

“Creators of a New Reality”

*Together we have felt the fire, struggling with the poor
Together seen the bonds that hold us down,
Together hear our people cry, call us to be
Creators of a new reality.*

This is the chorus of a hymn sung in the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Aquino the Sunday I visited this small agricultural community near a volcano on Negros Island in The Philippines. It captures the remarkable spirit and resolve I found at the denominational and congregational levels as I traveled to seven congregations during an all too brief trip.

In a meeting with a group of women from the Bonbon congregation in Metro Manila. The meeting was held under a tarp stretched across an alley. I heard their determination to build a church on the cement posts rising from the wetland which underlays their homes, as well as how they plan to use micro-finance loans to start or expand businesses in their community and surrounding areas selling vegetables, bananas, and other staples. The loans are from the Unitarian-Universalist Church of the Philippines' (UUCP) “Livelihood Program.” In Bicutan, another congregation in Metro Manila, I attended the first of two workshops on how to make, use and market tempeh (a soy-based meat substitute). There was also the bio-mass farm raising trees for energy production near Nataban, the Learning Center (pre-school) in Aquino, and the mango orchard at Nagbinlod all UUCP initiated efforts to better the lives and livelihoods of the communities and generate income for the Church. Nagbinlod is also where Dr. Richard Ford led the Community-Capacity Building program that resulted in the village partnering with the local government and its partner-church in the US to build a gravity-fed water system that for the first time made available safe drinking water within the village. The success of that effort generated additional village/local government improvement efforts including a new elementary school, a renovated town hall, and improved town park, and extension of the water system.

In talking with Rev. Rebecca Quimada Sienes, Chair of the UUCP's Planning and Finance Department, and Rev. Nihal Attanayake, Chair of the UUCP's Faith in Action Department, I learned of other plans and dreams for applying U-U principles to increase the well-being and education of the U-U community in self-sustaining, environmentally respectful ways. I heard about the efforts of the UU women's organization Buhata Pinay (“Do It, Filipina!”) to improve health care and education and advocate for women, and from the newly certified lay U-U minister in Bicutan who is teaching the National Police U-U principles and community capacity building techniques to improve police/community relations. Bob Guerrero, the President of the Bicutan congregation, told me about his weekly text-message-in radio show with guests from U-U and other progressive religious groups in the area. At every turn, I was struck with how our faith not only provides sustenance to those in difficult circumstances, but also hope and encouragement for changing those circumstances for the better.

When I asked Rev. Sienes how U-U's in the United States could assist the UUCP, the first response was more partnerships. I have heard the same from the leaders of the Unitarian Union of Northeast India and the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. True partnership between congregations provides us with a real opportunity to join in creating a new reality – providing a hand up, not simply giving a hand out -- and in the process, deepening our understanding of the meaning and power of our collective faith.

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