:text=South%20Korea's%20fertility%20rate%20hit,fertility%20replacement%20rate%20of%20>.

²⁸ Bangkok Post, “Don’t Ignore Birth Rate Dip,” editorial, December 23, 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2925101/dont-ignore-birth-rate-dip>.

²⁹ UCA News, “Dealing with Secularization and Its Consequences in Japan,” May 29, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/dealing-with-secularization-and-its-consequences-in-japan/101455>.

³⁰ Pham, “Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan,” 241.

³¹ It must be noted that in the Asian spiritual milieu, atheism, or not believing in a monotheistic God does not necessary mean that there is lack of spirituality and religiosity. Asians who practice Daoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Buddhism often declare that they do not follow a religion or believe in God.

³² Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

³³ Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, “The paradox of change: Religion and fertility decline in South Korea,” *Demographic Research* 44, Article 23 (2021): 541.

³⁴ UCA News, “Korean Religious Blame Secularization for Vocation Decline,” January 26, 2024, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/korean-religious-blame-secularization-for-vocation-decline/103953>.

While Kasselstrand et al. do not discuss the case of Japan extensively, they assert that “secularization occurs when people simply stop being religious of their own volition. And that is exactly the kind of secularization we now see taking place the world over, from Canada and Uruguay to Germany and Japan.”³⁵ It must be noted that the phenomenon of secularization in the case of Japan is a highly contested issue with scholars such as José Casanova arguing against the standard secularization theory, which predicts a decline in religion in modern societies. While acknowledging that Japan is secular in terms of the separation of church and state, and its education system, Casanova asserts that Japanese society remains receptive to various religions. This openness to spirituality, for Casanova, challenges the Enlightenment-era assumption that modernization inevitably leads to the demise of religion.³⁶ Rodney Stark, citing the popularity of Shinto rituals in modern day Japan, has also denied that the country is undergoing secularization.³⁷

Although going deep into secularization theories in particular contexts is beyond the scope of this paper, what cannot be denied is that in Japan, church attendance is observably seen to be among the older people, and many are dying. Without young people entering the church, the number of native Japanese in the church is steadily decreasing. In reality, the majority of Catholics in Japan today come from the immigrant community.³⁸

The case of Thailand is slightly different from the East Asian countries. Thailand is still overwhelmingly religious with 90 percent of the population adhering to Buddhism,³⁹ oftentimes intermixed with local animistic beliefs in gods, spirits, and ghosts. Muslims and Christians make up the majority of the rest. While it is possible to argue for the greater prominence of secular values in Thai society, it would be incorrect to claim that it is a secular culture. Therefore, the church in Thailand is not so much affected by secularism as by the non-Catholic religious milieu that makes it difficult for Catholics, especially the youth, to remain faithful to their religious traditions. Although no official statistics exist, empirical observations indicate that nowadays a majority of Thai Catholics marry outside of their faith, which makes it difficult to maintain traditional Catholic households. And many of them already come from mixed-faith families themselves. Many young people, once they move away from the home to study or work also tend to drift away from the church. This is the primary reason why all the dioceses in Thailand as well as many religious congregations insist on maintaining minor seminaries accepting students who have completed primary school to ensure that there is a cohort of young people being trained in the Catholic environment on an ongoing basis. Despite the extremely low success rate of minor seminarians eventually becoming priests and religious, many church leaders remark that at least the ones who benefit from seminary life will have a better chance of holding on to their faith than their peers.⁴⁰

As we can see, the already small churches in Asia are experiencing multiple challenges in maintaining the number both in terms of adherents and vocation. Facing this reality, the presence of Catholic immigrants can help to sustain the church in numerous ways.

³⁵ Kasselstrand, et al., *Beyond Doubt*, 113.

³⁶ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 11-12.

³⁷ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 8.

³⁸ UCA News, “The Fading Japanese Church, the Growing Church in Japan,” May 2, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/the-fading-japanese-church-the-growing-church-in-japan/101175>.

³⁹ US Department of State, 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499-THAILAND-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Information presented here comes from the author’s experience working in the Thai Church and conversations with various individuals in the Church.

Favorable characteristics of Vietnamese migrants

In terms of missionary potential, Vietnamese Catholic migrants have a number of favorable characteristics. First, because Vietnamese migrants to the Asian countries are either workers, students, or spouses, they are overwhelmingly young—in their 20s and 30s, sometimes even in their teens.⁴¹ There is a mix of those who have already been married as well as single. Because of their youthfulness, they have a better opportunity to learn the local language and adapt to the local culture if provided the favorable environment. In Thailand, many Vietnamese migrants speak the language very well without having received any formal language training. Their ability to speak the language simply comes from working with Thai people, serving Thai customers in restaurants and pubs, and interacting with Thai people on a daily basis. On the other hand, those migrating to Japan and Korea often have the opportunity to study the language in formal settings at least for a period of time before going to work.⁴² In Japan, individuals on student visa are also allowed to work part-time.

Second, the majority of the migrants come from rural areas of Vietnam, especially in the northern provinces of the country, where religiosity is still high. Vietnamese Catholics traditionally reside in Catholic villages where the parish church is the center of the community. While the office of the Bishops Conference of Vietnam reports that there has not been any formal estimate of the rate of Mass attendance in Vietnam,⁴³ empirical observations indicate that this number is still relatively high, especially in the rural parts of the country. I have observed in my visits to the country that Vietnamese migrants who often skip Mass, even on Sunday, while abroad, resume their church attendance even on weekdays upon returning home either for visits or permanently. Vietnamese parishes, especially in the countryside, is notable for holding its Mass early with church bells ringing as early as 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning.

Third, because of their Catholic training, many Vietnamese Catholics still desire to practice their faith even when they go abroad. In all the countries examined in this paper, there are numerous Vietnamese Catholic migrant groups that meet at least monthly for Vietnamese language Mass. In Thailand, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, there were 20 such groups, with most of them located in the Bangkok Archdiocese and the neighboring diocese of Chanthaburi.⁴⁴ In the other countries, the number of Vietnamese groups is significantly higher due to the greater number of migrants. In Taiwan, there are about 30 communities with larger communities having several hundred members. In South Korea and Taiwan, many communities hold weekly Vietnamese Mass. Usually, these liturgies take place in a parish church at a convenient time for the immigrants and do not conflict with other parish celebrations and activities. In some places, the Vietnamese community holds their activities in facilities independent of the parish church.

Possible missionary contributions by Vietnamese Catholic migrants

When discussing migrants in the context of evangelization, conversations often revolve around familiar issues such as welcoming migrants, providing them with spaces for worship and community in their own language, advocating for their rights, and helping them integrate into the local culture to stabilize their lives. These are essential aspects of the church's mission *among* or *with*

⁴¹ For a more comprehensive discussion on Vietnamese migrants in Asia, see Anthony Le Duc and Nguyen Quoc Thuan, eds. *Di Dân Việt Nam Tại Á Châu (Vietnamese Migrants in Asia)* (Manila: Logos, 2020).

⁴² In reality, many Vietnamese migrants, through agencies, attempt to go to Korea and Japan via the student visa route, with the ultimate aim of “jumping ship” to work once they have managed to make it into the country.

⁴³ The inquiry was made directly to the General Secretary of the Bishops Conference of Vietnam by the author on February 17, 2025.

⁴⁴ Presently, the number of groups range between 15-17.

migrants. This concern is evident in the fact that, as of 2025, there have been 111 annual messages from popes on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees—significantly more than on occasions like World Communications Day (59 years), World Day of Peace (58 years), or World Day of the Sick (33 years). However, in this article, I wish to highlight a different aspect— evangelization *by* migrants—where migrants actively participate in God’s mission. In other words, Christian migrants are not merely the objects of pastoral outreach and evangelization efforts of the church; they are also subjects of mission of God within the church.⁴⁵ They have the potential to become evangelizers both within their own communities and in their new homelands.

I propose that Vietnamese migrants in Asia today can engage in missionary discipleship in three key areas: 1) Embodiment of the core values of mission; 2) Evangelization within Vietnamese migrant community; and 3) Evangelization beyond the community.

Embodiment of the core values of mission

First, like all migrants, Vietnamese migrants can participate in the mission of evangelization by embodying essential values such as hospitality, reconciliation, charity, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. At the heart of God’s mission is the restoration of God’s image in each person through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, so that all may fully become *imago Dei*. The lives and experiences of migrants reflect a deep longing for transformation, renewal, and self-betterment— aspirations shared by all humanity. Pope Francis describes migrants as embodying “the aspiration of humanity to enjoy a unity marked by respect for differences, acceptance, and hospitality, enabling an equitable sharing of the world’s goods while protecting and advancing human dignity.”⁴⁶

The reality of migration challenges divisions and inequalities within the human family. The struggles faced by countless migrants expose the greed, deception, exploitation, and injustices that violate human dignity, which is rooted in being created in God’s image, evident in every person, transcending factors like efficiency, social class, or ethnicity.⁴⁷ Their presence calls members of the host society to overcome prejudice and fear while embracing diversity, caring for the vulnerable, and welcoming individuals on the peripheries.⁴⁸

The presence of Vietnamese migrants also challenges the host societies to go beyond a zero-sum mindset—the idea that when one group gains, another must lose. This perspective instigates division and competition, assuming that resources and opportunities are limited, and that one group’s progress comes at another’s expense. However, the reality of migration and human solidarity calls us to adopt a broader vision where migrants do not diminish a community’s potential or prosperity; rather, there is mutual enrichment through diversity, cultural exchange, and the contributions migrants bring.⁴⁹ Pope Francis points out that “history teaches us that the contribution of migrants and refugees

⁴⁵ Stephen Bevans, “Migration and Mission: Pastoral Challenges, Theological Insights,” in *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology*, ed. Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 168.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html.

⁴⁷ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2014.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20210503_world-migrants-day-2021.html.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20150912_world-migrants-day-2016.html.

has been fundamental to the social and economic growth of our societies. This continues to be true in our own day. Their work, their youth, their enthusiasm and their willingness to sacrifice enrich the communities that receive them.”⁵⁰ This is especially true in the case of Vietnamese migrants who are overwhelmingly young and mobile. By embracing an inclusive approach, we can move away from scarcity-based thinking towards “building together a future of justice and peace, and ensuring that no one is left behind.”⁵¹

Evangelizing within migrant communities

When a Christian migrant arrives in a new land, they bring not only their culture but also their faith. In their new country, they often form migrant communities as a means for social and spiritual support. Many individuals, despite never having actively participated or held leadership roles in their home parishes, become key contributors in migrant groups for various reasons. Many serve on pastoral leadership teams and play essential roles in their communities. In Vietnamese migrant communities across Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and other countries, most pastoral council members working alongside chaplains are young adults in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Despite facing the same demands and challenges as other migrants, they dedicate time to organizing spiritual activities that help sustain their religious life.

Beyond church participation, some migrants initiate charitable and volunteer efforts to support fellow migrants facing difficulties such as accidents, illness, or job loss. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many Vietnamese migrants in Thailand organized fundraising and food distribution for those struggling due to illness and unemployment. As part of the generation that grew up on digital technology, some individuals use social media to mobilize donations for charitable causes. Vo Cong Dung, a migrant from Ha Tinh Diocese, and his Divine Mercy group is especially active on social media as they collect funds for needy cases both in Thailand and in Vietnam. Through their efforts motivated by the spirit of solidarity and charity, Vietnamese migrants become a source of strength and mutual support for one another.

Even migrants who do not actively engage in church activities can contribute to evangelization to other migrants simply by maintaining and living out their faith in their new home. It is often the case that many Catholic migrants were devout churchgoers while still living at home with regular church attendance and a consistent faith life. However, once they leave the structured environment of their family and parish, some, especially young migrants, grow spiritually distant or lukewarm in their faith. Therefore, the presence of fellow migrants who are active in their faith life holds great witnessing value and serves as a constant reminder about the need to maintain their faith life even when living and working abroad.

Evangelizing beyond the community

When migrants arrive in a new land, many observe that the local faithful’s religious life lacks fervor.⁵² In contrast to the vibrant religious life in their homeland, they often find the host country’s environment overly secularized. This reality can inspire some migrants to become enthusiastic evangelizers, eager to share their faith with the people of their new homeland. They not only engage

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>

⁵¹ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2021.

⁵² Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 298–299.

in activities within their migrant communities but also integrate into parishes and participate in the wider local church.⁵³ Migrants in many cases serve on pastoral councils, teach catechism to the youth, sing in liturgical choirs, and collaborate with parish priests in various pastoral activities. This dynamic is particularly evident among Filipino Catholics who rarely establish separate ethnic communities. Instead, they actively participate in international congregations and contribute their talents to local parishes. For example, at the Redemptorist Parish in Bangkok, there are five English Masses every Sunday attended by both Thai and foreigners. The 11:00 AM Mass is the most attended, not only because of its convenient timing, particularly for tourists in Thailand, but also because of the vibrant choir composed of Filipino singers and musicians—some of them working in major hotels and restaurants in the city.

In the context of Vietnamese migrants in Asia, there are a number of areas where the local church can benefit from their presence and integration. First is their witness to local congregations that are aging and experiencing decreasing membership. For example, in Bangkok, at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, young Vietnamese migrants constitute nearly half of the Sunday Mass participants during weeks that they do not have their own language Mass. Similarly, at Our Lady of Fatima church, the Sunday 5PM Mass witnesses a significant presence of young Vietnamese migrants in the pews. Many Thai Catholics have commented that Vietnamese young people generally dress well when going to church—a practice consistent with their formation in Vietnam where strict dress codes are often enforced in rural parishes.

A second possible contribution to the local churches in Asia is vocation. Countries like the United States and Australia have greatly benefited from vocations within the Vietnamese migrant community. For example, Vietnamese currently make up 12 percent of seminarians in the United States.⁵⁴ This is remarkable considering Vietnamese American Catholics constitute less than one percent to the American church. In the countries of Asia, there are hundreds of Vietnamese priests and religious serving in the church. For example, in Taiwan, as of the end of 2022, there were 82 priests, 146 nuns, and 7 seminarians in the country.⁵⁵ In Japan, there are also several hundred Vietnamese priests and religious engaged in various ministries. However, the Vietnamese priests and religious in Asia have mostly been assigned to these countries by their religious superiors or have been recruited by local dioceses and religious congregations directly from Vietnam. Efforts have generally not been made to recruit vocation from within the migrant community in these countries. In Thailand, there have been three cases where this took place, which is seen as somewhat extraordinary. Admittedly, economic aspirations are the primary driver for the migration of Vietnamese abroad; however, it is unfortunate that local churches and congregations have not paid more attention to the potential of vocation within this community, which is overwhelmingly young and oftentimes single.

Beyond their potential for religious vocations, Vietnamese migrants can serve as valuable advocates for peace and justice initiatives within the church. Their experiences, shaped by the limitations on freedom, including religious freedom,⁵⁶ in their country of origin, as well as direct encounters with injustice, environmental degradation, and discrimination in both their homeland and host countries, provide unique perspectives. For instance, many migrants originate from the central Vietnamese provinces of Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Nghe An, regions that suffered a significant environmental crisis in 2016 due to the Formosa Steel Corporation's discharge of toxic

⁵³ Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 298, 324–349.

⁵⁴ USCCB, “Vietnamese Vocations,” <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/vocation-directors/vietnamese-vocations#:~:text=Vietnamese%20men%20currently%20make%20up,Vietnamese%20priests%20in%20the%20US.>

⁵⁵ Pham Trong Quang, “Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan,” 240.

⁵⁶ US Department of State, “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Vietnam,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/vietnam/>

chemicals, resulting in widespread marine mortality and ecological damage.⁵⁷ These lived experiences enable migrants to challenge prevailing narratives and offer powerful insights that enhance public awareness of broader societal issues. In this way, they can contribute to finding new solutions and even mobilizing their communities to support peace and justice efforts. While language barriers and discrimination may pose challenges, with the support of the local church and integration efforts, migrants can become powerful agents of social reform.

Finally, the presence of Vietnamese migrants has the potential to foster interreligious dialogue. The church since Vatican II has affirmed that interfaith dialogue is an indispensable means of carrying out evangelization in today's world.⁵⁸ Vietnamese migrants often live and work in multicultural and multi-religious settings when they move to a new country. Even if they previously lived in a predominantly Catholic area in their homeland, migration often requires them to interact and work with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. In addition, their supervisors in these countries are most likely non-Catholic. As they settle into diverse living and working contexts and encounter individuals of various beliefs in daily life, they encounter opportunities for interfaith exchange. Christian migrants can serve as ambassadors of their faith, breaking down prejudices and fostering a deeper appreciation of the spiritual aspirations shared by humanity. These interactions become forms of interreligious dialogue, particularly the dialogue of life, one that all Christians can engage in no matter their station in life.⁵⁹

Challenges to Migrant Missionary Discipleship

While Vietnamese Catholic migrants in Asia are called to migrant missionary discipleship with great potential as subjects of mission in the church, many challenges must be overcome before they are able to truly live out their Christian vocation. The challenges can be discussed in four primary areas: (1) on the part of the receiving church; (2) on the part of the sending church; (3) on the part of migrant chaplains; and (4) on the part of the migrants themselves.

The receiving church

The church in the host country has an extremely essential role in helping Vietnamese migrants to realize their missionary potential. This requires the church to first and foremost, adopt an attitude counter to the prevalent societal attitude toward migrants. According to Cardinal Tarcisio Isao Kikuchi, bishop of Tokyo, in Japanese society, the presence of migrants is often referred to as a problem. Unfortunately, this sentiment is often echoed within the local church, with individuals speaking of an “immigrant problem.”⁶⁰ While societal depictions of immigrants can often be negative, given that the church has over 100 papal annual messages regarding migrants, not to mention countless other ecclesial documents at the global and local level, the church must raise a

⁵⁷ M.F. Fan, C.M. Chiu, and L. Mabon, “Environmental Justice and the Politics of Pollution: The Case of the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Pollution Incident in Vietnam,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 1 (2022): 189–206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620973164>.

⁵⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

⁵⁹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 1991, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

⁶⁰ Henríquez, Andrés. “Archbishop of Tokyo: An Aging Society like Japan’s Will Not Survive,” *Catholic News Agency*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260647/archbishop-of-tokyo-an-aging-society-like-japans-will-not-be-able-to-survive>.

countercultural and prophetic voice in defense of migrants when they are unreasonably criticized and depicted.

Beside overcoming the perception of migrants as a “problem,” another challenge of the local church is seeing immigrants only as objects of mission. While this is essential because immigrants are in great need of support, as the teachings of the church have abundantly made clear, missionary discipleship means that the individual is not the passive recipient of mission outreach but become the active agent. In the Asian countries discussed in this essay, there are pastoral outreach initiatives to support Vietnamese migrants. In Taiwan, there are also initiatives that help Vietnamese migrants to fight for their rights when exploited by Taiwanese bosses.⁶¹ In Korea, Archbishop Peter Chung Soon-taick of Seoul declared in his homily in a commemorative Mass on World Migrants and Refugees Day on September 24, 2023, “We must protect the rights that immigrants and refugees deserve.”⁶² To various degrees, these words have been reflected in the actions of the local churches on behalf of Vietnamese migrants.

However, in order for migrants to become missionary disciples, there needs to be integration into the local church, which remains a significant challenge. In the receiving churches, there exists a reality of migrants being seen as outsiders. Thus, there is little effort to include them in the life of the indigenous church. UCA News observes that in Japan, previously, foreign missionaries were valued and actively recruited to evangelize Japanese society. This required significant linguistic and cultural preparation. Currently, however, overseas clergy and religious are primarily brought in to minister to specific immigrant communities within the Japanese Catholic church. These individuals are not required to develop skills, linguistic or cultural, to facilitate the integration of either themselves or their congregations into the broader Japanese context for the purposes of evangelization. Simultaneously, the training of Japanese clergy omits instruction in immigrant languages and cultures, as well as preparation for incorporating immigrant members into the evangelization of Japan. Consequently, with some exceptions, the Japanese Catholic church has become effectively divided. One segment is a shrinking, largely elderly Japanese community, while the other is an expanding, predominantly younger immigrant population, whose faith practices are largely separate from any outreach to Japanese society. Because neither the foreign clergy nor the local clergy are equipped or expected to bridge the linguistic and cultural divides, integration of newcomers into the Japanese church, and its subsequent revitalization, is hindered.⁶³

In Thailand, Vietnamese migrant ministry is only nominally recognized as a formal ministry within the church. The Pastoral Committee for Vietnamese Migrants in Thailand was established in 2017 at the direction of the now retired Cardinal Francis Xavier Kriengsak when he was still president of the Bishops Conference of Thailand. However, for all intents and purposes, the committee, which comprises of various Vietnamese priests and religious serving in Thailand, works independently, does not have any budget, is not obligated to attend any meetings or make any reports. Almost all activities in which church facilities are needed are arranged in consultation with local parish priests, who can choose to or not grant the request. In one parish, the new parish priest refuses to allow for a monthly Vietnamese language Mass while the former one did. In churches where there are Vietnamese groups, the activities are run by the Vietnamese priest without any involvement of the Thai parish priest. With rare exceptions, the Thai parish priest makes himself present during special celebrations such as celebrating the group’s patron saint or Christmas and Easter.

⁶¹ Pham Trong Quang, “Vài nét về mục vụ di dân của Giáo hội Đài Loan,” in *Di Dân Việt Nam Tại Á Châu (Vietnamese Migrants in Asia)*, ed. Anthony Le Duc and Nguyen Quoc Thuan (Manila: Logos, 2020), 126-156.

⁶² UCA News, “Korean Catholics Urged to Protect Migrants, Refugees,” September 27, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/korean-catholics-urged-to-protect-migrants-refugees/102725>.

⁶³ UCA News, “The Fading Japanese Church, the Growing Church in Japan.”

While South Korea has a much more formal ministry for migrants in general, and Vietnamese immigrants in particular, the situation of parallel church also exists. One Vietnamese chaplain in Korea reported:

The Korean Church is very concerned with ministry to migrants. Therefore, most dioceses have migrant ministry centers. However, upon closer examination, only a few dioceses truly prioritize meaningful migrant ministry. This means that these centers invite Vietnamese priests to collaborate, providing pastoral care for migrants through activities such as celebrating Mass, administering sacraments, conducting catechism classes, and organizing religious activities. Other migrant ministry centers primarily function with a few office staff, focusing mainly on providing health consultation or contacting companies and restaurants to claim unpaid wages for workers. Some parishes and parish priests, despite knowing that many foreign migrants are living (working and studying) within their parish boundaries, show no interest and sometimes even harbor prejudice against these foreigners. This discourages many migrants from attending Mass or participating in parish activities. Consequently, maintaining their faith becomes difficult, let alone engaging in evangelization.⁶⁴

While other issues could be discussed when it comes to the receiving church, the primary challenges for the church in the host country is threefold: 1) resisting the temptation to perceive immigrants as a “problem”; 2) resisting the tendency to see migrants in the church as outsiders; and 3) going beyond pastoral/social outreach to achieve integration of immigrants into the local church.

The sending church

The vocation of missionary discipleship necessitates robust formation. While migration, both internal (from rural to urban areas) and international (for work and study), is a widespread phenomenon among young Vietnamese, their spiritual formation for this “going forth” is often deficient. Catechetical training in Vietnam frequently emphasizes rote memorization of church teachings and diocesan-specific prayers, evidenced by the prevalence of prayer books and marriage preparation manuals tailored to individual dioceses. According to Nguyen Van Quy, a Dominican priest engaging in Vietnamese migrant ministry in Thailand, Vietnamese migrants do not leave their home country with an official missionary mandate from their diocese or parish. Instead, their migration is driven primarily by economic necessity, as they seek better job opportunities in Thailand. Since their departure is personal and family-oriented rather than mission-driven, they do not receive any formation or guidance on their role as missionary disciples before leaving.⁶⁵

Dang Quoc Cuong, a Divine Word Missionary, who spent a number of years as a migrant worker before joining religious life remarked:

In the early days, before being sent out by Jesus, the apostles were also taught and formed by Him. Similarly, like the apostles, migrants today need the care and preparation of the sending church before they go to other countries for study or work. However, equipping Christian migrants with the necessary knowledge and formation seems to be lacking at present. Lunar New Year, when many migrants return home from abroad or other regions within the country, presents a valuable opportunity for

⁶⁴ Direct communication via social media on February 19, 2025.

⁶⁵ Nguyen Van Quy, Direct communication via social media, February 14, 2025.

gatherings and guidance. Yet, meetings and sharing sessions between church leaders and migrants at the parish level are almost non-existent. Many of them leave without adequate preparation for living out their faith in a foreign land or understanding the potential contributions they can make to the local Church.⁶⁶

In addition to the lack of formation preparing for missionary discipleship, there is also inadequate connection between the migrants and pastors in the home church. Many Vietnamese Catholics do not inform their parish priests when they migrate, only reaching out when they need sacraments like marriage or baptism for their children.⁶⁷ This may be a reason why there is inadequate follow up from the pastor of the home parish. Nguyen Binh, SVD, a chaplain in Thailand observed that the pastor of the home parish of many migrants keep in touch and make so called pastoral visits to various countries more for the purpose of fundraising for church projects than to encourage them to live in accordance with their Christian calling. If there are messages to this effect they tend to be at the level of lipservice without any concrete plans or suggestions for evangelization.⁶⁸ In other words, pastors from the home parish seem more concerned about what migrants contribute to the parish in the home country than what they can contribute in their present context. Nguyen Van Quy remarked that while some priests from the migrants' home dioceses, particularly from Ha Tinh, occasionally visit, their engagement is minimal and lacks a clear pastoral or missionary strategy.

In assessing the quality of formation for missionary discipleship in Vietnam, Le Cong Duc, who teaches at the major seminary in Hue pointed out the lack of a comprehensive approach to faith education, one that integrates human formation, theological knowledge, and practical faith living.⁶⁹ In particular, he asserted that there is an overemphasis on academic knowledge at the expense of practical and ethical development, a lack of integral human formation focusing on character and social responsibility, inadequate theological understanding among Catholics, and a superficial integration of faith into daily life. Le Cong Duc argued that faith education must move beyond mere memorization and ritualistic practice in order to enable a transformative experience that permeates all aspects of life and authentically reflects Gospel values. Faith education, he said, must challenge the popular Vietnamese adage of simply being “good in faith, good in society.” This outlook is not sufficient for effective evangelization.

The migrant ministry chaplain

In migrant ministry, the chaplain has multiple functions. First, the chaplain has a special role as a spiritual guide, pastoral caregiver, and provider of faith formation and consultation on social and legal problems that migrants experience in their daily life. Second, the chaplain plays the role of the advocate who provides emotional support and a sense of community for migrants facing cultural, economic, and social challenges. Third, they also serve as the bridge between the migrant community and the local church, helping to integrate them into parish life while preserving their cultural and spiritual identity. Additionally, they mediate between migrants and civil society, offering guidance on legal, social, and economic matters to ensure their rights and dignity are upheld.

⁶⁶ Dang Quoc Cuong, Direct communication via social media, February 27, 2025.

⁶⁷ Nguyen Van Quy, Direct communication via social media, February 14, 2025.

⁶⁸ Direct communication via social media on February 13, 2025.

⁶⁹ Le Cong Duc, “Vài Suy Nghĩ Về Giáo Dục Đức Tin Toàn Diện Trong Tầm Nhìn Sứ Mạng,” in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sứ Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng (Vietnamese Migrants and Mission)*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 296-307.

However there have been multiple challenges when it comes to effective chaplaincy. Pham Trong Quang, SVD identified several key limitations within the Taiwanese context. First, the availability of qualified Vietnamese chaplains engaged in full-time ministry with migrant communities remains insufficient. A substantial proportion of these chaplains work on a part-time basis, concurrently fulfilling other pastoral duties within the local church or within their religious congregations. In addition, the number of Vietnamese chaplains possessing adequate proficiency in the local language, culture, and laws is not large. While their presence fosters a sense of community and familiarity among Vietnamese migrants, these constraints hinder the migrants' comprehensive integration into the life and mission of the local church.⁷⁰

A similar situation can be found in the context of Thailand. The majority of the migrant chaplains have limited Thai language skills and do not have close working relationship with the local church. Almost all are involved in other duties unrelated to migrant ministry and therefore can only engage in it part-time. Joseph Nguyen Hai Phuong, OP, the current president of the Pastoral Committee on Vietnamese Migrants in Thailand pointed out a number of other challenges for effective chaplaincy work in Thailand. First, there is a lack of a clear and concrete pastoral direction for missionary work within the Thai context. While this direction should ideally align with the broader mission of the universal church, as well as the local churches in Thailand and Vietnam, its absence makes it difficult to guide and inspire Vietnamese migrants in their evangelizing efforts. In addition, the limited number of chaplains and their uneven distribution across different dioceses pose significant obstacles. Most chaplains are concentrated in Bangkok, leaving many migrant communities in other regions without adequate pastoral care. Without consistent accompaniment, Vietnamese migrants struggle to deepen their faith, build strong faith communities, and engage in missionary discipleship. Finally, the relationship between chaplains and dioceses in both Thailand and Vietnam remains weak due to various objective and subjective factors. This lack of strong institutional collaboration further complicates pastoral ministry for migrants, making it difficult to provide effective and coordinated support. As a result, Vietnamese migrant communities in Thailand face considerable challenges in maintaining and sharing their faith, limiting their ability to live out their missionary calling.⁷¹

The unevenness pointed out in the context of Thailand has also been identified as a challenge by Ta Thach, SVD who is presently doing Vietnamese migrant ministry in Seoul, South Korea. According to the Divine Word missionary, while larger communities in Korea benefit from regular Sunday Mass, catechism classes, and communal activities that strengthen faith and promote missionary awareness, smaller communities face challenges due to the shortage of priests. Many of these smaller communities can only have Mass once a month or even once every two months. This irregularity in religious gatherings leads to weakening communal bonds, decreased participation, and even disengagement from faith practices altogether. As a result, many migrants struggle to maintain their faith, which is indispensable to missionary discipleship. Without consistent spiritual support, opportunities for faith formation and evangelization diminish, making it difficult for individuals to nurture their own faith and share it with others.⁷²

In the Japan context, according to Hy Nguyen, SVD who grew up in Japan, and engages in ministry for both the Japanese and Vietnamese community, in the past three years, the Japan Bishops Conference has actively tried to establish Vietnamese chaplaincy in every diocese. As a result, presently, every diocese has Vietnamese language Mass celebrated by Vietnamese chaplains.⁷³ In Nguyen's assessment, Vietnamese priests and religious who are engaged in migrant ministry generally

⁷⁰ Direct communication via social media on February 13, 2025.

⁷¹ Joseph Nguyen Hai Phuong, Direct communication via social media on February 13, 2025.

⁷² Ta Thach, Direct communication via social media on February 19, 2025.

⁷³ Hy Nguyen, Direct communication via social media on February 22, 2025.

have sufficient knowledge and language skills for pastoral work in Japan. This is because their primary responsibilities still revolve around celebrating Mass or working for Japanese parishes and Catholic institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes, and kindergartens. Despite these positive signs, the primary challenge in the Japan context is the issue of a “parallel” church, which has already been identified in the previous section of the paper. Vietnamese chaplains need to not only play their separate roles in the Japanese and Vietnamese communities but also be able to bridge these two communities to bring about greater integration.

The Vietnamese migrants

We cannot discuss migrant missionary discipleship without delving into the challenges concerning the migrants themselves. In many ways, these challenges are intertwined with the previous three challenges. According to Ta Thach, SVD, one of the primary obstacles to missionary discipleship among Vietnamese migrants in South Korea is the widespread perception that evangelization is the sole responsibility of clergy and religious figures. Many Vietnamese Catholics do not see missionary work as an integral part of their lay vocation, believing instead that it is the duty of bishops, priests, and religious members of the church. In this respect, the mindset of Vietnamese migrants is not different from that of Christians throughout the world today. One of the reasons that Pope Francis felt the need to propose the paradigm of missionary discipleship of all Christians was to combat this type of thinking.

However, in the circumstances of Vietnamese migrant workers in Asia, economic and work-related pressures further compound these challenges. Most Vietnamese migrants today travel to other countries for employment opportunities, education, or marriage, with the primary goal of improving their financial situation. They bear heavy financial burdens, including the cost of living, tuition fees, and remittances sent home to support their families and oftentimes to repay loans that were taken to facilitate their trip. Oftentimes, these economic demands take precedence over religious practice, leaving little time or energy for evangelization. There is a famous Vietnamese adage, “*có thực mới vực được đạo*” (One must have food before they can uphold their faith). This mentality prioritizes practical concerns over spiritual ones.

For many migrant workers, demanding work schedules make it nearly impossible to engage in religious activities. Those employed in factories often work long hours, including weekends, limiting their ability to attend Mass or participate in church-related events. In South Korea, as reported by Ta Thach, SVD, workers in the fishing industry face even greater restrictions, as their employers frequently control their living conditions and dictate their schedules. In some cases, even when Masses are organized for migrant workers, employers refuse to grant them permission to attend. Over time, this enforced absence from religious life leads to a gradual weakening of faith and participation in church activities.

Similarly, Vietnamese students in South Korea and Japan struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with financial pressures. Many students must work part-time jobs to cover tuition fees and living expenses, often working on weekends when Mass and other religious gatherings take place. This leaves them with little opportunity to engage in religious practices, leading to a decline in faith and detachment from the church. Many young migrants who were previously active in religious life back home gradually lose their connection to the church as they navigate the pressures of studying and working abroad.

As a result of these challenges, maintaining faith itself becomes a struggle for many Vietnamese migrants, making missionary discipleship even more difficult. Over time, some stop attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, or participating in religious activities altogether. Given these circumstances,

according to Ta Thach, efforts promoting missionary consciousness among Vietnamese migrants in South Korea are only feasible in well-established and larger migrant communities that provide support and religious engagement. Smaller or more isolated groups, however, face significant obstacles in sustaining their faith, let alone spreading it to others.

In addition to economic pressures, young people living in a new environment presents numerous spiritual challenges. According to Joseph Nguyen Hai Phuong, OP, one of the key difficulties Vietnamese migrants face is the lack of a strong faith-based community to sustain their religious life. In Vietnam, Catholic faith is often nurtured within families and communities through traditions such as daily prayers, participation in Mass, catechism classes, and involvement in church groups. Moreover, the close-knit nature of Vietnamese villages and parishes acts as a protective “fence” for faith. Social pressure and communal expectations often encourage people to remain actively engaged in religious life, as neglecting church activities could lead to a loss of reputation or a sense of isolation within their community. However, when migrants leave their home parishes and move to other countries—sometimes in areas where churches are distant or nonexistent—they lose this protective support system. Many find themselves in situations where they know no one, and they receive little to no encouragement to maintain their faith. This sense of detachment and loneliness makes it easy for migrants to drift away from religious practice.⁷⁴

Joseph Nguyen Hai Phuong further pointed out that apart from the absence of a supportive faith community, Vietnamese migrants also face moral and spiritual challenges that threaten their religious identity. Without the “fence” of their home parishes, they become vulnerable to various social temptations, including gambling, alcohol abuse, superstitions, and financial scams. Some, in their desperation for financial stability, fall victim to exploitative schemes such as high-interest loans, illegal trade, and even human trafficking. Others, struggling with loneliness and personal hardships, become easy targets for religious conversion efforts by non-Catholic groups. Many migrants, out of curiosity or a desire to belong, explore groups outside their faith. Over time, this exposure can lead them to question their Catholic beliefs and gradually distance themselves from the church. Some ultimately abandon their faith altogether, falling into doctrinally problematic religious sects.

A final major challenge to overcome is the tendency of Vietnamese Catholic migrants to organize and engage in activities based on group identity—whether as Vietnamese, as members of a particular diocese in Vietnam, or even as members of a specific parish. Liturgical celebrations are often arranged along these lines. Let’s say in a diocese like Tokyo or Bangkok, while there may be a broader Vietnamese migrant community comprising members from across Vietnam, smaller subgroups within it frequently organize events based on their diocesan or parish affiliations. While this provides a level of familiarity and comfort, strong tendency hampers their integration into the local church and the cultural adaptations necessary for this process. Without adequate formation in intercultural living and communication, Vietnamese migrants often feel most comfortable within their own groups, limiting their participation in the wider church and society.

⁷⁴ Nguyen Hai Phuong, “Di dân Việt Nam với sứ mệnh truyền giáo trong bối cảnh Thái Lan,” in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sứ Mạng Loan Báo Tin Mừng (Vietnamese Migrants and Mission)*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 249–271.

Going Forward

Cardinal Tarcisio Isao Kikuchi commented in an interview, “I firmly believe that immigrants are not a problem but a hope for the church. They offer the Catholic community a unique opportunity to grow, especially with young people, and to proclaim the Gospel in areas where there is no active presence of the church.” In the context of Japan, Cardinal Kikuchi added, “In a certain way, immigrants offer the Japanese church the possibility of renewing itself and of being more active in its mission. This is a real hope.”⁷⁵ If Cardinal Kikuchi’s sentiments are to be realized in the context of the church in Japan as well as the other Asian countries discussed in this paper, the challenges in the four areas above must be overcome so that the potentialities highlighted can become reality. In particular, I recommend attention to the following matters as directions for promotion of migrant missionary discipleship by Vietnamese in Asia.

In light of the discussion in the previous sections, the following recommendations can be made to enhance the capacity of Vietnamese migrants to live out their missionary discipleship.

The sending church

It is imperative for the sending church, particularly at the diocesan and parochial levels, to proactively form and catechize young Catholics in preparation for their future roles as missionary disciples. Given the prevalent situation of migration, both internal and international, by Vietnamese youth, the church must equip young people to navigate the social, cultural, and spiritual complexities inherent in such transitions. In addition to achieving academic or economic aspirations, their journey must also include the dimension of missionary discipleship as an indispensable aspect of Christian life no matter where they go.

A crucial aspect of empowering Vietnamese migrants in their missionary discipleship is enhancing their consciousness of the myriad opportunities for missionary witness in their daily life—in their dormitories or residences, at work, in interreligious families and social relationships, in their consistent religious practices, etc. Pastoral leadership plays an indispensable role in enlightening migrants about these missionary possibilities in their daily lives. By bringing attention to the diverse and creative ways that migrants can witness their faith, the church empowers migrants to recognize their missionary potential and value as migrant missionary disciples.

In addition to nurturing missionary discipleship consciousness, formation in cross-cultural competence is also essential. The migrant worker turned Divine Word missionary priest Dang Quoc Cuong remarked:

The sending church must emphasize to migrant brothers and sisters the importance of learning about and living in accordance with the cultures of their host countries as part of their mission to proclaim the Gospel. In today’s world—characterized by increasing cultural exchange and diversity within international communities—migrant Christians are called to integrate into their new environments by understanding and respecting local cultural values, while remaining steadfast in their faith and actively sharing it with others. Learning the local culture is not only essential for successful integration and flourishing in a new context, but it also fosters mutual understanding

⁷⁵ Henríquez, Andrés. “Archbishop of Tokyo: An Aging Society like Japan’s Will Not Survive.” Catholic News Agency, November 22, 2024. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260647/archbishop-of-tokyo-an-aging-society-like-japans-will-not-be-able-to-survive>.

between migrant and local Christians, enabling them to build and strengthen the local church together.⁷⁶

The receiving church

The receiving church must transition from a problem-focused approach to one of solidarity, recognizing Vietnamese migrants not as problems but as fellow members of the Body of Christ. This paradigm shift necessarily entails active advocacy, pastoral care, and social outreach. However, it cannot stop at these actions. In order to promote migrant missionary discipleship in all its aspects, it is essential to create an environment where migrants are genuinely integrated into the local ecclesiastical community. Such integration necessitates a move beyond mere tokenism or parallel ministries towards creating a unified church experience.

A key area of concern for local churches is the need for a positive attitude toward migrants—and corresponding pastoral programs—to permeate all levels of church life. While the church often articulates inspiring teachings at the universal, national, and even diocesan levels, the reality on the ground can be quite different. As expressed in a well-known Vietnamese adage, “the king’s law yields to village customs;” in other words, parish priests and other pastoral workers—those with the most direct impact on the lives of Vietnamese migrants—frequently lack sufficient understanding of, or awareness about, the importance of engaging with these migrants as members of their pastoral care and as potential contributors to the life and growth of the community.

Chaplains in migrant ministry

Given the pivotal role of chaplains, it is essential that individuals appointed to this ministry are equipped with the requisite linguistic, cultural, and legal competencies to effectively serve the migrant population. These pastoral agents should be accorded the same recognition and integration as other diocesan personnel, ensuring their active participation in the diocesan life and pastoral planning. This integration not only amplifies their effectiveness but also bridges the gap between the migrant community and the local church. Migrant chaplains are hindered in their multifaceted roles when they themselves are sidelined or are perceived as “outsiders” in the church, not so unlike the migrants themselves.

Collaborative framework

The establishment of a collaborative framework involving the sending church, the receiving church, and migrant ministry chaplains is vital. This synergy facilitates a coordinated response to the multifaceted needs of migrants and addresses the systemic challenges encountered in their journey of faith and mission. Within the Asian context, ecclesial bodies such as individual bishops conferences and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) can be instrumental in devising more collaborative mechanisms to enhance pastoral care for migrants as well as empowering migrant missionary discipleship. It must be noted that the Pastoral Committee on Vietnamese Migrants in Thailand was only established after Bishop Nguyen Thai Hop of Vinh Diocese made a visit to Cardinal Francis Xavier Kriengsak, then president of the Catholic Bishops of Conference of Thailand, in order to request for greater attention to Vietnamese migrant ministry in Thailand. While this was an important initial step, a collaborative response to the migrant situation, as I have suggested in this

⁷⁶ Dang Quoc Cuong, Direct communication via social media on February 27, 2025.

paper, would require much more comprehensive and ongoing engagement between the sending and receiving churches as well as other relevant individuals.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, we have explored the concept of migrant missionary discipleship, particularly focusing on the Catholic Vietnamese migrants in Asia. This exploration has underscored the significant potential these migrants hold for invigorating the church's evangelization efforts amidst the challenges of aging congregations and secularization. By embracing their role as missionary disciples, they can contribute to revitalizing the church's mission in Asia.

However, the journey towards realizing this potential is fraught with challenges. These obstacles—ranging from the receiving church's perception of migrants and the sending church's preparation to the specific challenges faced by chaplains and the migrants themselves—necessitate a concerted effort to foster an environment conducive to migrant missionary discipleship. The church, in its universal mission, is called to transcend barriers and transform these challenges into opportunities for growth and renewal.

While this paper focuses on the Vietnamese context, many of the issues raised here are also relevant to the situation of other migrant groups both in Asia and beyond. The imperative to integrate migrants into the local church, to move beyond mere pastoral care towards active participation in the church's mission, and to recognize the agency of migrants as evangelizers are universal themes. By addressing these issues, the Church can more effectively support the missionary efforts of local communities, harness the missionary potential of all migrants, and promote a truly synodal church—one in which mission is carried out through the participation and communion of all members of the Body of Christ.

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