

## **Remembering the Philippines: 1957 -1972**

On March 18, 1957, we arrived in Manila with the Philippines in great crisis. The previous day, while we were waiting at the Shiba Park Hotel in Tokyo, the headlines of an English newspaper announced the death of President Ramon Magsaysay in an air crash in Cebu, an island in the central Philippines. When we landed at the Manila airport, crowds filled the small room and many stood along the roads, waiting for the arrival of the body of the President from Cebu City.

This was the beginning of an adventurous and an eventful fifteen years in the Philippines. The United Church of Christ in the Philippines, the U.C.C.P. we called it, had called us to be fraternal workers to develop an urban-industrial ministry for the national church. We were in a new day in mission.

Overseas churches, originally begun through the evangelistic work of U.S. and other Western churches, were now national churches with their own leadership. The Presbyterian Church, of which I was a pastor, had begun its work in the Philippines at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their request in the years after World War II was for specific programs aimed at developing those areas in which they needed new national leadership. Persons being called from the United States and Western national churches had the task of developing programs which trained nationals for specific programs in the new areas where the overseas churches saw their ministry. In my case we had been called to develop programs which would develop ministries to engage the growing urban and industrial areas in which the Philippines were now growing.

This was a new ministry and in 1957 there were only two national churches which had made requests for work in this area. The Japanese church, which had developed work in urban-industrial ministry, was requesting a person who would develop a specialized approach to the industrial areas of Japanese society. The other opening was in the Philippines where the United Church of Christ in the Philippines was launching a venture in

urban-industrial ministry, its own type of urban-industrial ministry. It was to this opening in the Philippines that Eunice and I had been called. The Presbyterian Church, USA, had over a fifty-year history related to the issues of urban-industrial areas and their growth in the United States.

The next fifteen years of our ministry was devoted to our relations within the United Church and to the work of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. In this work we felt enriched by our relationships with those among whom we had become acquainted, both in the local church settings as well as in the larger Philippine society.

While we were working within the national structure of the Philippine church we were deeply engaged with friends we made in our local church setting. Those relationships have lasted until this very day. Our family, which included our five children, became very much a part of Philippine life. Our children's relationships with the Philippines have carried over into their own adult life. We feel bound to the future of the Philippines even after returning to the United States.

We have been often asked, what did our experience in the Philippines mean to us? We immediately reflect on how the Philippines and our fifteen years there continue to influence our lives and our thinking about the larger mission of the church in our current times. These issues cannot be separated. We see this specifically in the ongoing work of our children. Just as an example, our daughter Kathryn, who is now a professor of global studies at the California State University at Monterey Bay, has recently been asked by the San Francisco Theological Seminary to lead a group this January on a study seminar in the Philippines. Kathryn attended Philippine schools and was deeply influenced by her growing up in the Philippines. She tells her own story in a web site called [maniladays.com](http://maniladays.com).

Her brother Scott was interested in the agricultural work being done at Los Banos, on the green revolution. At the University of the Philippines Prep School (U.P. Prep) he was deeply influenced by the biology teacher Mrs. Rabago, and spent his freshman year at the University of the Philippines. Scott would have continued at the University of the Philippines but the outbreak of violence in 1971 forced the continuation of his studies in

biology at the College of Wooster in Ohio. Scott went on to earn his PhD at Yale University and now teaches plant genetics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Daughter Johanna also teaches at the California State University in Monterey Bay in the area of public and visual arts. Johanna attended Jose Abad Santos Memorial School in Quezon City where she began her art studies. She and her husband Chris Brown whose family also served in student work in the Philippines have visited the Philippines several times as part of art events in which both she and Chris have had displays. Chris Brown has worked with Filipino musicians, especially and notably Jose Maceda. In pursuit of her visual artwork, Johanna has major murals related to Philippine history and also Philippine-U.S. immigrant history in San Francisco. Johanna has painted a 90-foot mural, “Ang Lipi ng Lapu-Lapu” on the Dimasalang House, a retirement community for elders of Philippine ancestry in San Francisco. The mural tells the story of the heroes and heroines of the Philippines and also of the Filipinos who have immigrated to the United States.

Daughter Margaret, who attended the Philippine Christian College elementary school in Malate and then Jose Abad Santos Memorial School in Quezon City, drew heavily upon her Philippine education and Filipino friendships on her return to the United States. She attended Kenwood Academy in the Hyde Park area when we returned to the U.S., where she was in the minority among the African-American student body. In college, the College of Wooster, she went on in African American studies and went to work in the Chicago Police Department and ultimately in the overseas criminal justice program of the United States Department of Justice.

Our fifth child, Erika, was the only one of our children born in the Philippines in May 1971, the year before we concluded our work in the Philippines. She has followed in my concern for affordable urban housing, especially for the urban poor. She served during the first term of the Obama Administration in the Department of Housing and Urban Development. She continues in this work of affordable housing in the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C.

My work in urban-industrial mission in the Philippines has been related to this field as it has grown in Asia and subsequently around the world. One year after we had arrived in Manila, the larger body of Asian churches decided to hold a gathering called The First Asian Conference on Industrial Evangelism. The conference brought together Asian nationals from fifteen different nations to discuss the work in their countries as the church was responding to the growth of their cities and their industries. The urban-industrial mission work grew in the Philippines, and after this Conference it also became a movement within the churches across Asia and across the world. The World Council of Churches saw its importance and created a desk of Urban-Industrial Mission in Geneva. Philippine leaders became very much a part of this movement both in Asia and in the World Council of Churches.

The ministry, in which I was to be engaged for fifteen years with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines from 1957 to 1972, was a new and open ground for experimentation. One does not easily transfer the long-range experience of U.S. urban and industrial change to a largely agriculturally based economy. I myself was to undergo a major cultural learning experience in how urban-industrial ministry was to be accomplished in a Philippine setting. I was to be a listener, an observer, an inquirer into the lives of the people undergoing dramatic change in a culture different from my own. The beginning point was not only to become acquainted with the language, even though most Filipinos spoke English, but the way in which urban and industrial change was occurring in the Philippines.

I was fortunate in beginning this ministry that the United Church of Christ in the Philippines had provided an invaluable co-worker who was to be the head of this ministry. His name was Valentin Montes, and he was from Samar, an island in the central part of the Philippines. He was an attorney in the field of labor law. We were to develop programs together throughout the Philippines. This ministry for me was a two-way street. It had to begin with my listening and my learning from Valentin how he viewed the changes taking place in the Philippines.

One of our first ministries was to bring together in Manila urban pastors to discuss how people were affected by the rapid urbanization taking place in the city and its region. There was a sharing of experience and an investigation of what cultural changes urbanization was having in a largely rural society from which most of the city population had come. From my point of view the question was “What had we learned from the U.S. experience as people, many times as immigrants, as they became part of city life?” My own family experience growing up with immigrant grandparents and living in a crowded tenement city culture provided a base for understanding the issues in Manila.

To get a wider view of economic life in the Philippines, that is beyond Manila, we planned conferences in other regions of the Philippines to learn how industrial change was affecting the life and culture of local people. This drew in a wider range of experience. We concentrated on the lives of young people as they were employed in industries in their regions. Several conferences were held on the “Young Workers in Industry” in San Pablo City and in the Laguna Province where many young workers were on the processing lines in the coconut industry. We travelled to Baguio to visit the mining industry where many people from the Mountain Province were engaged in the gold and silver mines. We next visited Mindano and Iligan City where a new steel industry was being established.

In each of these areas we held conferences and seminars, situations with those who made up the industry or who were part of the business and working community in the region. These were sharing experiences in which pastors and lay people in the local areas were learning the effects of the industries upon their daily lives. We were gathering profiles of these experiences, which the church leaders needed to know as they were relating to the people in these communities.

As part of the growing economic life in the Philippines, one of the crucial areas was the role of labor unions in the nation’s industrial sector. Here the church’s industrial programs were aided by the work of the Asian Labor Education Center, in Manila, which was begun as part of the U.S. Agency for International Development (A.I.D.). Cicero Calderon, who headed the Center, agreed to have pastors participate in the training programs, which

brought together trade unionists from across the Philippines. The industrial program of the U.C.C.P. provided the scholarships for pastors to join these programs as learners in the issues facing trade unions. Their learnings from these programs and their contact with trade unionists provided them a basis for understanding the role of trade unions in their communities in which they, themselves, were ministering.

In the development of these urban-industrial ministries we also saw the need to begin training within the theological seminaries. If this was the urban and industrial culture which was shaping community life in the Philippines, then young seminarians needed to become aware of this culture into which they would be graduating. In the process of achieving this goal an Inter-seminary Urban-Industrial Institute was created which would provide the courses and the training related to these changes. Some seminarians went to work in Manila industries to learn what some of their parishioners would be experiencing. Others were recruited to do organizing in the squatter communities, which had grown up in many of the cities. Here they were to support residents in achieving fire protection, water accessibility, and the possibility of home ownership.

From the beginning of our presence in Manila, Eunice was asked to help teach young women who were becoming deaconesses in congregations throughout the Philippines. A deaconess is a major force in the carrying out children's programs and in the worship life of Philippine congregations throughout the Philippines. Eunice was recruited to write Christian curriculum, both for the United Church of Christ in the Philippines as well as for the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. One of her major contributions was as a faculty member for non-Catholic students at the Philippine Women's University.

In response to the crises facing the Philippines, Eunice brought together songs, drawn from the music traditions of the people, in three separate publications: "Everybody I Love You" was one, "O The Wonder, Wonder of it All" was another, and, finally, "Let's Sing Christmas."

One of Eunice's most successful productions was a joint effort with Eva Villanueva, a member of the S.S. Wright couples club of which we both were a part. "A Filipino Family

Cook Book” grew out of the potluck suppers, which we held as part of our family programs. After being reprinted twelve times, in 2011 Eva Villanueva produced a modernized version to meet the needs of a new generation.

Our years in the Philippines were richly rewarded by friendships, which were continued even as we returned to the United States. When we arrived in Chicago in the summer of 1972, where I was to begin work at the McCormick Theological Seminary, we discovered that many of our Filipino friends had arrived in Chicago before us. Dick Solis, whom we had known as a pastor at Ellinwood Malate Church, was pastoring with his wife Mutya, a Filipino congregation in Chicago. Abel and Phoebe Amago, Imo and Roni Sapaula, and Lilis and Arsenio Kapili, all from Manila, were among others with whom we renewed our friendship.

We had learned much about the church as a global institution during our years of work with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. These renewed friendships in Chicago were a witness to the vitality of the Spirit which binds Christians together across continents and oceans. For this we have been eternally thankful.

Richard P. Poethig  
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