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# METHODISTS AGAINST MARTIAL LAW: FILIPINO CHICAGOANS AND THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN A GLOBAL CRUSADE

James Zarsadiaz

**ABSTRACT.** During the 1970s and 1980s, the United Methodist Church in the Midwest prioritized recruiting people of color. This included Filipino immigrants whose population continued to grow across greater Chicago. Amid these recruitment efforts, Methodists took firm stances on matters related to social justice and international affairs using religious doctrine or reasoning to justify political mobilization. Filipino Methodists formed critical alliances with non-Filipino Methodists, other Christians, and leftist organizations to raise awareness about Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship and martial law order in the Philippines. Their grassroots activism helped sustain and bolster the efficacy of anti-Marcos and anti-martial law movements occurring worldwide.

On September 21, 1972, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law over the archipelago, curtailing Filipinos' rights and freedoms. Through the military and police, the administration used force, surveillance, and other forms of intimidation to uphold state power. For almost a decade, Filipinos lived under martial law due in part to Marcos' fear of a communist takeover and civil unrest across the islands. During this period, progressive and center-left organizations in the Philippines and the United States worked to dismantle the Marcos regime's grip on Malacañang Palace. While groups like *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong* (KDP, aka Union of Democratic Filipinos), Friends of the Filipino People, Movement for a Free Philippines, and the Ninoy Aquino Moment mobilized Filipinos in both countries, intellectuals and religious institutions including the United Methodist Church were also crucial activists and allies in the cause. Methodists claimed martial law ran against the central tenets of Christianity and thus encouraged believers to intervene. I argue that Methodists based in the Midwest played a key role in educating their congregations on matters related to Marcos and martial law. This was especially true in greater Chicago. Methodists across racial lines took an interest, partly for church recruiting purposes and to support Chicago's rising population of Filipino immigrants, some of whom were amenable to conversion or recently joined the Methodist faith.

In the 1970s and 1980s, amid a wider Christian evangelical movement in the United States, Protestants including Methodists increased their outreach to Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup> In 1975, the United Methodist Church declared it a “missional priority” to recruit people of color. At the 1976, 1980, and 1984 General Conference, church leaders and activists—most of whom were white—listed “developing & strengthening ethnic minority local churches for witness & mission” as a primary goal in bolstering Methodist Church membership in metropolitan areas.<sup>2</sup> One of their strategies was establishing ethnic-specific congregations and “ethnic-minority caucuses,” which was anticipated to generate interest or help with retention in the church.<sup>3</sup> Mainly targeting East and Southeast Asians, the Asian American United Methodist caucus along with the church’s 1980 “Ripe for Harvest” plan attracted thousands of new members. The plan’s goal was to bring 24,000 Asian Americans into the church within four years. Other goals included establishing 150 new Asian American congregations; building 50 new church facilities; raising an endowment fund for campus ministries and seminary education for Asian Americans; enlisting 200 new Asian Americans for the ordained ministry; creating new hymnal supplements with an emphasis on Asian American resources; developing “sister church” relations between Asian American congregations and those in Asia (particularly the Philippines, Korea, and Taiwan); and supporting political prisoners in Asia.<sup>4</sup>

In the Midwest, Methodist ministers initially believed Chinese immigrants and Hmong and Vietnamese refugees were the most likely to join the church.<sup>5</sup> In actuality, Filipino immigrants were among the most receptive to their recruitment initiatives thanks to a collective of Filipinos who made efforts before the church’s official “Ripe for Harvest” plan. In 1977, Filipino Methodists in the region formed the United Filipino Church of Chicago. Six years later, they reorganized as a mission church of the United Methodist Church, becoming part of the Northern Illinois Conference.<sup>6</sup> Recruiters believed one way to make inroads with Filipino immigrants was to highlight the church’s commitment to international human rights—a topic that was top-

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1. For a brief history on the rise of Christian evangelicalism and political engagement, see Clyde Haberman, “Religion and Right-Wing Politics: How Evangelicals Reshaped Elections,” *New York Times*, October 28, 2018; John Fea, Laura Gifford, R. Marie Griffith, and Lerone A. Martin, “Evangelicalism and Politics,” *The American Historian*, November 2018, accessed June 16, 2021. <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2018/november/evangelicalism-and-politics/>.

2. Roy Howard Beck, “Ethnic Numbers barely grow despite ‘priority,’” *United Methodist Review* 3, no. 3, February 7, 1986, 3.

3. Beck, 3.

4. Joyce Hopkins, “Asian Americans Seek Membership Rise,” *United Methodist Reporter*, November 28, 1980, 3.

5. Victor T. Fujiu, “The Far East Has Now Become the Near East,” *United Methodist Reporter*, June 1, 1984, 1.

6. Fujiu, 1.

of-mind for immigrants who fled the Philippines during Marcos' tenure. Methodist leaders hoped the church's vocal stance on this, social justice, and missionary or charitable work would convince the predominantly Catholic community to change religions. Along with aggressive outreach, Methodist activists banked on the church's growing number of Filipino leaders including Bishop Emerito Nacpil, Rev. Roger Pangilinan, and Rev. Adele Gonzales, the first Asian woman clergy member in the Northern Illinois Conference.<sup>7</sup> They all held positions of pastoral authority in the 1980s, using their influence to deliver messages about martial law, oftentimes from the bully pulpit.

Among the most prominent Filipino Methodists in the Midwest was Rev. Leo Constantino, a community organizer and martial law critic. In 1961 (four years before the start of Marcos' presidency), at the age of 26, Constantino moved from the Philippines to the United States—a time when immigration from Asia was largely limited to students, businessmen, and diplomats. He arrived in Illinois to pursue a doctorate at the University of Chicago's Divinity School. Planned as a sojourn, he did not anticipate staying in the area after graduation. But Constantino planted roots in the city, settling in the South Side. For over four decades, he served as a pastor, working closely with the city's Filipino Methodist community and other Filipino Protestants.

While most of his life was spent living in America, Constantino—like many of his *kababayan* (fellow Filipinos)—held strong ties to the Philippines. He was a proud Philippine nationalist who feared Marcos' administration was ruining his homeland. In line with Methodist activists' views of the era, Constantino believed Christian notions of liberation and freedom were not possible without legal protections from the state. Constantino appealed to Chicagoans through his weekly sermons and op-eds in community and religious periodicals claiming a core Christian obligation was to care about humanitarian issues beyond America. In more scathing critiques, he alleged the US government aided in maintaining Marcos' power and called for Americans to question policymakers.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1970s and

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7. Roy Howard Beck, "Global Ministries' New Board Works at Broadening," *United Methodist Reporter*, November 2, 1984, 4; Victor T. Fujiu, "The Far East Has Now Become the Near East," *United Methodist Reporter*, June 1, 1984, 1; Unknown, "The Church Today: Filipino UMs Deadlock on Third Bishop Choice," *United Methodist Reporter*, January 11, 1985, 4; Unknown, "NIC Receives First Asian Woman Clergy Member," *United Methodist Reporter*, August 13, 1982, 1.

8. Filipino American anti-martial law activists often argued that imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy were interconnected systems of oppression. For more information, see Madge Bello and Vincent Reyes, "Filipino Americans and the Marcos Overthrow: The Transformation of Political Consciousness," *Amerasia* 13, no. 1 (1986-1987), 73-83; Estella Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Helen C. Toribio, "We Are Revolution: A Reflective History of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP)," *Amerasia* 24, no. 2 (1998); Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino, "Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino First National Congress, July 1973," Santa Cruz, CA, July 1973, from the private collection of Abe Ignacio.

1980s, he placed martial law at the center of his public and private presentations, talking with Protestants and Catholics alike at parishes across the Midwest.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the church hall, Constantino gained a following among activists including radical organizers based in the Philippines, some of whom were not Christian or had religious attachments.

Constantino grounded his arguments and activism in theology. But he and his church counterparts also borrowed political tactics from US-based ethnic nationalists like the Black Panther Party or Asian American groups such as I Wor Kuen, Red Guard, and KDP.<sup>10</sup> On a domestic level, ethnic nationalists called for progressive reforms to education, healthcare, housing, and employment. They promoted social revolution and the eradication of colonialism and other forms of structural or economic domination worldwide. Using similar rhetoric, reasoning, and strategies, in the 1980s, the United Methodist Church of Illinois held rallies, staged teach-ins, and hosted community forums on issues ranging from imperialism to human rights in the so-called “global South.” Specifically, regional Methodist churches educated congregations on hot-button issues such as the Iran-Contra scandal, racial apartheid in South Africa, and militarization in Korea, thus aiding in the politicization of church members.<sup>11</sup> These conversations included younger Methodists who were often less in touch with both politics and spiritual life. In November 1983, Asian Methodists in Chicago held a two-day conference on bigotry, highlighting the church’s commitment to diversifying its congregations and to raise awareness of how social injustice could be remedied through religious-based activism. Attendees went to panels about civil rights, US-Asia relations, and racism in Chicago. These “consciousness-raising” efforts broadened the spectrum of what was considered typical church issues or activities (e.g., helping the poor, volunteerism). For Filipino Methodists like Bishop Emerito Nacpil, political or civic engagement enhanced one’s faith and level of piety: “We can fight against human rights violations, imperialism, sexism, racism ... We can say ‘amen’ to that. But we must ask, ‘Is that all?’... Mission is not a humanistic activity. It is an evangelical exercise.”<sup>12</sup> With the support of non-Filipino allies

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9. Leo Constantino, oral history interview by author, Chicago, IL, November 23, 2009.

10. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, “Yellow Power: The Formation of Asian-American Nationalism in the Age of Black Power, 1966-1975,” *Souls* 3, no.3 (Summer 2001), 29-38; Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow & Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Helen C. Toribio, “We Are Revolution: A Reflective History of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP),” *Amerasia* 24, no. 2 (1998), 155-178.

11. Charles Bloomstein, “Pros & Cons of Disinvestment,” *United Methodist Review*, January 10, 1986, 12; Linda Jones, “Korea Education Series Scheduled at Mayfair UMC,” *United Methodist Review*, April 4, 1986, 12; Norma Kehrberg, “It Was Awesome Year in Human Suffering,” *United Methodist Review*, June 13, 1986, 1; Helen Post, “Resistance Rather Than Resignation,” *United Methodist Review*, May 31, 1985, 12; Unknown, “Korean Woman Tells of Suffering,” *United Methodist Review*, May 20, 1983, 3.

12. Roy Howard Beck, “Global Ministries’ New Board Works at Broadening,” *United Methodist Review*, November 2, 1984, 4.

in the church, Filipino Methodists wove together religious doctrine, domestic issues, and international affairs in ways to suggest that these matters fundamentally informed each other. Similar to how their ethnic nationalist allies understood politics and society, for Methodists, these were not independent areas of concern; they were intersectional.

Filipino Methodists' reputation as committed anti-martial law activists impressed leaders in the Philippines, particularly Sen. Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr., a prominent Marcos critic who would later be assassinated.<sup>13</sup> In 1981, Constantino and local Methodists handled Aquino's accommodations and logistics during his trip to the Midwest.<sup>14</sup> Aquino trusted Chicago's Filipino religious community to protect him from Marcos sympathizers or apologists who had threatened him and his surrogates with blackmail, assault, or death. With the assistance of Ed Monteclaro, Constantino organized a successful speaking tour for Aquino to explain why Filipinos in greater Chicago should get involved in anti-Marcos and anti-martial law politics. In the months leading to and following Aquino's 1981 tour, his visit bolstered mass interest in the cause. For example, the United Methodist Church increased coverage about martial law in its official newspaper, the *United Methodist Reporter/United Methodist Review*.<sup>15</sup> Stories included testimonials from activists as well as articles about Christian missionaries captured by Marcos officials or civilian pro-Marcos extremists. The paper aided mobilization efforts by publicizing stories and op-eds or listing event calendars about anti-martial law workshops or rallies. In turn, Aquino's visit and its momentum elongated the public's attention to what was occurring in the Philippines.

For the next several years, Filipino Methodists continued to work with church leaders and worshippers in keeping Chicagoans aware of the movement. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, between February 22 and 25, 1986, thousands of protestors took to the streets of Manila's Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) calling for Marcos' deposal. Known as the People Power Revolution, everyday Filipinos pressured Marcos to relinquish the presidency after two decades in office.<sup>16</sup> The Marcoses were forced out within days. Ferdinand and his

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13. For detailed information about Filipino and Filipino American activism in the Midwest in the 1970s and 1980s, see James Zarsadiaz, "Raising Hell in the Heartland: Filipino Chicago and the Anti-Martial Law Movement, 1972-1986," *American Studies* 56, no. 1 (2017), 141-162.

14. Leo Constantino, oral history interview by author, Chicago, IL, November 23, 2009.

15. Joyce Hopkins, "Asian Americans Seek Membership Rise," *United Methodist Review*, November 28, 1980, 3; Carolyn Oehler, "Banned Priest Outlines Rights Violations in Philippines," *United Methodist Reporter*, October 9, 1981, 1; Unknown, "The Church in the World Today: Foreign Bishop Finds Error in Resolutions," *United Methodist Reporter*, ca. 1980, 2; Unknown, "World Council Protests Arrest of Filipino Official," *United Methodist Review*, November 28, 1980, 4.

16. For more recent scholarship about EDSA and mobilization efforts leading to Marcos' departure, see Jose V. Fuentecilla, *Fighting from a Distance: How Filipino Exiles Helped Topple a Dictator* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Mark John Sanchez, "Let the People Speak: Solidarity Culture and the Making of a Transnational Opposition to the Marcos Dictatorship, 1972-1986," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-

wife Imelda fled Malacañang Palace for Hawaii where they stayed as exiles thanks to the support of US president Ronald Reagan.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the end of Marcos' tenure, Filipino Methodists remained critical of his administration and its political legacies. They continued to blast neocolonialism and US-Philippine relations even though Corazon "Cory" Aquino—Ninoy's wife—had now assumed the presidency. This included Constantino who condemned Reagan when he suggested US officials played a major part in the grassroots revolution at EDSA. For Constantino and other Filipino activists in the Midwest, it was not the US who restored democracy in the Philippines. Rather, it was the will of the Filipino people who, as Constantino said, "brought the Marcos house down."<sup>18</sup> While the population was modest in size, the Filipino Methodist community played a pivotal part in the global anti-Marcos and anti-martial law movement. By strategically connecting church and state—that is, Methodism and geopolitics—Filipino Methodists and their allies across greater Chicago utilized their resources and personal connections in both America and the Philippines to organize, raise awareness, and ultimately help dismantle a dictatorship from another side of the world.

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Champaign, 2018.

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