

# NAFAUM Connect

*News Worthy of the Truth*

Official Newsletter of the National Association of Filipino-American United Methodists

## CONTENTS

Esguerra Steps Forward 1

From the President's Desk 6

Editorial 7

Harris Memorial College: A Snapshot  
Built to Become: The living legacy of Harris Memorial College 9

God's Call 11

My Call 13

Pastoring After 80: Defining the R Word 14

Meditatin: The Spirit at Work 17

Ben Vinluan – Editor

Mighty Rasing – Associate Editor

Joy Hayag – Web Administrator

## Esguerra Steps Forward

Paglago/Vitality Commission Resurges Anew

By Rev. Dr. Ben Vinluan

*“...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40: 31, NIV).*

The Rev. Dr. Enrico Esguerra has recently been named the new chairperson of Paglago/Vitalization Commission, the program arm of the National Association of Filipino American United Methodists. That is a very significant development in our community of faith in America, in the rest of diaspora and in the Philippines, where the influence and ministries of NAFAUM appropriately extend. This article seeks to show the story behind Paglago/ Vitalization Commission, as well as underscore the reason for our excitement about the program's new leader.

Paglago is a term in Pilipino which means growth. It is indicative of strides being made, and progress as an outcome of a community's collective and dedicated action toward a desired goal. In our case, that goal was the growing and thriving of a vital and dynamic community of faithful, witnessing United Methodists.

Paglago was originally a brainchild of three visionary NAFAUM leaders from the California-Nevada Annual Conference, now all gone to their eternal rest – the Rev. David Rodriguez, the Rev. Arturo Capuli & the Rev. Ruth Ocera Cortez. Its evolution to become the program end of NAFAUM is a lived metaphor of what Paglago actually means. And it bears sharing. I remember exactly how it took place, at the Auditorium of Claremont School of Theology in July, 1999. It was the last plenary of the NAFAUM Convocation. The Rev. Leo Constantino was President, but he had asked the Vice President, Rev. Ben Vinluan, to preside in his stead in order to enable him to attend to some personal matter. I had the privilege of taking care of mostly housekeeping items, before adjourning and prepare for an extravaganza of a program dubbed “NAFAUM in Hollywood.” Rodriguez had spoken to me about his vision at some point during the convocation, but no written presentation was forthcoming. As the chair, I recognized him for a turn to speak when he asked to do so, hoping to have a quick wrap-up. But he spoke with such passion for church growth – at a time when most Filipinos were unsure about the future of congregational development. He had the support of his cohorts Arturo Capuli and Ruth Ocera Cortez.

There was some sentiment to move on and pass the issue to the next Convocation two years later – in Iowa. But sensing the importance of the issue, the chair asked about approving it in principle, for Paglago to become the Program end of NAFAUM. Rodriguez came up with a handwritten motion in two parts: approving it in principle, and creating a special task force to report to the next Convocation for feasibility and launching at that time. The vote came out unanimous. The rest, for NAFAUM and its program end, Paglago, is history.

Now fast forwarding from 1999, we will see how the new and exciting era unfold, one we might call the Esguerra Era. The Rev. Dr. Enrico Esguerra, Pastor of a two-point charge in the Illinois Great Rivers Annual conference, is stepping forward to lead and chair the Paglago/Vitality Commission for this biennium and, hopefully, beyond. He fills a vacuum created when the previously elected chair needed to vacate for new and emerging ministry priorities. But he assumes the leadership of this program on the shoulders of leaders who have blessed NAFAUM and gave glory to God for the foundational endeavors they have given with love since the inception of the program in 1999, and its launching in 2001 at Simpson College, Iowa. A listing of those who have thus given of themselves reads like a “who’s who” of exceptionally dedicated and principled leaders in our community, and still risks being incomplete. That includes Ruth Ocera Cortez, Arturo Capuli, David Rodriguez, Leo Constantino, Fred Agtarap, Estan Cueto, Leo V. Tipay, Jr., Pong Javier, Jr., Benoni SilvaNetto; Miguel de Guzman, Neal Platon & Ben Vinluan, 2001 NAFAUM Secretary & President, respectively; Mark Marcos, Ofelia Macapugay, Laddie Galang, Debbie Dillon, & Pros Tomunong, our tireless Treasurer; Adiel de Pano, Edgar de Jesus & Nelson Castorillo, Levi LaGuardia, Eduardo & Amy Cajuat, Hemesias Ares, Patti Agustin, Dante Simon, Alex Vergara, David Valera, Liberato Bautista. Mariano Santos of Chicago, and Tony & Becky Doles of the Los Angeles Area were very generous of their support of NAFAUM and of Paglago in time, effort and of their money. There were other lay folks that helped along, specially contributing to the Paglago Fund in our time deposit account who will have to remain anonymous. Last but not least are Ruby Bago and Bener Agtarap – to whom we now turn.

The NAFAUM Convocation in 2011 at Campbell, California was a watershed specially for Paglago/Vitality Commission. Ruby Bago, one of our very able, homegrown laity leaders within our Filipino American community, was elected in Dallas President for the biennium 2009 – 2011. That convocation – Campbell, CA in 2011, came up with a plan to reboot Paglago/Vitality commission. That plan and its implementation paved the way for fresh new thinking and action, making possible new strides into the ensuing years until the present.

To answer the obvious question of how consistently we, as a community, seemed to always find our way through the maze of challenges, we go back to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The idea of us Filipino Americans consistently finding a meeting of the minds to accomplish a common goal and purpose, let alone in the area of faith and witness was, and still is, easier said than done. Bonding was enhanced by our biennial convocations. The mentoring presence of

of staff from the general boards, especially the General Board of Church and Society, General Commission on Religion and Race, the General Board of Discipleship were invaluable resources through which the Spirit strengthened and empowered us. This was especially true about the Board of Global Ministries since our very formation. Ruth Prudente was among the very first that patiently worked with us in seeking to articulate creation of National Fellowship of Filipino-American United Methodists back in Indianapolis and again 4 years later in San Francisco in 1984. The same was true with Edwin Francisco of GBGM who patiently resourced us with regard to available funds in that general Board.

The late Manny Espartero, who preceded Dr. Levi Bautista at the General Board of Church and Society always lent his presence and support not only through convocations, but assisted in locating general resources available through the special funding generated by the General Conference. Thus, the mentoring presence of Rev. Dr. Bener Agtarap in 2011 in Campbell, CA. was consistent with what took place through the years. Agtarap by that time had become effective in making an impact at the General Board of Discipleship, and made himself available to NAFAUM as we struggled with the challenges of making it truly live up to its potential. He believed in and saw the great potential of Paglago.

When the Convocation convened in Campbell, Agtarap wasted no time in getting down to brass tacks, working with the special task force headed by Ruby Bago. He and the task force work laser-like in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the program. The effort yielded a revitalized program. It got a new identity as Paglago/Vitalization Commission. NAFAUM approved a plan to partner with the General Board of Discipleship. It does continue to come under oversight and control of the Board of Directors of NAFAUM. The new set of goals and objectives of the program has given it a new lease on life, as it operates under the close mentorship of Dr. Agtarap in close partnership with the General Board of Discipleship's Path I and its various expressions and evolutions, under and in cooperation with the NAFAUM Board.

Details of this new set of goals and objectives are available through Dr. Agtarap and, of course, through Dr. Esguerra as well once he is settled in. Under this new set up, the new program has seen the unfolding of new and exciting possibilities, under the leadership of the Rev. Nelson Castorillo, who assumed leadership of the program in 2017. Dr. Agtarap and a team of dedicated program planners got busy following the needed revamp of Paglago in 2011 at Campbell, a work that overlapped and extended beyond the regular biennia. When the next convocation met in Manila in 2018, a new tandem leadership emerged with the Rev. Edgar de Jesus President, and Castorillo continuing in the role of chair of the program arm of NAFAUM. Both of them proved able to effectively pick up on the excellent preparations made under the tutelage of Dr. Agtarap. The result was a good measure of collective appreciation over reported successes shared in Honolulu in 2023.

There was good reason for optimism over the choice of Rev. Dr. Bong Sarmiento as the new chair then and there. Unfortunately, emerging choices and priorities for ministry made him decide to resign, creating a hiatus over the next two years. The move to choose a new leader fell on the 18th Convocation in Clovis, CA last summer. The choice of Esguerra happened at a perfect time, both in regard to the need as well as to the apparent quality of leadership that he makes available and is ready to offer.

The Rev. Dr. Enrico Esguerra, (he says please call me Rico) is a member of the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference. Serving a two-point charge of the Wesley UMC in Bradley and St. Mark's UMC in Kankakee in the North District, now into his sixth year in the area, he is married to Myra D. Esguerra. They have 3 musically gifted children.

Pastor Esguerra originally came from the Manila Area. His initial focus in life was in business, where he rose through the ranks and became a manager of a Macdonald's fast food chain. His life interest in business & educational management was undergirded by educational work done at San Sebastian, Philippine Christian & Philippine Normal universities, all in Manila. He was all set and well prepared for a fulfilling career in business. Except one early morning, he was driving at a fast clip on one of the new expressways around metro Manila, when a six-wheeler truck stalled in front of him, making it impossible for him to avoid a violent crash. In an amazingly improbable outcome— perhaps miraculously, which confounded witnesses, he walked away unscathed.

In a major move and in an act of faith, he walked away from what already was a promising life and career. We next find him bent on the ministry. We commend the church leaders that recognized a promising church servant leader when they saw one in him. He found his way and in his studies at Union Theological Seminary of the Philippines. It seems he took the school of the prophets by a storm, because he ended up getting not only the basic Master of Divinity but, later the graduate professional Doctor of ministry degree as well.

He tended to experience a meteoric rise in ministry, where he became first the Administrative Assistant to the Manila Area episcopal head, the Rev. Dr. Rodolfo Juan, at the time the most senior member of the active Philippine College of Bishops. That was 2013. By 2014 he was appointed superintendent of the Metro North District of the Philippines Annual Conference. Somehow his inimitable spirit of service abroad was making him restless. So in 2018 – just before pandemic struck, he decided to take up the challenge of ministry in the United States, after months of discernment and prayer. Now he finds himself serving churches in in a North District – not in Manila Area, but in the Illinois Great Conference of the Chicago area of The United Methodist church. I must hasten to add – what you all probably guessed, that Brother Rico is an inveterate learner.

For all the educational preparations he already has under his belt, he has done on line work, or is currently involved in one or two. He's done on line work at Harvard, on foundational principles of leadership; doing JD on line at San Beda University. All that, on top of being full time pastor of two churches. They say that it's usually the busy professional who has extra time to share where the need comes calling for the sake of faithful witness. That we have in the Rev. Dr. Rico Esguerra, our new chair of the Paglago/Vitalization Commission, NAFAUM.



*Rev. Dr. Ben Vinluan, a retired pastor of 43 years in ministry both in the Philippines and at Cal-Pac Conference, Los Angeles Area, loves to hang around NAFAUM to help where needed to make us all a means of grace.*



**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
FILIPINO-AMERICAN UNITED  
METHODISTS (NAFAUM)**

**19th CONVOCAATION**  
**Aug 3-6, 2027**  
**Chicago, IL**

# From the President's Desk

By Karen G. Prudente



Peace be with you! The 2026 Lenten season started on February 18th in a continued midst of challenging events in American society, especially government forces attacking its populace on race and immigration issues. The USA has been a diverse landscape of cultures; however, there are some currently in power who wish otherwise. Epstein files and human trafficking, genocide in Gaza and Ukraine, the invasion of Venezuela, threats on Greenland and Cuba plus the floodgate corruption in the Philippines, add to the mix.

On top of that, on February 28 the current USA administration with help of Israel attacked Iran to halt its nuclear arsenal build-up without allies and Congressional insights. New forms of military exchanges using drones and short-range missiles and the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz have shown the world's interdependence geopolitically. Civilians are caught in the barrage of power grabbing. And, it is not over yet. Thus, this Lenten season has required prayers of courage, spiritual reflection and repentance for humanity's behaviors and one's bold personal actions.

This Easter, as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, we hope for humility and sanity to end any forms of aggression. No one wins in a war except the arms manufacturers and brokers. This Easter we seek the Prince of Peace to reign. This Easter we need to awaken from temptations in our wildernesses. This Easter we need to radically love our neighbors to atone and be like Jesus who gave his life to share God's unconditional love so that we find salvation from humanity's sins..

As Filipino-Americans, we play a vital role in American Christianity and the broader diaspora. We revitalize churches, bridge cultural divides, and integrate faith with social justice and community building. As the second largest immigrant community in the United States, we have the opportunity to reshape American Christianity and religious life through our devotional practices, family-focused values and active community participation. Let us be leaders of peace wherever God sends us to live and serve.

# EDITORIAL

## Citizens, and Still Strangers

By Ben Vinluan, Editor

In the '80s, there was a thin volume of a book titled "Stranded No Longer." Written by Rev. Dr. Alejandro Ramos, who joined us at NAFAUM after its founding in 1984, the book enjoyed some popular appeal around the church on both sides of the aisle. In some parts, it was required reading in schools and colleges. For readers among Filipino-Americans and other people of color, Ramos captured the eager sense of belonging by that of being accepted for who and what we are. Whether that was an actual reality did not seem to matter. The book's popularity among Caucasian readers was partly due to Ramos' acknowledgement of the seeming magnanimity of that community toward people of color, especially toward Filipinos. I believed that may also have been due to the euphoria engendered by the overall effects of the implementation of the Immigration and Nationality Act following its passage in 1965. Dr. Ramos, who was a member of the Minnesota Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church was, before he immigrated to the United States, a houseboy of J. B. Holt, a long time missionary Pastor of Knox Memorial Methodist Church in Manila. He did not stay long with NAFAUM, but he was an ardent supporter, and long enough to work with me to write the original NAFAUM Constitution and by-laws that we just recently revised. He passed away in 2021.

The idea of having made it, or had finally arrived in life with some measure of relative comfort in America for Filipino Americans and other people of color now may seem totally strange, especially in Trump's America.

Or even hollow. A flawed vision of America as just something for the white people that first got themselves established, has taken hold of many Americans in recent years. This same stance has dogged the republic soon after its establishment in 1776. It had taken great minds and even greater leaders to be a buffer, to enable the country to take the high moral and political grounds to overcome it. Leaders like Abraham Lincoln, and others during, and those who followed him after the civil war, succeeded in positioning America to be a beacon of political openness, equity and inclusion. But continued and consistent success in that regard had ever and always remained an ongoing challenge requiring eternal vigilance. The grassroots conflicts, exacerbated by Protestant-Roman Catholic animosities during the period of the Know Nothings, and their Know Nothing Party; and of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and beyond, were manifestations of that strain, fueled by religious and racial hatred where Methodist and other clergy were involved, especially in the latter. Today that conflict remains as a strong undercurrent of American life, being accurately documented by vigilant organizations dedicated to justice and inclusion like the Southern Poverty Law Center of Birmingham, Alabama.

The xenophobic turn in governance in the hands of those who devised the once secretive Project 2025 have now shown beyond a doubt what hatred of others outside of the white nativist enclave can do. We have seen the meanness of spirit, and unabashed cruelty inflicted upon those considered alien under the guise of governance.

We have seen constitutional guarantees about residency and citizenship upended and twisted in order to deny the rightful place of many among us with the slightest pretext or even by manufactured evidence. To be sure many are able to successfully push back. But the whole thing violates due process to which all are supposed to be entitled under normal circumstances; and shown propensity to get away with so much that is patently wrong and abhorrent. We are at the moment confronted by dangers we need carefully to apprehend as people of color. Given the arc of history, and our Christian understanding of events and of time, we can take comfort that it would be a matter of when, not if, this too, will pass.

Meanwhile, the sweet strains of Ramos' book, *Stranded No Longer*, may continue to be held just as a sweet, faintly held dream a while longer. It's not comforting to realize that buying into the American dream, embracing all the duties and responsibilities of citizenship and living into what is constitutionally guaranteed, nevertheless may entail being considered still strangers in your own home. But for all that, the consolation is that we share with the Lord the view that his kingdom is not of this world.



*Rev. Dr. Ben Vinluan, a retired clergy member of the California-Pacific Conference, Los Angeles area, lives in Covina, CA. His is a neighborhood of many different ethnicity where none is a stranger, and everybody feels cared about; and where he knows everyone by their names.*

**Comments, Reactions, & Suggestions**

**Send us an email:**

**[umcnafaum@gmail.com](mailto:umcnafaum@gmail.com)**

# Harris Memorial College: A Snapshot

## Built to Become: The living legacy of Harris Memorial College

by Erica Jazleen R. Tuliao

Every school day begins the same way, though not in the way one might expect. Not with a bell, but with a question that lingers in quiet spaces, between footsteps, in the pause before a class begins. What am I becoming? At Harris Memorial College, this question is not drowned out by routine. It is met with intention, shaped with care, and, in time, answered.

For more than a century, Harris has existed in that space between learning and becoming. Founded in 1903 by Methodist missionaries as a Bible training school for young women, the institution was built on a vision that remains clear today. Education should transform not only the mind, but the whole person. While its programs have grown and its systems modernized, Harris continues to form students grounded in faith, guided by values, and driven by purpose.

### **A tradition that shapes, not just teaches**

At Harris Memorial College, values are not simply written in handbooks or displayed on walls. They are lived daily in classrooms, hallways, and shared spaces. Academic excellence, responsible citizenship, mission-driven service, and servant leadership are not abstract ideals but guiding practices that shape how students think, act, and relate to others.

As Dr. Rosalyn L. Ward, Basic Education Principal, emphasizes, “The core values are intentionally lived out in everyday school life.” Students are not only formed to succeed academically, but to carry integrity and purpose into every achievement.

Faith remains central to this formation. Biblical principles are integrated into learning, allowing students to connect knowledge with life. Chapel services, devotions, and outreach programs form part of the school’s rhythm, reinforcing the idea that education does not end in the classroom—it extends into character, choices, and service.

### **Formation in the everyday**

If Harris is defined by a clear mission, it is carried out through consistent practice. Transformation is not reserved for defining moments; it unfolds gradually in everyday encounters—in lessons, conversations, and school life.

For teacher Dexon Bobis, this is where formation becomes tangible. “I integrate school values by promoting respect, encouraging critical thinking, and allowing students to ask and explore questions,” he said. For him, readiness is not measured by grades alone, but by a student’s ability to think independently, apply learning meaningfully, and make responsible decisions. These are the lessons that remain long after examinations are over.

This same philosophy extends beyond the classroom. In the registrar’s office, service takes on a deeper meaning. “Enrollment is not just a system. It is a sacred ministry,” said Rev. Dr. Cristine C. Atrero. Students are not treated as entries in a record, but as individuals with stories, struggles, and potential.

“We don’t just assist. We affirm, uplift, and minister,” she added. In this way, even administrative work becomes part of a larger mission of formation—where every interaction contributes to a student’s growth as a person.

### **Becoming beyond the campus**

The impact of Harris does not end at its gates. What is formed within its walls continues to shape how students think, lead, and live beyond graduation. For Cedric Magnata, a Harris alumnus and former student leader, the school’s influence became clearer through experiences that challenged him to grow. Leadership, he realized, was not defined by position or recognition, but by responsibility, service, and faith in action.

“Through the many opportunities the school offered, I was able to grow into the person I am today, someone who faces challenges head-on, guided by faith in God,” he said. His experience reflects a deeper truth shared by many Harris graduates—that success is not only about achievement, but about purpose-driven living and commitment to serve others.

### **A journey that continues**

By midday, the campus is lively and active, yet beneath it all, Harris Memorial College remains grounded in its core belief: education is not just about achievements, but about shaping who students become. Here, students are not rushed toward outcomes but guided through a formation that is intentional, and lasting. The question that begins each day never truly disappears. It lingers in classrooms, surfaces in moments of uncertainty, and is reflected in acts of service and quiet decisions. In time, it is no longer just a question they ask. It becomes a life they live .

*Note: A great majority of Filipino pastors and other religious workers in the United States and elsewhere have come, and received excellent training and education from, top quality church related colleges and universities in the Philippines. Harris Memorial College is one of them. This article was solicited to enable the church to have a glimpse of how these institutions equip servant leaders for the important roles they play in the life of the church in today’s world. -Ed.*



**Erica Jazleen R. Tuliao**, High School Senior, Harris Memorial College, Taytay, Rizal, Philippines, under the guidance of Rev. Dr. Cristine Carnate-Atrero, Registrar & Chaplain, Harris Memorial College.

## God's Call

By Rev. Dante Garibay

*"I will serve You now even without heaven."* This was my innocent declaration when I was finally caught by the long hands of God, our heavenly Father.

I was born into a family deeply rooted in the Methodist tradition. On my father's side, my grandfathers were pastors who pioneered mission work in Anda, Pangasinan, and even as far as Mindanao. I also have four uncles who devoted many years serving as clergy in the Lord's vineyard. I grew up in a Methodist household where many relatives, both men and women, were actively involved in church work. To me, their number already seemed more than enough for one family, and I never imagined that I would become one of them.

From childhood, I was immersed in church life through Sunday School and Vacation Church School, and I remained active throughout my college years. I served as an officer in the youth organization, not only in our local church but also at the district and annual conference levels. I was appointed as a lay minister for two years by our District Superintendent, who persistently encouraged me to enter the pastoral ministry. However, during the time of the Martial Law regime, a different passion grew in my heart. I desired to become a lawyer to defend the poor and victims of injustice. Although I completed a degree in Education, I intended to pursue this new calling. Yet, things did not unfold as I had planned.

Year after year, I was asked whether I had considered entering the ministry. I was even elected as District Lay Leader. Over time, four district superintendents came and went, and each one encouraged me to become a pastor, but I declined every time.

At that time, I needed to earn money to continue my legal studies. I ventured into the fish business, which proved to be profitable. However, everything came to a halt when the 7.2 magnitude earthquake in 1990 struck. Dalton Pass, the only route to Isabela and Quirino provinces where my market was located, was closed for more than three months, forcing my business to shut down. I returned to Anda feeling defeated and discouraged. In 1992, I entered politics and ran for municipal councilor under the ticket of Gen. Fidel V. Ramos for president. I was a strong youth candidate and outspoken on many social issues, and I belonged to the largest religious denomination in the municipality, where I also held a leadership role. Although Gen. Ramos won, I lost the election by a very narrow margin. That experience left me feeling that life was unfair and harsh, and I nearly lost hope.

Despite everything, I remained active in the church, continuing my involvement in meetings and leadership roles. In 1993, I married my longtime acquaintance and fellow youth leader. Five months into our marriage, she began experiencing unusual pain throughout her body. As time passed, the pain worsened, affecting her from head to toe. We sought medical help and tried various treatments, but nothing worked. The pain persisted and became debilitating. She even underwent an MRI, which at that time was rare and expensive, but no abnormalities were found. Gradually, she lost hope and refused further medication, crying daily from both pain and despair.

On August 18, 1994, at about three in the afternoon, I was traveling to Tarlac City to purchase supplies for our photocopying business. While riding a Philippine Rabbit bus and sitting alone, I thought of my wife, whom I had left at home in tears and losing hope of recovery. Overcome with emotion, I prayed quietly, *“Lord, I know You are powerful. If You truly want me to become a pastor, please heal my wife, and I will serve You now even without heaven.”*

After that prayer, a deep and inexplicable peace filled my heart. I continued my trip, completed my errand, and returned home. I immediately shared my prayer with my wife, and she simply smiled, as she had long been encouraging me to enter the ministry.

Days passed into weeks, and weeks into months. During that time, she experienced no pain and took no medication. In quiet amazement, I came to realize that even before I reached my point of surrender, God had already been calling me. Like Samuel, who at first did not recognize God’s voice and needed Eli’s guidance, I too had failed to recognize God’s call, even though He had sent several people to lead me.

The following year, my new home church in Paniqui, Tarlac recommended me to the Charge Conference, and I was accepted as a candidate for the ministry during the Annual Conference held at Mababanaba UMC in May 1995. Whenever I experience exhaustion in ministry and my passion begins to fade, I return to that sacred moment when I made my promise to serve, even without heaven. In remembering that moment, my spirit finds rest and serenity.



***The Rev. Dante Garibay** is a clergy member of the Central Luzon Philippines Annual Conference. He received his basic seminary education at Union Theological Seminary of the Philippines, Dasmarinas, Cavite; currently on the last leg of his pursuit of the Doctor of Education at Wesleyan University – Philippines. He’s pastor of the Gerona United Methodist Church, Gerona, Tarlac Province.*

# My Call

By Rev. Joshua Zulueta

When I think about the ways that God has called people throughout scripture, I always think of those big, dramatic moments. God calling Moses through the burning bush, Isaiah being anointed with the smoldering coal, Paul being struck blind on the road to Damascus. All these stories and more paint a vibrant and exciting picture of what it means to be called by God. And yet, when I think about my own call story, there are no burning bushes, no intense moments of sudden conversion, not even a booming voice from above. So, then, what does come to mind when I reflect on my calling? The words of an old beloved hymn, “softly and tenderly Jesus is calling.”

God’s call to ministry came at a turning point in my life. I was nearing the end of my high school years and had found that the community I had made through some of my extracurricular activities had abruptly evaporated. This meant that I was about to embark on a new chapter of my life without the comfort of a long enjoyed hobby or the support of a close friend’s group. It was during this time that I had the first inclination that God does provide for my needs. I felt the smallest, softest voice calling me to reconnect with my church family. In doing so, God revealed a wonderful and loving community who helped to feed my spirit. That soft and tender voice didn’t stop there. It continued to gently call me to become more involved in the church. I began attending small group studies, volunteering for committees, and helping as a student aid for the Youth Group. It was through participating with the youth group that that soft and tender voice became louder and clearer.

*The Rev. Josh Zulueta, one of a growing number of young, new and effective leaders in our Filipino-American community, is a member of the Cal-Pac Annual Conference, Los Angeles Area of The United Methodist Church. He serves in the San Diego District.*

During one overnight retreat at the church, we were all gathered together in the chapel for evening worship. Following the service, we held a time of mutual prayer for one another. People moved about the room and asked each other for prayers and spent time simply praying for one another. I remember looking around the room and seeing all these different people, from different backgrounds, cultures, and languages, all drawn together by the Holy Spirit to share in the most vibrant and authentic love I had ever seen. And then the voice called to me. Still gentle and loving, but now much clearer and authoritative than soft and tender. It was the recognizable voice of the Good Shepherd, and I knew that this voice was Jesus’ and not my own. Jesus in this moment called me to pay attention to what I was witnessing because He was inviting me to be a part of creating moments like this.

I shared my experience of that moment with my pastor at the time and with other leaders who prayed with me and helped me to discern this as a calling to ordained ministry. Throughout the following years of church service, seminary, local church

ministry, and ordination, the soft and tender but powerful and assuring voice of Jesus has not stopped calling me. Time and again Jesus has called me into unknown places and time and again the Holy Spirit has helped to gather community around me and equipped me to share the love of God with them. Words cannot express my gratitude to God for the calling God has placed on my life. As long as the soft and tender voice of Jesus still calls to me, by faith I will try my best to follow wherever He leads.

# Pastoring After 80: Defining the R Word

by Florante Padama Tangonan

When people ask me what I do, my immediate response is: I am a pastor. Present tense. But wait a minute. I have already retired, haven't I, many times? First, in 1996, Los Angeles; second in 2010, San Francisco; and third, Montebello in 2017.

Will I ever learn when to retire or what the term means? After all, my father, a young teacher, retired at 50 after years as a school principal. I need to find the panacea for this yes-I-can and yes-I-will malady. One way to understand my journey to my eighties living like the mid-sixties is to trace the original sin labelled labor of love. Truth be told: I enjoy preaching. I relish ministering. There is joy in serving others.

My story began when I finished college at 19 graduating at the top of my class without even trying. There must have been an error in computing my GPA but so be it. Having caught the perennial student bug, I pursued graduate school immediately at the University of the Philippines taking classes by night while teaching a private parochial school by day in Manila. At 21 I obtained a student visa to the United States. I received my M.S. in Guidance and Counseling from Drake University two years later. At 23, I became the youngest faculty member in the Des Moines junior high school where I earned my counseling practicum credits. I was the only Asian and person of color in the whole campus. The following year I was promoted to chair the counseling department over two counselors who were in their mid- sixties to my early twenties.

At 52, the same restlessness that afflicted me fresh from college reared its persuasive head once again. That was the time when I was nominated and recognized as the employee of the year award during a ceremony complete with the LA County Board of Supervisors official seal. I was able to initiate and develop the Deaf Services Unit in the Children's Court to serve abused deaf children and youth. It was partially funded through a federal ADA grant. The initiative was the first of its kind in the nation which brought me to Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. to present my program to aspiring deaf social workers.

One early morning in my office, after a difficult case was litigated by the county counsel and the judge, I found myself asking about the purpose of life- my life after surviving these so-called high achievers era. Hours, days and weeks passed with existential questions nagging me. Are there other hills to climb, waters to navigate, and horizons to explore? Looking at my certificates and plaques, is that all there is? The answers came not like a trickle but a cascade. My exploration led me back to my happy place, the academia now called at this juncture of my adult life- seminary.

I traded my briefcase and suit for a backpack and sweats, resigned from my civil service career of 17 years to the august halls of Boston University School of Theology. It is still called the School of the Prophets with distinguished alumni such as MLK Jr. and the great theologian Howard Thurman.

I was the recipient of a 100 % merit scholarship and a registered graduate student at 53. Other than summer classes at USC and UCLA, I have not been on campus fulltime since 1965. My fellow Californian seatmate was slightly older than my NYU junior son. My wife also quit her job and found a job at the Harvard teaching hospital pharmacy.

One of my study partners was a Physics PhD from Stanford and the other was a lady prosecutor in a Boston courtroom. What did we have in common? We were all foolish enough to test the waters and be blessed enough to find them soothing, even healing. Soon I became friends with a Benedictine monk and a Greek Orthodox priest. We were all members of the Class of 2001, all Masters of Divinity (M Div). I was also accepted for my field education requirement at Harvard Divinity School and in the process became a pastoral intern at Harvard-Epworth UMC in Cambridge, Massachusetts until graduation.

My “academic” background did not exactly prepare me to face the first encounters of tough reality. My first church appointment was in the affluent and retirement enclave of Kernville, gateway to the Sequoias, in July of 2001. I was the first “person of color” to pastor an all-white congregation after more than 100 years. Then on 9/11 the Twin Towers in NYC fell, where my son lived and my first year pastorage was severely tested. The resulting hysteria and trauma nationally and internationally was more pronounced locally. Suddenly my skin color got a little darker, my ethnicity a little more different, my otherness was on the front line, my invisible persona became the visible alien in everyone’s radar. My wife and I bravely and carefully walked down the street to the post office or marketplace and back. I was one of the few residents in the neighborhood who did not have an American flag waving in front and back of our car.

One of the many challenges that I had to face was to organize a multi-faith forum in Kern County inviting citizens of different political stripes and persuasions to meet a panel of Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. I did this without the blessing of church leaders due to projected low interest and attendance. What was left unsaid was their fear for my well-being. It exceeded expectations and I had to reschedule another Saturday. Three years later I was appointed to a San Francisco UMC and served there for 7 years. My clergy county association gave me a farewell party to “sin city” as they scornfully called my brave new world. It was there where I received my commissioning and ordination by the Bishop of California-Nevada Annual Conference while serving this “sin city” by the Bay.

Due to my wife’s family responsibilities including her newly widowed aging mother, it was time to return to southern California where I started my candidacy process to become a United Methodist pastor. It was also a period of personal discernment to consider. My wife retired early from her hospital pharmacy in Boston. We had visions of traveling the world, rediscovering our homeland, the Philippines, and even building a retirement home in south of Manila.

A few months after my retirement, once again restlessness was knocking on my door. This time the knock ranged from a gentle tap with the fingers to a consistent pounding of the fist as if a voice was saying “come out of your shell, I have other plans for you. Right here, right now.”

The Bishop called to tell me I was needed in Montebello. With my administrative background, I was being requested to help rebuild and revitalize this fledgling congregation as I implement the New Ministries project of the conference. I dutifully accepted it under the impression that it was a short term assignment. But the joys of serving my siblings whose warm welcome was a signature warm-hearted Methodist embrace were seductively intoxicating. I became the pastor for Montebello UMC for four years then “retired” using that old game of “I mean it this time.”

When Covid 19 put the whole world and the church into a standstill, my wife and I were traveling outside the country. I was tending to my orchids and flower pots on my condo balcony. I just installed a fountain to create that tropical sound and sight of flowing waters while reading all the books I left unread and writing the great Filipino immigrant story waiting to be chronicled for publication in my mind. I accepted speaking engagements around the city. I was truly retired, I proclaimed to myself.

When we returned to Los Angeles, after months of checking what to-do-lists and itinerary planning for our golden wedding anniversary river cruise through Eastern Europe, I got another call from the district superintendent (DS) on behalf of the bishop. The words were the same but by a different messenger with a compassionate nurturing tune like a newly composed melody. The pastor of an ethnic church had to take a medical leave. It was the easiest decision for me.

This church was my home church in the nineties before I left for the seminary. The members are my old friends. We were young parents then. Now we have become grey and intimately called lolos (grandpas) and lolas (grandmas). Our kids are now mommies and daddies. It was like coming home- to be my friends' pastor. Sadly my colleague passed on after four months. In July of this year, I will complete my four years serving the First Filipino American United Methodist Church of San Gabriel Valley. Itinerancy is a foreign word among my parishioners freely spreading the myth of my lifetime tenure. Somewhere in time, I forgot the meaning of retirement, a word ripe for definition in my own terms with God's gentle hand and Christ's heart.

Loving boldly, serving joyfully, and leading courageously is more than a vision for the church of my youth through adulthood, a Methodist by confirmation and baptism, a third generation of holy rollers with a methodist bent on singing, studying, and praying. Looking back to my good old "Christ Above All" motto as an MYF'er, names of American missionaries are rolling back like a scroll: Norman Case, Thelma Hammond, Richard Schwenck. Merwyn Nelson, Paul Van Buren. They all stayed overnight or more in my nipa hut. They all worshiped in my little village chapel in Bangan. They modelled for me servanthood and personhood.

Sometime in 1999, there was a convocation in Boston U for seminarians where an general board officer from Nashville was invited to help us discern what track we were to follow: the elder or the deacon. The name was Paul Van Buren. After the presentation, I introduced myself. He looked like the one I met during Christmas Institute. After I gave my last name, Paul said, "I remember your sister deaconess Remy, and your mother and father..." As the world turns, is this serendipity, coincidences, God-moments? Only the All-knowing Creator of the Universe knows.

I am an 82 year-old ordained elder from Monrovia, California, born and raised in Sanchez Mira, Cagayan, Philippines. My life's purpose is loving, serving, and leading my siblings in Christ to wherever and whenever and however the Risen Christ will take me as long as I have breath.



***The Rev. Florante P. Tangonan** is a member of the Cal-Nevada Annual Conference.  
He certainly has a rare take on what retirement means.*

# Meditation: The Spirit at Work

by Rev. Dr. Ben Vinluan

*“...and when the spirit rested upon them they prophesied. . .Moses said to him. . .would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirt on them.” (Numbers 11: 25b,29b, NRSV).*

That strikingly bright red lily standing upright among other but lesser blooms caught my eye as I went to the front yard. It was just in time as I was thinking about the approach of our usual observance of Pentecost. Traditionally, we associate Pentecost with the color red, because it signifies power by its ability to transform and purify. The irony was not lost on me that in its delicate and vulnerable estate, that lily nevertheless possesses a capacity to captivate and boldly proclaim a power beyond itself. Never mind that it stood there in a class by itself.



We are used to identifying Pentecost with tongues of fire alighting on each one of the disciples at that house in Jerusalem. But the account of the charismatic experience provided the select seventy elders in the desert shows that God does not work only in selective ways, and shuns others. In fact, it’s inspiring how God “took some of the spirit that was on him” (Moses) and put it on the seventy. And that “some” was sufficient to provide charismatic power and gave them ability to fulfill their role of leadership at a given time. And it was equally amazing to see that two others not originally among the original seventy elders, by some mysterious process, were gifted with as much ability that made Joshua, Moses’ assistant, suspicious. But Moses rightfully dismissed his fears saying, “. . .would that the Lord give his spirit to all the people.”

One thing is clear. The spirit is always at work in lives and situations in all of creation. And when allowed to do so as where Moses worked with God in assembling the seventy elders, we are renewed and are never the same again. That renewal is infectious that it works in others as well, beyond our capacity to control or manage. That should give us pause, especially when we begin to feel that keeping up with a faithful way of living seem to set us apart. There’s beauty that may not be apparent, and an inner quality that is fulfilling. That’s what that delicate lily reminded me of when I saw it standing there in its own quality, content while being different, fulfilling a purpose greater than its transitory and vulnerable existence. No matter your condition, whatever challenges confront you and me, I believe that God continues to work in our life. We are a work in progress. Methodists like to think of that process as “moving unto perfection”, with John Wesley’s teaching that our faith journey is actually where the Spirit is at work in and through us guiding us to that moment of the perfectibility of grace towards our real home in God’s eternal habitation. May the Lord bless you and keep you always. AMEN.