

The Beginnings of Reformed-Presbyterian Churches in the Philippines

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*The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession. ~ "Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government"
by the United Reformed Churches in North America*

Last week, Rev. Richard Bout, Chairman of the Missions Committee (MC) of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) visited our two churches in Pasig and Imus. Rev. Bout served as a missionary pastor in Tepic, Nayarit in Mexico for 15 years. The MC is exploring ways in which it can serve our two young churches in the Philippines.

Pasig Covenant Reformed Church (now located in Cainta, Rizal) started as a small home Bible study in June 2008 after Rev. Nollie Malabuyo was called and ordained to be a missionary-pastor to the Philippines by Trinity URC in Walnut Creek, California. Last year, our Lord's Day attendance peaked at about 40-50, but has currently settled back to about 30-35. Trinity Covenant Reformed Church in Imus, Cavite also started as a small home Bible study in June 2011. Current Lord's Day attendance also averages 30-35 people. The church in Imus has a minister, Rev. Lance Filio, who preaches and teaches every other Lord's Days, and two elders and two deacons. The Pasig church is served by two elders and two deacons as well, but is currently in search of a minister. Rev. Bout preached in both of our churches on February 1, and held a seminar on marriage and parenting on February 7. He also presented his work in Mexico on the Lord's Day February 8.

On February 4-5, Mr. Ryan Reyes, one of our Pasig elders, and Pastor Nollie accompanied "Pastor Richard" to Cagayan De Oro to meet with two Reformed groups in the area. In the Lord's providence, **Revs. Bout, Stephen 't Hart** of the Free Reformed Church in Baldivic, Western Australia, and **Raymond Sikkema**, a retired URCNA pastor, all came to visit and hold seminars in Cagayan De Oro (CDO) and Davao almost at the same time.

Beginnings in Davao City

How did our two churches get connected with these groups in CDO and Davao, and other places in the Philippines? A brief review of events in the last 20 years or so will help. In 1993, Pastor Nollie and his wife joined a mission organization called Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT). So in 1995, after working as a mechanical engineer for 19 years in the States, Pastor Nollie and his family arrived in Davao City, working there as a Computer Specialist until 2001. From the outset, they searched for a Reformed presbyterian church, but in vain. In 1999, feeling the great need for Bible-based preaching and teaching, they started a home Bible study with a few friends that included Vic and Cathy Bernales and Bob Sterner, another WBT missionary and a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

In January 23, 2000 (supposed to be the end of the world!), the small group started worship services on the Lord's Day, with **Dr. Donald Paauw** (Trinity URC) as guest preacher. The congregation agreed to name the church **Davao Covenant Reformed Church (DCRC)**. In February 2001, we were able to convince **Rev. Steven Poelman**, a URC missionary-pastor in India, to fill our vacant pulpit. We were blessed with his preaching and teaching until he

returned to the States in October 2001. Later in 2001, at our recommendation and with the help of Trinity URC, Dr. Paauw and **Mr. David Linden** (former elder at Bethel URC, Calgary, Alberta, Canada), Mr. Bernales started his studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, obtaining his M.Div. in 2008.

The United Covenant Reformed Churches in the Philippines

Pastor Nollie also started his studies at Westminster Seminary in California in 2001. After obtaining his M.Div. in 2005, he and his wife returned to the Philippines, still as a missionary with WBT. Through the Internet, he started meeting with Revs. Edwin Puzon, Napoleon Narag and Rey Domingo in Manila in 2001. As a result of these meetings, the **United Covenant Reformed Churches in the Philippines** (UCRCP) was born in 2005, with three mission churches in Las Piñas (Metro Manila), San Carlos (Pangasinan), and San Pablo (Laguna). Because the church in San Carlos did not have a minister, Pastor Nollie committed to preach there once a month, traveling six hours by bus, jeepney and tricycle. In 2009, DCRC joined the UCRCP, and in 2010, **Rev. Vic Bernales** was ordained by the pastors and elders of the denomination.

Blogosphere Spreads Reformed Christianity in the Philippines

To keep up with the times, Pastor Nollie started a blog which he called Doctrine Unites! in November 2006. Since the first post, people from all over the Philippines (and the world) have viewed and read articles about many different aspects of Reformed doctrine, worship and life. We will never know how much Doctrine Unites! has spread Reformed Christianity in the Philippines, but to date, this blog has over 350,000 views. Pastor Nollie has received many inquiries from Filipino brothers and sisters about the Reformation, and who are now searching for Reformed churches in their locations. As a result, he has been invited to preach and teach as far north as Vigan, Ilocos Sur and as far south as CDO and Marawi City.

Conferences and Classes

To further promote Reformation in the Philippines, we supported and sponsored various conferences and seminars in the Philippines. In June 1999 in Davao City, our very young church sponsored a **Y2K Conference**, focusing on Reformed eschatology and warning over 200 attendees to avoid gross speculations about the end of the world.

After finishing his M.Div. at WSC in 2005, Pastor Nollie taught various classes at **Unida Biblical Seminary** and **Presbyterian Theological Seminary** for two years. Several of his students who are now pastors have embraced Reformed Christianity as a result, even at the cost of ridicule and persecution.

In May 2009, our church promoted the **Manila Conference on Theology**, featuring Dr. **Joel Beeke**, President of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At this conference, some of our members met **Rev. Brian Najapfour** for the first time. He has served as pastor of Dutton URC in Caledonia, Michigan since 2012.

In January 2010, our church, together with three other pastors (whom I will mention again in Part 2), sponsored another Conference on Theology, "**Putting Amazing Back into Grace**," featuring Dr. **Michael Horton**, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at WSC. While Dr. Horton was here, Pastor Nollie introduced him to Ms. Tiffany Liong (Gabuya), Station Manager of DZFE. This meeting resulted in the weekly airing of **White Horse Inn** broadcast at DZFE.

And in October 2014, **Rev. Michael Brown**, pastor of Christ URC in San Diego, California came to Manila as the featured speaker in a conference with the theme “**Exploring Covenant Theology.**” He was invited by Grace Covenant Evangelical Church, Pilgrim Community Church, and PCRC.

In addition to these conferences, we have held annual seminars and classes under **Rev. Allen Vander Pol** of Miami International Theological Seminary (MINTS) and Mr. Linden. Mr. Linden was also instrumental in providing funds for PCRC’s H-P laser printer.

One of the goals of Pastor Nollie was to hold classes for pastors who lack theological education. Mr. Linden was once again instrumental in providing funds for the purchase of the first 200 books of what we called Mars Hill Study Center, which is now MINTS Philippines, headed by Bro. Benjamin Anum-Higher.

The spread of Reformed presbyterianism in the Philippines was not limited to Manila and the island of Luzon, but also included other parts of the country.

Cagayan De Oro, Marawi, and Other Mindanao Groups

In 2009, Pastor Vic Bernales introduced his friend Glimar (Glem) Melo, a pastor in **Cagayan De Oro City (CDO)**, to the UCRCP. The denomination hoped that Pastor Glem would join them. However, in 2010, he eventually decided not to join the UCRCP. Our Pasig church also unanimously voted to withdraw from the UCRCP due to concerns about its hierarchical form of church government and Christian liberty issues.

Shortly after his decision not to pursue membership in the UCRCP, Pastor Glem requested Pastor Nollie to interview their 20-plus regular attendees and administer their professions of faith. In September 2010, Pastor Nollie traveled to CDO and did as requested in a joyful Lord’s Day worship at Kagay-an Reformed Church (KRC), the new name of his church.

Pastor Glem also introduced Pastor Nollie to Mr. Jim Ouano, a lecturer at Mindanao State University (MSU) in **Marawi** (a predominantly Islamic city), and who also leads a group of students in worship and Bible studies. Pastor Glem again requested Pastor Nollie to interview Bro. Jim for eldership at KRC, and the Marawi group for professions of faith. In December 2010, Pastor Nollie returned to CDO and traveled to Marawi. After sustaining the interview, Bro. Jim was installed as an elder of KRC. About 20 brothers and sisters in Marawi were also interviewed and joyfully made professions and received their first Holy Communion as a Reformed congregation.

Most recently, Pastor Jim Ouano invited Pastor Nino Cuevas of Grace Church in Talakag, **Bukidnon** to attend Rev. Stephen ‘t Hart’s lectures in Naawan, Misamis Oriental (near CDO) last year and just last week. It was good to meet Pastor Nino and also see about 30 of Grace Church’s 70 people attend the lecture.

A small group of Reformed believers in CDO started meeting in December 2014 at a house for study and worship. They agreed to meet regularly once a month as a start. They will be led by Pastor Jim and one of the men in the group. In **Butuan**, a city about 3-4 hours by bus to the east, another group of Pastor Jim’s former students in MSU in Marawi also desire to meet regularly once a month. Pasig CRC is discussing with Pastor Jim and the CDO group how best to help strengthen and oversee these two Reformed groups.

The Chinese-Filipino Connection

Rev. Dennis Yam began his journey to Reformed Christianity in the mid-1990s, so he pursued further studies at Westminster Theological Seminary, from where he received his Th.M. in 1997. After his return to the Philippines, he started teaching at the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines (BSOP). He was a great influence on many of his students, who later became acquainted with the Pasig and Imus members, including Pastors **James Bryner Chu** of Pilgrim Community Church and **Dennis Ohsan**, who now co-pastors Grace Covenant Evangelical Church with Rev. Yam. Pastor James was also influenced by two other pastors of the United Evangelical Church.

David Linden was instrumental in our earliest contacts with our Chinese-Filipino brethren. We are not able to recall how we were introduced to him, possibly in early 2006. However, even in the years prior to 2006, he had been teaching and preaching at churches in Hong Kong and in the Philippines, notably at BSOP and the Chinese-Filipino churches above.

Together with these three pastors, we have brought to the Philippines Dr. Michael Horton in 2009 and Rev. Michael Brown in 2014 to speak at Reformed conferences. Our goal is to teach and spread Reformed presbyterianism in the Philippines by inviting pastors and theologians in annual Reformation Day Conferences.

Concluding Remarks

The spread of Reformed presbyterianism in the Philippines owes much to various churches and individuals here and overseas. **Trinity URC** and **Escondido URC** were the first supporters of the Philippine mission. **Rev. Yogi Gangar** and the Consistory of Trinity URC provided Biblical oversight. Several professors of WSC, notably **Drs. Horton** and **Scott Clark**, were always ready to give wise counsel on Reformed doctrine, worship and church polity. Other URC pastors such as **Revs. Brown, Kim Riddlebarger** (Christ Reformed URC), and **Steve Donovan** (Escondido URC) likewise provided godly counsel and other resources.

Without them and many others not mentioned in this short write-up, Reformed presbyterianism in the Philippines would have been set back several more years. And many of the current Reformed pastors and churches scattered all over the country would most probably have remained Arminian-Dispensationalist Baptist and Pentecostal pastors and churches for some time. Only by God's gracious providence that the Reformation came to the Philippines.

The future for Reformed presbyterianism in the Philippines would be brighter if and when these four things are accomplished: *first*, a Reformed presbyterian council of churches, patterned after the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC); *second*, a Reformed presbyterian seminary in the mold of Westminster Seminary in California; *third*, an annual Reformed presbyterian pastor's conference, similar to Ligonier's Annual Pastors' Conference; and *fourth*, an annual Reformed presbyterian conference for everyone, now in progress.

*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle. ~ Martin Luther, 1529*