

# VOICES of COMPASSION



Newsletter of Maryknoll Lay Missioners

Spring 2009

## Three MKLM missioners serve in their birthplace— Vietnam



# Dear Friend,

**I**n the pages that follow, you will read about the ministries of Tawny Thanh, her husband Hiep Vu, and Anh Vu (no relation), all of whom are serving as Maryknoll Lay Missioners in the land of their birth – Vietnam. To serve in one's native country is both a wonderful and uniquely challenging experience. Of this, I am sure, having spent 21 years in mission in my home country of Bolivia.

At first thought, it might seem that returning to one's homeland would be easier than finding one's self in a wholly foreign setting. I'm not so sure that this is the case.



Alicia Butkiewicz became an MKLM missionary in 1982 and has served as the organization's Director of Missions since 2006.

Imagine growing up in an impoverished, sometimes war-torn country, where the face of suffering is one that is all too familiar. The daily struggle for survival is tightly woven into the social fabric. Oppression hangs in the air as essential systems and structures lie broken.

Then, through the grace of God, you have the chance to leave that world and witness the contrast of life in abundance. Safe water, anywhere and everywhere. K through 12, and often more. Reliable transportation. Doctors and dentists in almost every town.

If you wish to learn more about MKLM, please call us at 1.800.867.2980, visit us at [www.mklm.org](http://www.mklm.org) or write us at: Maryknoll Lay Missioners  
P.O. Box 307  
Maryknoll, NY  
10545-0307

So there you are. You can see the enormous gap between affluence and poverty. You feel small and powerless as you stand in between, a foot in each world, not quite belonging to either. Yet, you feel called to mission... and so you go. But there is no romantic sense of adventure when you know well the trying circumstances that await you.

Still, with perseverance and the help of the Holy Spirit, native-born missionaries can achieve a profound and richly rewarding sense of solidarity with those that they have returned to serve. With self-confidence and conviction, a native-born missionary can use his or her knowledge of their homeland's history and struggles to demonstrate a very credible sense of hope... a hope that is firmly rooted in Christ's infinite love.

Over the years, nearly 600 men and women have gone forth as Maryknoll Lay Missioners. In doing so, perhaps a few dozen... like Hiep, Tawny and Anh... have returned to their native lands. It is a different and special journey, a "donation of self" that is shaped by the past and, lovingly, aimed at the future.

Thank you very much for making their work, and every MKLM ministry, possible.

Yours in Mission,

  
Alicia Butkiewicz  
Director of Missions

## SPOTLIGHT:

# MKLM Answers the Call in Vietnam

*WITH HER BACK TO THE WINDS of the South China Sea, her head and belly curved around Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam's long finger-like landmass lies conspicuously along Southeast Asia's eastern coast. Exotic and graceful, her swaying palms provide respite from the tropical sun. But even they cannot provide shade for the children burned by Vietnam's poverty.*

**N**ot unlike her neighboring countries, Vietnam has known war and political conflict, and the poverty that often ensues from both. After the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese









government implemented an economic plan which included collectivization of farms and factories, and millions of government jobs for its people. But the plan proved inefficient and weaker than its enemies of corruption and trade embargoes. In 1986, a new economic plan called “Renovation” was instituted. This market economy-based plan has shown to be much more beneficial to Vietnam, with the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) steadily on the rise, and fewer of its people living in poverty. But where poverty continues, it does so with tenacity.

**Vietnam’s Gross Domestic Product is on the rise. Each year, fewer Vietnamese live in poverty. But where poverty continues, it does so with tenacity.**

There is still work to be done for the nation’s 86 million inhabitants. Three MKLM missionaries, with the help of your generosity, are able to help those Vietnamese who still struggle. Sadly, but commonly, those most greatly affected by the poverty of this nation are the children. The three MKLM missionaries you will read about in this edition of *Voices of Compassion* have each dedicated themselves to ministries that address the needs of Vietnamese youths.

## THE MINISTRIES

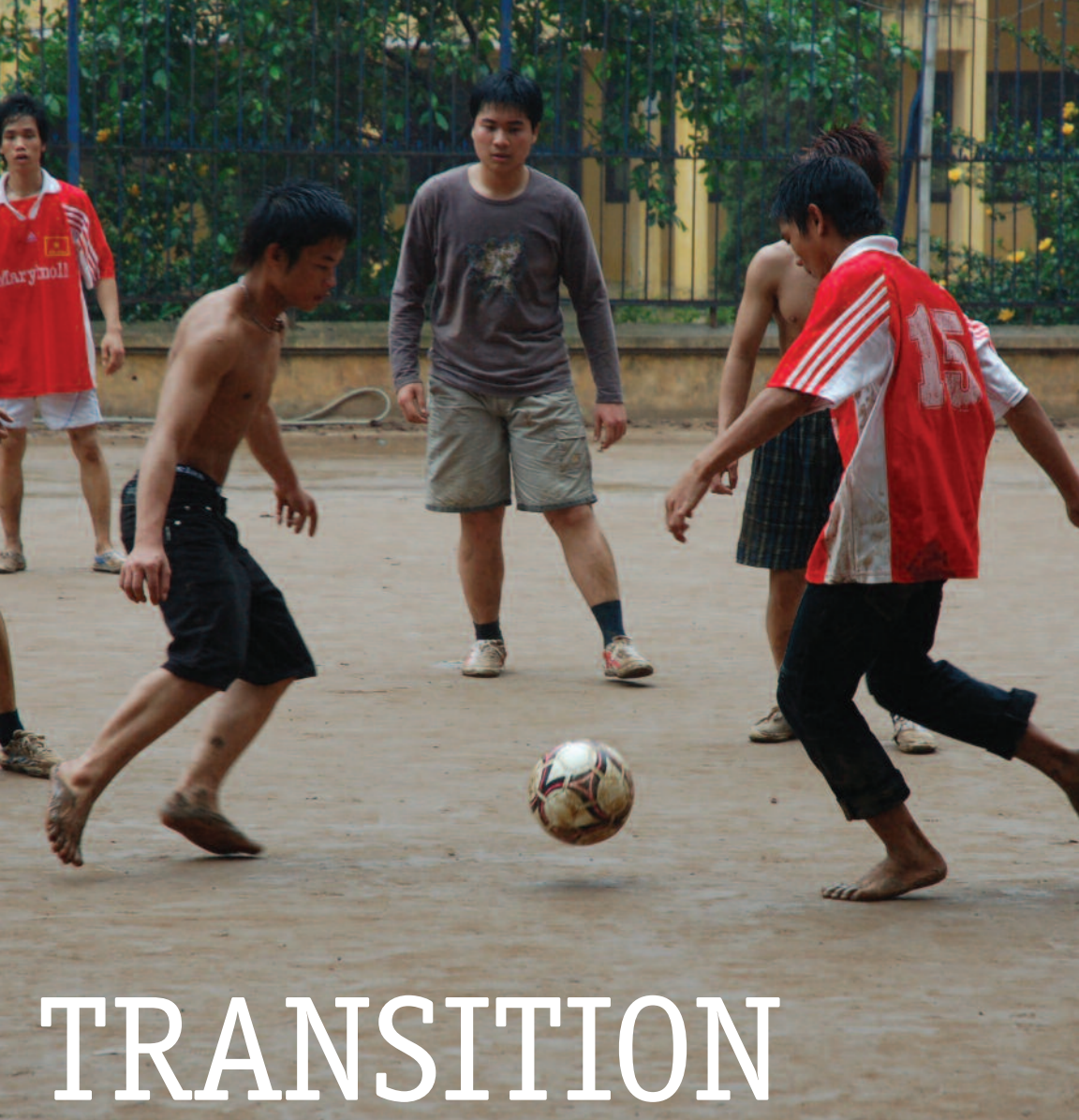
Under the terms of agreement with the Vietnamese government, MKLM currently works in developmental projects serving urban and rural poor populations. Ministries include Transition House, Morning Star, Sao Mai Center for Autistic Children, and Blue Dragon Shelter for Urban and Street Children.

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## THE MISSIONERS

For husband and wife, Hiep Vu and Tawny Thanh, and for Anh Vu (no relation), a ministry assignment in Vietnam has special significance. All three of these MKLM missionaries were born in Vietnam, and have returned to their native land to serve the people of their heritage. On page 17, Hiep has shared a reflection on his service to the people of his ancestry.





# TRANSITION HOUSE

*"Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

*– The Serenity Prayer*



In a suburb just south of Hanoi is the government-established Boys Detention Center which houses 12 to 17-year-olds who commit petty crimes. Prior to the center's establishment, repeat offenders were sent to adult prisons. Once released, the boys would often return to their old environment and associate once again with their previous contacts. Soon, they would be engaged in the same behaviors that landed them in jail in the first place.

Transition House was established in the hopes of rehabilitating the youths after their release.

Teaching the boys new ways to generate income, interact with others, and gain self-esteem would provide alternatives to the criminal acts that they had previously employed in order to survive poverty and difficult home environments.

MKLM missionaries Hiep Vu, Tawny Thanh, and Anh Vu each

**Residents learn life skills, computer skills, and attend workshops on how to deal with different pressures in their social interactions.**

serve in ministry at Transition House. Founded in 1998, the boarding house provides basic education,

skills training, and counseling services. Residents learn life skills, computer skills, and attend workshops on how to deal with different pressures in their social interactions. The counseling services are continued

after the boys leave the house to assist both them and their families so that they may successfully reintegrate into society. Transition House is the only place in Hanoi that helps young people in this target group to do this successfully.



Before Transition House was established, the youths had very little chance of living normal lives. They would often return to their old habits, using the only skills they had, dysfunctional though they were. Thanks to the work and life-skills training that the boys are offered at Transition House, they

have opportunities to obtain and keep decent jobs. They return to their village with better self-esteem and are prepared to interact with society in a healthy way.

As Transition House Coordinator, Tawny runs the center. She oversees all activities, planning, and networking



Hiep, far left, is confident that the computer-maintenance skills training he provides will help Transition House residents find work in Vietnam's growing technology sector.

with other NGOs and groups. Hiep runs the Computer Program, teaching classes in computer software, applications, computer maintenance, interactive English, and typing. As the technology sector gains strength in Vietnam, Hiep is confident that the skills training he provides will prove to be invaluable to the youths as they leave the house and look for work.

It is inspirational for me to serve in Vietnam knowing that I share the same heritage with these people who have gone through so much, have so little, and yet are still so courageous and happy.

—Anh Vu

Anh, too, is providing invaluable skills to the young people at Transition House. As Life Skills Coach, Anh counsels the young men in areas such as anger management, drug abuse intervention, relationship development, and

self-esteem, and provides them with empathy training. She uses a variety of techniques to engage them on those topics, including role play, lectures, games, songs, discussions, individual and group sharing, activities, and journaling.

## Companions in Mission



Meet Jurencio, a ten-year-old boy living in East Timor. Gifts from



Companions in Mission sponsors enabled MKLM to send a missionary to build a specialized wheelchair for Jurencio and countless others like him. Now, Jurencio can finally travel to school.

This little boy is just one of the thousands of reasons why you should join MKLM's Companions in Mission sponsorship program.

To learn more, go to [www.mklm.org](http://www.mklm.org), or call Libby DiSisto at 1-800-867-2980.



# SUCCESS!

## One Transition Graduate Shares His Accomplishments

Occasionally a former resident and graduate of Transition House will return to visit and share his gratitude for his successes. Anh, Hiep, and Tawny often request that the “successful”

graduate share his stories with current residents in the hope of inspiring them and providing an example for a path that will lead to a better life.

The visitors are also encouraged to share some of the negative experiences that they may have encountered since they left the house, so that the boys get a realistic view of what they might

face. “The interactions provide good opportunities for the boys to reflect on what types of things are required to be successful and stay out of trouble,” says Hiep.

**“The interactions provide good opportunities for the boys to reflect on what types of things are required to be successful and stay out of trouble.”**

Kien is one of many Transition House success stories. Now 20 years old, Kien had been a resident of Transition House for two years. He recently returned to share his story with current residents.

“When I came to Transition House, I was a tenth grader with a bad amphetamine addiction. My family disowned me because they kept catching me



Kien, far left, a former resident of Transition House, shares his success story with Hiep and current residents.

steal from them to support my habit. I stole money and sometimes I stole belongings so that I could sell them to get my drugs.

The first few months here were very hard for me, and I made it hard for the staff members. While I was withdrawing from the drugs, I got sick. Then I would cry. Then I would laugh. It was a struggle every-day because many times I just wanted to get out and get just a sip of the drug.”

Kien did finally “get out.” But not to get drugs. Kien stayed at Transition House until he was equipped to face the world in a new way. Two years after his arrival, Kien was ready to leave. He had earned a high school diploma and graduated from welding class; he had learned how to live and cope with difficulties without resorting to drug use; and through the compassion and support of Transition House staff members, he had learned how to be compassionate and supportive.

**"It was a struggle everyday because many times I just wanted to get out and get just a sip of the drug."**

Now, Kien has a job. He has regained the trust of his family. And, he is compassionate enough to want to share his story with the

other boys at Transition House, hoping that they, too, will know the inner peace and success that he has come to know.

**JOIN US IN CELEBRATING** the success of Kien and Transition House! Through your support and partnership, we are able to recruit, send, and sustain nearly 100 missionaries worldwide. Without ministries like Transition House, there wouldn't be many stories like Kien's that

end on a positive note. Please consider joining MKLM in sustaining nearly 100 missionaries worldwide. Donations can be mailed through the provided envelope, or by visiting [www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org). Please, help us to create more success stories.

## Forever Changed



If you or someone you know would like to learn more about becoming an MKLM missionary, please visit [www.mkmlm.org/ForChange](http://www.mkmlm.org/ForChange), or call or write to:

Michelle Born  
Recruitment Manager  
Maryknoll Lay Missioners  
P.O. Box 307  
Maryknoll, NY 10545 – 0307  
1.800.818.5276 Ext. 114  
**MBorn@mkmlm.org**



# A JOURNEY OUTSIDE-IN

## HIEP VU AND TAWNY THANH

Husband and wife Hiep Vu and Tawny Thanh joined MKLM in 2000. Both fled Vietnam in the mid-1970s amid war and political upheaval. As Vietnamese refugees in the United States, both went on to earn college degrees and business success. Now, both have returned to Vietnam to serve in mission.

Hiep and Tawny came to MKLM from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, California, where the couple used their educations and leadership skills to serve the Vietnamese communities of the area, including their parish, Our Lady of Peace, in North Hills.

Hiep put his musical talents to work by mentoring the youth choir in the archdiocese. He was also a volunteer teacher for computer software, and hardware usage and maintenance to many religious



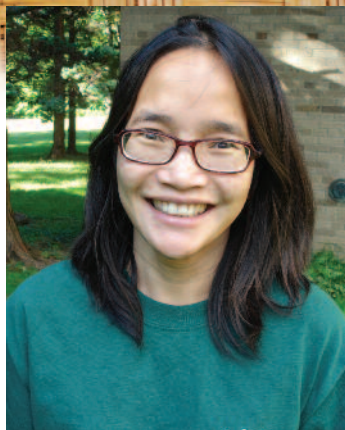
orders and non-profit organizations. Tawny also served the young people of the Vietnamese communities, training the youth leaders of the archdiocese's Eucharistic Youth Movement. In addition, Tawny served as a council member for Our Lady of Peace.

The couple's first mission assignment with MKLM was not in Vietnam. Rather, it was in northern Thailand, where they drew upon their personal experiences to work with the refugees and migrants from Burma and with the internal

*continued on bottom of page 16*

## ANH VU

**A**nh Vu, no relation to Hiep, came to MKLM in 2006 from the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida. Anh was an active member of the Saints Peter & Paul Parish in Panama City. With bachelor's degrees in psychology, biology, and secondary education in science, Anh worked to enrich the education of youths. She was also a volunteer at the Covenant House in Ft. Lauderdale.



Prior to settling in Florida, Anh lived in Cincinnati, Ohio and was a member of Saints Monica & George Parish of the Diocese of Cincinnati.

In January 2007, Anh departed for her birthplace of Vietnam to serve in ministry.

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► *Hiep Vu and Tawny Thanh (continued from previous page)*

displaced hill tribe people. Those minority groups receive little or no help from the Thai government. Hiep's ministry was to operate a computer classroom for Burmese refugees and a computer center for hill tribe students. Tawny's ministry was in developing handicraft projects for the men and women of the Kachin refugee village.

After serving in Thailand from 2000 – 2004 and Burma from 2005 – 2007, Hiep and Tawny started their mission work in Vietnam.

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*To learn more about Anh, Hiep, Tawny, and other MKLM missionaries and their ministries, or to learn more about becoming an MKLM missionary, please visit [www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org).*

# A JOURNEY TO A LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES

**HIEP VU SHARES HIS  
REFLECTION ON HIS TIME IN  
MISSION, THE PEOPLE HE  
SERVES, AND HIS RETURN TO  
THE COUNTRY HE ONCE FLED.**

*"I am the way, the  
truth and the life."*

*— John 14:6*

MKLM missionary Hiep has  
returned to Vietnam – a  
country he once fled.





**D**uring my mission journey in the last eight years, I have often reflected on the wisdom that “a prophet is not accepted in his hometown” (Luke 4:24). I certainly do not view myself as a “prophet.” But the words have comforted me, nonetheless, as I serve as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner in Vietnam, the country where I was born. Having spent 25 years as an American, I often feel that I am viewed as a foreigner here. I remind myself that I cannot be better than Jesus, who was also not accepted among His own people.

We decided to visit Vietnam for the first time in 1994, just when the trade embargo was lifted. We journeyed through the country, from north to south. Our trip, the people we encountered, and the realities we witnessed, changed me. I was moved by the poverty I saw, and struck by its contrast to the life I was living in California. So many of the people expressed to me their feelings of hopelessness.

Tawny and I returned home from our trip and began to reflect on

**“I remind myself that I cannot be better than Jesus, who was also not accepted among His own people.”**

I left Vietnam just when the country was taken over by the Socialist Vietnamese Communists in 1975. I was in my first year at college, full of life, ready to change the world. But I was uprooted and empty-handed when I began life in the ‘land of opportunities,’ the United States of America. I loved living in the United States. I learned so much. I and my wife Tawny, also from Vietnam, became successful business-people and enjoyed comfortable lives in California.

what we could do to help some of the poverty-stricken people of the world. We had been so blessed! If we could share our lives with these people, perhaps we could help them to be hopeful. We decided to leave our material comforts to pursue life in overseas mission – something we agreed would be more meaningful to us than the material things we had acquired.

We weren’t able to join MKLM as missionaries until 2000. Then, we began mission in Thailand along

the Thai-Burma border. Many people have fled Burma, also known as Myanmar, since the rule of a socialist military regime began in 1962. Having been refugees from a politically torn country, Tawny and I were happy to serve the Burmese refugees. The refugees face additional hardships once they flee Burma because they are denied refugee status by the Thai-government. After spending five



Tawny's first ministry was along the Thai-Burma border.

years on the Thai border with the refugees, we had the opportunity to serve in Burma itself. We spent almost two years there, which was long enough to learn what it means to be powerless.

In 2007, Tawny and I were invited to serve in Vietnam. We accepted, excitedly, thinking, "We don't have to learn the language and we know the culture! We can begin our

## YOUR WILL, YOUR LEGACY

**"He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor."**

*– Proverbs 22:8, 9*

**YOU** can be generous today and for generations to come.

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To receive a **FREE WILLS PLANNING BOOKLET**, call Dave Loretan at 1.800.867.2980.



work right away!” In many ways, it was true. But, upon our arrival we realized that we were viewed as foreigners and so we would need to be accepted by the community and gain the trust of those we serve. We’ve been here for more than a year and we feel so close to the people. That, in turn, makes us feel more connected with our ministries.

During our 25-year absence, the Vietnamese culture had evolved and changed, as cultures do. Now, we are learning the Vietnamese culture. And we are relearning the enduring Vietnamese traditions and ways that we had forgotten. The most significant lesson we have learned in the past year is

The three Maryknoll entities were given strict instructions that although they might be religious in foundation, their work must remain non-religious in nature.

## DID YOU KNOW?

The three branches of Maryknoll – **Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers**, *Maryknoll Sisters*, and us, **MARYKNOLL LAY MISSIONERS** – are each *separately funded and operated*. Each depends on its unique donors for support.

that our journey to mission has, for us, been a journey home. We have reunited with the people of our heritage. We are slowly erasing the boundaries that had separat-

ed us from them. And slowly, little-by-little, day-by-day, we and the people of our ministry, are becoming one again.



**MKLM** is a BBB Accredited Charity and a proud member of the BBB Charity Seal Program, which indicates a commitment to the 20 Standards for Charity Accountability. MKLM meets all the Standards, which assess our organization’s finances, governance and oversight, effectiveness measures, and fundraising and informational materials.



# A Teacher Still

**M**any MKLM missionaries have more than one ministry, and Anh Vu is no exception. While stateside, Anh had been a high school science teacher and youth counselor. Anh is passionate about teaching and helping children. She uses that passion in mission, too.

In addition to her work at Transition House, Anh also works at the Sao Mai Center for Autistic Children and at the Blue Dragon Shelter for Urban and Street Children. In these ministries, she works with children to try to enhance their education

through life-skills workshops and English classes. She also assists in speech therapy and special education classes, and trains teachers in special education. The goal of Anh's ministries is to train autistic kids and street kids for promising employment in restaurants and hotels in Hanoi.

**THROUGH YOUR SUPPORT and partnership with MKLM, Anh is able to stay in mission and help these children. Please consider continuing your support of Anh and nearly 100 missionaries like her in mission worldwide. Donations can be mailed through the provided envelope, or by visiting [www.mkmlm.org](http://www.mkmlm.org).**



## Join Us at Your Local Parish!

Maryknoll Lay Missioners will be speaking in nearly 100 parishes throughout the U.S. in 2009!

Go to [www.mkmlm.org/ChurchTalks](http://www.mkmlm.org/ChurchTalks) to find out when a Maryknoll Lay Missioner will be speaking at a church in your area, or to learn how to schedule a talk for your parish!

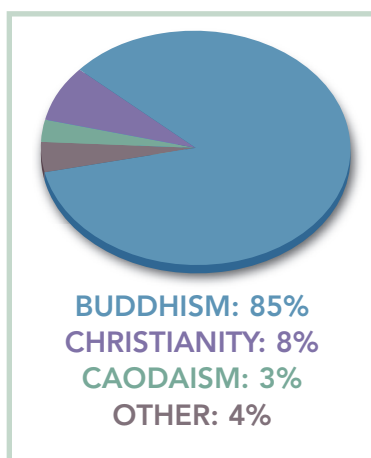
# RELIGION IN VIETNAM

**M**aryknoll Lay Missioners is not new to Vietnam. MKLM has been joining our partner organizations, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, and the Maryknoll Sisters in Vietnam since November 1992. Officially recognized by the Vietnamese government as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the three Maryknoll entities were given strict instructions that although they might be religious in foundation, their work must remain non-religious in nature. The entities agreed to non-evangelical-based service knowing well that their mission, inspired by the mission of Jesus, would be transparent to all those whom they would serve.

The government's concerns were based, perhaps, on a long history of mistrusting Catholicism. Quite openly, the Catholic Church has denounced Communism, an unfav-



Only 8% of the population of Vietnam is Christian.



orable viewpoint from the perspective of the Vietnamese Socialist government. And, during French Colonial rule of the country, Catholics were seen to collaborate with French Colonists to fight against Vietnamese independence. However, the government does not officially practice any religious discrimination or restrictions. An overwhelming 85% of the population is Buddhist, while only 8% is Christian.

# Did You Know?



The three branches of Maryknoll – Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers, Maryknoll Sisters, and us, Maryknoll Lay Missioners – are each separately funded and operated.

Although we often join together to serve in mission, each entity depends on its unique donors for support.

## Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers

Through contributions to Maryknoll Lay Missioners, you can make a difference in the lives of the poor in thirteen countries worldwide. To make your gift, please complete the form below and return it today.

On behalf of all those that we are privileged to serve, we thank you very much.

## Maryknoll Sisters

## Maryknoll Lay Missioners



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**Check:** Enclosed is my gift to Maryknoll Lay Missioners of:

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## INSIDE

Read the stories of MKLM's  
missioners in Vietnam.