



Meeting the UUs of the Philippines

For two weeks this past February I had the exceptional opportunity to travel to the Philippines to meet our co-religionists there and forge new bonds between us. As the UUPCC's Outreach Coordinator, I was most focused on gaining a good understanding of the UU Church of the Philippines, making personal connections, discovering ways that we could best create and nurture new partnerships and laying the groundwork for a future UUPCC trip. I relayed my goals to Nihal Attanayake, the Director of the Faith in Action department of the UU Church of the Philippines and the head of their Partner Church Program, and asked that he fill my itinerary with relevant experiences...which he did!

Traveling primitive roads, deeply rutted by the massive trucks used to haul the sugar cane harvests, I road tripped to the mountainous northern part of Negros Island with Nihal, Rebecca Quimada, Joseph Santos-Lyons, and our skilled van driver Ricky. Over four days' time, we visited nine churches and fellowships. Each time we were enthusiastically greeted by the congregants who often sang or danced for us and offered us fresh coconut or mango or taro root. Joseph, the first UUA intern to ever serve in the Philippines, explained that he had been working with the emerging UU fellowships in Metro-Manila and shared photos of activities there. He sought to learn the whereabouts of the young people who had left the small, poor

agricultural villages of Negros to find a more prosperous livelihood in Manila in hopes of connecting with them in their new lives.

I explained that I was there to help grow our UU connections. I was delighted to be in a land of sunshine and warmth, especially considering the -40 degree wind chills back in Wisconsin. For a people living in a tropical land where the growing season is forever, this was a big exercise for their imaginations. What was easy for them to understand was that I hoped we could grow to know each other better. This was a joyful message.

I asked them to help me introduce them to the UUs of North America by drawing pictures of “what was in their hearts...what they dreamed about.” I promised to share these pictures at GA along with the photos that I took. Although unaccustomed to this form of communication, they took up the challenge, often with smiles, self-conscious giggles and an expanding enthusiasm for the project. Prominent visual themes were the church and its importance in their lives, their homes and families, their connection to the land and the beauty of flowers, their symbol of love. Their desire for increased opportunities for education for their children, decent and available medical care, better livelihoods and access to better water systems, roads, etc. also surfaced.

Rebecca, daughter of UUCP founder, served as translator and she and Nihal invited the UUs of Negros to share more about their dreams and realities. We were especially touched by the sincerity of a young man from Doldol who serves as a lay minister for the church. Arman is college educated, speaks fluent English as well as several other languages and has a deep desire to understand the UU faith better and be able to explain it to others. How many of us also wish we could understand and explain our faith better?

We were also very touched by a young woman in Aquino who wants to be a pre-school teacher. In the Philippines if a child is unable to attend pre-school for any reason, he/she is closed out of the educational system. This policy has made “higher education” unavailable for many UUs as has the low, but prohibitive cost of education for UU school-aged children who often have to leave school to work on their parents land. This young woman’s determination has led to the creation of the first UU pre-school in the Philippines which will open this spring.

After a day of rest that included a visit to Siquijor Island (feisty blue crabs, a misty, rainy mountain hike, turquoise waterfalls, laughing times with Lundy Mae Quimada’s family and an unanticipated late night return over high seas to Dumaguete,) we were back on the road again. This time we traveled to the southern part of Negros with Henry Legaje UUCP president, and Susan Quisel, the RE Director of the UUCP. We visited 6 churches/fellowships including Nagbinlod, the village where the first UUPCC Community Capacity Building experience was tried. We saw the progress that had ensued and the empowerment of the village women.

We also met a community of refugees from their mountain village home. Their minister had preached a sermon that the government felt was too liberal. Perhaps, the government thought, he was a communist. They all fled for their lives. Things have calmed down now but the threat of violence exists for liberal social reformers. How often do we realize how fortunate we are for our freedoms?

After another day of rest, this time visiting spectacular Apo Island, I spent a day in Dumaguete, the location of the UUCP National office. We shared all we learned and looked ahead. We had a moving farewell ceremony. Then Henry and I left for Manila to visit two more churches and a University discussion group. We also were able to attend the final hours of an exhilarating youth conference.

Some of the most profoundly touching moments of my visit occurred in Manila. The Bon Bon UU Church is located in one of the most desperately poor areas of Metro-Manila, and as one approaches the home where the services are now being held, one must walk through a garbage dump and into a house that has a cement wall topped by barbed wire just 3 feet outside the entrance door. When we visited the Sunday service, we were greeted by a full house of smiling faces. They sang "Enter, Rejoice and Come In," did Joys and Concerns and also sang "Spirit of Life" in English. During Joys and Concerns we learned that a seven year old girl, a member of the congregation, had been killed by gang gunfire just three days before. The young woman who lived in the house-church commuted four hours a day for a minimum wage job and dreamed of being a minister. We are so different. We are so much more alike. We are all Unitarian Universalists and we are all on paths of discovery and compassion.