

**A CYCLICAL, GLOCAL DIASPORA CONGREGATION:
A CASE STUDY OF THE FIRST FILIPINO ALLIANCE CHURCH
FROM 1984 -- 2007**

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Introduction

There are two terms used in this brief story to describe the history and development of First Filipino Alliance Church (FFAC) in Edmonton, Alberta (Canada) – “cyclical” and “glocal.”

A “cyclical” congregation¹ starts small but over the years becomes larger (not necessarily in numbers but in ministries). It is like the making of a “snowman.” A snowman starts out as a fist-size snowball. The small snowball is rolled to gain more snow and becomes larger in size. As the ball rolls, it picks up more snow and eventually takes on the shape of a snowman. Christ started his Church with a few disciples in Jerusalem. It later became a regional (Asia Minor) and ultimately became a global movement. The Church that Christ founded is cyclical. A “glocal” congregation² is a local church that is thinking and acting locally and globally. The word “glocal” was originally coined to express a new interweaving of the global and local.³ In the article, “The Glocal Church: Locality and Catholicity in a Globalizing World,” Charles Van Engen of Fuller Seminary proposed that the church of Jesus Christ needs to become self-conscious of what is in fact already is: “a glocal church”.⁴ The Church must be “active simultaneously in global and local mission.”⁵

FFAC is providentially designed as a cyclical and glocal congregation⁶ without them intentionally planning for it. Their ministry started as a small bible-study group – an outreach post to Filipino university students, then it grew to become a home-base and “nerve-centre” of the Filipino International Network (FIN) (until 2007). Over the years it has also become a catalyst in birthing other ministries such as the Praying and Loving Muslims (PALM) and the Conference of Filipino Alliance Ministries (CFAM). Both these two ministries trace their roots from FFAC. Reflecting its ministry growth, FFAC

¹ Tira, 2002.

² Ibid.

³ Charles Van Engen, “The Global Church: Locality and Catholicity in Globalizing World” in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds. Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Also see Rosenau 2003; Robertson 1995; Tai and Wong 1998.

⁴ Van Engen, 157.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For more information about cyclical and glocal congregations, see Sadiri Joy Tira’s Doctor of Ministry dissertation, “Global Missions and Local Congregation: A Case study of the First Filipino Alliance Church in Edmonton, Alberta (Canada), from Reformed Theological Seminary, 2002. Using historical, documentary and archival research methodologies, Tira analyses the birth and growth of FFAC to showcase global missions and local congregations. (i.e. Glocal congregation’s missions).

went from a living-room at the University of Alberta's student housing complex, to the basement of Millbourne Alliance Church, and is now occupying one of Edmonton's primary examples of modernist architecture.⁷

The following article⁸ portrays FFAC as a model of a cyclical and glocal congregation. Dr. Stuart Lightbody wrote the unpublished article, "The Ripple Effect" before his retirement as Vice-President for Canadian Ministries for C&MA Canada in 2007.

The Ripple Effect by Stuart Lightbody

For many decades, Canada has attracted the Filipino people. From the 1960's to the present day, the Philippines has been a major source of immigrants, normally ranking in the top five originating countries of Canadian immigrants. Indeed, there are now more than 300,000 Filipinos living across Canada, primarily in the major urban areas of Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Montreal.

The Filipinos do not follow the pattern of other immigrant groups. They speak English well, many are professional and well educated and they do not tend to cluster in ethnic ghettos, as do other groups. Additionally, most are practicing Roman Catholics.

In the early 1980's a small group of Filipino students and graduates of the University of Alberta in Edmonton met for prayer and bible study in a small townhouse in the Mitchener Park at the University's housing complex for married couples. For the handful of evangelical Filipinos it was enough that they could gather and celebrate the joy of the Lord with each other. There was no thought of birthing a church or extending any kind of ministry beyond the comfort zone of their own fellowship. It was enough for them that there were some fellow believers in the Edmonton Filipino community of more than 2,000.⁹

[Sadiri] Joy Tira was a Filipino seminary student and interning at Millbourne Alliance Church. At an outreach event he met with the Mitchener Park group to help in the bible studies and was soon helping lead the bible studies as well as handling a Sunday School class at Millbourne for some of the Filipino families. A summer ending event in 1983 saw nearly 100 Filipinos of various religious persuasions attend.

Joy returned to school at Canadian Theological Seminary but God had planted a seed with visions of the first-ever Filipino Alliance church in Canada. With the strong support of the Western Canadian District Superintendent at that time, Harvey Town, a series of meetings between the Millbourne church, the district and the Filipino families led to the birthing of a Filipino congregation within the mother church,

⁷ The FFAC building was designed by Howard and Robert Bouey Architects. It is now one of the architectural landmarks in Edmonton showcasing Modern architecture. See the Edmonton Art Gallery's Capital Modern: A guide to Edmonton architecture & urban design 1940-1969 edited by Catherine Crowston. It is the hope of the writer (Tira) that the succeeding FFAC congregation will manage it with care. Future renovations must be done with this consideration.

⁸ Rev. Sadiri Joy Tira, founding pastor of FFAC (1984-2007) wrote the introduction and conclusion to fit Dr. Stuart Lightbody's article into the theme of this volume.

⁹ In 2007, there were approximately 18,000 Filipinos in Edmonton.

Millbourne. Filipino Christian Alliance Fellowship was born. But, exciting as that was for the Filipinos in Edmonton, God was not finished.

Over the next number of years, the fellowship flourished as Sadiri Joy Tira was recruited to lead them and by 1989 they were an independent congregation. They purchased their own land, built their own facility¹⁰ and renamed themselves First Filipino Alliance Church.

From the start, missionary and evangelism zeal permeated the church, particularly as they contemplated the burgeoning Filipino community in Edmonton. They organized a team to participate in the All-Filipino Basketball League; they organized community-wide events from prayer breakfasts to seminars for newcomers. Steady growth was highlighted by continuous grounding in evangelism, discipleship and outreach. But the church not only impacted the Edmonton Filipino community. It has had a ripple effect across Canada and around the world.

The current leader of the Conference of Filipino Alliance Ministries (CFAM) in Canada, Rev. Charlie Mance, readily acknowledges the vision, drive and leadership provided by the First Filipino Alliance Church in Edmonton. Joy and the church, he said, provided inspirational leadership and were the driving force behind Filipino Alliance churches, ministries, mission efforts and outreach over the last 15 years.

There are now [17] churches associated with CFAM with another one in the birthing process and yet another organized congregation outside the Alliance that is seriously considering moving into the denomination. It has produced leaders: at least 4 pastors and 8 missionaries. To the glory of God, many of our Filipino missionaries are serving in Creative Access Countries that we call Desert Sands, Asian Spice or Silk Road.

From its earliest stages of growth, First Filipino's goal was to be a sending church, whether across Canada or around the world. Along with those directly connected with the C&MA, the church has also provided personnel for other Christian ministries including Campus Crusade, Samaritan's Purse, Operation Mobilization among others. Many church people have also participated in various forms of short-term missions.

The church was also a major catalyst in the creation of a global movement amongst the Filipino diaspora around the world. The Filipino International Network (FIN) is now led by Sadiri Joy Tira with a set mandate to reach Filipinos for Christ and, through them, reach other people groups. Originally dubbed Operation Trojan Horse, it was recognition that the warmth and friendliness of the Filipino people added to the fact that Filipinos are able to work and live in many so-called closed countries was an ideal evangelism opportunity – particularly in the Middle East.

It began in the mid 90's with the strategy of mobilizing prayer and fellowship amongst Filipino Christians in the Middle East followed by showing and distributing the Jesus film throughout the region.

Since then FIN has grown to an international, interdenominational movement. It is creative in its efforts to reach the Filipino people. It is equally creative and aggressive

¹⁰ FFAC outgrew their first property. Their current building was purchased from St. Stephen's United Church in 1991. For both building projects, Horatio and Hope McCombs provided sufficient funds to acquire the properties. The C&MA Western District also provided a grant and loan at a low interest rate. In October 2006, FFAC conducted a mortgage burning service to celebrate God's faithfulness and provisions.

in its efforts to use the embedded Filipino populations as “missionaries” in the midst of difficult or hard to reach people and faith groups.

From that small pebble tossed into an Edmonton sea, the ripples engendered by First Filipino Alliance Church have touched every corner of Canada and now lap the edges of nations and peoples in every corner of the globe.

Conclusion

The preceding article is not just a diachronic and synchronic reporting of FFAC’s journey. Ultimately, FFAC’s story is a portrait of God’s hand at work in the lives of “people on the move” (i.e. migrants) who encountered God, followed Christ and are actively engage in fulfilling the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Dr. Lightbody’s article highlights obedience to Christ, visionary leadership, and healthy partnerships among like-minded individuals.

FFAC’s future depends on how the new generation of FFAC responds to God’s call and Christ’s commission, a call and commission that will not change but requires a renewed response in the 21st Century. If FFAC remains healthy and missional with godly, visionary, and catalytic leadership and committed members, their ministry will have an even further-reaching impact in the 21st century.

References

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Websites of Interest

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