







FALL ISSUE

NAFAUM CONNECT



“News Worthy of the Truth”


THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF FILIPINO - AMERICAN
UNITED METHODISTS
(NAFAUM)



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Ben Vinluan - Editor
Joy Hayag - Associate Editor




Welcome to **NAFAUM CONNECT**! We are delighted to be part of the Philippines Central Conference (PCC) as it meets to elect its new episcopal leaders for the next quadrennium. This edition brings great hope for PCC delegates as one discerns the new set of bishops, the ratification of regionalization, and resilient ministries for PCC sustainability.



Karen Prudente
NAFAUM President

We have many approved General Conference 2024 documents to study and implement. Committees are being formed with leaders who are filled with great energy to **#StayUMC**. We each find our place to serve well where we are called. God undergirds all.

The United Methodist Church is in a time of momentous change guided by BIG thinking on behalf of how GOD wants us to serve and with whom in the communities that we are called to. It takes BOLD vision to consider the needs of the next seven generations to follow. May you find inspiration in every mission step made to Christ's beloved villages of peace and justice!





The Extravagance of Emptiness

Rev. Cristine Carnate - Atrero

I flew nearly 2,621.62 km from the Philippines to South Korea, and lo and behold, I stepped into the new luxury of my life - emptiness!

Last year was my perfect storm. My 27-year pastoral life has been attacked and devastated. The strong wind of frustrations and heavy rain of disappointments injured and tortured all aspects of my life. This harrowing experience created a vast inner void. But it turned out to be one of the most powerful stories of my life.

It was a precious time of sweet lament. “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?” (Psalm 42:3, NIV). It’s like a world without God, love, and divine presence. I was unsure what I believed or what made sense, but these laments created a new resting place for my soul. No words needed to be uttered, and tears became my way of communicating with God.

In this period of lamentation, God creates a space, a desire, a longing, a need, and an emptiness – and in these, God comes. Richard Rohr said, “God never comes undesired; never comes uninvited; never comes not longed for, so, God creates a longing.” The more I expressed my laments and poured my heart into him, the more I felt homesick. This kind of feeling can be a risky, scary, and painful experience. However, this “God-shaped vacuum in my heart” (Pascal) became my wholesome refuge and fortress. I found my best self in this emptiness. This inner void is a sanctuary, a holy and safe space for God. The void is painful as it widens, but this is the only way to be re-filled by God himself. This precious time of sweet laments was my most intimate moment with God.

I got the premium prize of solitude. “God covered me with his feathers, and under his wings, I found refuge; his faithfulness became my shield and rampart. (Psalm 91:4) I found myself alone with special privileges and personalized favors under his wings. I felt so honored and elite in his grace and love. Solitude dispenses a unique power, offers an opportunity for self-discovery, speaks volumes about grace, and creates a new beginning. This is God-experience! The premium prize of solitude is made in a relationship with God, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Rumi perfectly says, “Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation.” I made friends with silence, solitude, and stillness during my healing period. I met God in a brand new way. My “stopover” here in Korea is a wonderful gift. The amazing faith journey will continue, and it’s going to be amazing and glorifying! Luci Shaw states that “time is not our enemy, nor is it a hostile place from which we must flee. It is a meeting place, a point of rendezvous with God.”

“Life is always an unfinished symphony,” said Leighton Ford. Yes, it is a continual becoming. It is a series of dying and rising; crucifixion and resurrection. Rohr states, “We do not know how to suffer. When problems attack, we attack back negatively. Our overreactions magnify our suffering.” The most important part of adversity is how to handle it so as not to hurt ourselves and harm others. We will miss the beauty of rising if we fail to do what is right during the dying. We will miss the miracle of resurrection if we do not respond well to the crucifixion. Rohr gave enlightenment when he said, “If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it.”

Sadguru, a well-known author from India agreed when he talked about “death investment” in one of his interviews. He discussed that “when you worry, doubt, be afraid, or allow negativity in your life, you are investing in death.” But he also mentioned “inner engineering” which he defines as, “the capacity and power to transform weakness into power.”

It takes great faith to find the silver lining. My emptiness became a haven of contemplation and introspection; a shelter that offered maximum protection during my fragile days; a school where I learn, relearn, and unlearn about grace and love; and a holy place where I had a daily encounter with God. It’s a “secret, peaceful, and loving infusion of God” (John of the Cross) that revived my whole being.

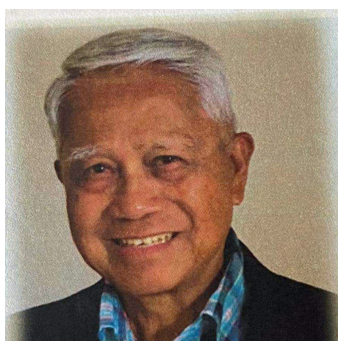
It takes abundant courage to claim and declare that emptiness is a luxury. God’s extravagant presence and love made both possible. And he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...” (2 Corinthians 12:9a, NIV).

It’s an excruciating desire. In many instances, I risked my life for this promise, and he never failed me. Never! It was a rich spiritual investment, indeed.

Living and loving God, grant me the opportunity to look for the beauty in the ashes; for the message in the mess; and the wisdom in the wounds. Thank you for upgrading, editing, and rewriting my story. Amen.

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The Rev. Dr. Cristine Carnate-Atrero, affectionately known to many across the connection as Doc Tintin, serves as Associate Pastor for English Ministries at Samchun Methodist Church in South Korea.



Remember Shechem. . .?

Rev. Ben Vinluan

Baguio, Davao or Manila are as far as you can get from Shechem. Or Cabanatuan City for that matter. But Shechem isn't necessarily a point in geography or space, as much as it is a set of mind in a crisis mode. Shechem quite uncomfortably loomed like a Central Conference. Especially this one.

Their long enslavement in Egypt now behind them, the Israelites continue to be hounded by life-size challenges; and pine for the comforts they led behind. At Shechem they're confronted by a crisis of choice. Living with strange folks in the process of settling lands taken over from them, they were becoming quite comfortable accommodating way of life and worship that was contrary to the Israelite monotheistic religious orientation. That meant saying that serving other gods and Yahweh at the same time are one and the same. But that clearly was apostasy and idolatry. So Joshua tells them to quit straddling the fence. Moving forward meant they had to make up their minds once and for all. They can't have their cake and eat it, too.

The Central Conference session, for us United Methodists, is more than a place of meeting. It's a mindset. It's putting our hearts and minds, our gifts and graces, our vulnerabilities in collective celebration of the God who sees that "we are yet alive, and see each other's faces." Then in obedience to the mandate of our coming together, see that leaders – read that "Bishops" – are elected and tasked in place in accordance with our system of governance.

Now we're quite aware that the United Methodists in the African continent have just done that. So are the United Methodists in Europe, and in the United States. All eyes are now on United Methodists in the Philippines – quite possibly the oldest Central Conference in the connection. We're hearing word of a movement called "NOEL." When I first heard it, I asked my nephew, who is a pastor in one of the conferences, who Noel was. And he laughed out loud at me. He seemed to have much fun laughing so I laughed with him. But I caught myself in check when I realized that it isn't funny at all. For he told me that it was really an acronym which means "No Election."

As an old, worn out preacher, I felt it unconscionable to intentionally work to prevent an election of bishops at Central Conference. So I admonished my nephew, who said that actually they – he and his cohorts are going to be praying that the Central Conference will be able to do its task by ensuring the election of Bishops in Cabanatuan as the Book of Discipline of our church so directs.

In our system, no one person speaks with authority for all across the connection. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church does. So obviously, while we do not have a Joshua, we nevertheless have an authoritative voice that calls us all to account. And as faithful United Methodists for such a time as this, that is all we need. For that is all that matters. So I will be joining my nephew and his cohorts in spirit in prayer for the Central Conference to so fulfill its mandate to elect our bishops for the Philippines Central Conference accordingly. And we all need to be praying that all delegates be imbued with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their sacred tasks mandated by our Book of Discipline. AMEN.

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Rev. Ben Vinluan, formerly of the Northwest Philippines Annual Conference in the Baguio Episcopal Area, is a retired clergy member of the California-Pacific Annual Conference. In retirement, he remains actively involved in ministry, and edits the newly launched NAFAUM Connect newsletter of the National Association of Filipino-American United Methodists.



Moving Forward: Embracing Our Mission and Building a Legacy for the Next Generation

Rev. Bener Baysa Agtarap

As we stand on the threshold of a momentous gathering for the Philippines Central Conference, this paper explores key principles that are essential to our collective mission of building a healthy and vibrant church for the next generation. The primary focus of this document is to encourage and equip delegates like you with the insights needed to shape the future of our beloved United Methodist Church. Our decisions today—whether about episcopal elections or vital issues—will have a lasting impact on the church's mission and its capacity to transform lives.

The purpose of this paper is to offer guidance rooted in Scripture, John Wesley's teachings, and the call to serve as faithful stewards of Christ's mission. It highlights critical areas such as fostering unity in diversity, embodying servant leadership, advocating for justice, and cultivating resilience and hope in a time of great change. These reflections aim to inspire conversations and actions that reflect our deepest values as a faith community.

For you, the delegates entrusted with this sacred responsibility, this document can serve as a valuable tool. It provides a framework for making decisions that align with our shared mission of making disciples and embodying God's love in the world.

Seven Guiding Principles:

1. Seek Unity in Diversity: Embrace differences while working toward unity in Christ, allowing love and peace to guide conversations and decisions.

- **Scripture:** "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3)
- **Reflection Question:** *How can we intentionally foster unity amid our diversity so that Christ's love is visible in all our actions and decisions?*

2. The Heart of a Servant: Choose leaders who exhibit Christ-like humility and serve others with selflessness rather than seeking power.

- **Scripture:** "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23:11-12)
- **Reflection Question:** *What qualities of humility and service should we prioritize in our candidates to ensure they lead with Christ-like servant hearts?*

3. Address Key Issues with Justice: Commit to making decisions that reflect fairness, compassion, and advocacy for justice, following Wesley's call to reform society.

- **Scripture:** “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24)
- **Reflection Question:** *What steps can we take to ensure that our decisions reflect the justice, inclusion, and mercy of Christ in the issues facing our church today?*

4. Commit to Prayer and Listening: Ground every decision in prayer and seek God's wisdom, trusting that through prayerful reflection, divine guidance will emerge.

- **Scripture:** “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” (James 1:5)
- **Reflection Question:** *How can we build a spirit of prayer and active listening into every part of our discussions and decisions during this Conference?*

5. Advance the Mission: Keep the Great Commission central to every decision, ensuring that making disciples of Jesus Christ remains the core mission of the church.

- **Scripture:** “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)
- **Reflection Question:** *How can we ensure that the mission of making disciples and transforming the world remains central in all that we decide and do in this gathering?*

6. Build a Healthy Church for the Next Generation: Create a church that is spiritually healthy and missionally engaged, adapting to new challenges while remaining faithful to the gospel.

- **Scripture:** “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” (Psalm 145:4)
- **Reflection Question:** *What steps can we take today to ensure that our church remains vibrant, faithful, and missionally effective for the next generation of believers?*

7. Cultivate Resilience and Hope: Foster a spirit of perseverance and hope, encouraging the church to rise above challenges with faith in God's promises.

- **Scripture:** “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)
- **Reflection Questions:** *How can we encourage resilience and hope in our communities during times of challenge and uncertainty?*

More than just a guide, this is an invitation to engage deeply with one another, ensuring that the future of the church is one that is filled with grace, wisdom, and a vision for generations to come.

I encourage you to take the time to read and reflect on the ideas presented here, to discuss them with your fellow delegates, and to let them shape your contributions to this historic moment.

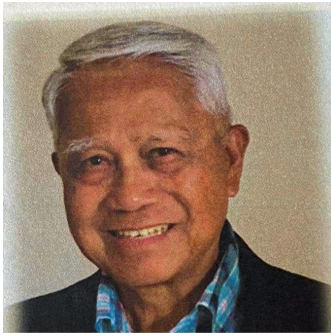
Together, let us move forward with hope, confidence, and a steadfast commitment to the mission of Christ.

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Rev. Bener Baysa Agtarap, Ph D., is an elder in the United Methodist Church of over 40 years, a full-member of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, and currently serves as the Executive Director of Path1 at Discipleship Ministries. Rev. Agtarap is an author, trainer, certified coach, and an adjunct professor and thesis advisor at Wesley Divinity School at the Wesleyan University – Philippines. He and his lovely wife, Talits, live in West Sacramento, CA. Website at <https://beneragtarap.com/about-bener/>



This is an excerpt of a longer piece. To read the full article, please scan this QR code or visit <http://nafaum.org/stories>



Life in the Old Hometown

Rev. Ben Vinluan

It's good to be home! Over the last 60 years, I've been away by choice. But for reasons not necessarily of my own making. Over that period, I've come home maybe 5 or 8 times. One of those was to bury my father. Each time I came home, the old place looked a little more different. And felt a little more strange. But I was still in love with it.

This particular session of the Philippines Central Conference is a watershed moment. For you may not have left our beloved Pilipinas to work elsewhere in the connection involving the diaspora. But left you have, nevertheless. You see, we all have been part of the imperial era of our beloved church. We may, or may not know it. But we were all unwitting participants in the life of the church we love, in a manner where we were not all "at home". We may have been here physically, but we might as well have been in Timbuktu. We spoke a strange language, where we tried to fit our culture, our mores, our tribal peculiarities and our traditions. Oh, we did quite well! Leave it up to the Filipino to make kalamansi drink out of life's lemons.

We've always longed for home. For some reason, we couldn't quite make it. We dreamed, for one, that autonomy would bring us home. Some of our best minds, highly schooled in the language of empire, and at home in the corridors of our imperial church's power, nodded in encouragement. But the tide of heightened interest came and went. Until, one day recently, regionalization became the center of interest. Not minding what it really meant at first, it reminded us more of the lost opportunity for autonomy. Never mind that regionalization is a product out of these shores we love. It is a product, even a blessing, that the dawn hailed at that Christmas Covenant of our beloved Philippines. From there it took the entire connection of the whole empire by storm. And because of it, the empire or the righteous remnant we now know as the renewed United Methodist Church, post Charlotte, will never be the same.

This regionalization that first saw the light of day right here at home is now the coin of the realm. Because of it, suddenly we are home. No more do we have to kowtow to the land of Uncle Sam for meaning and minutiae. Suddenly, Milton's "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. . ." gives us pause. Even makes us giddy with excitement and possibility. It may take time to figure this out. Noble enterprises take time to get used to. After the initial shock of reality, after the chaos of becoming, we will find ourselves truly at home, indeed. And what a joy it is, or will be. We will come to see the old hometown for what it is. It's been here all along. How patiently it had waited for us sons and daughters to come around. And for that, we know we did love the old hometown. And we do still love the old home, now the renewed United Methodist Church. Moored in the smells and sounds of home. We have loved so long, but left awhile.

Now I remember my late father, for whom I came home in one of those times to bury when his earthly time was up. My father in his dirt farmer's garb with the heart of gold. The best time I remember with him, he spoke to me with that shy smile. I confronted him with the question of a lifetime. He and I had hoped that his first born would become a successful lawyer in the old hometown. But one day God showed up in the echoes of a sermon by a Pastor named M. Valdez Garcia. In that preacher's mellow preaching voice, God thundered and called for God's people to give of their best. Not their leftovers. That was the calling I could not resist. That collided with the other dream shared with my father. So there we were face to face. After a long silence, my saintly father said to me, "Son, if that is what God is calling you, I do not wish to be in the way. I am honored that God finds you worthy."

The old hometown is where our dreams were born. This here is our old hometown. Our imperial United Methodist Church is imperial no more. Regionalization is the gift that allows us to bloom where we were born. Connected with others around the globe with the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, we're blessed with the freedom to be ourselves. With our best. Including our faults and our quirks. Warts and all. But we'd better as heck try our level best to make this new gift work to our advantage. Regionalization. To the glory of God.

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Rev. Ben Vinluan, formerly of the Northwest Philippines Annual Conference in the Baguio Episcopal Area, is a retired clergy member of the California-Pacific Annual Conference. In retirement, he remains actively involved in ministry, and edits the newly launched NAFAUM Connect newsletter of the National Association of Filipino-American United Methodists.

God is going to surprise us!

Rev. Edgar De Jesus

I read again the passage in the Gospel of Luke. The angel has just said to Mary, “God has a surprise for you” (Luke 1:29-33). I’m reading The Message transliteration, and its words sound fresh to my ears. Last month, God had a big surprise for my life — I would be the next World President of WesleyMen. (*Read the press release: <https://wesleymen.org/new-world-president/>*)

I’m deeply humbled and honored to be elected as the new leader of the World Fellowship of Methodist and Uniting Church Men, Inc. Also known as WesleyMen, it is the men’s affiliate organization of the World Methodist Council. It was created as a global connecting point of men’s ministry for Wesleyan, Methodist, and Uniting denominations. Its mission is to lead men in Christian Fellowship with a foundation rooted in the actions and words of Jesus Christ.

When I attended the World Methodist Conference in Sweden last August, I had no plan at all of taking another huge responsibility, much more to coordinate the men’s ministry of the World Methodist Council representing 80 million members in 138 countries. After all, I served six years as President of the NAFAUM and I’m on my fourth year serving as Vice President of New Federation of Asian American United Methodists (NFAAUM). Not only that, I’m also currently serving on fulltime pastoral appointment with two churches in the North Carolina Conference. My human side keeps on insisting that “I got too many things on my plate already and would not take another one!”



Rev. Edgar De Jesus (2nd from left) with other elected leaders of WesleyMen

But God is a God of surprises! God uses surprises to reveal His greater purpose and plan for our lives and to help us change the world for the better. God is reminding us that the Bible is filled with stories of individuals who are set on paths by God that are wildly different than what they planned. And though most of them responded by either running or hiding, God ultimately demonstrated His absolute sovereignty throughout each of their stories. God in His providence shows us that He can surprise us in the very best way.

Therefore, I would like to invite the NAFAUM community to do four things. First, please pray for me and for the WesleyMen. Second, I would like to invite you to follow our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/worldwesleymen>) and join our mailing list (<https://wesleymen.org/>).

Please share your stories on how you and your churches are leading men to Jesus Christ. The WesleyMen serves as “connectors” and “storytellers” about the wonderful things that God is doing through men’s ministry across the world. Third, please support the WesleyMen’s global movement to end hunger through FastPrayGive.org. We invite all the people called Methodists to fast one meal per week, pray during that time for people who are hungry, and give to those in need. Fourth, please pray for communities affected by Hurricane Helene and offer action (*Press release: <https://wesleymen.org/call-to-prayer-and-action-helene/>*).

Indeed, God is going to surprise us! Let us remain open to such surprises. Let us keep close to God and be focused on learning God’s will for our lives. Let us keep attuned to what God is doing and what God is saying to us. When we do those things, we may discover what that wonderful surprise is that God is waiting to reveal to us.

Rev. Edgar De Jesus is an ordained elder of The United Methodist Church, currently serving in the North Carolina Annual Conference. He is the immediate past president of NAFAUM.

Thank God I'm a United Methodist

Ruby Ramos-Bago

"Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, His love endures forever." (Psalm 136:1, NRSV).



My name is Ruby Ramos Bago. I was born and raised in Muzon, Malabon, Rizal, where my parents and other relatives were staunch Methodists. That's where, as a child, I saw that we were different from others because we were called "Protestante" or "Metodista." I did not really know what those words meant, but my parents loved and enjoyed being a part of, and even served as leaders of the church. I grew up in an environment of love and gracious living.

My family and I now live in Clovis, California, after my parents immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Fresno. Being devout Methodists, they yearned for a place to worship as Methodists. That made them instrumental in the founding of First Filipino United Methodist Church of Fresno. They were pillars of that church for many years.

I am proud to say I'm part of the United Methodist Church because of my heritage. I believe in the Wesleyan theology of grace rooted in scripture; faith in the life, death, resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, all hallmarks of our Wesleyan heritage that make faith alive for me.

I am grateful to my mother who have allowed me to stand on her shoulder for me to reach my dreams. My mother, my mentor, my hero, my role model and my best friend forever, would always remind me that everything I accomplished is for the glory of God. We can do greatly if we put God first in our life. It was through her vision, that the first Filipino United Methodist Church in Fresno came into fruition. Beyond just physically birthing me, I would not even be here today if it were not for my mother. She taught me that life doesn't revolve around me. And life is not always about me.

Yes, it was my mother who encouraged and influenced me to be in the laity ministry. I saw the joy in her life being a lay servant. She was all hands on deck, very decisive, never hesitated to commit to give her service to church life and ministry. She was never afraid to take on difficult tasks. She readily sought to admit if she was wrong and humbly owning up and used it as an opportunity for growth.

Looking back, during the postponed 2020 General Conference, we have all seen that God was doing something new in our beloved United Methodist Church. And, in my life God has done wonderful things. In the church, in my life, and in yours we have an awesome God who is always there in every season of our lives.

The General Conference of United Methodist Church meets every four years. This is the decision-making and policy-setting body of our Church. The postponed 2020 General Conference has been my third time to be part of General Conference delegation of California-Nevada Annual Conference and also part of the longest serving delegation to GC. This time, I would say it was most significant. Those who had been in attendance in the previous GC can see the difference from previous sessions of General Conference. Looking back, the previous ones were conflict driven; there were divided gatherings with their own hidden agendas. This year was so uplifting beyond measure. It was joyful, not bitter. There was collaboration and unity like the wall has been taken down, breaking the wall of hostility. God has shown how good it is when we come and work together in harmony.

The postponed 2020 General Conference has led the church in welcoming LGBTQ+ folks. The work we have done altogether has changed the Methodist movement. A long awaited and marvelous change has happened as most people commented.

The most remarkable thing that happened during the postponed 2020 General Conference was the approval of legislation on Regionalization. The World wide Regionalization legislation will create equity across the church without giving special privileges to any one region. The UMC in the USA will become a regional conference with the same powers and responsibilities as all other regions. Outside the US, the central conferences will change their name to become regional conference.

But for all these to take effect, ratification by all annual conferences is required. Other actions taken by General Conference include revision of the Social Principles, removal of exclusionary language, decreased general church apportionment percentage, new clergy retirement plan, allowing Deacons to offer sacraments in their ministry setting, and the reduction of active US bishops to 32 for the next quadrennium.

God is really doing a new thing in our United Methodist world. Being a United Methodist defines who I am. Knowing where I came from, knowing my family traditions help me embrace my culture and learn to appreciate the beauty of it. It also gives me the feeling of self worth to know my roots. It represents my values, a sense of belonging and strength. I consider it a treasure and would like my children to keep and it share with the next generation. My cultural heritage is my identity and my United Methodist DNA defines me. My heritage allows me to bridge what it means to be Asian in America.

Let us celebrate and be thankful because God is continuing to do a new thing. We are called to serve God by caring for each other. As United Methodists, we need to live out our own charter for racial justice which states that all persons are of equal value in the sight of God. And racism is an affront to God because we were made in the image of our Maker. It is a rejection of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. As John Wesley put it, "Though we may not all think alike, may we not all love alike?"

RUBY RAMOS BAGO, RN, is one of the most recognizable laity leaders in the California-Nevada Annual Conference and in United Methodist circles in the U.S. for her dedication and commitment as a servant leader. She is a former President of NAFAUM.

DEACONESS RETIREMENT FUND

A continuing advocacy for the Deaconess Movement

Dss. Dr. Emma A. Cantor

Throughout the years, deaconesses' welfare has always been a central concern of the foremothers of the Deaconess Movement. They have worked tirelessly to support the ministry of the deaconesses. Deaconess Homes, such as Decker Home in Manila and Mindanao, are spaces for their continuing leadership development in addition to the medical assistance provided and a pension fund initiated. These ongoing programs are just few of the initiatives of the Deaconess Movement that help renew the strength and spirit of the Deaconesses, enabling them to continue their vital ministry with renewed energy and purpose.

Among all programs, the Deaconess Pension was supposed to be given more priority but in reality receives lesser support. Nonetheless, our foremothers cherished hope that someday the Retirement Pension Fund will reach sustainability and stability to give the deaconesses their deserved benefits.

We thank our foremothers who had vision of putting up a retirement and pension fund for deaconesses as an expression of dignity and respect to the call of God to be in the service. The funds of the retirement and pension plan initially came from the balance of the donation that the deaconesses received from a donor in the United States in 1968 for the operation of Decker Home, a retirement home for deaconesses. This project was under the leadership of the late Dr. Prudencia Fabro who was then a resident of Decker Home and secretary of United Methodist Women's Work Foundation Incorporation. By then, the idea of pension for deaconesses was planted. The deaconesses themselves contribute to the pension on their own initiative and commitment. They contribute, build, and take care for the pension funds to grow.



Effective June 1, 2003, the “Deaconess Retirement and Pension Plan” was approved as tax- exempt by the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR). In 2008, under the leadership of Ms. Karen Prudente, the United Methodist Women (now United Women in Faith) granted a significant amount to the Deaconess Pension Fund to establish the Actuarial Plan, which was subsequently approved by the BIR. *(2024 Deaconess Retirement & Pension Fund Brochure)*



PATH TO PENSION SUPPORT

Many years back, the PCC- Board of Pension for Clergy extended an invitation to the Deaconess Committee on Pension to consider merging Deaconess and Clergy investments. Deaconess Pension Committee carefully deliberated on this proposal, taking into account key factors such as the following:

- At that time, Deaconess Pension held a greater amount of investments compared to the Clergy Pension (Ms. Prudencia Fabro time)
- Deaconesses were already contributing to their pension, whereas clergy members were receiving subsidies from the church.
- The number of clergy is more than that of deaconesses.

Taking these factors into consideration, the Deaconess Committee declined the merger of funds, but kept the doors of opportunity to remain open. The PCC- Clergy Board of Pension raised funds but excluded the deaconesses in the program. The Deaconess Committee on Pension, on the other hand, now seek support from the PCC-BOP, utilizing the funds they have raised, emphasizing that clergy and deaconesses are essential workers within the UMC.

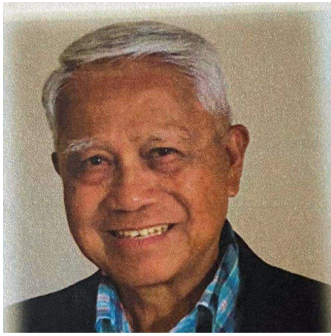
Following a series of discussions, the Deaconess Movement proposed forming a Deaconess Pension Study Committee to address the current state of Deaconess Work and their diverse contemporary ministries. We will review the proposal for a merger and, in the spirit of Micah 6:8—seeking justice, mercy, and humility before God—legitimately request the PCC - Board of Pension for fair treatment from the Fund, advocating for an equitable share for Deaconesses. As Isaiah 1:18 reminds us to "come now, and let us reason together," we will continue to challenge the PCC-BOP on the significance of the Deaconess Ministry within the church structure. Perhaps then, in God’s grace and in the spirit of unity (Psalm 133:1), our prayers for inclusion in the benefits program for workers will extend to the Deaconess Movement as well.

We are deeply grateful to all deaconesses who devoted their life to perfect advocacy and pass on the challenge and inspiration to the next generation. To ensure the sustainability of the Pension Fund and secure benefits for current and future deaconesses, we must raise ₱30 million, as outlined in the Actuarial Study. This is a call to action—let us work together in faith and determination to meet this goal, ensuring that the legacy of care and support for deaconesses continues for generations to come.

The Deaconess Movement have journeyed together, overcame challenges , and became victorious together. We will continue to be in unity for this purpose and wait patiently, for we know that in all things God works together for the good of those who love Him, remaining still before the Lord and waiting patiently for His perfect timing.

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Dss Dr. EMMA A. CANTOR, of the United Methodist Church Commission on Deaconess Service, is among the most consequential deaconess leaders in the Deaconess Movement in the Philippines, and was a United Women in Faith Missionary, now retired.



Values in the Whirlwind

Rev. Ben Vinluan

“. . .the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
Who is this that darkens counsel with words
without knowledge?” . (Job. 38:1, NRSV);

The media the last few days have carried the story of a Van Gogh painting, Vase with Flowers, that was salvaged by a collector from a junk heap years ago. The collector took it home, and his family was not impressed. They thought it odd and ugly so he allowed his wife to display it in a spot where it was not readily seen. To protect himself from predatory collectors, he registered it with authorities. That's when the debate over its authenticity started that went on for many years. Last month, it was declared to be authentic Van Gogh by art experts. Now instead of it being a cheap imitation and practically worthless, it will be worth millions at auction.

Job's thankless quest for validation seemed finally at an end. It wasn't in the temple, with the music of choirs of angels. It was in the face of a whirlwind. What a test of his vaunted tenacious and unwavering faith. But for all his unshakable faith that God would still pay heed to him, and of his confidence that God was not a distant and inscrutable deity, God finally addressed him as if God never knew him. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" But it was validation, nevertheless, far and away more precious than the markup of millions of a painting deemed a worthless imitation. The priceless value of God's gaze finally tuned to him. He had shown, above his friends' opprobrium, or merciless reproach and criticism, that God listens, and responds, and that it was possible to relate personally with God. More importantly, Job discovered and showed that owning up to his smallness is a truly valuable asset in his relationship with God.

The search for validation can become an unconscious preoccupation. Facebook, and other media tools, are all useful resources in the pursuit of meaning and value, especially in the journey of faith and life. But they could take inordinate portions of our time and effort. So there's the need to be alert to the promptings of our call amidst all the opportunities and tasks that are consistent with the values we pursue, and stances we take. Early in ministry, I found it possible and superficially valuable to hobnob and rub elbows with local public servants (read that politicians). I even got an ego boost when asked to ghost write one or two candidate's campaign speech. The point is that it could be intoxicating to get caught up in the whirl of extraneous pursuits and activities in the hope that it could be a means of reaching people for ministry. Or validation of the values we embrace. So it behooves us to know where our heart is, relative to our propensity to listen to the siren songs of popular approval, over against the "still, small voice" of the Spirit.

A friend, writing in an email from Manila wrote, “Ben, it is complicated here. When you come, I wish you to be well.” I take that to be a microcosm of how things are in the church we all love – The United Methodist Church in the Philippines – like we do all other regions in the connection. I’m stunned to know and hear of groups bailing. It is telling that it seems to be happening with relative ease. People are just now beginning to take stock, and raising questions. Many are beginning to take sides without benefit of informed counsel or consultations other than whom they consider kindly between what now are competing groups.

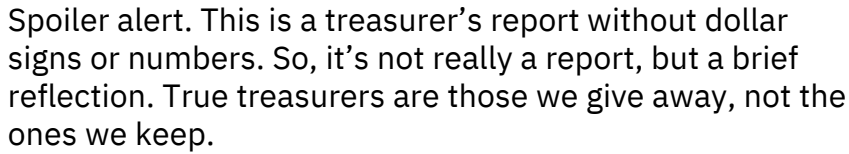
We are in a veritable whirlwind in the church in the Philippines now too, as other areas were the last two years. We need the Job experience hearing God out of the whirlwind. We may be those that “darkens counsel without knowledge.” Job, in the face of it, had the presence of mind, indeed, the faith, the humility, to see himself, as we all need to, as small in the presence of God. That, in God’s book, is of enormous value. And it is of such enormous value as we tackle what the church is about in this new era of regionalization. To see it as truly a new day of opportunity to witness to the God who loves us. The Philippines Central Conference finds itself before the whirlwind.

A call might be perceptible in the voice that comes out of that whirlwind. God’s gaze is upon us, especially the Central Conference and its leaders and delegates. And pivotal decisions made. Let those decisions be truly Spirit-motivated. For the church is of God, as our Book of Discipline says. God is with us. And like our forebears, we celebrate God’s presence with becoming humility, grace and joyous faithfulness. AMEN.

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Rev. Ben Vinluan, formerly of the Northwest Philippines Annual Conference in the Baguio Episcopal Area, is a retired clergy member of the California-Pacific Annual Conference. In retirement, he remains actively involved in ministry, and edits the newly launched NAFAUM Connect newsletter of the National Association of Filipino-American United Methodists.

Prospero Tumonong



As the one who records these transactions, I've been privileged to witness the amazing generosity of Filipinos in diaspora in the US in their giving to NAFAUM. I am also witness to the incredible generosity of time and talents of the NAFAUM leadership in working to secure support from the general church agencies and their friends. True to her objectives, NAFAUM has been an advocate for Filipino causes and needs and a conduit of the primary flow of God's grace. Let me count the ways...

- My dear friends, on behalf of NAFAUM, I acknowledge with deep gratitude your invaluable support. As disciples of Jesus Christ, our participation in his mission is our common calling and in so doing, we usher in the transformation of the world! Joy and Peace!

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