

SABBATICAL MINISTER'S REPORT
Rev. Diane Rollert - 7 March 2012
Sabbatical Dates: January 17 – March 11, 2012

INTRODUCTION

When I informed my congregation that I would be spending the majority of my sabbatical in the Philippines, a few people expressed concern. They were worried that I was taking on too much. A sabbatical should be a time for rest, reflection and renewal, they said. Wouldn't my time in the Philippines be too intense? Wouldn't I be putting myself into a dangerous situation? It is true, that when you search for information about the Philippines, you find many negative warnings: Don't go to Manila, it's too dangerous. Don't ever travel alone. Don't drink the water or eat the fruit. Watch out for malaria, typhus, dengue fever and dysentery. Watch out for kidnappers.

I admit, that as I finished the transaction of paying for my non-refundable airplane ticket, I had a moment of doubt. What if they were right and the trip *was* too intense? What if there was an earthquake or a typhoon or I got sick? Then there was the daunting schedule Rev. Rebecca Siennes had sent: two major workshops to run, many visits to congregations, several conferences to attend, plus preaching. What if I returned exhausted? Somehow, those concerns weren't enough to dissuade me. I set aside all the worries and decided to go with an open mind and heart.

Now my two months in the Philippines are coming to an end. On Sunday, I will have my final *despedida* at the UUCP headquarters, and in Manila with a gathering of UUs at the Old Penang restaurant. I will say goodbye to a people and a country that have filled my heart. I will return home a changed person, and there will be tears in my eyes. It will be hard to leave.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to serve as sabbatical minister to the UUCP. It was a life-changing experience. No, I didn't find it dangerous to be in Manila, or to travel alone. No, I didn't get sick, even though I ate plenty of salad and fruit (I received a full education on indigenous fruits with many names I have already forgotten). I tried not to drink the water, but probably did anyway (how can you not try Halo-Halo?). I missed the typhoon by a month, but yes, I did experience an earthquake.

We joked that we should create a T-shirt that says: "When UU women meet, the earth shakes. Dumaguete City, February 6, 2012." That day became a defining experience for the women who were participating in the ICUUW conference. I will never forget escaping to the mountains during a false tsunami alert with six women crowded into a pedicab as many other pedicabs overflowing with women from our conference followed behind us. None of us had any idea what to do, and we quickly realized that you really have no control when it comes to natural disasters.

I'm not sure how much I've really learned about preparing for an earthquake or a tsunami. But that day, I learned a lot about what it takes to minister in the midst of a potential disaster. Some of the local women were especially frightened as they worried about their families left at home. I could hardly think about my own concerns as I comforted and calmed them. I am grateful for the experience, now that it has passed.

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At the same time, I find myself truly humbled by the powerful forces of this earth. I am still deeply saddened by the devastation we saw as we travelled north through Negros Oriental to the site of the epicentre of the earthquake. Had the epicentre been closer to Dumaguete, I could be telling a very different story now. Facing such moments, even when they turn out to be false alarms, brings a deeper appreciation for life. To be human means to be vulnerable, no matter where we stand. It seems cliché to say, but I stepped out of that experience feeling a renewed and intense gratitude for every moment of my life. It is a feeling that has remained with me since.

My time here has been filled with precious moments. There is much that divides Unitarian Universalism between the West and here, yet there is much that we have in common. The “daunting” schedule that Rebecca prepared for me turned out to be incredibly energizing and inspiring. I am glad that we planned for the Our Whole Lives and Religious Education Teachers workshops. Those two experiences have been highlights for me. They have enabled me to really see this movement where it has the most power and potential for the future, and in a way that I might have missed had I only visited congregations or met with ministers and key adult leaders.

OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

My 8 weeks here included the following activities:

Manila. Meetings with the Manila fellowship in Bicutan and the UU group in Quezon City. I spent many hours with Bob Guerrero, Janet Cemanes and Tet Gallardo talking about their experiences and concerns for the UU movement in Manila. I encouraged Tet Gallardo to resume her involvement in Bicutan and Quezon City after a year's absence. I preached once at Bicutan and once in Quezon City (this was due to the fact that my visit only spanned three Sundays, two of which the QC group did not meet). I went with Bob twice as he did the books with Norma Maesa for the women's micro-lending in Bicutan. I spent one Sunday at Bicutan presenting a children's RE lesson with Meling who is in charge of children's RE. I discovered and purchased for Bicutan a collection of excellent bilingual children's books at the Ayala Library of the Filipinas. The children loved the books, and Bob and Meling were pleased with the gift.

- **ICUW Conference.** I participated in the one-day conference, meeting with many women from UUCP who I would get to know better. Several would return for my workshops. The earthquake interrupted our session at Silliman University. We completed the program at the home of Celia Hoffman in Valencia. Upon Rebecca's request, I led the final worship in a circle in Celia's backyard.
- **ICUU Conference.** This was an opportunity to meet with Filipinos, Filipinas and other UUs from around the world. I got to spend time with both Fred Muir and Roger Jones who shared their impressions and experiences here. I organized the final offering during our closing ceremony to provide a gift to the BUILD project. We raised approximately \$1400.

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- **Congregational Visits.** Visits to congregations included the ICUU South Trip to Nagbinlod and Banaybanay. After the trip, I travelled with Rebecca to visit the Aquino Religious Education School, Nataban to see where the movement first began and Ulay where I preached. Our trip included travel through the zone most devastated by the earthquake.
- **Funeral Service.** Participation in the funeral service for Iluminada Cayab near Ulay. I delivered a reflection that was translated by Rebecca. It was a rare opportunity for me to experience a Philippine funeral. Since that day, I had an opportunity to get to know Iluminada's youngest daughter, Mai Mai, who participated in the RE Teachers workshop.
- **Our Whole Lives Workshop.** I developed and facilitated a 2-day program for 21 youth and young adults. I waited until I had spent some time talking with young adult leaders before preparing the program. This helped me to identify some of the key issues that needed to be addressed. Much of the program was translated by Rebecca, which was a heroic job. I also worked closely with Elvie and Efren who acted as my translators and co-facilitators. Working with Rebecca, we engaged the participation of Dr. Wale and a colleague to present information about anatomy, pregnancy, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. This was a transformative experience for us all (more below).
- **Women's Programs.** I participated in the UUCP Women's Conference and Ecumenical Women's Conference. I met with the women of UUCP's national women's organization and introduced some "getting to know you" games with Tet Gallardo. I then presented a reflection at the Ecumenical Women's Conference, and participated in the Women's Forum with Luz Ilagan.
- **Preaching.** I preached at Bicutan on January 22, at Ulay on February 19, and at the Dumaguete Fellowship on March 4.
- **Religious Education Teachers Workshop.** I developed and facilitated a 2 ½ day workshop for 11 Religious Education teachers (including Rev. Tirso Ponsica). Although we did not translate the written materials, Efren acted as my translator. Rebecca participated in several sessions. Again, I found this to be a successful program that brought a group of women together to explore theology and the challenges of their lives, and their communities as they impact their work with children.

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OBSERVATIONS AND THOUGHTS

(Note that I spent most of my time working with Rebecca, since Nihal was travelling for much of the time I was in Dumaguete.)

Children Are the Key Attendees – Challenges and Opportunities

On my very first visit to Bicutan in Manila, I was struck by the number of children who were present (perhaps 30) and the low adult attendance (perhaps 10). As we visited congregations throughout Negros Oriental and Occidental, this impression grew as I saw churches filled with so many children. Later, towards the end of my time here, I learned from the RE teachers of the rural congregations that they are concerned that parents are not committed to the churches. They each told stories of parents who do not attend church, but send their children who come for the community but also for the snacks. In the case of those congregations with scholars programs, the children come to be counted so that they can be given financial support. (Although the Manila RE teacher was not present, one member of Quezon City had previously expressed concern to me that Bicutan was less likely to meet when Bob Guerrero was not present. Bob brings snacks, and distributes financial support.)

While meeting with the RE Teachers from the rural congregations, we brainstormed some possible solutions to the lack of parental involvement. One suggestion was to require parents to attend in order for their children to receive scholar support. But as we explored further, we wondered whether parents had needs that weren't being met by the church. Perhaps there is a need for more opportunities for adults to find a space to talk about their burdens (as in Mothers Groups), or if there were more outreach to the adults (as in going as a group to a person's house to sing Birthday wishes) or creating community activities with heart that would attract the parents.

The discussion has led me to wonder if, just as the children come for snacks, perhaps the adults would come for meals. Hunger may be an issue, and as I have found in my own congregation, the hospitality of food is often a way to build community. This, of course, would require financial assistance. Whatever the solutions may be, it is clear that this is an issue that needs to be discussed among the congregations.

It could be easy to look cynically at high attendance of children as merely a result of material gifts of food and financial support. But I also observed a high level of comfort among the children. Church is a safe place for them, and the value of this should not be underestimated. Children are also the greatest resource of this movement. While in Manila, I encouraged professional women like Janet Cemanes and Tet Gallardo to be as present as possible in Bicutan. Among the children, there are many young girls who need role models. If these two strong women become more engaged, I believe there can be many benefits. Tet expressed concern that one of the most poised girls in the Bicutan church, who impressed ICUU participants when she acted as liturgist on the Sunday they visited, has left to join Iglesia ni Cristo. Such movement from one church to another is normal, but this also points to a need for strengthened children's ministry in Bicutan.

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The Promise of Youth and Young Adults

As I travelled, I was impressed by the youth and young adults who were taking on roles as liturgists in their congregations. Often, they are the children of ministers, yet they bring their own understanding to their roles. Meeting with youth and young adults during the Our Whole Lives program gave me a stronger view of what happens as the children in the UUCP grow and develop. There is cause for much hope here. These young people have a strong sense of UU values and UU identity, which they communicated throughout the program as we talked about specific scenarios that touch their lives. They made it clear that they strongly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. They expressed this through their acceptance of gays and lesbians, and through their willingness to consider the affects of abuse and the double standards of gender relations. I observed several strong leaders and potential leaders among them. In particular, I see Elvie (who is currently taking a break to care for her 19-month old son) and Efren as strong future leaders, as well as the current youth president, Arniel, and the current young adult president, Marife. Youth who I saw stand out as possibly growing into leadership someday include Laica and Kenneth from Aquino, and Karel. Lesley from Ulay, who attended the RE Teachers program, also stood out. If carefully nurtured, these youth and young adult leaders have the potential to carry the movement forward.

Finding a Place to Deal with Pain

As the RE teachers met, there were several occasions where sharing about personal pain arose. The people in the rural churches live hard lives, sometimes not having money for food or for medicine, often having to discontinue education in order to pay medical bills or family expenses. These concerns came up as we spoke of topics such as kindness and forgiveness. As Rebecca expressed to the group, there is a need to share these burdens rather than to hold them in. I asked the group whether this might also be the case for the children. Perhaps they needed more opportunities to talk and express their pain as well, perhaps through dictating stories or drawing.

As I reflect upon comments that heard from Rebecca and Tet, I also wonder whether there needs to be more support in developing liturgy and rituals that speak to the people's hearts in their own language. Perhaps this would draw in more adults.

Strengthening the Voice of Women

During the Women's conferences, OWL and the RE Teachers program, I had the opportunity to see Rebecca Siennes in action as she models for the women how to express themselves. Rebecca is not afraid to speak about the effects of patriarchy in the Philippines.

We had an exceptionally poignant experience during the OWL program. One male minister from a rural congregation had escorted a group of youth to the program. He stayed and observed throughout. On the day Dr. Wale presented information about STDs and contraception, this particular minister stepped in to give a strong speech

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about the importance of girls remaining virgins until marriage. Rebecca responded by talking about the double standard expected between men and women here (boys are not told to be virgins, but are encouraged to be sexually experienced). The next day, during a session about sexual abuse, this same male minister made a joke to some of the boys that rape was okay as long as you married the girl. Rebecca informed me of this joke in the presence of the group and she, Elvie and I responded by making it clear to the group that rape is a crime (something that many in the Philippines still do not realize). I shared my own experience of ministering to those who are survivors of abuse, and had the group read in unison about sexual rights and responsibilities. We ended with a candle lighting ceremony to wish for healing.

Later that day, Rebecca facilitated a meeting with the minister, myself, Efren, Arniel and Marife. I was impressed by Rebecca's courage to have the conversation. The minister apologized, but it is clear that there is much work that needs to be done to shift attitudes about gender, particularly among the older male ministers. Young men like Efren and Arniel, who expressed their feelings about injustices toward women, will have to be counted upon to work with the women to make needed changes. Strong female leaders need to be developed over the coming years to be ready to step in when Rebecca retires.

Leadership

The need for developing more leadership in the UUCP is a topic that comes up repeatedly. I have heard several people speak of their concerns about who will replace Rebecca and Nihal should they ever retire. There is a gap between the staff in Dumaguete and the leadership in the congregations. The staff work hard, but need to see stronger leadership skills develop within the congregations. There is a challenge between the needs of the rural congregations and the leadership potential among the Manila young professionals in Quezon City. People like Bob Guerrero, Tet Gallardo, Janet Cemanes and Edlyn have professional skills that they can contribute, but a balance will need to be developed between rural poor and urban middle (and upper) class perspectives.

While I was here, Rebecca and I both had conversations with Tet Gallardo about her ideas to develop a series of leadership workshops to be given to the congregations in Negros. Rebecca has been working on programs that focus on leadership, and I think that using Tet's professional skills in this area has promise.

Assertiveness Training, Right Relations, and Conflict Resolution

Just as I have encountered in my own congregation, the need to develop right relations and methods for conflict resolution within the congregations came up repeatedly. These are areas that need to be developed as part of leadership training, and as congregational programs. I found, as well, through working with the youth, young adults, teachers and women, that there is a great need for assertiveness training. In fact, we used the OWL program's session on assertiveness with the RE teachers after they raised concerns about conflicts that were happening within their congregations.

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Family Churches vs. Urban Churches

All of the churches I visited, including Bicutan, appeared to be family churches with a single extended family at the core. Although the Dumaguete Fellowship is fairly inactive (it may meet every other Sunday), it has a family component as well. During the time I was here, Rebecca's daughter-in-law Elvie had to step down from her involvement in the church to care for her toddler son. Rebecca's son has been the minister of the church, but is serving in the military and so is often not available. In order for the fellowship to develop again, it will need a dedicated minister. This will take money, and there is hope that the BUILD project will eventually provide the financial support needed.

Both Dumaguete and Quezon City in Manila will require a different approach from the other congregations. Leaders I spoke with from both groups have a vision of UUism that is more akin to that of the UUA than that of the rural congregations. This will require leadership and ministry that can respond to their needs and attract more like-minded urban congregants. There is untapped potential here that could carry the movement in a new direction, but again, would require commitment and investment.

Strengthening Theology in Language that Can Be Understood

The first congregation I visited was Nagbinlod. The sanctuary was filled to overflowing, with many adults and many more children. When Rebecca asked if someone would give a reflection, my fellow tour members nudged me forward to speak. As I looked at the faces of so many bright-eyed, expectant children, a simple saying from my past days as a director of religious education came into my mind: "We are Unitarian Universalists, with minds that think, hearts that love and hands that are ready to serve." That became my mantra for the rest of my stay as I thought about how to communicate the essence of our faith to both children and adults. It was the outline I used when working with the RE teachers, and it was the basis of what I preached in Ulay.

Within the rural congregations there is a strong reliance on the Bible. As I got to know some of the ministers, I discovered a strong tradition of seeing the Bible as truth. For example, there is a strong emphasis on teaching children through Bible drill (how big was Noah's ark? How many children did Jacob have, etc.), with little emphasis on encouraging members to think for themselves. This may be a cultural difference between East and West, but those within Manila and Dumaguete understand a more nuanced Unitarian Universalism. All will agree that UUism is not dogmatic, but there is a difference of opinion in how to express that non-dogmatism. As I met with congregations and spoke with leaders, it seemed to me that there is a thirst for ways to express our theology so that it speaks to people's hearts. In many ways, this is no different than what I have discovered in North America, or in speaking to fellow UU

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ministers from around the world. This is a movement-wide challenge that we all need to address.

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Religious Education as a Resource

Given that there are so many children in the UUCP, RE teachers are at the forefront of the movement. I would recommend that the program I developed be translated into Cebuano for future use. I would also recommend that there be more opportunity for teacher trainings. The teachers need the support that develops when they meet each other from different congregations (in fact we set up a cellphone text list for them – though they will need money for the load).

It would be wonderful if there were resources for someone to translate North American RE materials into Cebuano for Negros (and possibly Tagalog for Manila). The UUA has a new curricula called "Tapestry of Faith" on the uua.org website, but these materials need to be culled and revised for the cultural and economic context here. It was shocking to me to consider how much we assume wealth in the North American context. Every lesson begins with an expensive materials list, one of everything for each child, something that is out of the question here. I think RE curricula development would be a worthwhile investment for the UUCP, perhaps something that could be sponsored by some of the Partner Churches.

Having now worked with the teachers, there are some things that I would include in a future program. Teachers need help learning how to tell stories, how to encourage discussion, how to teach a song, how to encourage children to tell their own stories and how to talk with children about their artwork. I would have each teacher practice each of these techniques with each other. Facilitating discussions about the children's psychological and spiritual needs would also be helpful.

In terms of the best approach for leading workshops here, I found with both RE and OWL that the best techniques were values voting (where there is a line marked Agree, Unsure and Disagree on the floor, and everyone moves to their position) and brainstorming in small groups that then present to the larger group. Large group discussions were harder to facilitate.

Listening to the RE Teachers provided me with great insight into the needs and dreams of the UUCP. When asked what most mattered for the children, the RE Teachers responded that they needed to: 1) Know God, 2) Learn UU principles, and 3) Respect each other. Their biggest dreams for the children were: 1) The children would become good UUs; 2) Parents would provide more support and cooperation, and 3) That the children would achieve their dreams, especially so that they would know enough success to become the ones to support other children as scholars.

The Need for Sexuality Education

During the Our Whole Lives program, participants were invited to write anonymous questions. The overwhelming response we received made it clear to us that sexuality education of this kind is essential for the youth and young adults here. Participants submitted questions that ranged from personal concerns about their own sexuality to questions about sexual orientation, pregnancy, STDs, and broad cultural questions.

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One participant asked if there was a solution to overpopulation besides contraception. Overpopulation is an obvious concern here as poor families have so many mouths to feed. As one foreigner said to me, the population here has grown from 30 million to over 90 million in the 29 years that he has lived here. Estimates are that it will reach 120 million in the next 10 to 20 years. The proposed Reproduction Health Bill has become a major political issue, and it is strongly opposed by the Catholic Church.

Programs like OWL can play a critical role in increasing education about sexual health. At the same time, offering such programs within the context of the UUCP offers a safe place for participants to speak openly and honestly with each other. The participants told us that not only did they have fun but they also gained invaluable knowledge. As one young adult told us, she wishes that she had participated in the program when she was a teen. She might have made very different life choices as a result.

We were only able to provide the program to 21 participants, but we received word that many more youth and young adults would have attended had there been room. Currently, half of the materials I prepared have been translated into Cebuano. My hope is that the rest will be translated so that Elvie and Efren can lead the program for others in the future.

OWL provides much needed sexuality education that encourages young people to defer sexual activity until they are ready, to learn skills for building healthy relationships, and to learn important decision-making skills. It is also a powerful way to build community among young people.

Reproductive Health Education and AWAKE

Another way that UUCP may be able to have an impact on the lives and future of its membership is through the AWAKE program that Rebecca has organized with Dr. Wale. There are many married women who would not be able to travel to headquarters for an OWL workshop, but would benefit from discussions about reproductive health. It was also suggested to me that providing women with actual contraceptives or the money for contraceptives could be a step to consider as part of this program.

UUCP Headquarters as an Asset

While here I have observed the essential role UUCP headquarters plays in the life of the movement. By offering workshops and conferences, UUCP brings together leaders and members from the Negros congregations and Manila and thereby strengthens connections between otherwise isolated communities. During my five weeks in Dumaguete, I watched as new relationships were formed and understandings were broadened as people came together for the ICUUW, ICUU, OWL, RE Teacher Training and the Women's Conference. It may be difficult for participants to fully articulate what they have learned once they return home, but I have witnessed transformations taking hold. This is one way to identify and develop new leadership. I hope that the value of these gatherings will continue to be appreciated and supported.

Partner Church Joys and Concerns

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Partnership offers much needed support, and raises some challenges for the congregations. Members are openly appreciative of their North American partners. They enjoy the relationships that are developing, in addition to financial and other support. At the same time, it is work to prepare for visitors, as several of the women told me. Rebecca expressed concerns that there is some in-fighting that happens as money is introduced into the relationship. Members who have lapsed in their involvement complain that they are not eligible for funds. Another concern is the needed for others besides Rebecca and Nihal to effectively translate between English and Cebuano. There is also concern about developing stronger faith connections. Livelihood projects are much appreciated, but there is a sense that they don't focus on strengthening UUism in the Philippines.

Text Ministry

The idea of a text ministry began as a joke between Efren and me during one of our trips to the North. But the more I have thought about it, the more sense it makes. Many of the UUCP members do not have ready access to Internet, but many do have cellphones which they primarily use to text messages to family and friends. The Philippines, I was told, is the text capitol of the world – and based on my observations, I'd say this must be true. Text messaging is a medium that could have a lot of potential for the UUCP, with a bit of creativity and concerted effort. Imagine daily messages of UU inspiration. It sounds funny, but it could work.

Raising Awareness in the West

I wonder if there are new ways for we Westerners to raise awareness about the UUCP outside of the Philippines. Before I arrived, I had read all of the material that was available, but nothing fully communicated to me the compelling stories of the people I have met – especially the women – since I have been here. So many times my heart ached as I heard stories of woman giving up on their dreams in order to feed their families or pay medical bills. I met bright women with big hearts, great creativity and strong UU faith who are living hard lives in poor communities. The more stories I heard, the more I wanted to open my cheque book and give whatever I could to support as many of these women as I can. If we could tell these stories, perhaps we could raise greater understanding and support.

CONCLUSION

The Importance of UUCP as a Liberal Voice in the Philippines

I've written more pages than I planned, and I am sure that I could write another twenty about my experiences and observations. But I will end with these thoughts: I am so grateful to Rebecca for her companionship, her inspiring leadership and her support. It was a privilege to travel with her as we met with congregations, and to work with her as I led workshops. She is a respected liberal voice here in Dumaguete. (I wish that I had had more opportunity to meet with Nihal, but his travels kept him very busy. I hope that we'll find more time together during a future visit.) I am also grateful to Elvie for her

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participation in OWL, and I am especially grateful to Efren who cheerfully stepped in as translator and co-facilitator for both OWL and the RE Teacher Training. Both so impressed me with their thoughtfulness.

I leave with my own faith strengthened. I am convinced that Unitarian Universalism can and must play a critical role in the Philippines. It is a much-needed liberal voice in a very complex religious, cultural and political landscape. My hope is that UUs in the West will continue to support and learn from the UUs here. There is much for us to gain through our relationship. It is a precious gift to know the people of the Philippine congregations. There is a remarkable depth and wisdom alongside joyful simplicity that is hard to capture in words.

Finally, I want to thank the *mga guapa tawo* of the UUCP. You have changed me forever. Blessings to you all. *Daghan salamat!*