

Church planter begins journey of establishing only Vietnamese church in MS

By Lindsey Williams

Writing Specialist

Twenty years ago, the only Vietnamese Baptist church in Mississippi, located on the coast, disbanded when Hurricane Katrina scattered the struggling congregation. Today, a growing population of Vietnamese people are continuing to make the coast their home, while seeking to carry on the traditions of their culture.

As for a church that teaches the Bible and makes disciples in their heart language, there is little to no opportunity for the Vietnamese people in Mississippi to know Christ.

Until Tan came to Gulfport with a vision.

“He had been to the area before and visited with other churches,” said Ray Duplessie, Pastor of Fernwood Church in Gulfport and Choctaw Ministry Contract Consultant with the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB). “When he came to Fernwood last fall, we connected really well and started to talk about how he could work with the Southern Baptist Convention and, more specifically, the Mississippi Baptist Convention.”

Already involved in church ministry in the Northwest, Tan was looking to move his family to the South. After Tan’s first visit to Gulfport, he knew that’s where God was calling him.

“When I first arrived in the U.S., I went to Portland, Oregon,” said Tan. “I served there with a Vietnamese Baptist church for two years. After that, I really had planned to move

to Houston or New Orleans, but I had a friend in Gulfport whom I visited in 2023. I stayed near the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and I thought the area would be very comfortable for my family. So I brought my wife and children from Portland and we moved here.”

Since last November, Tan has worked on beginning and growing a Vietnamese Bible study at Fernwood that meets on Sunday afternoons.

“This Bible study is small right now, but I believe we can grow it with the help of the Vietnamese believers around here,” said Tan. “We get to study the Bible and worship God together, and it’s very good for us to have that fellowship.”

In 1993, Tan received Jesus from the witness of Campus Crusade for Christ at his university in Vietnam. The crusade missionaries started a student group in which he became involved to spread the Gospel across campus. When he began to work with a group of church planters, however, his situation became dangerous. In 2003, he went to the Philippines for three years to train under and study Christian leadership.

After Tan finally returned to Vietnam, the government watched his every move for years. Since he continued to plant churches and make disciples, government officials eventually confiscated his passport and gave him the ultimatum to leave the country for good, work for the government (and deny his ministry), or be placed in prison. For his family’s sake, Tan decided to leave the country.

Quickly, Tan moved his family to Vancouver before ultimately relocating to Portland. His heart continues to beat for the Vietnamese people to know Christ as their Savior.

“This is my vision and my desire: I want to reach the Vietnamese community near college campuses because I believe God will change Vietnam through Christian student leaders. Like I did in Vietnam, I try to evangelize here and focus on

raising young students to become Christian leaders.”

“As Tan connected with people here,” said Duplessie, “he found that many parents want to reconnect their children to their heritage, because many of the kids were born here and have never been to Vietnam. So one way he is building relationships with non-believing families is by teaching the language and culture.”

Many of Tan’s first days of ministry on the coast involved visits to the Vietnamese market and the nail salons. “Many come to work here in nail salons, in fishing businesses, and in chicken farming. Most of the older generation are under a Catholic tradition, but the new generation who have come to work and raise their families in America are from a unique culture that doesn’t believe anything; they just follow this culture they have developed.”

Every Sunday afternoon, Tan and about 15 other people, including adults, students, and children, come together to sing worship songs, pray, study the Bible, and fellowship with good food.

“Many Vietnamese believers here are very lonely,” said Tan. “They need community. Pray for them. Pray also for those who believe in a God but don’t know Him personally. Pray for those who do not believe in a God. There are many problems that come with leaving Vietnam to live here. Many struggle.”

“Many are here by themselves,” Duplessie added, “and so this Bible study is an opportunity to gain community. Tan is working on making more connections, especially with people who are new here and only know about the communistic lifestyle they left. He is able to share with them because he once lived in that environment.”

Tan also requested his brothers and sisters in Christ to, “Pray for me and my family, and for opportunities to reach more Vietnamese students, that they will come to know Christ

and become evangelists for God to reach Vietnamese non-believers here and in Vietnam.”