



## A WITNESS RESOLUTION

### *HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>*

WHEREAS in the past three years, sixteen (16) church workers and members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) have been brutally killed, and others have disappeared because they worked for basic human dignity and justice, and

WHEREAS many more have died or suffered before them, and

WHEREAS the UCCP seeks the continued critical presence and accompaniment of the Michigan Conference through Global Ministries of UCC and DOC in this journey until all shall have found the meaning and reality of the prophet Isaiah's hope, and

WHEREAS the Michigan Conference of the UCC is committed in partnership with the Eastern and Western Visayas Jurisdictions of the UCCP and hears the cries of our brothers and sisters in the Philippines,

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT** we are in solidarity over the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters in the Philippines and are outraged by the human rights violations that have been committed and continue in the present time, and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that we call on all members and churches of the Michigan Conference to express their deep Christian concern to the U.S. Administration, the Philippine Embassies in the United States, and to the Members of Congress, and advocate for specific supportive legislation; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that our continued prayers will be with our sisters and brothers in Christ in the East and West Visayas Jurisdictions of the UCCP as they continue to pursue the biblical vision of a land which will one day be free from all forms of corruption, injustice, suffering, and violence, and

**BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that as partners we will continue to support the struggle and ministry of our brothers and sisters in the East and West Visayas Jurisdictions of the UCCP.

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<sup>1</sup> Passed June 16, 2007 by the delegates to the Michigan Conference Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:** The current human rights crisis in the Philippines has been around since the country's independence in 1947, and has roots long before. When Spain claimed land from the indigenous people in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, human rights were not taken into consideration then, and centuries later they are still not taken into consideration today. Problems then persist today and are becoming worse: no land reform, displacement of indigenous people, land grabbing, the poor getting poorer and the rich getting richer. Government sanctioned violence against those who are advocating for the poor and disposed is increasing. The rich are those who control the government.

Spanish colonialism established a feudal system in the Philippines and, from that time on, land problems began. By the "divine right of kings," the King of Spain claimed ownership of all the lands in the archipelago, hence, the Philippines, or lands of King Philip. Vast tracks of land originally planted to supply food needs of the indigenous population were massively converted for products to supply the demands of the European market. Those who were farmers became peasant laborers on the lands of the large landowners. The principal problem over the past 400 years has been massive landlessness due to this feudal monopoly of land ownership. This is the reason there have been more than 200 uprisings, mostly agrarian in nature.

During American Colonialism, which started in 1898, lands were still not redistributed back to the people. Instead, land monopoly was more deeply rooted through capitalist farming by large U.S. controlled plantations and vast logging and mining concessions. A total of 439,076 acres of land were seized for U.S. military camps and reservations. The Philippines is haunted by endless stories of murder and violence. The killing of so many people, mainly church workers, because they have dared to stand up for truth and justice, points to the present worsening situation of tumult and violent repression. The U.S. gives more military aid to the Philippines than any other country in Asia. Congress is supposed to ensure that our military aid is not used in any way that abuses human rights.

Yet, today the people of the Philippines continue to suffer human rights violations for much the same reasons as have been true over several centuries. As globalization becomes part of the Filipinos' world, the unresolved problems continue to worsen, resulting in the tragic crisis today.

**BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE:** Today we hear the cry of our sisters and brothers in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) as they experience increasing state-sponsored violence at the hands of the Philippine military and paramilitary groups. A number of church leaders have been assassinated; many more live with death threats. They use the words of the seventh century B.C. prophet Jeremiah to say: "*We look for peace, but find no good, for a time of healing, but there is terror instead*" (Jeremiah 8:15 NRSV).

As pastors, conference ministers, bishops, and human rights workers live under this reign of terror, their desperate cry for help goes up to God and out to the global Christian community:

*Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us  
look and see our disgrace!  
Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers  
our homes to aliens.  
We have become orphans, fatherless;  
our mothers are like widows. (Lamentations 5:1-3)*

With courage and prophetic integrity they are calling the government of the Philippines to accountability at all levels for this increasing violence against progressive forces in their society. They again reference the prophet Jeremiah as, speaking truth to power, as he spoke twenty-eight centuries ago to King Shallum of Judah, who succeeded his father Josiah on the throne:

*Did not your father eat and drink  
and do justice and righteousness?  
Then it was well with him.  
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
then it was well.  
Is this not to know me? says the Lord.  
But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain,  
for shedding innocent blood,  
and for practicing oppression and violence. (Jeremiah 22:15-17)*

Philippine church leaders hear the prophetic call of God as they seek to faithfully live their discipleship. They draw vision and courage from the words of Isaiah, words later used by Jesus in his “first sermon” in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18):

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners. (Isaiah 61:1)*

They envision a time when “a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice” (Isaiah 32:1) and claim these words for the future of their society:

*Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,  
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
The effect of righteousness will be peace,  
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.*

*My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,  
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (Isaiah 32:16-18)*

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)*

**QUESTIONS for REFLECTION:**

- What does the prophet Jeremiah think it means to “know God” in Jeremiah 22:16?
- When we hear the painful lament of our Filipino sisters and brothers, what are ways in which we might seek to be “members one of another” (Romans 12:5) in the Body of Christ, the Church? How might members of local churches seek to live this out in a way that makes a difference for our neighbors in the UCCP?