

A View from the Philippines

Daniel C. Arichea Jr.

I am writing primarily as one coming from the United Methodist Church in the Philippines and who has been involved in the Asian situation for all these years due to my participation in the work of the United Bible Societies and the various Methodist churches in Asia.



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The Asian Situation

I have a feeling that many if not most Americans do not quite understand or appreciate the Asian situation where in most countries Christianity is a very small minority, and where Christians in general belong to the marginalized groups. The situation in the U.S. is the exact opposite, where the church is generally in a position of privilege. Awareness of the Asian situation would lead Americans to a deeper appreciation of the sacrifices and sufferings of Christians in many parts of Asia, especially as they live out their faith in the midst of resurgent classical religions and the impact of globalization.

The Church and the Poor

By and large the American church is not poor. It is therefore easy for Americans to talk about ministry *to* the poor. In the Asian situation, however, since the church is poor, and is among the poor, it is more appropriate to talk about ministry *with* and *among* the poor. The challenge to the American church is to think of ways to help and enable the church in Asia to do its mission with and among the poor. How can the American church use its tremendous resources in order to help the American church and Asian churches become partners in making a difference in the life of Asians and Asian nations?

Training and Development of Church Leaders

One very important concern in the Philippine church is the development of leadership. Our seminaries and colleges face problems of resources and facilities. Our libraries are nothing compared to libraries of American seminaries. We need not only to acquire resources but to develop resources for the Asian church. Sometimes I wonder if the American church can partner with us in Asia in something similar to Africa University.

Support of Church Workers

The economic situation of church members leads to inadequate financial support of church workers and their families. In the American church, the minimum salaries of church workers as well as guaranteed appointments are faithfully observed. In the Philippine church, the minimum salaries for church workers are rarely implemented, if at all. This inadequate support of church workers often gives rise to many problems, especially those related to health and education of the children of church workers.

The Philippine Church and Autonomy

Some Americans don't see any rhyme or reason for the autonomy aspirations of the Philippine church. Simply put, the leadership of the American church does not look favorably on the Philippine church becoming autonomous. This is evidenced by mentioning the desire of the Philippine church to become autonomous as one of the motivations for the proposals for a global UMC. **Americans should understand that the Philippine church is in a very embarrassing position, being the only non-autonomous church in all of Asia.** The Korean

Methodist Church became autonomous in 1930. The Methodist churches in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Indonesia became autonomous in the 70s, and the Methodist Church in India proclaimed its autonomy in 1981. A friend of mine has written, "Symbols matter much in a country with a long colonial past like the Philippines. Autonomy is the shining symbol for respect, identity, and freedom. Like an individual, an institution must have a good name of its own, the product of its own people, culture, and history. As Proverbs says, a good name is more precious than gold."

We must remember that autonomy is not severing relationships with the American church but redefining this relationship, so that the Philippine church becomes a full partner rather than continuing in a mother-daughter relationship, or even worse in a relationship in which the Philippine church is seen as a branch of the American church.

What Should the UMC Do?

The American church and the whole UMC should take more seriously its nature as a church for all peoples, as exemplified in the motto: Open hearts, Open minds, Open doors. The Hispanic presence is prominent almost everywhere in the United States. However, many congregations act as if the Hispanics are not around. In many places the integration of white and black has not really happened. White churches have remained white, with a little sprinkling of some color and black churches have remained black, only with a few from other racial backgrounds. This situation is also true with other ethnic groups in the United States, such as Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, etc. A further comment: how can this motto of open hearts, open minds, open doors be applied to divisive issues such as human sexuality?

Declining Membership in the American Church. Statistical records show that with very little exception, membership in the American church is in decline. There is a tendency to accept the situation of declining membership as normal, and even to justify it, as for instance when it is asserted that numbers are not that important. Furthermore, there is a tendency to cover up this decline by focusing on the growth of the Central

Conferences. Could this be the main reason why it was so easy for the church in the Ivory Coast to be accepted into the UMC, since that automatically added 650,000 members to the UMC? It should of course be mentioned that there are serious efforts being exerted to address this problem, including the training of church planting specialists. **Here there is a need for the American church to learn from the Central Conferences, where the practice is for local churches to plant churches, and that it is an integral part of the mission of a local church to start another local church.**

Related to the decline of membership is the decreasing number of young people in United Methodist congregations. Most American congregations are dominated by aging people, with negligible presence of the young. This leads to the question: Is there an effective youth ministry in the UMC? We in Asia have learned many things from the American church, including the whole program of camps for young people and children. Is this program still effective? In conversation with a friend, he suggested the need for the camping program to become "a more balanced program of discipleship formation and not just entertainment for our U.S. youth involved in all aspects of our youth ministries." This would mean that the camping program include at least "a modicum of biblical understanding and appropriate theological and ethical awareness as part of a proactive discipling experience, rather than just bonding based on psycho-babble that seems to occupy most of our youth programs." What this friend says about camps may be relevant to other ministries and programs related to young people.

The United Methodist Church and Foreign Missions. The UMC is to be commended for a revival in missionary interest, as is shown in the establishment of UMC churches in Vietnam, Thailand, and Mongolia. There are, however, issues that need to be addressed. Is not the UMC making the same mistake as the Western missionary movement in putting a "Western" label and flavor to these new congregations, and putting these new congregations under the Episcopal leadership of Americans? Initially these new churches will feel comfortable being related to a big church like the UMC, but then how will they be viewed by the people around them? Furthermore, is the

UMC once again encouraging a relationship of dependency? In the light of the actual situation (Christians are in the minority, plus the presence of other Methodist mission groups), is the Cambodian approach worth considering as a model? (In Cambodia, five Methodist mission organizations came together to form the Methodist Church of Cambodia).

The Structure of the American Church. There is a real need for the American church to have its own forum where it can deal with issues that are primarily American, without the participation of non-Americans. The General Conference cannot be this forum, because although over 90 percent of the business of the General Conference is American related, still there are delegates from the Central Conferences as well as from affiliated autonomous churches. Incidentally, this may be one reason why the more conservative wing of the UMC is against the move to make the American Church a Central (or Regional) Conference, because they perceive (perhaps correctly) that the Central Conference delegates are allied with them when dealing with hotly contested issues, such as the whole matter of human sexuality.

The Global Nature of the Church. I believe that this should be the concern of the whole church. **I do not understand why the UMC wants to be a global church structurally and insists that it is a global church, when in fact it is not. The truth is the UMC has reached its global limits. Isn't it better to think of "global" in terms of mission and relationships rather than in terms of formal structures?** Would it not be better if as a matter of policy, the UMC encouraged UMC conferences outside the United States to develop as self-governing, self-perpetuating and self-sustaining bodies, and thus become equal partners in mission rather than continue to be dependent on the American church for financial support, including and primarily the support given to Episcopal leaders and their offices? Should not the American church encourage the Central Conferences to take more responsibility for their own leadership? □

Daniel C. Arichea Jr. is a retired United Methodist bishop from the Philippines. He is also Bishop in Residence at Duke Divinity School (September to December).