

**Report of the Philippines Episcopal Assessment Team  
Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters  
March 25, 2019, Manila**

The United Methodist Church in the Philippines is strong and faithful! This was overwhelmingly obvious to the three teams that traveled March 16-19 in the various episcopal areas of the Philippines Central Conference. What follows is a combination of information we received from our hosts, notes from conversations we had, and our own impressions during the assessment period.

**Structure**

The Philippines consists of over 7,000 islands and 394,000 sq km. Its population is over 106 million inhabitants with an average age of 23.4 yrs. On the UN “index of human development” it is ranked 113<sup>th</sup>.

The United Methodist Church in the Philippines is divided into three episcopal areas: Baguio in the north, Manila in the central, and Davao in the south. Each episcopal area is further divided into several annual or provisional annual conferences: Baguio—9 annual conferences; Manila—12 annual conferences; Davao—5 annual conferences, for a total of 26 annual conferences in the Philippines. The latest statistics we have list the total membership for the Philippines Central Conference at 207,190 lay members and 1910 clergy members.

**Common Strengths**

As we shared stories and experiences between the three assessment teams, several common strengths were obvious throughout the UMC in the Philippines.

- There is a strong spirit of evangelism and a growth mindset. This is seen most obviously in the various “worshipping congregations” or “mission congregations” that are part of almost every district throughout the country. They are all birthed and supported by local churches until they can be self-sufficient (worshipping congregations give all their offerings to the mother church and have all their bills paid by the mother church, mission congregations keep their offerings and pay their own bills but still receive support from the mother church). Some local churches support two, three, or four of these new worshipping communities. No funds on the annual conference level exist for new church development; it is all done through the mother/daughter model.
- The church is engaged in mission to the whole person and is invested in community well-being. This results in ministries in the local churches and across the episcopal areas that address arenas like health, the environment, financial well-being, and HIV/AIDS education and awareness.
- Over and over again, we witnessed an entrepreneurial spirit among the churches and their leaders. There are complex problems facing the church but they are met with creative solutions, a willingness to experiment, and desire to expand ministry and mission.
- Each of the three bishops offer gifts in strategic planning and leadership that unite and give direction to their episcopal areas. While each bishop’s vision varies slightly according to the contextual needs of his episcopal area, all three are offering clear strategies for strengthening the church that then cascade down through the district superintendents and local leaders.

- Across the episcopal areas we found strong support for the current episcopal leadership. The Filipino church loves its bishops, trusts their leadership, recognizes their strengths, and is grateful for their hard work on behalf of the church. In turn the bishops speak highly of their annual conference and local church leaders who are implementing the common vision.
- There is a strong desire to develop and employ lay leadership. This is seen foremost in the strength of the deaconess movement where specially trained, credentialed, and commissioned lay women (or men who are called home missionaries) are deployed across the church to build up the ministry of the UMC. Most often they are working in education, from preschool to college level, and also often music ministry. Resources are also poured into developing local leaders through the School of Christian Development and the National Laity Congress held every year. For youth and young adults, development is highlighted in the Christmas Institute and Summer Institute. Most leaders we met had been a part of these robust programs for years.

### **Common Struggles**

Along with strengths shared across the episcopal areas, we also found commonalities in some of the struggles.

- Adequate pay for church workers (clergy and deaconesses) is a struggle everywhere, and in some places a critical need. Many local churches cannot pay their pastor a living wage and there are limited funds at the district or annual conference level to subsidize pay. In some places, churches have come together with great pride, larger churches helping to supplement the salary of workers in smaller places. In other cases, local churches are able to offer rice, corn, chickens, and other foodstuffs to help. In yet other cases, local church pastors must take on second jobs or find other supplementary sources of income. This results in less time for ministry and lower morale among church workers.
- There is also limited funding for education for church workers, both seminary students and deaconess training. This affects recruitment efforts as some willing to enter full-time Christian service cannot pay for schooling.
- While many gifted and committed lay people offer themselves for leadership there is still work to do to improve leadership recruitment, development, and training.
- There are great geographic challenges that lead to long travel times within episcopal areas and cause high expense for leaders to gather. This limits the amount of collaboration cabinets and committees of various annual conferences can do with one another. It also puts a high burden on the bishops who must travel by car, boat and plane for many, many hours, over sometimes treacherous terrain to reach their various churches.
- All three bishops have a very high administrative load due to the large number of annual conferences in each area. The Philippines has adopted a unique strategy in the connection regarding the creation of new annual conferences. This has resulted in most annual conference being very small, even consisting of a single district. Some barely meet the minimum

requirement of 25 clergy persons (elders, deacons, provisional members, associate members, and local pastors). There are clear benefits to these numerous and small conferences. Leaders are locally focused and well acquainted with each other. They also know the context of their small region well. There is reduction in the need for travel time and the cost of conference level gatherings. There are more positions of leadership for more people. Giving is also encouraged as people take pride in supporting their annual conference. For example, the Hundred Islands Annual Conference, the newest, had a budget of around 300,000 pesos when it was a district in 2017; it projects a budget of around 1,400,000 pesos in 2020. But there are also clear liabilities to this culture of very small and very localized annual conferences. It focuses a bishop's time on administrative responsibilities which takes time away from other mission and strategic work. The schedule kept by all three bishops is intense both in terms of meetings and travel. Overload is a concern. There is also increased cost in terms of personnel for each small annual conference and to fund the committees and meetings required. There is a reduction in the ability for people to learn from one another across different contexts.

### **Distinctive Characteristics**

While much in common can be seen across the three episcopal areas, each also has a distinctive character and programming born from different contexts.

#### **Baguio Episcopal Area—led by Bishop Peter Torio**

- In the last 18 months the BEA has developed a signature ministry of Covenant discipleship groups called "CARE for the margins." Now implemented in every district these small groups meet weekly for fellowship, spiritual formation, and financial stewardship. They function like Wesleyan class meetings and also micro-finance cooperatives, providing help for members who do not have access to traditional banks and credit. The program was launched in 2018 and already has assets of almost 3 million pesos. There is also a parallel credit cooperative for clergy and deaconesses called GEMS. Created in 2013 it has already distributed 3.7 million pesos in loans.
- The BEA has created four funds with Wespath with four distinct goals to help the long-term financial health and growth of the episcopal area. Funds are now growing for 1. educational scholarships for pastors and deaconesses, 2. a trust fund for underfunded ministries, 3. connectional giving fund to help districts with annual conference and general church apportionments, 4. church workers salary fund to help those with low salaries.
- Bishop Torio is raising emphasis on data collection and measuring progress with year over year metrics. For some churches even the idea of regularly counting the number of people in worship is new.
- Bishop Torio has a vision to advocate for new educational resources in the episcopal area both around deaconess training and in keeping home grown academics at home to educate the next generation of leaders.
- When asked what sort of impact the UMC has in Baguio, leaders spoke of respect and integrity, members won't cheat or be corrupt, an openness to ecumenical relations, generosity with the poor, willingness to visit the sick and the imprisoned, rushing to help after a natural disaster, and that Methodists were good at praying and were a singing people.

### **Manila Episcopal Area**—led by Bishop Ciriaco Francisco

- The area has a clear mission focus. Along with mission focus of starting new local congregations in the mother/daughter model, the episcopal area puts a strong emphasis for each local church on “Six Areas of Focus.” The episcopal office published a small booklet entitled “Biblico-Theological Reflections on the Six Areas of Focus” in 2018 that is shared and used in all the annual conferences. In addition to the denomination’s four areas of focus—engaging in ministry with the poor, improving global health, developing principled Christian leaders, and developing vital congregations—they added “care for the environment” and “respect for human rights.” Leaders in this episcopal area are well aware of the impact that climate change has brought to their environment, now causing severe drought and the damage to the agriculture economy. While the bishop was key in setting the vision for the episcopal area, as it “cascades” to the local level, district superintendents play a critical role in ensuring that the mission is carried out.
- Standardization of salary for the ordained clergy, deaconesses and local pastors is a high priority. Some annual conferences and districts have begun to implement this structure, with churches contributing to the annual conference or district for the salaries of appointed staff. The bishop is hoping that the standardization of salary can be implemented throughout the episcopal area, with local churches setting aside 1% of their annual budget to support this important project. Annual conferences and districts that have implemented such a structure speak with pride about what they have been able to accomplish to ensure that minimum compensation is provided for their appointed pastors and deaconesses.
- There is also a strong emphasis on leadership development in this episcopal area. Particularly because of the large number of educational institutions which have a strong relationship to the Manila episcopal area. The educational institutions, for example, provide financial support for the ministries of the episcopal area and resources for leadership development. Women’s leadership is highly valued. The bishop has appointed a good number of women as district superintendents. Many deaconesses are assigned to various ministries throughout the episcopal area. The annual conferences are also keenly aware of the need to develop young leaders.

### **Davao Episcopal Area**—led by Bishop Rodolfo Alfonso Juan

- The episcopal area is made up of diverse terrain, cultures, languages, and customs. Consisting of many islands, transportation is a huge challenge.
- DEA is home to a large indigenous population with the Lumma being one of the tribes with which the UMC has deep relationships and ministry. Mindanao is the largest island, and the episcopal center is located there. It is home to the Muslim community and has been under martial law since 2017.
- Missional strategy to spread the Gospel and transform the world. Known as the DEA’s 7K Program, the strategy focuses on: Kapayapaan—Peace, Kaliksasan—Environment, Kalusugan—Health, Kahirapan—Pro-Poor, Karunungan—Knowledge, Komunikasyon—Communication, Kabuhayan—Livelihood. The 7K Program is holistic and intentionally integrates all aspects of faith, life, church and community. Bishop Rudy models this holistic approach in his leadership and ministry among the people. Leaders, both lay and clergy, have fully embraced this model of ministry, and momentum is building. Leaders within the Davao area have identified the critical importance of relational discipleship and leadership development in order to implement the

compelling vision of Bishop Rudy within the diverse local contexts. The Heart-Warming Experience is a key formational initiative for lay and clergy implemented across all districts. There is great zeal for sharing the love of Jesus Christ.

- The area is focused on impacting communities by developing relational partnerships with public entities, the Muslim community, private organizations and ecumenical partners. One example of this is the health board partnering with an LGBTQ Pride organization and a state-run high school to do HIV testing and counseling.
- Due to the high degree of unemployment and poverty, the episcopal area has prioritized the development of income-generating projects to build self-sustainability as congregations, districts, annual conferences and episcopal area. Tapping of rubber trees, fruit and vegetable farms, development of the episcopal center for hosting groups and retreats are among the projects that generate income to support the continued development of mission and ministry within the Davao Area.
- A story of transformation that incarnates the vision of the Davao Area and the Gospel is Zmij. Because of an established prison visitation ministry, a district superintendent met Zmij. She then introduced Bishop Rudy to him, and the church developed a relationship of mutuality that transformed every person and every system involved. Bishop Rudy requested that the state release Zmij into his custody. First, though, they had to raise a large sum of money. When the church made a first down payment, the state forgave the rest of the debt because of the generosity and sincerity expressed by Bishop Rudy and church leaders. Zmij was released into Bishop Rudy's care where he began working as a cook at the episcopal residence and center. Now, Zmij is a Global Ministries National in Mission leading the Livelihood Focus Area. He is training others, especially those in indigenous communities, how to make crafts, access financing and market them in order to make a living. Because the church risked going into the margins, Zmij is no longer living as a 'convict', but as a Child of God. Dignity restored, he now lives from his own God-given gifts, helping to restore the dignity of others by creating opportunities to make a living and contribute to their community. The stigma of being marginalized because of differences is transformed into a community of faith where diversity and beauty are celebrated in all its forms.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, we have seen a very strong and healthy UMC in the Philippines, with leaders working hard with an entrepreneurial spirit and creativity to address the many challenges the church faces. Based on what we have seen and the current climate of deep budget reduction at the General Church level, we feel confident that the current three episcopal areas are fully adequate to provide the leadership needed in the Philippines Central Conference.

Realizing the main location of ministry work is at the district level, we believe there is further fruitful conversation to be had across the Central Conference about the number and size of annual conferences in the Philippines.

We would encourage continued cooperation between the episcopal areas to learn from one another and to increase the resources they bring to their common struggles.

Submitted with gratitude for the grace we experienced with our brothers and sisters in the Philippines,

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