

REACH Vietnam – Kon Tum Visit - May, 2026

This was the fourth visit by parishioners and the second with Sr Nhung in charge. Now knowing her better, it was a more relaxed and open visit. We had been more specific about the content which gave opportunities to broaden our understanding of the work of the Divine Provident Nuns (DPN) in Vietnam.

In Saigon, before heading to Kon Tum, we met with Sr Phuong, who was the first Nun we met in Kon Tum in 2013. The DPN have 800 nuns in Vietnam. Their major focus is children and education, mainly working with ethnic minority people, although there is some work in other areas. They also have a number of commercial ventures that provide some of the funding for their work. For example, in Saigon, they provide 'paid for' religious education for young Catholic children. In the Kon Tum region, where our project is situated, the DPN have a total of 11 boarding centres where ethnic minority girls live during school time. Of these 3 are similar to ours, while the remainder are smaller. Ours is considered as the strongest in terms of long term external support.

Flying from Saigon to Pleiku, a large town about 45kms from Kon Tum, we were picked up at Pleiku airport by Sr Nhung who was accompanied by Sr Tang. Tang is a protégé of Sr Nhung who speaks fluent English. This facilitated easier communication and relieved Fr Linh of much interpreting. She was also able to provide much valuable information about the work of the DPN. In Pleiku we visited another commercial enterprise – a coffee plantation. This is run by three nuns and includes about 3 hectares of plantation plus processing, through to roasting of the beans. They typically harvest, roast and sell about 5 tonnes of beans per year. The plantation was in a beautiful setting in the midst of which the nuns have a beautiful wooden chapel on stilts in the style of



Sr Nhung



Sr Tang

ethnic minority houses. It was an idyllic religious place. On to Kon Tum we met our 50 girls, plus two permanent nuns, a retired nun, Sr Dominique, as well as five postulants / novices. Once again arrival gave a great sense of serenity and belonging. That evening we had a Mass said by Fr Linh, with the girls and nuns, in memory of Pauline Audley who came on the first visit in 2013 with Fr Linh, when the project was founded, and died about 6 months ago. This was most beautiful, Fran Findlay did a reading and Cheryl Annetts, Tony Phillips and Rita Busbridge sang an offertory hymn. A video of this Mass is available at (.....)



The Saturday started with a visit to the vegetable garden set up by Sr Nhung soon after she arrived. We had seen this in 2023. It is on an acre of land and provides valuable additional vegetables for the girls, plus they work in the garden in class groups for a couple of hours per week and also are encouraged to plan what vegetables they will grow and given a budget buy seed and seedlings . When we last visited, a number of small coconut palm trees had been planted. These have now matured and this summer will provide their first cash crop.

At a meeting with Sr Nhung and Sr Tang over a couple of hours we asked whether our current level of money, \$18,000, was now sufficient for feeding the girls, given cost of living increases and the Iran War. It seems not. Further discussion came up with a formula based on giving the girls a certain level of nutrition. This suggested an increase of 15 %, so we agreed to raise it this year to \$22,000, or around a 20% increase, and then review each year. Us visitors had decided that we would make a personal donation to be used for some urgent need. After raising several things Sr Nhung noted that the girls' toilet and bathroom area was in an extremely bad condition. Tony Phillips looked at this and concurred, noting that it is a major job. The amount of money needed for this was going to be beyond the amount of our donation. Anyway it was agreed that Sr Nhung bring in a plumber on the following day to give an estimated cost.

That evening going back to the girls boarding house, we picked up Sonia and Justin, two Melbourne friends of Fr Linh. This couple had provided a large cash donation to the project in 2014. Before dinner Linh spent time with the couple and explained the problem with the toilets and bathroom. On the spot they committed to a large cash donation. Amazing!!



Figure 3 Kon Tum Alumni

Then we enjoyed dinner with the girls out in the delightful tropical evening air, followed by a concert by our girls, that we have become used to,. Their singing was, as ever, incredible. This evening we were joined by girls who had finished their high school education with the nuns, either to the end of high

school or had gone on to tertiary education. Sr Nhung had invited 64 and an incredible 30 came, some from Hanoi, Saigon and Da Nang. This was extraordinary.

The eldest of these is now around 30 years old, and some are married with children. Some could now speak very good English. Words cannot do this justice. Our parish has and is doing something remarkable.

Sunday, we fronted up for 7.00a.m. Mass which Fr Linh concelebrated with the local parish priest in the church adjacent to the center where the girls and nuns live. This was followed by breakfast and then, as we had requested, we travelled to another ethnic minority village about 45 kms from Kon Tum where two of our girls come from, with one of them accompanying us. Our visit there began at another DPN girls' boarding centre with about 25 girls and run by two nuns, and otherwise very similar to ours. We then went to see the ethnic minority family of a Divine Provident Nun who works elsewhere.



Figure 4 Ethnic minority family

This was in a typical, quite new house built with concrete instead of the traditional wood, which is now too expensive. Very simple with a tiled floor and very little furniture. Basically all eating and socializing is done on mats on the floor. Somewhat trying for our elderly mob, the visit was very much appreciated by the family. Next we went to the family of the girl who came with us, where we had lunch. Interestingly the father sat with us, but the remainder of the family, mother, ten other kids, grannie and aunties sat to one side. They provided us with a meal that included two chickens that had been killed earlier in the day, served with rice and washed down with rice wine in a clay urn with two communal straws. Some of us tried this and it was good. This showed the high esteem for us. The opportunity to have one of their girls board with the nuns while they stay at school to continue their education is prized. What also left them incredulous was that a Catholic priest - Fr Linh - casually dressed, not only visited them but also served food to the women in the family sitting off to the side. The sense is that this will be long talked about in this community. That evening we shared with Sr Nhung the news about our increased annual donation, gave her the additional cash donation, and spoke of the money that Justin and Sonya had promised. To say the least Sr Nhung was overwhelmed.

She gave us the estimate she had received from the plumber, which was low enough that she can complete all the work needed and have money left over. There followed another beautiful meal, centred around Vietnamese pancakes made by the girls, and an impromptu concert. Tony and Jennie Phillips, as they had done in 2023, donated the guitar they had brought, and as well Sr Nhung excitedly told the girls about the plan to rebuild the toilets and bathrooms. The night then ended with a very emotional farewell as we departed the following morning.

Joe Annetts
18th May, 2025

PS – The money from Sonia and Justin has arrived and been transferred to Sr Nhung. Our annual appeal for REACH Vietnam will be in July.