

NAFAUM Connect

News Worthy of the Truth

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

CONTENTS

Christmas Institute: Thriving in the Philippines and Its Impact on Christian Witness 1

From the President's Desk 3

Editorial 4

Fifth Sunday – Epiphany 2025
Meditation 5

Christmas Institute, Philippine Mission 2025 touch lives 6

My Christmas Institute Experience 8

Hymn of Promise: Dios Lang ang May Alam 9

New Beginnings: A Vision for the Baguio Episcopal Area for the 2025–2028 Quadrennium 10

Reflections on the Philippines Central Conference: Nov. 18–22, 2024 12

Following Jesus is Risky (Sermon Notes) 17



Ben Vinluan – Editor
Mighty Rasing – Associate Editor



Christmas Institute: Thriving in the Philippines and Its Impact on Christian Witness

By Dave Uriel Angelo Rombaoa

The Christmas season in the Philippines is one of the most anticipated times of the year, a celebration filled with traditions for families and communities.

Among these traditions among Filipino United Methodists is the unique and enduring practice of the Christmas Institute (CI), an annual gathering organized by the United Methodist Youth Fellowship in the Philippines (UMYFP). Since 1921, CI has served as a platform for young people to deepen their faith, foster fellowship, and strengthen their commitment to Christian witness.

For more than a century, CI has stood as a testament to the importance of the Methodist youth movement in the Philippines. Designed as camps held during the Christmas season, CI combines spiritual growth with social action, empowering youth to become agents of justice, peace, hope, and love. This mission also aligns with the broader message of Christmas: the embodiment of hope and love through Jesus Christ.

Each CI carries a unique theme that relates with the challenges and hopes of the Filipino Methodist youth. These themes guide the activities, including Bible studies, socially relevant lectures, revival nights, and community outreach programs. Since the early 2010s, these themes have also been accompanied by original theme songs, adding to the experience.

For the recently concluded CI, 13,834 youth delegates from across the Philippines, gathered in their respective annual conferences and districts, took part in the gathering, reflecting its continued impact on young people. The theme for 2024, Sibol (which means "sprout"), encapsulates the message of growth, renewal, and bearing fruit in faith. It is inspired by Mark 4:26-29, where Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God as a seed that grows, nurtured by God's divine work:



For the recently concluded CI, 13,834 youth delegates from across the Philippines, gathered in their respective annual conferences and districts, took part in the gathering, reflecting its continued impact on young people. The theme for 2024, Sibol (which means "sprout"), encapsulates the message of growth, renewal, and bearing fruit in faith. It is inspired by Mark 4:26-29, where Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God as a seed that grows, nurtured by God's divine work:

"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29, NIV)

The impact of CI extends beyond its participants. By nurturing principled and mission-driven youth, the program continuously contributes to the church's mission. Moreover, the CI's continued success highlights the resilience and relevance of Christian youth initiatives in a changing world.

In a season of joy and giving, CI stands as a reminder of how the celebration of Christ's birth can inspire a new generation of believers to embrace their role as witnesses of God's love and power. Through CI, the UMYFP continues to make an impact on the church and society, ensuring that the spirit of Christmas is felt not only during the season but throughout the year.



Dave Uriel Angelo Rombaoa, National President of the National United Methodist Youth Fellowship of the Philippines, is from the Central Luzon Philippines Annual Conference, Baguio Area, The United Methodist Church; a junior in college, Uriel comes from a family of devout United Methodists.

Aside from Rombaoa, National President, members of the National UMYFP Executive Committee are: Roella Marcella Bautista, Executive vice president; Janne Christine Arellano, MEA vice president; Samantha Dawn Marron, DEA vice president; Jeremiah Candelaria, Finance officer; Edelweise Genelsa, IRCD head; and Christian Love Daroy-Gagno & Ceejay Hernadez, Youth coordinators.

From the President's Desk

By Karen G. Prudente



Mabuhay! God's peace be with you.

We are excited to share this edition of NAFAUM CONNECT to share and to strengthen our community relationships as Filipino American and Filipino Canadian United Methodists.

We look forward to seeing you at two major NAFAUM events this 2025: an Online Convocation on July 19th and at our 18th National Convocation and Youth Summit from July 31–August 2 to be held at Memorial UMC–Clovis (Fresno, California). Information is in this edition and on the NAFAUM website. Our convocation will be a time of spiritual discernment, planning, and actions as we embark on our roles of serving joyfully within our denomination and in the neighborhoods where God has guided us to be. Come for nourishment and inspiration as we start fresh beginnings in this period of Methodist Renaissance. NAFAUM recommits to be witnesses of God's justice for the marginalized and to bring new disciples to Christ as we transform our world together with bold love and courageous leadership.

Information is in this edition and on the NAFAUM website. Our convocation will be a time of spiritual discernment, planning, and actions as we embark on our roles of serving joyfully within our denomination and in the neighborhoods where God has guided us to be. Come for nourishment and inspiration as we start fresh beginnings in this period of Methodist Renaissance. NAFAUM recommits to be witnesses of God's justice for the marginalized and to bring new disciples to Christ as we transform our world together with bold love and courageous leadership.

The 2025 Annual Conference season is upon us. If you are an Annual Conference delegate, we ask those with voting privileges to attend their Annual Conference and to thoughtfully approve the four amendments being presented. Of particular interest is Regionalization

which was introduced as the Christmas Covenant legislation by the Cavite Annual Conference in the Philippines. It was later tweaked by the Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters to the current Worldwide Regionalization (WR) legislation approved at the 2020/2024 General Conference.

Last week, with a 98% rate, Liberian Annual Conference delegates approved WR despite Liberia being the bastion of the Africa Initiative. This February starts a season of Philippine Annual Conferences which will begin deciding the fate of the Worldwide Regionalization. We hope that it passes with wide margins there as well as in the United States and other UMC regions.

The last Annual Conference to vote for the 4 amendments will be in November 2025. In January 2026, the Council of Bishops will give an official statement on the aggregate ballots result. When WR is fully passed, each region can begin working on their General and Regional Books of Disciplines, which based on local missional contexts, adaptability sections are possible.

Several of us on the NAFAUM Board are having conversations about our Christmas Institutes becoming our legacy gift of discipleship to the entire denomination. It shaped many of our young people's devotion to church ministry and missions. Were you one of these young persons? What do you think of this proposition? This is one topic to be discussed during our Convocation. Thus, we look forward to seeing you in Fresno this July.

Blessings and maraming salamat.

EDITORIAL

In Times Like These...

By Ben Vinluan, Editor

There’s a storm no, a hurricane, brewing right in our midst. It started at the beginning of a new administration that believes it alone knows the answer to all the problems Americans have – or will ever have. I do not need to describe exactly what’s happening, because the whole nation is a witness to the way the usual norms and standards are discarded, and the stable nature of governance as we know it rendered useless, subject to the whims and caprices of a power elite that believes it has free reins over everything in sight.

From where I am, it seems that we all need more than just to buckle up for the rough ride. Sure enough, we’ve had ample resources. Our United Methodist Council

of Bishops have come up with reassuring and empowering voices, reminding us about whose we are, and what kind of a people we are. Our area bishops, have come up with practical things that we could avail of freely that would be of ready use at any given time of need, like making sure that we carry proper identification, and the name of an immigration attorney handy just in case the need for one arises.

Temporals aside, this time in our history as a nation may remind us about Thomas Paine’s pamphleteering in our nation’s early days. Thomas Paine’s common sense pamphlets provided the rationale for those unsure about their support in their fight for independence. But in a deeply divided nation, it might be quixotic to expect for there to have common sense take place. Robert de Niro, one of the most influential men of our time, suggests that there may not be any alternative to it. He suggests that we all just have to embrace one another as people regardless of our political philosophies or affiliations, for the sake of our common good. Then, he says, when there is enough of us, we could be a force to stop the insanity of the moment, and together allow for common sense to help us find the wisdom to do what is right for all of us. Not just for a few. And thus prevail as a people for a new day.



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FILIPINO-AMERICAN UNITED METHODISTS (NAFAUM)

18th CONVOCATION

Online Business Session (via Zoom)

July 19, 2025

3:00 – 5:00 PM Pacific | 5:00 – 7:00 PM Central

6:00 – 8:00 PM Eastern

6:00 – 8:00 AM Philippines (July 6, 2025)

Convocation Proper

Jul 31 – Aug 2, 2025

Memorial United Methodist Church

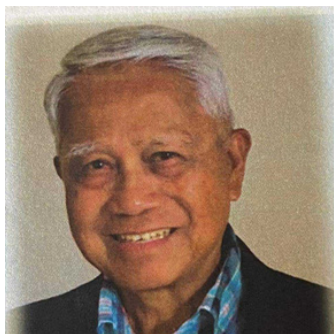
1726 Pollasky Ave, Clovis, CA 93612

REGISTER NOW AT <http://nafaum.org/>

Fifth Sunday - Epiphany 2025 Meditation

Isa. 6:1-8,(9-13); I Cor. 15:1-11; Lk. 5:1-11.

By Rev. Ben Vinluan



Hearing the Call

And I said, "Here am I; send me." (Isa. 6:8b, NRSV); "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." (Lk. 5:11, NRSV).

There are two different situations involving a call taking place in our meditation today. The first one took place in a royal setting – in the temple. King Uzziah was a relatively popular monarch, and his death brought deep sadness and mourning over the realm. That's where Isaiah found himself in a vision of God's majestic presence filling the temple. And in that presence Isaiah was overwhelmed by the realization of his unworthiness, partly as a continuing influence of the reforms instituted during the reign of King Uzziah. Yet in the midst of his sense of unworthiness, Isaiah heard the call. That call was greater and stronger than his unworthiness. Even in the midst of his unworthiness, he heard God's call enough to answer, "Here am I; send me."

The other setting could not be more dramatically different. It's a setting where men must live by the sweat of their brow, and where elbow grease is the coin of the realm. Peter and James and John found fishing as a way of life and a means of livelihood. In their situation, there was not much alternative choices while, at the same time, they must have enjoyed the opportunity to be of service to the community by the supply of food with the sometimes meager catch they made. So the implication to themselves as a family for Peter and James and John's decision to leave "everything and followed" Jesus was huge. Their father, Zebedee, who must be getting on in years was now left to carry on with the work his sons used to do. But that is what happens when God calls. God interrupts our comfort zones, not because God is unconcerned about our scales of values, but because God sees us for the higher purpose we could play where we see ourselves merely for the mundane roles we have.

Now not everybody is called to leave everything behind. But that's just one way of saying that hearing the call entails something on our part. Augustine's encounter with God's call in the garden, and his vision to "take, read" and heed the Word of God was one. He had to forego his pursuit of and dabbling in various philosophies, and cease being a part libertine. Martin Luther's terror when caught in the middle of a thunderstorm on his way home when he was pursuing studies to become a lawyer changed the course of his life. He was said to have promised to become a priest if he got home safely through the storm. That same Augustine who was, at the time part libertine, became our St. Augustine of the Confessions, the most outstanding religious autobiography every produced. And writer of the City of God. Martin Luther, of course, was the one who showed the Christian world the need for changes. He became the father of the Protestant Reformation. His studies in the Bible, particularly the Pauline letters,

are models of biblical scholarship that have benefited the Christian church. It has also helped inspire the Methodist movement, because it was his exposition of Paul's letter to the Romans that lighted John Wesley's Aldersgate street experience, and changed the direction of his life and career. As a result, he gained new fervor to preach the gospel to the poor of England that some historians say may have saved England from a revolution.

Best of all, it brought us the Wesleyan understanding of life, namely, that as faithful believers, we are on the road to perfection into the full sanctification in Jesus Christ our Lord. Ultimately, God's call is for all of us, not just a select few. We see how God calls people in every conceivable setting. God constantly and, by the Holy Spirit, ever and always comes patiently to each one of us. Even now I pray that you hear, and see how, in what the poet Cullen Bryant said, "guide your steps aright" each day and always. AMEN.



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.

Christmas Institute, Philippine Mission 2025 touch lives

By Rev. Adiel DePano

A total of forty-six young people spent their Christmas break on Palomar Mountain, California for this year's Christmas Institute around the theme, "Our Solidarity in Christ". Many came away from "CI" expressing how they have been transformed by the experience of spending five days and four nights spent in worship, study, and recreation in the awe-inspiring setting which was Palomar Christian Conference Center in Palomar Mountain.

Jaden Torino, a camper from Santa Ana United Methodist Church, was grateful for the time "to be by myself. Being with nature made me happy and helped me a lot. I spent early mornings walking through the campsite asking why I am here and asking other questions. I am thankful for being at CI and being away from the stress of school and chores at home, to learn more about God."

Lilikoi Blake, another camper from Santa Ana United Methodist Church, shared how the social justice role play activity on the second day of CI left an indelible mark on her soul. The activity called for participants to role-play the parts of a homeless, street person and people around him/her. Lilikoi played the role of a street person and experienced the condescending attention people directed at her.

"I suddenly felt the harsh realities of what my [Tongan] people endure from others. It was a learning moment for me. The activity was an eye-opener. It took me out of my comfort zone, for sure, but it made me realize that we need to see others how Jesus sees us. Every person is valuable and loved. The activity made me ask myself how I am living out my faith. Am I loving and compassionate?"

Another highlight for Blake was how CI not only grew her relationship with God closer but how it brought Tongan and Filipino youth of Santa Ana UMC closer. “The vision of being one family in Christ became real before my very eyes! The Bible verse from Galatians 6:2 took on a special significance for me – Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. I wasn’t sure what to expect from CI (it was Lilikoi’s first CI). I am so grateful now that I went.”

This year’s Christmas Institute built on last year’s CI which was the first in-person CI after the pandemic. CI Dean, the Rev. Eric Iki, feels momentum is building and CI is on the right trajectory. Assisting Rev. Iki with the leadership of CI is Director Joshua Platon, a Design Team composed of Aubrey & Jasmine Neumann, Marius Pico, and Bri Uipi, plus a cadre of young adult counselors and other volunteers.

Several local congregations were represented among the campers, including: First Fil-Am UMC of San Gabriel Valley, First UMC of Glendale, First UMC of Wilmington, Mission Community UMC (Rosemead), Santa Ana UMC, and Wilshire UMC (LA). CI registration costs \$316 per camper. It seems clear that the investment was well worth it!

Philippine Mission 2025

Sta. Ana United Methodist Church in Dulo, Bulakan, Bulacan is this year’s recipient of a \$15,000 grant from the Filipino Caucus Foundation of the California-Pacific Conference to help build a new sanctuary. A group of 19 missionaries from Southern California and Guam descended upon the local church Jan. 10-12, 2025. Led by Philippine Mission Coordinator Jesse Roxas, the team included the following: Beth Babaran & Miriam Balatan (LA: Wilshire UMC), Jun & Ruth Camat (Guam UMC), Ruth Casulla (Covina UMC), Glenn & Joyce Conte (National City: First UMC), Pastor Adiel & Brenda DePano (Santa Ana UMC), Greg & Janet Poland (Santa Ana UMC), Connie Predas (Hacienda Heights: First Fil-Am UMC), Ben & Sarah Richardson (National City: First UMC), Lilie Roxas (Santa Ana UMC),

Eleanor Serrano (Northridge UMC), and Pastor Adel & Ruth Torino (Santa Ana UMC).

The mission weekend included a PAPURI Revival Concert on Friday produced by Arnel DePano. It featured the present crop of PAPURI singers who sang to a packed house at Tree of Life UMC (formerly Bulacan Central UMC) of mostly young people. Retired Bishop Cerrie Francisco delivered an inspired evangelistic message. The concert was sponsored by Bert David of Fullerton, California in memory of his wife, Eileen DePano David.

A medical mission was held on Saturday in partnership with Kamuning First UMC of Quezon City. The mission team included a number of registered nurses who provided triage care before sending patients to four volunteer medical doctors for consultation. A pharmacy team dispensed medicines purchased with funds provided by the Filipino Caucus Foundation.

The highlight of the mission weekend was the celebration of the church’s 39th Anniversary and dedication of the new sanctuary on Sunday. Manila Episcopal Area Bishop Ruby-Nell Estrella was the guest preacher. Bags of free grocery items were given to widows during the service of worship as well. The mission team rendered a gift of song – “Tanging Alay Ko” – during the service. A celebration luncheon followed at 1959 Event Place in Bulakan.

Missioners paid their own way to be part of the mission weekend, i.e., airfare to and from Manila, lodging at Acro Residences in Guiguinto, Bulacan, and local transportation.

During the team’s debriefing Saturday at Ningnangan Restaurant in Guiguinto and facilitated by Rev. Adiel DePano, Filipino Caucus Foundation President, several members expressed deep gratitude for newfound friends and how the experience reignited their flickering flame of faith. Many plan to be part of the next Philippine Mission program in 2027. The recipient of the Foundation’s mission grant will be a local church in the Davao Episcopal Area.

My Christmas Institute Experience

By Joshua Platon

When people ask you what your Christmas Tradition is, what would it be? Maybe it would be meeting with loved ones, enjoying fellowship with food, or counting down the advent calendars. For myself, it would be looking forward to Christmas Institute. Since my father (Rev. Dr. Neil Platon) was, for a number of years, the dean for Cal-Pac's Christmas Institute, I would always attend with my family every Christmas. Even though I attended my first CI at five years old back in 2010, I still felt the Holy Spirit present throughout the camp.

Fifteen years later, the Holy Spirit has guided me to the leadership position that I am in today. Through the hard work of our design teams, Cal-Pac's Christmas Institute has successfully concluded two years of camp post the Covid-19 Pandemic. To say that we're blessed is an understatement because of the many lives that we are able to touch and change.

My life included, as I am twenty years old, being paraded with the different challenges and obstacles we face in life. There were times of uncertainty or doubts. There were feelings that there's no light at the end of the tunnel. Within all of it, God reaches his hands out and provides his assurance to keep us moving forward. Throughout 2024's CI, our whole team was tested and at times ready to lose hope, but we learned to trust in God. Our personal journeys and relationship with God proved to be stronger than ever before. Teamwork and perseverance are a testament to how we react when the odds are against us.

I want to personally thank my design team, camp dean, all participating churches, all participating youth, and most importantly the NAFAUM association. Through all of the support and donations for our ministry, you are able to help change someone's life. I encourage and challenge everyone to help grow our next generation of youth. It all starts with one youth member, a person to reach out to, and most importantly a prayer to give to someone. Again, I am so grateful and honored to be a part of this ministry. I look forward to another year of growing our CI community.



Joshua Platon is a CI director from California-Pacific Annual Conference. He's a junior at California State University, Fullerton working toward a degree in Business Administration, concentrating on analytics.

Hymn of Promise: Dios Lang ang May Alam

D
1. Sa binhi'y mayro'ng halaman
Em A
Na nahihimlay lamang;
A7 A
Sisibol sa tamang araw
D D7
'Tinakda ng Maykapal!
G D
Tag-ulan man at tag-araw,
Em F# Bm
Pagibig ng Dios, tunay.
G D
Balong ng kanyang biyaya
Em A A7 D
Di lilipas kaylan man.

D
2. Sa oras ng dalamhati,
Em A
Mayroong kaaliwan.
A7 A
Sa kadilimang pusikit
D D7
May awit na sisilang.
G D
Sa pusong nababalisa
Em F# Bm
Pag-asa'y ibibigay
G D
Kung sa Dios ay mananalig,
Em A A7 D
Galak mo'y walang humpay!

D
3. Maging sa 'ting kamatayan
Em A
Tayo'y iidlip lamang;
A7 A
Buhay ay walang hangganan
D D7
Babangon sa libingan.
G D
Pagkat Dios ang siyang daluyan
Em F# Bm
Buhay na walang hanggan.
G D
Sa Kanya'y magtitiwala
Em A A7 D
Hanggang sa katapusan!

D
4. Pusong nag-aalinlangan,
Em A
Maraming katanungan!
A7 A
Hiwagang hindi malirip,
D D7
Di abot ng isipan.
G D
Sa lahat ng manga bagay
Em F# Bm
Salat sa kaalaman!
G D
Ang Dios lang ang kasagutan
Em A A7 D
Dios lamang ang may alam!



Tune: Promise
Hymn of Promise

Words & Music: Natalie Sleeth, 1986 Tagalog Translation : Miguel de Guzman 2024
Fourth Stanza: Miguel de Guzman, 2024 (Tagalog)

New Beginnings: A Vision for the Baguio Episcopal Area for the 2025-2028 Quadrennium

By Bishop Rodel Acdal
Resident Bishop, Baguio Episcopal Area

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." –

Isaiah 43:19

The journey of faith is marked by seasons of renewal, and in this quadrennium, the Baguio Episcopal Area embarks on a path of New Beginnings—a journey of transformation, revitalization, and steadfast commitment to God's mission.

Having served as bishop for the past two years, I recognize the divine hand at work in my re-election to a full 4-year term. Perhaps God, through the faithful people of the Philippine Central Conference, has designed this moment for us—to step forward boldly, embracing the abundant opportunities He has placed before us, amidst the many challenges we are facing as a church and as people. This is not just a continuation of what has been, but a launching point for what will be. A new season has dawned, and together, we move forward in faith.

With the Lord's leading as I endeavor to fully maximize the privileges, responsibilities and accountabilities of the episcopal office and do my very best to anchor my term on the following programs, at the heart of this vision using the initials of my name RODEL, connoting that I am willing to stake my very name in pursuit of excellence in ministry and mission, the framework that will guide our ministries:

- Revitalized Congregation
- Open Table
- Devoted Disciples
- Empowered Leaders
- Loyal to Christ

These five pillars form the foundation of our shared calling—to be a Church that is alive, welcoming, deeply rooted in discipleship, strong in leadership, and steadfast in our faith. But beyond these foundational pillars, our RODEL vision also extends to strengthening church structures and sustainability through:

- Reliable Source Development
- Objective Leadership Development
- Development of Deeply Rooted Wesleyan Discipleship Resources
- Equity and Salary Standardization
- Level-Up Program for Church Workers' Health Care

These strategic thrusts will guide our ministries and ensure that our churches are not only spiritually nourished but also structurally fortified to serve the present and future generations.

REVITALIZED CONGREGATION

A strong and thriving church starts with vibrant, Spirit-filled congregations. To achieve this, we are committed to enhancing stewardship and sustainable ministry programs. Through Reliable Source Development, we are committed to empower our Annual Conferences, District Conferences and Local Churches to improve stewardship responsibility and sustaining church ministry programs.

OPEN TABLE

Jesus extended His table to everyone, embracing the outcasts and the marginalized. The Church must do the same. An Open Table means inclusivity, justice, and mission-driven outreach. We will strengthen holistic ministries that support the poor, advocate for social justice, and engage in ecumenical partnerships to nurture unity within the wider community. The Church must remain a beacon of hope, welcoming all with the love of Christ.

DEVOTED DISCIPLES

Discipleship is the heartbeat of our mission. This quadrennium, we will focus on the Development of Deeply Rooted Wesleyan Discipleship Resources, ensuring that our local churches have multi-lingual Bible study materials, Sunday School curricula, and leadership training programs. Additionally, we aim to establish a BEA Printing Press to publish confirmation manuals, membership guides, and UMC-related textbooks. Through these resources, we will strengthen discipleship, evangelism, and faith formation at all levels.

EMPOWERED LEADERS

A flourishing church requires strong and Spirit-filled leadership. To achieve this, we will focus on equipping both clergy and lay leaders with the necessary skills, knowledge, and spiritual depth for effective ministry. Through targeted training, mentorship, and theological enrichment, we will nurture a new generation of dedicated leaders who are prepared to guide the Church with wisdom, integrity, and a deep commitment to discipleship. Additionally, we will emphasize leadership effectiveness, nurture a culture of continuous learning and adaptability to meet the evolving needs of our congregations. By strengthening our leaders, we strengthen the Church as a whole, ensuring its growth, resilience, and impact in the world.

LOYAL TO CHRIST

Our ultimate calling is to remain steadfast in Christ. A Loyal Church is one that is prayerful, mission-focused, and deeply rooted in faith. We must Reclaim, Revive, and Renew our true identity as

United Methodists in our unwavering commitment to our rich Wesleyan heritage. This means living out our faith through action, ensuring that every ministry we undertake aligns with the Great Commission.

Supporting Our Church Workers

As a church worker with humble beginnings, my heart understands the plea of many of our dedicated servants who tirelessly commit their lives to ministry despite financial and health challenges. A thriving church is built upon the dedication of its workers, and it is our sacred duty to ensure their well-being, dignity, and security. This quadrennium, we are committed to equity and salary standardization, ensuring that our clergy and lay workers receive just and fair compensation for their service. Through structured subsidy programs, fundraising efforts, and expanded financial benefits such as SSS, PhilHealth, Pag-IBIG, and children's allowances, we will uphold the value of their labor. In addition, our Level-Up Program for Church Workers' Health Care will prioritize accident insurance, comprehensive health coverage, annual medical check-ups, and mental health support, recognizing that a healthy ministry begins with healthy ministers. By investing in the welfare of those who serve, we fortify the spiritual and structural foundation of our Church, enabling it to flourish and fulfill its divine mission with strength and compassion.

A Call to Move Forward Together

New beginnings require bold steps of faith. As we embrace this vision for BEA, let us be reminded that God is making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. This journey is not mine alone; it is ours. Each pastor, lay leader, and church member has a role in building a stronger, more faithful Baguio Episcopal Area and beyond. God is not done yet. We have work to do, but we are never alone! Let us move forward together, fully embracing the work that God has called us to do. So be it.

Reflections on the Philippines Central Conference: Nov. 18-22, 2024

By Rev. Ben Vinluan

With barely a week before the Conference was to take place, I got word from Karen Prudente, our indefatigable President of NAFAUM. She's been the one with whom I have been coordinating regarding the trip, specially as she signed off on my plan to cover the Conference on behalf of NAFAUM Connect, our fledgling newsletter. The point of her call was to tell me that the ceiling of the WU-P chapel, where the Conference was to be held, suddenly collapsed. So instead of a beautiful, brand-new church, the Philippines Central Conference, so Prudente told me, would now be held at the University auditorium.



There was a typhoon that was wreaking havoc on the Philippines on November 16th, the day of our arrival in Manila, but we could manage to be largely unconcerned on its impact on our trip. After all, we were allowed to land at Ninoy Aquino International airport from Taipei. But early in the morning of November 17th, we received an advisory at our hotel that the roads were impassable between Manila and Cabanatuan City, and that we were not to attempt to travel to Cabanatuan City until further notice. There ensued a scramble for last minute hotel reservation adjustments, which was facilitated by traveling companions Izzy Alvaran and Richard Bentley, who showed me how savvy they are at doing it on line.

Travel eventually was clear to Cabanatuan City from Manila, and we arrived at Wesleyan University-Philippines around noon Monday, November 18th. After hotel check-in and a quick change, we hastened to the University Auditorium. It was swarming with security guards, courtesy of the University ROTC, which used its cadets for that service during the Conference. Registration and getting ID lanyards and other needed paper work took much of the time amidst the disorganization. Following that, we took time to tour the various exhibits, meeting all manner of nice fellow United Methodists from across the 7 thousand islands of the Philippines. There were also the usual general board staff from across the connection, coming mainly from the United States. There were some from the African continent, and a couple from Europe. Before we knew it, it was time for dinner. There was a welcome program following dinner, but those of us who came from out of town opted to go back to the hotel, deciding to call it a day that was particularly a long one!

The University Auditorium, as the venue of the Conference, is a about a 15 minute drive from our hotel through streets clogged by tricycles, which function as taxis in Cabanatuan City, known as the tricycle center of the Philippines, because of the number of them. November 19th, Tuesday, we got to the Auditorium after breakfast to find that the entire "pit", or floor of the auditorium was declared conference bar. Suddenly I had a problem. Because of the color of my lanyard, I was being directed to go to the opposite bleachers, separating me from my companions. I was trying to be persuasive with the guard, but I was not particularly successful. A Pastor from the

Philippines, whom I didn't personally know overheard the problem and he spoke to the guard, telling him that I was part of the foreign contingent and, while still looking a little incredulous, the guard finally relented. I was thus able to stay on the east wing bleachers of the auditorium, along with my companions.

The opening worship service was on. The sermon was spirited and impassioned as it was a little long. As a pastor, I learned to be mindful to make it a point to have the preaching to be a tad shorter where it is part of a Communion Service. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper deserves our recognition of its power to speak for itself. I soon found out the preacher was Bishop Tracy Smith-Malone of the Indianapolis Area of The United Methodist Church, and president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops. Seeing it was the good Bishop made me wish there was an unwritten rule to preach shorter sermons when we are having the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. No disrespect intended.

Most of the Philippines Central Conference, per se, like any other Central Conference, dealt with the minutiae of governance, and the comprehensive look at the life of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines. I do not intend to bring up a picture of it in its entirety here. But there are a few significant aspects of it that might merit mention. For one thing, there are the women. Their outstanding leadership throughout the conference stood out. They were present in every aspect of the Conference, either as deaconesses, or as women pastors. Among them, of course, is deaconess Norma Dolliaga, 2024 World Methodist Peace awardee. Dolliaga was there, doing everything she was assigned to do; she wore her celebrity status lightly and humbly on her sleeves.

Another worth noting is the leadership shown by the young people. Of special significance is the success they have shown in the conduct of the Christmas Institute across the archipelago which they did and are doing on a volunteer basis. I was able to have an opportunity to speak to one of the leaders, Dave Uriel Angelo Rombaoa, who serves as the national President of the National United Methodist Youth Fellowship of the Philippines. He told me how their funding is such a pittance as a national youth group. But he is so dedicated to his role as National President that whatever personal expense money he gets from his parents, while at college, he manages to save part of it to enable him to visit with youth groups in the remotest part of the Philippines. That may be part of the secret of the success of the Christmas Institute in the Philippines. Word has it that in the Baguio Area alone, there were seven thousand (7,000) young people registered this past December's Christmas Institute.

The Episcopal Election

Episcopal elections in The United Methodist Church are mandated by the church's Book of Discipline. The mandate comes under the specific language in Section V of said Book of Discipline directing that the Central Conference be held within the year following the General Conference. And the Book of Discipline explicitly specifies that one of the powers of the Central Conference is "to elect the bishops for the respective central conferences, in number as may be determined. . . ." (Book of discipline, Par. 30.2, 2012 Edition, p.32).

That was one of the reasons that drew me to this event. Episcopal elections are always a big deal within the church, because it deals with a core aspect and character of the church in a given context. Who the leaders are is indicative of the church's values, and often tells us the direction the church is headed.

“Noel . . .”

In advance of my trip to the Philippines Central Conference, I have made contact with some leaders in a few of the Annual Conferences. I was trying to gauge the atmosphere with regard to the upcoming episcopal election. Sure enough, there appeared to be much excitement to the extent that some were openly advertising themselves on social media as candidates. There was one particular candidate that had his photo enlarged showing him with his clerical collar, indicating he was elected a bishop of The United Methodist Church – all in living color plastered all over. The Central Conference has not even been held yet, so I asked a friend who happens to be in the know in Manila. She simply smiled and said to me that the guy is a usual clown.

I was particularly curious about a candidate making the rounds by the name of “Noel”. One of my informers from another Annual Conference told me they have been holding prayer meetings for this “Noel.” He even told me that they will be out in force at WU-P with a plan to hold prayer meetings there, too, for “Noel.” So I was curious, and I told my informer that I was serious and wanted him to tell me who this Noel fellow was. That’s when he confessed to me that “Noel” wasn’t a person, but it was an acronym for “No election.” Apparently, there was an attempt to go on with the motions of an election with the intent of not electing any and, in the impasse, the Council of Bishops would then make the necessary assignment to the three episcopal areas. I do not know exactly how serious a plan it was, but it shows the extent, or depth we could go in making a mockery of the opportunity and authority we have in the church to be a means of grace in the world, and witnesses to the Christ for the transformation of the world.

“Ballots, at last . . .”

All of the above, notwithstanding, the Philippines Central Conference eventually arrived at the moment of the 2024 Episcopal Elections . Bishop Tracy-Smith Malone, President of The United Methodist Council of Bishops gave detailed and succinct instructions for the delegates to follow in the conduct of the election. Along the way, from the start of the election with the first ballot, there would be prayers scattered across the conference sessions, predicated upon the hopes of the conference for the leading of the Holy Spirit; with retired bishops from the Philippines College of Bishops, district superintendents, laity leaders taking turns at those prayer junctures.

The first to be elected, either on the fourth or fifth ballot, was Bishop Rodel M. Acdal, of the Baguio Episcopal area. After so many more ballots in what it soon seemed an interminable process, Bishop Ruby-Nell Estrella of the Manila Episcopal Area managed to pull up and became the second to be elected. So far so good.

Bishop Israel Painit of the Davao Episcopal Area appeared to have struggled ever since the start of the balloting. In fact, all three incumbents shared a collective defensive stance, it seemed to me. Before I arrived in Manila, I was in contact with scattered delegates in a number of conferences. While they did not betray confidences nor mentioned names, there was palpable unease across the board, and a seeming desire for change. The disaffiliations taking place in various critical places around the country, the seeming failure to confront and overcome the autonomy non-issue, and the Torio – Puno fiasco, these and other issues pictured a church in disarray. Taken all together, and add them to what United Methodism has opened up to the Philippines in new opportunities of becoming a new church in a new day seemed ready made for new leadership, to many it seemed, as the Central Conference approached. The early election of Acdal and, to some extent, Estrella, may have represented a turning of the tide partly by dint of their resilience, or having successfully mended fences.

The seeming ambivalent attitude of the church was evident in Bishop Painit's struggle. The emergence of Rev. Jonathan Ulanday as a credible challenger posed a particularly difficult one as he himself is from the Davao Area. This was not allowed to play out, however. At the opening of the evening plenary session on Thursday Nov. 21, 2024, Bishop Malone made a bombshell of a revelation. It was a statement that was circulated around with delegates purportedly by Judge Benjamin Turgano urging delegates to support the candidacy of Jonathan Ulanday. It was a flawlessly well written statement, which appeared to be so credibly written by him. Earlier in the afternoon, Ulanday got wind of the statement being circulated. Ulanday told me personally that he contacted Turgano (he was on a car enroute to his home in Pampanga). Ulanday asked him, and Turgano said he didn't know anything about it. So Ulanday asked him to come back and make a defense of himself before the conference. Turgano thereupon turned around and came back to Cabanatuan City.

So as Bishop Malone made the bombshell revelation, Turgano was already there. The Bishop simply said she is allowing him to make a statement of the spurious letter that was circulated. There was complete silence in the auditorium. Turgano began by saying he was grateful for the opportunity to speak to the Conference. Forthwith he said that he considers our episcopal election a sacred responsibility and would not, will not in any way shape or form do anything to sully the sanctity of one of the most sacred tasks within our church we love so much. After he spoke, there was complete silence. In the midst of the silence, Ulanday, who was seated behind me in the bleachers, stood up and address the chair. He made it to the microphone so fast, and as he began to speak, the Bishop tried to stop him saying he's a candidate he is not allowed to speak or make a campaign speech. But Ulanday said, "Bishop I am here not to make a campaign speech, but to do something more important. I am here to say that I am withdrawing from this contest because I have lost faith in this process and could no longer in good conscience continue to participate in it." Some people tried to applaud him, seeing it as a principled moment. Bishop Malone, however raised her hand and said, "Please do not applaud." So what followed was a long, audible silence, punctuated by some who started to sob. In a moment like that you could make your own conclusion why people would cry and be sad.

It was a very difficult moment. But Bishop Malone was equal to the difficulty of the moment. She did not speak - but she decided to do something else. She sang a song as if to sooth our wounded spirits, or perhaps heal some broken hopes for a particular candidate. She sung all 3 stanzas of that song - I do not know where it is from in any of our hymnals. Or perhaps it may have come from her tradition as Black preacher. After a prayer or two, Bishop Malone successfully shepherded the plenary back on track to continue with the election, based on the agreed upon rules. And finally on the 24 ballot, or was it even 25th ballot?, Bishop Israel Painit, who then dominated the picture without Jonathan Ulanday, was elected.

Whoever generated that original statement in the first place knows who he/she is. Whatever motivations, whether base and ignoble, or ideal and spirit-inspired would perhaps not see the light of day. But it wreaked havoc upon the church we all love. Nevertheless, it made evident to me how one could rise above the ordinary and stand tall like Jonathan Ulanday, forgetting his self-interest and reach out to the high calling he has in Jesus Christ. It also made richly evident how the Holy spirit guided Bishop Tracy-Smith Malone to skillfully shepherd that conference in the midst of chaos, in uncharted territory and into a momentous decision for the 2024 Episcopal election. Israel Painit, as the special beneficiary of that moment, could claim a sense of victory not by his machinations,(and this writer implies none whatsoever); but as a result of the Holy Spirit guiding the church through a difficult moment. And the whole experience became a lived parable for the whole church's life as it confronts the challenges today and in the future, not by its own might and skill, but by the guidance of the ever present Holy Spirit in our midst. AMEN.



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.

Comments, Reactions, & Suggestions

Send us an email:

umcnafaum@gmail.com

Following Jesus is Risky (Sermon Notes)

By Rev. Dr. Armando Arellano

Text: Matthew 14:22-33 NRSV

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. Matthew 14:28,29 (NRSV)

Main Points

For Peter, it takes courage to step out of the boat. It takes lots of resolve to step out of his safety and comfort zone. For Peter, it took him full trust on Christ word to do unfamiliar decision to step forward away from his comfort zone. Peter’s curiosity to follow the words of Christ ushered him into the unknown, not knowing and not expecting that he’ll witness more of what Christ do.

Life’s transforming events happen outside the boat, outside our comfort zones. Just to give us some events in the life of the Methodist church. When the church finally decided to live and witness beyond the church comfort zone.

- In 1858, Francis Burns was elected and served as a missionary bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Liberia. Bishop Burns was the First African American Bishop elected in the Methodist Episcopal Church. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- On July 17, 1980, Marjorie Swank Matthews was elected the first woman bishop at the United Methodist Church North Central regional conference in Dayton, Ohio. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- The first African American woman bishop was Bishop Leontine T.C. Kelly, elected in 1984. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.

- Wilbur Wong Yan Choy was the first Asian American elected as a bishop in the United Methodist Church, elected in 1972. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- Dionisio Deista Alejandro (1893–1972) was the first Filipino Bishop of the Methodist Church, elected in 1944. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- Karen Oliveto was the first openly lesbian bishop to be elected in the United Methodist Church. She was elected bishop on July 15, 2016, at the Western Jurisdictional conference. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- In 2022, the Western Jurisdiction elected Carlo Rapanut as the First Filipino-American bishop in the United States. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church has never been the same since then.
- Philippines Central Conference gathering in 2022 in Cabanatuan City elected three – including the region’s first female bishop, Bishop Ruby-Nell M. Estrella. God’s Spirit moved beyond the church’s comfort zone, and the church will never be the same again.*

These are just a few transforming events that took place beyond the church’s comfort zone. Our calling to make disciples of Christ was not limited to personal likes and individuals comfort circles. The mandate from Christ was to go beyond these comfort zones and familiar environments. The Kingdom of God is so big and encompasses and embraces all ethnic groups. Christ gave the order to make all kinds of people Christ disciples.

The fact that the church is guilty of inventing, keeping, and promoting the systemic evil of racism cannot be denied. Many people are aware of the horror and divisive power of racism that prevailed in our churches and society for centuries. To become intentional as a multicultural church is one way for the church to show sincerity and that the church is repentant about the past.

The World Council of Churches summed it up well: To be the church today requires deliberate, consistent, and constant action in the struggle for racial justice. To be the church today requires transformation into church communities, which fully live the diversity of their peoples and cultures as a clear reflection of God's Creations and Image humankind. To be the church today calls churches to make a costly commitment to overcome their division on ethnic lines. To be the church today means overcoming racism by re-establishing right relationships with the churches' own people.... It is to search and tell the truth about the realities of racism as expressed in assimilation policies, superiority myths, and disrespect to the diversity of cultures and identities, disrespect to creation. To be the church today is to be healing communities, transformed by the lives, gifts and spirits of their own people, and to uphold the interconnectedness of life as a whole. (Maurer 2010, 101-102) Maurer, Dehner. 2010. *The Blended church: The Emergence of Multicultural Christianity*

Application:

Church...there is...

- the need to overcome our fears in life.
 - the need to leave our comfort zones
 - the need to go beyond our comfort zones
- Church...
- Following Jesus is a risky commitment.
 - disciples were called to be risk-takers

-to be identified with Jesus is exposing us to risks

-to be at risk with Jesus is a way of life

-transformation happens outside our comfort zone

-God's Spirit moves freely beyond the comfort zone of the church

Quote: Dietrich Bonhoffer, a German theologian said, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others . . . not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell men (people) of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others."

The church has a moral, spiritual, and Biblical responsibility to witness and to reach out to all kinds of people outside the boat, outside our preferred communities. The church's mission is to offer radical hospitality especially to the ethnic minorities and vulnerable. The church cannot turn a blind eye to the needs of the mission field, where people in need of God's Word and grace.

Ministry outside the boat, beyond our comfort zones might look and sound scary, but it is a step into the future. A church for ALL, a church that gives comfort and sanctuary to those outside the boat might be a journey to the unknown, but it is a powerful and most effective approach and antidote to end, eradicate, and dismantle systemic and institutionalized racism, a church the preferred few. A church for ALL people, even for those outside the boat is not easy, it is hard, but it Biblical, it is the Christian way, and it is cool! Don't be afraid; it will work. Amen!

**All three Bishops have just recently been re-elected at the Philippines Central Conference of 2024.*