



UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST INT THE PHILIPPINES

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COUNCIL OF BISHOPS

PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

07 JULY 2024

Warmest greetings of love and peace to all the UCCP members and Church Workers.. We, as bishops of the Church have reflected on the outcome of the Conference Annual Session or Assembly in the forty nine (49) Conferences. We are grateful to God that in spite of unresolved differences, divergences in perspectives and glitches in decision making process in some Conferences, the majority have conducted their meetings in an orderly and respectful manner.

Given the differing perspectives of some individuals who still believe that they are members of the UCCP, but are acting contrary to the evolved evangelical and Protestant Christian faith, the contemporary ministries and the strategic program plan of the Church have caused damage to the unity of some local churches and Conferences. In the light of this, we would like to impress in the minds and hearts of the constituent members and Church Workers the following:

1. Historical, theological and ethical affirmations undergird and serve as foundation of the preaching, teaching and healing ministries:

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines was an organic union of Protestant-evangelical churches in 1948, and bound together by the Basis of Union and the succeeding Constitution and By-Laws, the Magna Carta for Church Workers, which were all ratified by the Conferences and proclaimed by the General Assembly and binding to all members and local churches.

These include as well the policies made by the legislative and judicial bodies of the Church which constitute the written covenant we have with God and with one another, and even with the entire *oikoumene* or the inhabited world. We believe that these are manifestations of Christian unity that Jesus prayed for—the unity of all believers, emphasizing that their unity will demonstrate to the world that He was sent by God (John 17: 20-23). This unity ought to be embraced, worked for and lived for by Church leaders and all members.

Let us be reminded that our theology as UCCP and being part and parcel of the apostolic and universal Church has been encapsulated in the Statement of Faith (SOF) which guided the UCCP mission and ministry for thirty eight years (1986-2024) now and has enlightened the maturing and new generation of members. Specifically, our contemporary worship, to this day, has balanced integration of denominational heritages, ecumenical influences, and it highlights as well our desire for a more Filipino kind of worship - in contrast to the kind of worship introduced by the New Religious Movements, which was considered as a problem by 2014 General Assembly in Legaspi City. We are currently reviewing and editing our Book of Common Worship in our attempt to make it authentic UCCP, expressive of our theological affirmation and ethical imperatives.

The UCCP's theological and ethical stances reflect its commitment to living out the gospel through action, striving to embody the values of justice, peace, and compassion in all areas of life. These are explicitly outlined in the Declaration of Principles in the CBL and seen and understood in its program priorities, such as:

Social Justice and Human Rights — in advocating for social justice and human rights. It addresses issues such as poverty, human rights abuses, and the rights of marginalized communities, striving to be a prophetic voice in society; Environmental Stewardship — promotes the responsible stewardship of God's creation. It encourages sustainable practices and advocates for environmental protection as part of its mission; Peace and Reconciliation— promoting peace and reconciliation within society and among different communities. It seeks to resolve conflicts through dialogue and mutual understanding, in line with its Christian principles.

Also, we advocate for Gender Equality- supports the empowerment of women within the church and society. It opposes gender discrimination and works towards inclusivity in its practices and policies; Health and Education—runs various health and educational programs, recognizing these as essential aspects of its ministry. It operates hospitals, clinics, and schools, emphasizing the importance of accessible healthcare and quality education for all, and Responsible and accountable Stewardship of time, talents, real, material and financial resources for sustainability of the mission and ministry of the Church.

2. The UCCP management system and mission strategies have been undergoing changes for the last quadrenniums and these are based on the vision, mission and goals set forth by a significant number of people from the Conferences. These are being done to make the Church Ministries sustainable in the next 50 years and beyond.

The local church as the primary locus of mission presupposes local autonomy and it is considered as the bastion of democratic participation, where creative and innovative ministries are carried out and responsive to the needs of the communities where they are located. The local church is both the locus of mission and the harbinger of the wider work of the people of God expresses the missiology of the UCCP. It follows the logic of why the churches came together in 1948. Our forebears wanted to cover a wider mission field -faithful to the mission mandate that they received from the Head of the Church.

Yet, there's the rub, some have been redefining this line as a justification for withholding their WMS and breaking their alignment with the wider life and work of the church. It should be understood that the mission of the church is likened to the very nature of the church as a spring flowing into a stream down to the ocean. Upholding the understanding that the 'world is our parish', we are guided by this vision and commitment that makes us continue to affirm that our work in our local church is the harbinger of our work in the wider world. By explicitly stating that "the local church is the locus of mission and harbinger of the wider work of the people of God," we reaffirm the UCCP's commitment to a comprehensive and outward-reaching mission, aligned with the ecclesiology and broader goals of the church as envisioned by its founders.

It has been observed that in view of the understanding of local church autonomy there is a fusion of missiology with polity in the UCCP. The wisdom behind this provision is that missiological self-understanding informs our polity, thereby induce relevant change in the Church's polity that

results in integration of local autonomy, a characteristic of Church's polity. We assume that local church autonomy, while valued, must and always be defined by the Church's missional vision and commitment.

We reckon that the evolving missiology of the UCCP has already superseded some aspects of our strictly congregationalist polity, especially about how we connect beyond our local church and within the framework of the organic Union that our forebears established. Local autonomy is equally affirmed but the organic union also has evolved a new mission orientation and new order in the ministry. For example, the recruitment, training, call, and deployment of pastors have been modified to fit into the life and witness of the organic union. The UCCP has already instituted a charter that superseded the Basis of Union document. We have embraced the charter as our ultimate point of reference or our book of discipline. Going beyond it means going beyond what is UCCP.

3. Christian Stewardship and Resource Development—be it in the use of real properties, buildings, human and financial resources are based on the biblical-theological foundations and with the guidance of the Spirit of God. The understanding that the Church in its corporate life must address and support the needs of its members and the wider community has been revealed in the faith of our forebears and in the perspective of the reign of God.

The General Assembly has approved the stewardship program formulated by the Commission on Stewardship Resource Development (CSRD). The 1970s moratorium of foreign missions operations that supported the Church financially has immensely impacted the life and ministry of the Church. Thus the Self-Reliance Fund Campaign was launched to raise adequate financial resources. This was a signal that a resource generation strategy was needed for sustainability and for supporting the various ministries of the Church.

It was in the late 1980s when the property development program was carried out in the construction of Shalom Hotel that generated financial resources to fund the programs of the Church, But in the succeeding years financial resources generated could not cover the growing programs and administrative costs. This prompted the Church leaders to further enhance the Church's property development program. On its own, the Church does not have the capital to develop its properties and therefore the CSRD recommended to the general assembly to get into the Joint Venture Agreements.

These have saved valuable institutions from insolvency and eventual closure such as the hospitals and will further develop the service centers, like Shalom Hotel and others. The National Council has approved the allocation of income from property development programs for Church Workers salary assistance towards standardization, retirement benefits, and for the various ministries of the Church. Right now a significant amount of income from property rentals and related incomes are being plowed in to the ministries of the Church.

4. Furthermore, we would like to inform and guide our Church constituency that while the Church labors to provide a better and sustainable future for the Church Workers and sustainability of its mission and ministry, there are individuals and groups of people who have been sowing intrigues

and malign our Church leaders. They have consciously disrupted meetings in the Conferences, and some have harbored hatred of Church leaders and have undermined the unity of the Church. Given that some misguided members have willingly allowed themselves to be used by anti-Communist groups that ascribe malice to our prophetic ministry, our Church workers are put in a precarious situation that restricts their freedom in proclaiming the good news of a full life for all.

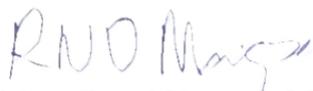
5. Finally, we would like to admonish our Church workers and members as much as possible to be on guard of their security and safety and always mindful of the undercurrents that threaten the unity and integrity of the Church. Let us be reminded by St. Paul when he advised Christians to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with each other and forgiving one another to maintain unity of the body of Christ (Colossians 3:12-15).

COUNCIL OF BISHOPS
07 JULY 2024

Bishop Melzar D. Labuntog
General Secretary



Bishop Joseph Agpoa
Temporary General Secretary



Bishop Reuel Norman Marigza
Temporary Bishop Assigned to North Luzon Jurisdictional Area



Bishop Francisco Aviso, Jr.
Middle Luzon Jurisdictional Area



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