

Dear OPMH friends,

Thank you so much for your prayers during my recent trip to the Philippines. It meant so much to me. I know some of you were probably scratching your heads, wondering, “What in the blazes is she doing there?” Many of you know that Larry Golemon and I were PCUSA mission co-workers in the Philippines from 1997-2000, where we served on the faculty of a theological seminary south of Manila. Both of us have gone back for occasional short-term teaching opportunities since our return to the U.S. This time, however, I did not go to teach theology but to serve as an international election observer, invited along with other church leaders by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCCP) and various church and non-government organizations concerned with justice and peace in relation to the Filipino national elections.

Elections in the Philippines are fraught with difficulties—lots of voters end up disenfranchised by various forms of fraud and cheating; voters may be threatened or coerced concerning their choices of candidates; sometimes people are physically prevented from going to the polls, or intimidated once they are there. In spite of these issues, many Filipinos remain passionate about democracy and determined to exercise their right to vote. The NCCCP, along with other church groups and NGO’s calls for international observers to monitor the elections and document what goes on at the polling places across the country. Evidence suggests that the mere presence of international observers helps to lessen intimidation of voters, poll cheating, and other issues that work against a free, peaceful, and fair election process. So that’s why I went—I was part of a group of Presbyterians from the US, and we joined others from Canada, Australia, Japan, Europe, Argentina, and elsewhere, numbering around a hundred observers, to fan out to places across the Philippines.

I was part of a six-member team assigned to the city of Marawi and province of Lanao del Sur, which are traditionally ‘election hot spots’ on the southern island of Mindanao—and this time was no exception! Lanao del Sur is part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). There, our team worked with a local host organization, an interfaith group called Healing Democracy, that included Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians together with Muslims, engaged in voter education and the formation of voter collectives in an effort to work for a peaceful, fair and free election. The polling places I observed were in traditional Muslim municipalities and villages, in areas populated by one of the thirteen Islamic indigenous tribes known as the Maranao or “people of the lake.” They are among the poorest people in the nation, and have not been well represented or well served by the political system of electoral politics in the Philippines. But the Maranao are resilient and determined people, having experienced a great deal of hardship as a religious and cultural minority, and yet maintained their culture, heritage, and dignity as a people. Our host group, Healing Democracy, worked throughout the year before the election to educate and organize people in that area to be empowered as voters, engaging in the electoral process with clarity and integrity, toward better access to good representation of their needs and concerns in government.

By now, many of you know that our observer team was caught in a gunfight at a polling place that lasted a couple of hours. Fortunately we were helped to a safe house, the home of one of Healing Democracy’s many young volunteers, where we literally “laid low” and listened as automatic weapon fire and grenades transformed the polling area into a battle scene, after a rivalry between two contesting candidates turned violent. Tragically, two Filipinos died there, along with 16 others in locations across the country where election related violence erupted that day. More than 50 others died in election-related violence prior to the May 10th polling period. This experience only increases my resolve about the importance of the church’s witness of accompaniment with people in situations where violence threatens their ability to be heard and counted. The Presbyterian Church has a long history of standing with people around the globe who live under dehumanizing conditions of poverty, tyranny, or violence, as part of our Christian witness to the power of the cross to lead us from death to life, to turn despair to hope, and to proclaim that God is at work to heal and mend the brokenness of our lives and world.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the elections, it became clear that the news reports from the mainstream media proclaimed a rather one-sided message that the elections were “smooth and peaceful.” The international observer groups were some of the only spokespeople for an alternative perspective—that along with many examples of a smooth, peaceful process in some areas on election day, there were also many “irregularities” and problems-- including the fact that that when eighteen people die on election day as a result of violence at the polls, it is not a peaceful election! It is important that someone tell another side of the story. Our PCUSA partner denomination in the Philippines, the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, has been especially bold in making sure that the experiences of the voiceless, poor, and struggling people of the nation are lifted up.

I hope we will have other opportunities and contexts to talk about the church in the Philippines, the reason election-related violence is so common there, and the situation of interfaith work among Christians and Muslims. Until then, I ask your continuing prayers for the Filipino people and their leaders and for our church partners and mission co-workers there, that the Peace of Christ might be made real for all.

Blessings,
Joyce Ann Mercer