

Witness to Reconciliation

By Dan Fisher

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Introduction

Good Morning. My name is Dan Fisher. Late on Friday, I returned from Vietnam where I work with children with HIV & AIDS. I'm a little jet lagged.

American Servicemen

My Vietnam journey started in 1968 when I was 15 years old and living on an Air Force base on Guam, where my father was stationed. Each day the squadrons of B-52s would head to Vietnam with their full payloads of bombs. And several times a week, the Medical Evacuation planes carrying critically wounded soldiers, would stop to refuel on their way to the US. My mother would board the planes and provide whatever comforting words she could. Many of the soldiers did not survive.

I played keyboards in a Rock band called the Burlington Express and on most weekends, we would head out to one of several field hospitals on the island. We would spend time with the wounded guys and play music, hear their stories, and talk and laugh with them. And for a short time, would help take their minds off experiences they wanted to forget, and from the pain and struggle of recovery.

As a kid, I got a pretty good sense of the devastating toll the Vietnam War had on American soldiers.

Adoption

Twenty years ago, we adopted a 5-year-old boy. David was born to a young single Vietnamese woman in a village south of Hanoi. When he was 2 years old, his mother was bitten by a dog. Without medical treatment, she died of rabies a few months later in a stone shed behind the house.

David was then raised by his grandmother, but she died about a year later. He was then passed between 6 aunts and uncles until they made the difficult decision to send him to to an orphanage. He was malnourished, withdrawn, had profound hearing issues, was severely ADD, and never went to school.

He was later adopted by a couple in Grand Rapids but that adoption was disrupted after only eight months. One day, my daughter Elyse and I picked him up from foster care for a weekend visit -- but we never took him back. David has been part of our family ever since. And Hope Church and many people sitting here today have been part of the village that helped to raise him.

Reunion

In 2006, after learning about David's relatives in Vietnam, our family boarded a plane and headed that way. We arrived on Christmas Eve and met with 6 sets of Aunts and Uncles, about 20 cousins, and most of the rest of the village.

For the family, seeing David brought back both happy and painful memories of David's mother, and of the difficult decision to give David up for adoption. About every photo we have of this encounter shows David with someone's arms around him. The emotion and the tears were overwhelming. David, who's not much of a touchy feely guy, he's a car guy, smiled as his uncles and aunts and cousins practically mauled him in their eagerness to connect. There was a sense of re-connection and a sense of reconciliation.

My most memorable moments were watching my son place flowers on his mother's grave. I think there was a sense of closure for David to know that he was not a discarded or thrown away child. He was dearly loved by his mother and by so many others.

Later, we took a tour of the village and we were shown where the bombs came down and saw the ruins of a destroyed stone church that had been left as a monument. And I thought of the B-52s.

Children with HIV

Before visiting David's relatives, I had met a Vietnamese woman named Hoang on a flight from China. She graciously accompanied us during this visit to David's relatives and helped us navigate through some complicated family dynamics. We met up with her again in HoChiMinh City where she was doing work with children with HIV/AIDs. And since that time, we have teamed up to actively work on and support this important work.

Before leaving HoChiMinh City, we visited the War Remnants museum, which graphically shows the civilian casualties of the "American War". We saw support groups set up for victims of Agent Orange. And I got a deeper sense of the devastation the war had on the Vietnamese people.

More recently, I have traveled to other provinces in the Mekong Delta region and west near the Cambodia boarder. I spend time with the orphaned children and their caretakers. Often the caretakers are a grandmother or great grandmother living in a run down house of dirt floors and thatched walls and roof.

When I ask about the young man in a photograph, I consistently get the same answer. A husband was killed in the war. A single mother was left raising a family in a war torn country. Now decades later in her old age and barely able to take care of

herself, she has taken on the difficult responsibility of raising an orphaned grandchild or great-grandchild with HIV.

Reconciliation

How do I reconcile within myself my own engagement in a world where people are suffering?

My father, David Fisher, was a proud and honorable career military man who I admire for is his faithful and distinguished service to his country. My son David Fisher, named after his grandfather, is Vietnamese and has brought enormous joy to my life.

I don't feel responsible for the war in Vietnam. But I want to make a difference in the lives of people in that country who today suffer as a result of the war, from the terrible tragedy of HIV/AIDS, poverty and of discrimination.

What started as support for 17 children with HIV in HoChiMinh City has now grown to 75 children in 3 different provinces. Hope Church and many of you here today have graciously provided support and assistance for this project. And for that, I am forever grateful.

My work in Vietnam is not a political statement or done out of a sense of guilt. It's not for recognition or even as a religious ministry. I do this work because we are humans and we take care of each other. It's what we do. This is my reconciliation work.

Peace to all of you.