

THE CRISIS IN THE PHILIPPINE ADVENTIST CHURCH

The explorer, Magellan, visited the archipelago of the Philippine Islands in 1521, and was met by the Malay peoples, whose ancestors probably migrated there from Southeast Asia in earlier times.

The Spanish founded Manila in 1571, and named the island group after King Phillip II, the individual who sent the immense Armada in a vain attempt to destroy the Protestants of England. In 1898, as a result of the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded the islands to the United States for \$20 million. On December 8, 1941, Japan attacked the Philippines. After World War II, on July 4, 1946, the islands were given their independence.

The Philippines have about 7,100 islands, stretching 1,100 miles from north to south. About 95 percent of the area and population are in 11 of the largest islands, which are mountainous, except for the heavily populated coastlines of the islands and the central plain of Luzon. The two largest islands, Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south, account for about two thirds of the land area. About four-fifths of the people are Roman Catholics. The largest city, Manila, has 1.7 million people; Quezon City has 1.3 million; and Cebu City has 552,000. Cebu City, on the central island of Cebu, will figure prominently in our report, below, although the action takes us all over the Philippines.

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination began work on the islands in 1905. The first baptisms were in March 1911. Many mission properties were destroyed during World War II, and everything was looted when the Japanese forces

withdrew. In the years since, the work has gradually grown.

You need to know that the Philippines are so large in territory, that our denomination has split up its work there into three territorial areas:

(1) *The North Philippine Union Mission*, with headquarters in Manila, has approximately 1,076 churches and 168,538 church members in the Luzon and northern island region, with 12,990,000 people.

(2) *The Central Philippine Union Mission*, headquartered in Cebu City, has about 609 churches and 130,165 church members in the Visayan Islands, inhabited by 12,990,000 people.

(3) *The South Philippine Union Mission*, with headquarters in Cagayan de Oro City, has about 1,037 churches and 256,739 church members in the Mindanao and Sulu Islands area, inhabited by 17,562,000 people.

Bob Vun Kannon recently presented an oral report on current developments in the Philippines, as it concerns our own people. Having returned from a visit to a number of local churches on several islands throughout the three union regions in the Republic, he brings to us an up-to-date report on the current crisis within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination in that far-away land.

I am sure you will want to learn of these developments. They represent a very real crisis for our people in that nation. Yet, intriguingly enough, it is turning out to be an opportunity for expanded missionary work! May our kind Father

guide His people through all of this.

From the best we can tell, it all began with a leaky roof in a little church. We know it was in the Visayan Islands of the Central Union, but whether in the territory of the Central Visayan Mission or East Visayan Mission is not clear.

The faithful church members had puzzled for quite some time over how to get that roof fixed, especially since it can rain very hard in that land!

But when they asked the mission office to fix it, they were told to wait awhile. This they did. After twelve months of rain through the roof, they asked again, and were essentially told to fix it themselves.

So they did. Withholding some of the money they were to send the mission office, they patched the roof. How big a patch it took, we do not know,—but when the mission office heard about it, they determined to make an example of this upstart local church. So they went down there and padlocked the church, and told the members they could not meet there any more.

Well, it was with sadness that the believers gathered together for prayer. Their leaders had turned against them, and now they had no church building at all!

For some reason, they did more than pray. They took it to court.

At the hearing, the judge inquired, “Whose money built the church building?” The plaintiffs replied, “Our money paid for the land and the building.” Since they were able to verify this fact, the judge decreed that the church members could certainly use that building as much as they wished. So the little congregation had their church

home back! They were so very thankful.

Unfortunately, there were others who were very unhappy about that turn of events. It was decided to erase the happiness from those believers.

An eyewitness saw three conference workers come to the church building, and throw gasoline bombs at it (Molotov cocktails, they are called by the world),—and burn it to the ground!

The message was: “If we can’t have it, you can’t either.”

There is a right way and a wrong way to do things, and when people use very wrong methods, it reacts upon themselves. The news of what had happened, spread rapidly throughout the entire Philippines.

The result was a home church movement which spread throughout large areas of the nation.

At about this time, Roger Carbo, received complaints about the mission hospitals from non-Adventists.

Roger Carbo lives in Cebu City, on the island of Cebu (the same city where the Central Philippine Union Mission has its headquarters). He is a dynamic, educated Adventist believer, who, on his own, started and operates a religious news radio broadcast in Cebu City. His wife is an attorney, as well as an English teacher. Thus, we have here a well-educated, hard-working family.

Because of his radio contacts, Carbo constantly receives information from all over the Visayan Islands, and throughout the Philippines as well. He was well-aware of the leaky roof problem, which resulted in a fire-bombing.

But now these complaints began pouring in. People told of how they had been refused service at the local Adventist hospital in Cebu City. Of the nine Adventist hospitals and two clinics in the Philippines, the one in Cebu City is the H.W. Miller Memorial Hospital, on Manila Street. Named after a well-known

Adventist surgeon in town, it began as the Miller Clinic in 1953 in a mission-owned home. By 1955, it had become a 20-bed hospital in a building of its own. It was enlarged in 1960, and two years later ground was broken for a new hospital. In the years since, additional all-concrete annexes have been built.

Roger Carbo decided to go with one of the complainants to the hospital. The sick man was told, “It will cost you \$2,000 pesos; do you have any money?” To the reply of “No,” the man was told, “Go and come back when you can pay the down payment.” That down payment, equivalent to about US\$83 (the current exchange rate is 24 pesos to a dollar), would amount to several years’ salary for a poor man.

Now, it is true that medical care costs money, but the denomination had a charter from the government, freeing it from paying government taxes, and permitting it to solicit donations—because it gave free medical help to the people. That was the agreement.

And that is the way it used to be. Ralph Larson recalls holding an evangelistic effort in the Philippines many years ago, and free medical services, and even operations, were being performed by the church at that time.

Back in the old days, Adventist missionary-minded physicians would treat the patients and perform operations at no charge. For example, Dr. Miller, in the first five days that the new hospital opened its doors in 1956, performed 27 free major surgeries. But, apparently, times had changed.

The message was: “We’re here to take in money.”

Because the problem was so flagrant, someone made a call to the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR), and informed them that the Central Philippine Union Mission was operating their hospital as a for-profit facility, and not as a missionary hospital.

When the BIR checked into this, they found that the report was true, and they issued a ruling, canceling the Central Union’s registration with the government as a tax-exempt organization, which could solicit funds from the

public.

But more, the BIR not only revoked the tax-free status of the union,—it also levied a fine for back taxes, which amounted to 17 million pesos. At current exchange rates, that would amount to US\$708,000.

While this was going on in the Central Philippine Union, down south in the South Philippine Union, the church officers filed a lawsuit against all the home churches in their territory. In their suit, they declared that the faithful Advent believers, who were meeting together on Sabbath in home churches, could no longer call themselves “Seventh-day Adventists,” because the name was not an expression of doctrine or faith (!), but was merely a commercial trade name of a registered religious organization.

The message was: “You will either give us your donations, or we will stop you from worshiping.”

What a crisis this brought to our believers everywhere! The leaky roof had resulted in home churches which, in turn, had brought this retaliatory effort to stop those believers from being Advent believers anymore!

While the denomination was collecting donations and avoiding taxes, it was charging a full amount for its treatments in their hospitals. At the same time it was suing believers to keep them from worshiping or spreading the Advent faith.

This was indeed a crisis. It remarkably parallels the Hungarian Union crisis, which we reported on extensively from 1984 to 1989 (see our 259-page *Ecumenism / Hungary Tractbook* and the *Ukrainian Union / Zambezi Conference Crisis [WM—461]*, which we published in May 1993). Indeed, one cannot help comparing it with the tragedy of over \$700,000 in tithe funds, spent by our General Conference in an effort to close down an 11-member church in Kona, Hawaii (see our trademark tractbooks—nearly a thousand pages filled with legal papers of this tragic litigation).

Unfortunately, the symptoms are

the same in various areas of Adventism throughout the world, because the causes are the same. Selfish men try to gather all the authority to themselves, and lord it over God's heritage.

But they will someday have to answer for this.

In the midst of all these crises, the General Conference Office of General Counsel (an office full of tithe-paid lawyers), which encourages the initiation of trademark lawsuits around the world against local groups of believers, sent word to the South Philippine Union to be sure and trademark the name, Seventh-day Adventist Church," or they could not win their case and be able to obliterate the worship gatherings of those believers.

At that moment in the gathering crisis, Roger Carbo, sitting at the center of a news-gathering broadcasting service, received word of that message!

A man of action, he recognized that he only had a little time in which to preserve the right of Seventh-day Adventist believers to maintain their faith!

Immediately, Carbo went to the trademark office of the Philippine Government (while Quezon City is the capital, many of the most important governmental agencies and decisions are still made in Manila)—and trademarked the name, "Seventh-day Adventist Church" as a trade name—belonging personally to himself!

He had registered and trademarked the name, before church leaders did!

This resulted in the strange situation of our denomination trying to keep believers from calling themselves Adventists,—when the leaders no longer could legally lay claim to the name themselves! The only person in the Philippine Republic who was a legal Seventh-day Adventist was Roger Carbo.

At the same time, the Bureau of Internal Revenue had revoked the license of the Central Philippine Union to operate as a church. It would henceforth have to call itself a "corporation"—because the govern-

ment had found it was only a profit-making outfit.

In the midst of this whirlwind of activities, when church leadership then applied for ownership and sole legal control over who could lawfully use the name,—they discovered that a man by the name of Roger Carbo, in Cebu City, had already trademarked it! It now belonged to him. Astounded, their attorneys tried to wrangle their way out of such an intolerable situation, but found that the trademark was legitimate and could not be canceled. But its registered owner could transfer, sell, or cancel it.

So Roger's telephone rang. On the other line, from his headquarter's office across town on Gorordo Avenue, was Hector V. Gayares, president of the Central Philippine Union.

Gayares asked Carbo to please come to his office so they could speak together. Carbo replied that he would be happy to receive the president at his own office. Gayares declined, and it was finally agreed that they would meet at a neutral location in the lobby of a public building.

Roger Carbo was understandably cautious. It was agreed that each would bring one witness. In addition, Roger also took a tape recorder with him.

When the meeting began at the appointed time, the president told Carbo they were having difficulty because Roger owned the name, "Seventh-day Adventist Church." Was not there some way he could solve their problem?

Personally appealing to Carbo, Gayares said, "Will you please let us use the name?"

To this, Roger replied something to this effect: "Of course, I will let you use the name. But there is one stipulation: You will have to drop the lawsuits against the Adventist believers. The name 'Seventh-day Adventist Church' was given by God to a people; to any people or corporation using it properly. So I trademarked it so everyone could use the name."

What a tragedy. All those lawsuits would have to be dropped. This came as quite a blow to the church leader.

To share that special name with fellow Seventh-day Adventists, who did not recognize their authority, was a bitter pill they could not, would not swallow.

Hector Gayares then asked if they could not have some time to think this through before replying. Why did they need to wait? The only loss would be to have to drop those wicked lawsuits.

Then, in spite of the running tape recorder, and thinking the opportune time had come, Gayares offered Carbo 30,000 pesos (US\$1,250) if he would transfer the trademark to them.

Carbo well-knew that, to do so would be to sell out his faith, and to sacrifice the faith of thousands of fellow Christians. Roger resolutely refused.

This stymied efforts of the leaders to sue faithful believers, and stop them from worshiping God, in peace, at their little gatherings.

The God of heaven can do a lot, when His people are alert and ready to defend His cause. May you and I be faithful in the days ahead.

Meanwhile, the crisis over the lost tax-free status continued.

A Central Philippines officer next went to a government official, whom he considered important enough—in an effort to corrupt him. He offered him a 300,000 peso bribe, from church coffers, if he would get the back taxes fine canceled. The agent took the bribe, but did nothing about it. Because it was an illegal transaction, done in secret, the leaders could have no recourse in the courts. The money was lost.

Church leaders needed to get on their knees and pray to the God of heaven, and confess and put away their sins. How could they receive His blessing, when they were trying to quench the faith, worship, and missionary work of thousands of believers?

But, instead of prayer, they resorted to illegal bribes. The first bribe had failed, so the next one would surely succeed.

Going to another government official, they offered him a 500,000 bribe. I wonder if they bothered to pray beforehand? Why do so, since they were

doing something illegal,—and they offered it with the blood of Christians they wanted to eliminate on their hands.

Once again, a government official took the bribe money, offered him by Adventist Church leaders. What a spectacle!

And once again, he smiled knowingly, pocketed it, and did nothing.

The message was: “Prayer and moral integrity count for nought, but corrupting public officials with bribes can do the job.”

So, as the matter stands, the Central Philippine Union owes 17 million pesos (US\$708,000 at current exchange rates) in back taxes. They have lost their tax-free status, and can no longer solicit donations or call themselves a church. According to the decree of the judge, they must henceforth declare themselves to be a “corporation” on all their public and private signs and notices.

We have here an incident of retribution. It was imposed by an insulted God of heaven, against a corrupt church leadership.

According to one ruling of the courts, the people had a right to use the church building which they built (later burned down), but which the leaders wanted them barred from.

According to another decision, the believers could call themselves a church, but the leaders no longer could.

According to a third legal document, the faithful could use the name, “Seventh-day Adventist,” because the leaders no longer owned it.

My friend, we have much to pray over. There is trouble ahead. We have not heard the last of this. Your turn and my turn is coming. Think not lightly of what is happening in the Philippines. It is not just some faraway place. Basic church policies, regarding locking church buildings against the believers who paid for them and trademarking the name,—are being implemented elsewhere in the world field. Both have already been done in America. The implications are ominous, and fraught with meaning for you and me today. We see here a war-

fare by leaders against believers.

It is true that legal actions, in the Philippines, turned against the leaders and protected the faithful, so they could continue worshiping and witnessing. But repressive measures may well be brought against our people in other lands, because of foolish actions by our church leaders.

While on his recent trip to churches and campmeetings in the Philippines, Bob Vun Kannon met Roger Carbo and his wife at a campmeeting and, over a period of several days, learned the details of the above sequences of events. From him, Vun Kannon received a copy of Carbo’s Certificate of Copyright of the name, and also a copy of the BIR document, refusing permission of the union to any longer operate as a church or solicit funds.

Just after that campmeeting ended, Vun Kannon left to visit a believer elsewhere. But, that same morning, Roger went to a phone and, calling his wife, told her that, since he was on a different island, he would be taking a boat and be home that night.

But although she is a very stable attorney and teacher, on the phone he found her to be hysterical. She told him she had received a death threat. He was to be killed unless he canceled or transferred ownership of the name, “Seventh-day Adventist Church,” to the denomination.

The message is: “Either give us what we want, or we will eliminate you.”

So we tell you the story in the hope that you will, not only pray for our people and our denominational leaders, but also that the notoriety of this report might protect Roger Carbo—so the brethren will not dare slay him. If he is murdered, we will report it to you. We, ourselves, are in contact with him.

Meanwhile, because of the home church movement, a new wave of active person-to-person evangelism, as well as the holding of public evangelistic meetings, is going on in the Philip-

pines. The people are very open to the message, and the home churches are actively witnessing for their faith.

We can be thankful that they can still do so, because leaders were not able to stop them, although they tried to do so.

Some estimate that there are as many as 600 home churches. Vun Kannon says there are probably at least 200-250 of them.

Most people are trilingual. They generally know their native dialect (there are 90 of them), Pilipino (based on Tagalog), and English. The three major native languages of the Philippines are Pilipino (Tagalog), Cebuano, and Panayan. But English is widely spoken and read, and books in English are very much appreciated there.

If you wish to have us send books to the believers there—to share with one another and with unbelievers—earmark your donation to that purpose.

There is yet one more crisis in the Philippines, which we have not yet told you of: The church organization no longer makes available Spirit of Prophecy books to the people! This seems impossible, but Vun Kannon checked it out carefully while visiting there. That is what he was told everywhere he went. The Philippines Publishing House, in Manila, no longer prints them.

Well, what more can we say? Fellow believer, we can pray! and we can work! And we can send books to the Philippines. Funds earmarked for that purpose will be used to send books over there. We have established contacts with faithful believers there, who can get the books out to the people. Both believers and unbelievers need them.

God bless and keep you. There is work to be done. We are nearing the end. There can be no doubt. Even our own denomination is crumbling in moral integrity. Surely, we are near the end of time.

— Vance Ferrell