

# An Accidental Faith in an Unlikely Place: Meet the Unitarian Universalists of the Philippines

Sunday, March 6, 2011

Roger Jones, Family Minister

Unitarian Universalist Society, Sacramento, CA

Hymns: 298, *Wake Now, My Senses*; 123, *Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor*;  
insert: *Maglipay Universalist (Be Joyful, Univesalists)*

Antiphonal Reading: [Unitarian Universalist Principles](#) (read antiphonally, left side/right side)

Special Music: “Welcome to the Family,” sung by Eric Stetson



## Sermon

There are 29 UU congregations in the Philippines, nearly all of them on the small, forested island of Negros. The national headquarters is in Dumaguete, a small college city on the coast. It has fewer cars than motorbikes, including motorcycle taxis with sidecars, known as pedi-cabs. Most congregations are in mountain villages, with a few in coastal villages. For money and food, the people grow rice, sugar cane, corn, root vegetables. Some have livestock. On the coast, they fish. Most of their ministers have a high-school education, if they are lucky. They learned their ministries on the job, with mentoring by elders. There’s no salary, so they have other jobs too: farmer, teacher, school principal. The national headquarters helps with a little money and a clergy uniform—a shirt with a flaming chalice logo.

With over 7,000 islands, the Philippines is the second largest island chain in the world, but half of them have no people. It was the first western colony in Asia. The Spanish empire and Roman Catholic Church controlled the islands for nearly four centuries. Unlike Spanish colonies in the Americas, the empire prevented Filipinos from learning Spanish.

This way, divided by multiple native languages



and scattered on separate islands, Filipinos were less likely to unify themselves against their oppressors. Today’s richest families date back to the 1500s. Spain granted

large pieces of land to its elite families, who set up dynasties on the islands and sent their kids back to Europe for expensive educations. Resistance movements arose, but Independence was not achieved until 1898, in the Spanish American War. The next year, however, a Philippine-American war solidified the islands as an American colony. Protestant missionaries and other teachers from the United States brought English to the masses. Now with 100 million people, the Philippines is the world’s fourth largest English-speaking country, even though not everybody speaks it.<sup>1</sup> After the Second World War, we gave full control of the country to Filipinos, leaving intact four centuries of wealth inequality. Now, 40 percent of the people live on \$2 a day. As with other poor countries, many of its citizens live and work overseas and send money home. Five percent of Filipinos are Muslim, ten percent are Protestant, and 80 percent are Roman Catholic.

Is it obvious to you that Unitarian Universalism would take root there? How did it happen? Well, it almost didn’t happen.

Let’s go back to the years after World War II. Toribio Quimada, a young man from a large Catholic family, has become a Protestant—a Pentecostal. In the lively and spirit-filled Pentecostal church on the island of Negros, he shows himself to be a natural preacher. He

throws himself into the ministry in remote villages, even as he has to



work to feed his wife and kids. One day in the mail Toribio gets a package wrapped in an American newspaper. He sees a listing of churches and looks for his Pentecostal denomination, Iglesia Universal de Cristo. Instead he sees the Universalist Church of America. Sounds close! *This* Universalist church is located in Wisconsin. He writes a letter to it and waits for an answer. Nobody answers. A few years later, 1955 to be precise, he looks in an almanac, and again he finds the Universalist Church. He writes another letter, this time to Massachusetts. A reply comes this



time, and a long-distance friendship begins.

He loves the gospel of this church: God is love.

Everybody's going to heaven. Everybody is a child of God: rich, poor, male, female, old and young. God bless everybody--No exceptions.

He wants to spread the word. He writes the Americans: "Will you send us missionaries?"

*Well, we don't have missionaries*, they say, but they will help. They send worship and education materials, Bibles and other books, and a little money. Toribio puts his life into this new ministry. He travels from village to village--on horseback, or hiking on foot, if that's what it takes. He preaches for an hour in front of market places, plays his guitar, makes friends. People listen, some argue, and some of them come to church. He gathers church members, starts new congregations. These are the poorest of the poor, and they spread the message: Be joyful! God is love. You are a



child of God!

As Toribio spreads the faith in the peasant class of this Philippine

island, over in the United States the once-numerous Universalists are in decline. They

join the American Unitarian Association in a merger, in 1961. Toribio stays in the UU family. Materials and a little money keep coming over, and he welcomes UU visitors. He registers the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines with the Philippine government. He launches 25 churches, recruits ministers and mentors them, writes hymns, and gives money and advice on community projects.

[One village minister tells me that Toribio recruited him 31 years ago to serve the church where he is still working: Toribio said: "If not you, then who else will do it?"

The man resisted: "But I have to learn the Principles and the doctrine?"

His reply: "We don't have any doctrine—only the Principles!"

The villagers are vulnerable, because they don't own the land they work and live on.



Toribio advocates for land reform and fair treatment of the peasants. In 1981, his wife dies of cancer. With small children, he persists in his ministry, starting community projects, helping churches and the villages around them. He's not a militant, only a community activist, but even this puts him at risk.

He applies for his church to join our Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA. Unfortunately, UUA bylaws limit membership to North American congregations. Toribio persists, and UUA leadership agrees to put it up for a vote, and let congregational delegates decide whether to amend our denomination's bylaws. The UUA plans to welcome Reverend Toribio Quimada at the General Assembly in June of 1988. It expects a positive decision on the vote and plans a big celebration with our guests as new members of the UU family. Over there, Toribio's activism has made him some enemies. A few months before he's to leave for General Assembly, one night in the middle of the night, his house is set on fire. His children escape, but he is shot and killed. Nobody has ever been charged.

At a bittersweet General Assembly, North American Unitarian Universalists revise the bylaws to welcome the UU Church of the Philippines as part of our movement. Rebecca Sienes, Toribio's grown-up daughter, and her family flee the Philippines. Rebecca gets an office job at the UU theological seminary in Chicago, and begins auditing classes there. She considers going back to Negros to help the church. She's in good shape in America: she even gets a green card. Why give up permanent residency and risk going home? Her Philippine-American immigrant friends can't believe she's thinking about it. Even her seminary dean says, *Rebecca, maybe you want to stay here. Can't you help the Philippines just as much from here?*

No! Ten years after her father's murder, she returns home to lead his church. Not only is she one of the few ministers in the UU Church of the Philippines to have a degree in ministry. In her Catholic nation, she's one of the few ordained women clergy. Her husband's abuse and alcoholism leads her to separate from him, but in her country divorce is illegal.



On my recent UU Pilgrimage to the Philippines (March 10-25) Rebecca is one of our two escorts. The other is her right hand man, the Reverend Nihal Attanayake, an immigrant from Sri Lanka. He directs the national UU office's high school and college scholarship fund, micro-lending program, leadership training programs, and partner church programs, among other things. Nihal visits the congregations every month, riding a bus and hiring a motorcycle driver to take him into the villages. For our trip in March, they've hired vans, reserved hotel rooms, and kept us on schedule visiting 11 churches and enjoying beach time, museums, shopping, a whale watch and an open-water fish farm.

A typical stop on our trip looks like this. The vans take us up a mountain road, steering around rocks and muddy ruts, and we pour out

and see a colorful welcome sign hanging on the church, often with our names listed. Nihal, our host, has sent them his printout of our group information, and on one welcome sign we saw printed our full names, hometowns... and passport numbers. A crowd of all ages greets us in front of the church. Everybody shakes hands, and we go inside.

All of the church buildings we visit are simple, most of them just one room, about the size of our lobby or the Fahs Classroom. The floors are dirt or concrete, the walls made of concrete blocks or wood and bamboo. Roofs are corrugated metal or thatched palm leaves. There is no running water inside, and few have electricity. The doorway is open, and the windows, but they may have painted iron bars or plain white shutters. Colorful curtains border the windows inside, and through them you can see mountains, fields or the sea. On the wall you might see a fabric banner of the congregation, a certificate of its registration with the government, and posters listing elected lay leaders of the congregation, and of its



women's organization, its youth group and young adult group. Many have the UU Principles pasted around the walls—eight of them:

our seven plus one more, which they make number one: It says, "We affirm and promote that there is God."

We sit on wooden benches, usually not painted. A young lay leader welcomes us in English and introduces the minister for greetings and a prayer in their language—Cebuano. They might all sing the Filipino national anthem, with hands on hearts, and we stand and listen. A group of children sings a hymn to us and recites the Principles—in Cebuano—as they do every week in Sunday school. In one church, a little girl sings a solo

from the hymnal<sup>ii</sup>. In another, a teenager sings "Welcome to the



Family,” but most often, everyone sings it together. After we Americans have come to learn this American song, we join in. (Then we can’t get it out of our heads!)

In three of the churches a pair of little girls treat us to an identical dance number as an American pop song blares from a boom box. Lay leaders take turns addressing us, with translation by Reverend Rebecca if necessary. After anybody sings or speaks and after every introduction, there is applause.

It’s warm and humid, but inside we’re away from the hot sun. As I sit, many faces turn to me with smiles, whether teeth are missing, decaying, or healthy and white. A few mothers nurse their babies openly; children wander around and look up at these rare visitors with cameras in front of our faces. Scrawny dogs dart amid our legs. Most of the dogs in the Philippines do not look healthy or happy, and people don’t seem to care to pay much attention to them, even if they’re close at hand.

On every visit, each of us from the United States will rise and give our name and hometown, and give greetings from our home congregation. If a visitor is from the American partner church of the village we are visiting, they give out gifts to the children. One visiting minister shows her Philippine partner church a poster of pictures of her Los Angeles-area parishioners. Three people from a Wisconsin church present a handmade album of letters and pictures from home, including staff, lay leaders, a group shot of the whole congregation and a few scenes of snow.

After one more song and the minister’s closing prayer, everybody shakes hands with everybody else. That’s also how worship services end in UU churches there:



everyone greets everyone else at the end--all ages shaking hands and smiling. Let’s try that here, today!

After the welcome ceremony, we get acquainted, walk around outside, and shoot lots of photographs.

They always have homemade snacks for us—unless it’s a lunchtime visit. In this case, we dine family style on long tables, sitting on borrowed plastic chairs. They serve fried chicken, pork knuckles, beans, noodles, fish, eggs. Veggie lovers enjoy a dish of eggplant, squash, green beans and bitter melon. And white rice. You have rice three meals a day, every day, in the Philippines. There’s also pineapple, watermelon, mango, little bananas, and tender sweet coconut in its own juice. We drink water, juice, or Coca Cola. Lunch makes me self-conscious, as our hosts don’t sit with us. They wait until we’ve started eating before they load their own plates. Dogs dash after a fallen piece of food. Kids have multiple helpings.

Away from the table, we mingle and wander, converse about village life, learn the history of the congregation. On a Sunday afternoon, after worship and lunch, a group of children walk me by shacks and houses and rice fields. They show me four penned up hogs, and a duck with her ducklings. A man rides by on a water buffalo, leading a younger one behind it. I ask teenagers how long the daily trip to high school is—if they’re still in

it—and what their plans are.



At whatever time and on whatever day we visit—on Sunday or on weekdays—

there is no pressure of time for them or for us. No sense that anyone has something more important to do. No need to be anyplace but right where we are, there with one another. Fully present, we sneak every smile and squeeze every bit of good cheer we can out of the time together. One evening an American friend emails people back home: “This is depressing,” he says. “These people are incredibly poor and they are incredibly happy. What’s wrong with us!”

When it’s time to go, leaving takes a while: group photos, hugs, lots of waving,

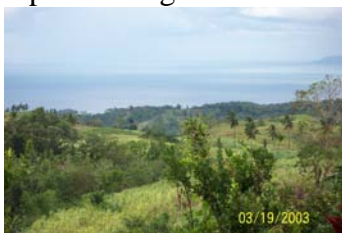
shouts of “come back next year!” and more waves.

Seven UU churches there are partnered with congregations here, from San Diego to Castine, Maine. I know on this visit that a few churches were ready and waiting for an American partnership. As I encounter each one, I wonder what you might think of it.



There's only one UU church in Metro Manila, on the island of Luzon, and it's hoping for a partner, as well as a minister. We meet them on a Sunday afternoon, when they hold worship on a narrow street in a crowded room with walls that go only up to my neck. Over the neck-high wall a rooster in a cage crows, traffic passes by, and boys play basketball in the street. It strikes me as odd that the first thing listed on their Sunday afternoon order of service is “Moment of Silence.” The girl leading worship wows us with her poise and loud, clear voice. I love the people here. But is this too urban? How can we feel at home that loud and crowded spot? I prefer the island life!

From the high-up village of Nagbinlod, there's a spectacular ocean view. Church members wait for three years for the first fruits of its new mango orchard. With congregational help, the village has laid a pipe along the mountain road. Now families can walk to the tap for fresh water. Inside the church, a poster on the wall shows more plans. Step 1: expand the chapel--30 bags of concrete. During the ceremony, the youth group leader speaks to us, and later I take her picture pointing to her name on the listing of youth officers. “Can I meet the



others?” I ask. Well... one lives in the city to attend high school, and the other two girls are away in Manila, working as maids. After the welcome ceremony, we don't have coffee--but coconuts, with a straw. But maybe this place is too remote for us! Is the road too muddy?

The village of Nataban is on the other side of the island, and we visit it a week later. It's only a half hour from the charming six-bedroom hotel where we spend the night, a nice place overlooking the mountains. Well, there is an extra half hour getting to the Nataban church: one of our vans gets stuck in the mud and the driver can't get it out. We all crowd in the other one, and go the rest of the way.

We get out, look up a hill and see steps carved in the hard clay. At the first landing of the steps, kids are waiting to welcome us. At the second landing, adults and youth are waiting and smiling. There are 15 families in the church, and with all the kids, it's a crowd. Being unsure when we'd arrive, they've waited for hours. I don't know how long they've been standing there.



On the tour, we have plastic name badges. They, as in most churches, wear construction paper nametags hanging around their necks with yarn, first names printed clearly. You may recall I said that dogs don't seem well cared for over there. Well, In Nataban, I see a dog, and it's wearing a name tag of its own. I smile and think: “This is the place!”

Songs, speeches, introductions laughter, applause. A woman named Shirley has a peanut roasting business in the city down the mountain. She gives each one of us a choice of bag of her merchandise.



The lay leader introduces the minister, Reverend William. On the order of service cover you can see my picture with him and his church banner. He's 45, married,

with two teenagers. He speaks to his own congregation as well as to us. He apologizes that in the past year he's been able to visit only once a month: his family lives far away, and his wife has been ill. We have already been told that she has a persistent and severe mental illness. She wanders among us now, smiling but fragile. Afterwards, I learn that this is not the only hardship this congregation has endured. Because of the weak economy there, a member named Jonathan was living on another island, and sending money back home. Arlyn, his wife, lived alone, with two girls, a three-year-old and a six-year-old. Homes in this mountain village are spread apart, many out of earshot of one another. In 2009, a man from Nataban was drunk and deranged, and he came to the house. He assaulted Arlyn. She ran out of the house with the girls, ran down a hill, and fell on the rocks. He stabbed her 13 times, killing her and splattering the baby in blood. The six-year-old ran to a neighbor's house. The man was arrested, and his trial is now underway, in the nearby city, at the slow pace of one hearing every month or two. Reverend Nihal, the program director from the national UU office takes the bus out and attends every hearing to be of support.

After the murder, a lay leader named David helped a number of the terrified families to move closer together and closer to the church. A member of the UU church in San Mateo, California, made a grant so Jonathan could return from the other island and live with his daughters again. In the past year, he began

dating Shirley, the peanut shop owner. Now they're engaged.

Before we leave, we make plans to meet Shirley and Jonathan in the city the next morning, to buy a load of her delicious peanuts to bring home. If you sign up for my slide show, I'll give you some.



When I realize how much our Unitarian Universalist values mean to people on the other side of the globe, it helps me do my work here in our community with more joy and gratitude. Our good news of inclusion and love can lift hearts and liberate spirits in cultures and situations and people of great variety. The message takes many forms, but shows the same spirit. There's no one way to be UU, except to welcome others with open hearts and open arms.

On our arrival into the Philippines, as the plane began descending toward Manila, all the passengers had to complete the form for the Philippine immigration and customs administration, so we could get through the airport: *origin, destination, length of stay. Purpose of travel: Business. Government. Holiday/Pleasure.* This is the box to check to avoid further questions at the window: *Holiday/Pleasure.*

But there is a box that says *Visiting Friends and Relatives.* That's the one I checked, and I turned in the form, and left the airport. And over the next two weeks, I learned that Visiting Family and Friends was the right choice.

I found family over there that a year earlier I hadn't known that I have—that we have.

Family... saying welcome.

People... keeping the faith for us , and keeping it with us.

Kids, teens, adults and elders... waiting to welcome us with little more than smiles, songs, applause, and all the time in the world. A Unitarian Universalist family proclaiming with joy: God bless everyone, no exceptions!

May they be blessed, and may you be blessed, and may everyone.

Bless the whole world, no exceptions.

Amen.



<sup>i</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_English-speaking\\_population#List\\_in\\_order\\_of\\_total\\_speakers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_English-speaking_population#List_in_order_of_total_speakers). This Wikipedia article lists USA, India, Nigeria, Philippines, & UK as the top five. *Lonely Planet Philippines* says it is the third-largest English speaking country.

<sup>ii</sup> "Creators of a New Reality," written by a group of former divinity school students at Silliman University, one of them a UU.

