

Central Philippine Union Conference

JAMES B. RUBRICO

James B. Rubrico, B.A., B.Th. in Theology, is an ordained minister. Currently, he is the Sabbath School, Personal Ministries, and Adventist Community Services (ACS) director for the Central Philippine Union Conference (CPUC). He is also head of the CPUC Heritage Center. He served as the former Sabbath School/Personal Ministries, ACS, and Adventist Laymen's Services director for the West Visayan Conference. He is currently working on his Master's of Divinity degree. He wrote several articles and books including *Reasons of Faith*, *SDA Reformed Movement Exposed*, and *Dawn of Hope in Panay*. He is married to Llena Z. Rubrico and they have two grown-up children.

The Central Philippine Union Conference (CPUC) is part of the Southern Asia-Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists. It was organized in 1964 and reorganized in 1996. Its headquarters is in Cebu City, the Philippines.

Territory: Visayan Islands; comprising the Central Visayan, East Visayan, Negros Occidental, and West Visayan Conferences; and the Negros Oriental-Siquijor, Romblon, and Samar Missions.

Statistics, as of June 30, 2021: churches 1,359, membership 202,373, population 21,339,508.

Origin of Adventist Work in the Territory of CPUC

The Central Philippine Union Conference has a unique and colorful history with diverse cultures and geography. The territory is strategically located at the center of the Philippine archipelago that encompasses the entire Central Philippines with many islands and is politically subdivided into the following regions: Tagalog Region 4B, Region 5, Region 6, Region 7, and Region 8. It has three major local dialects: Cebuano, Hiligaynon (Ilonggo), and Waray, while Tagalog is also used in some parts of the territory. It has a unique contribution to some "firsts" in Philippine history.

The coming of the Bornean Malays to the western side of the Visayas to colonize the area and establish a Malay settlement on the island of Panay and other neighboring islands is said to be the first Malay civilization in the country.¹

The decisive victory of Lapu-Lapu, the local chieftain in Mactan Island (Cebu), over the supremely armed European conquistador, Ferdinand Magellan in the battle of Mactan, Cebu, in 1521, is the first time in Philippine military history when a local islander defeated well-armed foreign invaders.² Despite being defeated in battle, Magellan and Catholic Christianity finally won the hearts of the Filipino people and became the dominant religion in the country. This eventually made the Philippines the only officially Christian country in Far East Asia, although some other countries in the Far East also have Christian citizens. It is commonly known that the Catholic cathedral in Cebu City is the first and oldest church/cathedral in the Philippines and Cebu city is the first

and oldest city in the whole country. The Catholic University of San Carlos in Cebu City is the first educational institution established in the Philippine Islands and it goes back to 1565.

The Landing of Adventism in CPUC Territory

Iloilo City, in the West Visayan Conference territory, is considered the center of Adventism in the Central Philippines. The first Adventist church school (now West Visayan Academy) in the Philippines was founded in Jaro, Iloilo City, by a missionary, Elder Elbridge Adams, on July 31, 1916.³

Adventism in the central Philippines started on the western side of the Visayas, on Panay Island. A colporteur, Floyd Ashbaugh, landed in Jaro, Iloilo City, in 1911 to start a literature evangelism program.⁴ This was followed up by an experienced gospel evangelist, Elder Elbridge M. Adams, who arrived in Iloilo City in January 1912 to strengthen and manage the work pioneered by Ashbaugh. After four years of hard labor, in March 1915, 12 precious souls were baptized in the ocean near Iloilo City.⁵ Elder and Mrs. Elbridge Adams and their official Ilonggo translator, Fausto Jornada⁷ (the first Filipino Adventist convert outside the Philippines),⁸ and the 12 newly baptized members became the nucleus of the first Adventist church in the Central Philippines.⁹ The first Sabbath School program in CPUC territory began in a rented building on General Hedges Street, Iloilo City, in 1914, with three members: Elder Elbridge Adams, his wife, and F. A. Jornada.¹⁰

Organization of West Visayan Mission

The propagation of the Adventist message was not confined to Iloilo City. It spread immediately to the neighboring provinces in Panay (Aklan, Antique, and Capiz) and to the islands of Negros and Romblon. These advances ushered in the need to organize the work in Panay into a mission field.

In 1914 the West Visayan Mission was organized under the name Panayan Mission,¹¹ and it was composed of the provinces of Iloilo, Antique, Aklan, Capiz, Romblon, and Negros Occidental.¹² Panayan Mission became the mother of all conferences and missions in the Central Philippines. On April 4, 1926, the mission was formally organized under the official name, West Visayan Mission, with about 1,500 members.¹³ The first administrator was the foreign evangelist, Elder Elbridge Adams. However, during the war years of 1941 to 1945, foreigners were not allowed to lead any organization in the Philippines, so Elder Gil de Guzman became the first national president of the West Visayan Mission.¹⁴

Negros Mission is Born

The year 1917 saw successful missionary endeavors in the Negros Island, which was still under the supervision of the Panayan Mission. That year the American missionary-colporteur, Robert Stewart, arrived in Bacolod City to start the literature ministry. As a result of his pioneering work, and with the help of gospel evangelists from

the mission office in Iloilo City, the first congregation on Negros Island began to meet at the house of Salud Salting on Luzuriaga-Lacson Streets, Bacolod City.¹⁵

It was not long before the number of Adventist conversions in the territory resulted in Negros becoming a mission field, and it was organized as the Negros Mission on January 1, 1962, with its territory composed of Negros Occidental, Negros Oriental, and the island province of Siquijor.¹⁶ Negros Conference today is the only territory in CPUC that has both medical (Adventist Hospital-Bacolod) and higher education institutions (Central Philippine Adventist College).

The oriental side of Negros, with Siquijor Island province, became another mission field in May 1997, with Pastor Elisio P. Doble as the first president of the Negros Oriental-Siquijor Mission (NSM).

Founding of East Visayan Mission in Cebu City

In February 1914, Dr. Ulyssis Charles (Carlos) Fattebert and his wife, Ellen I. Burril, after their missionary service in Mexico (1906-1913), were instructed to take the Adventist message to Cebu, Philippines. They first settled as medical missionaries in Argao, Cebu, a small coastal town, 65 kilometers from Cebu City. Dr. Fattebert used his medical work to establish relationships with the local residents, and he was able to communicate with them in Spanish, which he had learned as a missionary in Mexico. This led to some residents embracing the Adventist message.

After a couple of months, the Fatteberts began to hold Sabbath services in their home and were even able to hold services in the native language. Nine people began to keep the Sabbath and many more were interested. In September 1915 the first baptism took place in Argao as Pastor L.V. Finster led five converts down into the sea. A few months later a Chinese man was added to the fold as a result of the medical work of Dr. Fattebert.¹⁷

The book work created so much interest near Cebu that it was necessary for the mission to be moved to the large city. In March 1916 the mission station was moved from Argao to the capital city of Cebu. Robert Stewart's literature ministry had reached as far as Bohol, Negros, Leyte, and Samar. Dr. and Mrs. Fattebert conducted a tent effort in the city, which increased the membership of the Cebuan Mission to 27 by the end of 1916¹⁸ and resulted in the establishment of a church. Then, at the end of 1920, there were small groups of believers in Consolacion, Cebu, and Dumaguete, in Negros Oriental, and also in the towns of Bonifacio and Ozamis in Misamis Occidental in Mindanao.¹⁹ By this time the membership of this mission was 79. From these 79 members, Fattebert was able to recruit ministers and colporteurs. The three who were given ministerial licenses at that time were Carlos Arrendez, Manuel Kintanar, and Gogerico Arrogante. In the 1920s Panayan Mission in the west surged to a membership of 507, which was more than one-third of the total Philippine membership of 1,364 in 1925.²⁰

By then, churches had been planted in each of the islands of Leyte, Bohol, and Masbate. Companies and churches had also sprung up in the provinces of Misamis, Davao, and Zamboanga in Mindanao. The membership grew from 79 in 1920, to 3,060 in 1930.²¹ The Mindanao area, which was still supervised by the East Visayan Mission²² based in Cebu City, was contributing a rich harvest of souls to the mission.

With the continued endeavors of the missionaries and literature evangelists, the East Visayan Mission was established in Cebu City. The Adventist message now reaches to the eastern hemisphere of the Central Philippines, in Leyte, and to the Waray Islands of Samar.

Adventist Message Carried to Leyte and Waray Territory

By 1926 churches were already planted in Leyte.²³ From Cebu, the Adventist message spread to small islands in the eastern Visayas. In 1918 a colporteur named Pobleo Postrero, from San Remegio, Cebu, visited Burabod Island, province of Samar, where he canvassed and gave Bible studies that resulted in the baptism of a handful people on the island, including some prominent individuals in Adventist history in CPUC: the Abayons in 1924 and the Mahinays in 1925. The earliest clerk record book for the Burabod church registered them with the earliest members of the Adventist church in today's East Visayan Conference territory.²⁴ When membership in the Leyte and Samar areas qualified them for an additional mission field, the East Visayan Mission in Cebu was renamed Central Visayan Mission. Another mission territory in the central Visayas was composed of three provinces: Cebu, Bohol, and Masbate, and the name East Visayan Mission was carried over to the new territory on the eastern side of the Visayas, the Leyte and Samar areas. In 1965 the Central Visayan Mission was created and East Visayan Mission was born in Tacloban City (capital of Leyte).²⁵

A Mission is Born in the Marble Country

Romblon is generally considered the marble capital of the Philippines. The dawn of Adventism in Romblon began as early as the 1920s, as told by members still living in 2004-2005,²⁶ who were then in their eighties.

In 1927 there were already Adventist converts in Romblon. Elder E. M. Adams was the first foreign missionary to visit the place, followed by Elders Mote, Bergherms, Rogenberg, Armstrong, and Fighur. Their Filipino counterparts were Pastors Remegio Cahilig and Fausto Jornada. The crusade conducted by Elder Armstrong resulted in the conversion of the couple, Hilarion and Peni Faigao, and Eladia Sy, the mother of Mrs. Faigao.

The first gathering of believers in Romblon was on the ground floor of the home church belonging to Florentino Montesa, one of the early converts. They met there until the first church building was constructed on a lot donated by Florentino. The church was constructed in 1936, when the district pastor was Teodorico B. Tortal and the church elder was Hilarion Faigao. Hilarion was the first church member in Romblon to become church elder.

Romblon was a good distance from its mother mission, the West Visayan Conference. This was one reason the members proposed that their territory be converted to an additional mission field. The membership and financial capacity of the territory were enough to support a minimum working force. In April 2001 the Romblon area was detached from the West Visayan Conference to become an attached field under the direct supervision of the Central Philippine Union Conference, as voted by the executive committee of the West Visayan Conference.²⁷

Banton Island in Romblon was the home of Elder Howard Faigao, now retired Publishing Director of the General Conference, as well as other denominational leaders.

Creation of South Philippine Union Mission in Cebu City

With the Visayan territory evangelized, and some places in the Mindanao area entered and supporting established churches, the creation of a new union territory in the southern Philippines became feasible. On May 4, 1953, the South Philippine Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission. Located in the City of Cebu, the new headquarters would share the gospel in the central and southern Philippine territory.²⁸ Pastor Gil de Guzman, was the first elected president of the new union territory.

From South to Central Philippine Union Mission

With the rapid growth of the Church in the Visayas and Mindanao areas, the challenge of administration of such a large territory became apparent. After a period of 12 years, there was a need to create another union field in Mindanao. On January 28, 1965, the union office in Cebu City became the Central Philippine Union Mission,²⁹ with the office located at Gorordo Avenue, Cebu City; and the South Philippine Union Mission was established in Mindanao, with the office located at Masterson Avenue, Upper Carmen, Cagayan de Oro City.

During its organization in 1965, CPUC had four missions: Central Visayan Mission, East Visayan Mission, West Visayan Mission, and Negros Mission; three high schools; 285 churches; and 28,869 church members.³⁰ In 1975 it had the same number of missions and high schools, but the number of churches had risen to 339 and the membership to 49,404.³¹ In 1985 the union reported four missions, three high schools and a college, 460 churches, and 79,302 members.³²

Central Philippine Union Mission gained conference status in May 1996, and Pastor Alberto Gulfan was elected as president.³³

In 2005 the union had six missions/conferences with the addition of Romblon Adventist Mission and Siquijor Mission, four high schools and a college, 1,147 churches, and 107,409 church members.³⁴ Ten years later it had six missions, six high schools, and a college—Central Philippine Adventist College, which opened in 1983. It also

had 1,246 churches with a total membership of 170,507.³⁵ February 2015 was the golden anniversary of the original South Philippine Union Mission, although both unions celebrated it because they share its history.

In 2020 the union had seven missions/conferences, with the addition of Samar Adventist Mission, six high schools, and a college. It had 1,324 churches and a total membership of 195,181.³⁶ As of the third quarter 2021, CPUC had a membership of 196,841.³⁷

Presidents

South Philippine Union Mission: Gil De Guzman (1951-1954), Victoriano M. Montalban (1955-1963), Eugenio A. Capobres (1964-1965).

Central Philippine Union Mission: Eugenio Capobres (1965-1971), Florencio M. Arrogante (1972-1973), Leodegario E. Montaña (1974-1979), Dionisio M. Niere (1980-1987), Violeto F. Bocala (1988), Hector V. Gayares (1988-1996), Alberto C. Gulfan (1996-2003), Jimuel M. Toledanes (2003-2006), Agapito J. Catane (2006-2021), Joer M. Barlizo (2022-present).

SOURCES

Annual Statistical Report, 1965; 1975;1985; 2005; 2015; 2020; 2021.

Brodeur, E. A. *On Wings of Words*. Manila, Philippines: Philippine Publishing House, 1972.

Castro, Belle J. unpublished article entitled "History of West Visayan Mission." In author's private collection.

Chaney, Bertha Shanks. "Progress in Southern Philippines." *ARH*, October 1928.

Church Clerk Record Book, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Burabod, Northern Samar, September 10, 1924.

Donald Zabala, ed., *Celebrating God's Goodness*, Centennial Souvenir Book. Cebu City, Philippines: Communication's Department of Central Philippine Union Conference, 2005.

Editorial, *Manila Bulletin*, April 27, 2009. Central Philippine Union Conference Archives, Cebu City, Philippines.

Executive Committee Action # 2201-45. West Visayan Conference Archives, Iloilo City, Philippines.

Fernandez, Gil G. *Light Dawns Over Asia*. Silang, Cavite: AIIAS Publications, 1990.

Reyes, Herman. *Breaking Through*. Quezon City, Philippines: Trading & Printing Co., 1981.

Rubrico, James B. Sr., *Dawn of Hope in Panay*. Iloilo City, Philippines: Goldline Press, 2005.

Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (SDAE). Second revised edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996. S.v. "Far Eastern Division."

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, 1997. <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

Stewart R. E. "From the Philippine Islands," *The Workers Bulletin*, July 1916.

Young, Ethel and Natelkka Burrell, *Advancing Together*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1965.

NOTES

1. See James B. Rubrico Sr., *Dawn of Hope in Panay* (Iloilo City, Philippines: Goldline Press, 2005), 45. in 1865nelic,
2. Editorial, *Manila Bulletin*, April 27, 2009. Central Philippine Union Conference Archives.
3. See Ethel Young and Natelkka Burrell, *Advancing Together* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1965), 315,316.
4. See E. A. Brodeur, *On Wings of Words* (Manila, Philippines: Philippine Publishing House, 1972), 42.
5. See Herman Reyes, *Breaking Through* (Quezon City, Philippines: Trading & Printing Co., 1981), 113.
6. Belle J. Castro's unpublished article entitled "History of West Visayan Mission."
7. See Young and Burrell, 315.
8. See Reyes, 113.
9. See Castro.
10. Ibid.
11. See Gil G. Fernandez, *Light Dawns Over Asia* (Silang, Cavite: AIAS Publications, 1990), 143; Reyes, 125.
12. See *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia (SDAE)*, rev. ed. (1996), s.v. "Far Eastern Division."
13. Donald Zabala, ed., *Celebrating God's Goodness*, Centennial Souvenir Book (Cebu City, Philippines: Communication's Department of Central Philippine Union Conference, 2005), 26.
14. See Rubrico, 126.
15. Zabala, 29.
16. *SDABE*, s.v. "Far Eastern Division."
17. See Bertha Shanks Chaney, "Progress in Southern Philippines," *ARH*, October 1928, 8, 9.

18. See R. E. Stewart "From the Philippine Islands," *The Workers Bulletin*, July 1916, 2.
19. See Reyes, 123.
20. Ibid., 124-125.
21. Ibid., 124.
22. Zabala, 41.
23. See Reyes, 124.
24. See *Church Clerk Record Book*, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Burabod, Northern Samar, September 10, 1924, 10.
25. *SDAE*, s.v. "Far Eastern Division."
26. This was during my successive and actual interviews with the old Adventist people in the years 2004-2005.
27. See Executive Committee Action # 2201-45, West Visayan Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, dated on April 3, 2011, 13.
28. See Securities and Exchange Commission, Series of 1953. Central Philippine Union Conference, Archives.
29. See Securities and Exchange Commission Series of 1965. Central Philippine Union Conference, Archives.
30. Annual Statistical Report, 1965, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
31. Annual Statistical Report, 1975, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
32. Annual Statistical Report, 1985, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
33. *SDA Yearbook* (1997), 307.
34. Annual Statistical Report, 2005, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
35. Annual Statistical Report, 2015, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
36. Annual Statistical Report, 2020, Central Philippine Union Conference, CPUC Archives.
37. See the Secretary's Report of Central Philippine Union Conference, 3rd Quarter of 2021. Central Philippine Union Conference, Archives.

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000