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Pagunsan, Joel Honorario (1938–2020)

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Remwil R. Tornalejo is an associate professor in the Historical-Theological department of the International Institute of Advanced Studies Seminary (AIAS). Tornalejo has a B.A. in theology from Mountain View College, Valencia, Philippines, and M.P.S., M.Div., and M.Th. degrees from AIAS. He had served as a pastor, Literature Ministry Seminary dean and instructor at the South Philippine Union Conference. He had served as chair of the theology department of the South Philippine Adventist College. Tornalejo completed his D.Theol. from Theological Union (ATESEA). He is married to Marilou Manatad. They have four children.

Joel Honorario Pagunsan was an evangelist, pastor, youth leader, and church administrator.

Early life

Born July 2, 1938, at San Jose de Beunavista in the province of Antique, Philippines, to Adriano Pagunsan, a farmer, and Justa Honorario, Joel Honorario Pagunsan grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist home. He was the sixth of eight children in the family namely, Leah, Asher, Penena, Esther, Eleazar, Joel, Ruth, and Levi.¹

Pagunsan spent his early life in his hometown of San Jose de Beunavista. He was only 3 years old when the Japanese Imperial Forces bombed Manila on December 8, 1941, and then occupied the Philippines. During the war, life became very difficult for the Pagunsan family. The Japanese forces restricted many things only to those Filipinos who would cooperate with them.

Although life was difficult, the situation made the Pagunsan family more faithful to God. His parents taught Joel to depend on God's protection. Despite everything, his childhood was filled with love, faith and hope. Soon after Joel's seventh birthday, the war formally ended on August 15, 1945.²

After the war, the Pagunsan family left their province of Antique and went to Mindanao in the south of the Philippines, looking for economic freedom and a better life. They settled in M'lang, North Cotabato, because then national president Elpidio Quirino offered farmland for settlers to till. There, the Pagunsans started anew, found a congregation to join, and became active members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.³

Pagunsan spent his first two years of education at the Salaman Central Elementary School in Lebak, Cotabato, then finished at the M'lang Central Elementary School which he attended from 1950 to 1954.⁴

Education and Marriage

After completing his elementary education, he enrolled at Southern Mindanao Academy (now South Philippines Adventist Academy), Managa, Matan-ao, Davao del Sur, from 1954 until 1956.⁵ While he was in high school and 16 years old, he was baptized into Seventh-day Adventist Church by Pastor Cabansag on February 27, 1954, in Digos (now a city), Davao del Sur.⁶ Then in 1956 he moved to Mindanao Mission Academy in Manticao, Misamis Oriental, to continue his high school education, completing it in April 1960.⁷

After finishing high school, Pagunsan went to Mountain View College in 1960 and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and philosophy on April 24, 1966.⁸

On May 14, 1967, Joel married Eunice Jondonero-Tecson. Eunice Tecson was born April 28, 1943, at Astorga, Dumarao, Capiz.⁹ Pastor Teofilo Lyon performed the ceremony at Mountain View College, Valencia, Bukidnon.¹⁰ Eunice had a Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education (BSEED) from Mountain View College in 1964.¹¹ Their marriage produced five children, three boys (Jonie Ree, Edcel Jay, and Emvie Loyd) and two girls (Pearle and Eunice Joy).¹²

Ministry

In May 1966, just a week after his graduation, the Northern Mindanao Mission (NMM) hired him as a ministerial intern. After two years of internship, he became a district leader in the Western Coastal area comprising the towns of Alubijid up to Lugait, but he was based in Initao, Misamis Oriental, until June 1969. From July 1969 to April 1971, he taught Bible at Mindanao Mission Academy, in Manticao, Misamis Oriental. He was also an active youth and Pathfinder leader.¹³ It was during his tenure as a Bible instructor at MMA that he received ordination to the gospel ministry on January 2, 1971, during the Northern Mindanao Mission General meeting.¹⁴ Pagunsan was a hardworking pastor. In 1971 the worldwide church recognized him as belonging to a group of pastors who had baptized more than hundred individuals during 1970.¹⁵

At the close of the school year in April 1971, he became district pastor in Bukidnon, based in Don Carlos from May 1971 to December 31, 1975.¹⁶ Four years later, leadership appointed him as the Missionary Volunteer secretary of NMM January 1, 1976-December 31, 1977. On January 1, 1978, he became the stewardship director of the same mission and served in that capacity for eight years. The responsibility took on additional emphasis as church administration renamed the position stewardship/church ministries director. He remained in that post from January 1, 1987 until December 21, 1989. In January 1990 he was elected president of the Northern Mindanao Conference⁷ (NMM before), and held the position until December 31, 1995.¹⁸

During his tenure as president, he organized urban ministry teams to reach out and cater to the spiritual needs of urban people. The teams employed innovative approaches to evangelism such as seminars on group dynamics, professional growth, and the books of Revelation and Daniel. They met in government offices and large restaurants. In 1992, the first English language church was created as the Metro Cagayan de Oro English Congregation. Lacking a church building, it rented the Divisoria Plaza Restaurant and later the Tay Yen Restaurant in the center of the city. It has attracted professionals, college and university students, professors of Xavier University and Liceo de Cagayan, as well as foreigners and non-Cebuano speaking workers.¹⁹

Even though already busy with administrative responsibilities, Pagunsan would never miss an opportunity to visit the

pastors in the field as well as members in the local churches. Together with his wife, Eunice, and some other mission staff, they would depart the office on Friday afternoons to attend often far-flung Sabbath services.

Other times they would leave early on Sabbath to catch a Sabbath program. One Sabbath morning they traveled to Bukidnon, the central part of the mission area. On the way, they had an accident and the car overturned. Fortunately, there were no fatalities but Eunice's arm was badly injured and had to be amputated. In spite of that traumatic accident, he never became discouraged. His wife, after her recovery, continued to support her husband in his ministry and accompanied him in his travels.²⁰

After his term as president, Pagunsan, from January 1, 1996, until December 1998, the time of his retirement, pastored the Iligan Central Church at Tibanga, Iligan, City. He spent a total of 32 years in denominational service.²¹

Later Life

After his retirement in 1998, he continued to be active as an officer and consultant for his local congregation at La Sierra in Luinab, Iligan City. He did church and home visitations. As his health would allow, he would direct evangelism outreach programs.

As his age advanced, his health deteriorated. Twice he suffered mild strokes. In 2018, because of his medical condition, Joel, together with his wife, moved to Binalbagan, Negros Occidental, where his eldest son, who was a medical doctor, could provide him with medical care. They lived there for two years until Joel died on January 28, 2020, at the age of 81.

Contribution

Pastor Joel H. Pagunsan was a dynamic, visionary, and hardworking pastor and church leader. A passionate evangelist and church planter, his untiring ministry brought hundreds into the kingdom of God. Aside from being a busy church worker, he is also known as a family man and a loving and caring husband and father. In addition, he was a spiritual leader and father figure to the pastors in the mission in which he served as an administrator.

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NOTES

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