“Be careful what you pray for,” cautions Eli Toribio. “You just might get it.”

Toribio, a long-time diaconal ministry coordinator with the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines (CRCP), prayed in 1989 that God would send him as a missionary to Africa, even though his denomination had few international missions and none in Africa.

His prayer was answered when God led him to a position with the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. Today he serves with CRWRC in Zambia.

The denomination that cultivated Toribio in his faith and prepared him for service is itself an answer to many people’s prayers.

The roots of the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines are deeply tied to the Christian Reformed Church in North America. CRCNA missionaries Vicente and Lucy Apostol started the first Reformed outreach in the Philippines when they were sent in 1961 by Christian Reformed World Missions.

The Apostols formed a small Bible study with a group in the town of Pulupandan in 1964. Four years later, 20 adults confessed their faith in Christ and were baptized.

While early missionaries worked to meet spiritual needs, they often felt overwhelmed by the poverty and physical needs they saw around them. That’s when others stepped in.

Meeting Other Needs

In 1964 a typhoon followed by floods caused extensive damage in the Pulupandan area. Through CRWRC, Christian Reformed churches in North America sent food, blankets, and clothing and provided emergency medical aid.

In 1969 the CRC missionaries asked for additional support. The Acts of Synod 1970 explain that while missionaries “faithfully preached the Word, they were painfully impressed with the recurring instances of families unable to meet emergencies caused by medical needs and food shortages. The area is mainly dependent on a single crop—sugar cane—and offers little encouragement to those seeking stable employment for the support of their families.”

The missionaries asked that CRWRC support them in “upgrading the community and agricultural conditions.”
While early missionaries worked to meet spiritual needs, they often felt overwhelmed by the poverty and physical needs around them.

In June 1970, Fred Schuld of Blenheim, Ontario, arrived as CRWRC’s staff person in the Philippines. Schuld worked in the areas where CRWM missionaries were planting churches. His early “self-help” programs focused on introducing livestock and poultry flocks to families that had relied on sugar-cane production for their living. Soon CRWRC had also introduced health and nutrition classes for mothers and a feeding program for preschool children.

People in the pews of Christian Reformed churches across North America provided prayer and financial support. By 1976 the answer to their prayers was becoming evident: three strong worshiping congregations now existed in Pulupandan, Bago City, and Bacolod City, along with church plants in Manila and Iloilo.

In addition, CRWRC staffed a family-assistance program in a community on the outskirts of Manila, feeding nearly 1,000 children every day and supervising livestock and agriculture programs throughout the regions where the churches were located.

Birth of a Church
Those efforts received good cooperation from the local churches, so much so that in May 1976 CRWM missionaries turned the leadership of the churches over to Filipino leaders, establishing the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines.

World Missions continued to work with the leaders of this new denomination by mentoring pastors, training leaders, and providing theological education and missions development. CRWRC assisted in setting up diaconal outreach programs so that churches could meet the needs in their communities.

“The CRC in North America has done wondrously in building the capacities of deacons and other church leaders,” Toribio says. “For me, this is their key contribution.”

CRCCA staff and supporters prayed that the young denomination would grow,

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Tour Celebrates 40-Plus Years of Ministry in the Philippines
This year marks the 40th anniversary of CRWRC’s involvement in community development in the Philippines. To celebrate the occasion, former CRCNA-Philippines staff as well as supporters of the Philippines ministry are invited to attend a 14-day Discovery Tour in the Philippines in October. Participants will spend time visiting project sites and talking with staff and community members involved in ministry through CRWRC, CRWM, and Partners Worldwide. Participants will hear and experience what God has done and is doing in this country. For additional information or to register for the tour, please visit www.crwrc.org and look for Discovery Tours under Get Involved.

—Kristen deRoo VanderBerg

Reaching People Via Media

Christian Reformed Church outreach in the Philippines began in the mid-1950s when Synod 1954 instructed The Back to God Hour Radio Committee (now Back to God Ministries International) to investigate “foreign broadcasting.”

The first international broadcast began in 1955, when the radio program was aired worldwide over station HCJB from Quito, Ecuador. Letters came from all over the world, including the Philippines.

This broadcast opened the door for Filipino families to request the TODAY devotional booklet. Ernie Siacon from Bulacan used TODAY to disciple others. “It is perfect material for new believers,” he told BTGMI staff.

In the past, nearly 1,000 Filipino families and individuals received TODAY. BTGMI continues to send TODAY in bulk to a number of churches in the Philippines, but due to the recent economic crisis it no longer mails the devotional booklet internationally to individuals at no cost. Readers overseas can receive the TODAY free via e-mail or online at www.ThisIsToday.net.

BTGMI broadcasts the English-language “Back to God Hour” radio program over FEBC into four cities in the Philippines. “Spotlight,” a simplified English program produced in partnership with Words of Hope, reaches Filipino listeners on its broadcasts over HCJB, as well as its website www.SpotlightRadio.net.

Web ministry is a cost-effective and powerful tool for sharing the gospel. Children in the Philippines have access to the “Kids Corner” program at www.KidsCorner.net and to the popular HisKidsRadio network. Back to God Ministries International reports that each month an average of 296 people from the Philippines visit the “Kids Corner,” “Spotlight” or BackToGodRadio.net websites.

— Nancy VanderMeer, Back to God Ministries International
Beyond Relief: Rebuilding from the Inside Out

Three years ago, Typhoon Reming destroyed a thriving community in the Philippines. More than 1,000 people were killed, and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced by the flooding and mudslides.

Hardest hit was the region of Bicol, where some communities were completely wiped out. But that is not the end of the story. Through the work of the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines and CRWRC partners, communities are rebuilding and have become even stronger than before.

In the wake of the disaster, CRWRC partners BBK and KABALIKAT worked with the Disaster Response Team of the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines to meet the needs of hard-hit communities.

In the first phase, CRCP deacons packed kits of emergency food supplies and distributed them through local churches. The next phase involved distributing housing repair materials, particularly roofing supplies.

“CRWRC’s partners took the time to work with the community to design housing. Implementation of the program was done in collaboration with the community,” said CRWRC intern Andrew Vanstee.

This created a sense of ownership that transitioned well into the third phase of the response. At that point, instead of handing out money or supplies, CRWRC’s partners helped community members form small savings groups.

“Helping them organize themselves equipped the people in many ways,” said CRWRC-Philippines staff member Lem Rossellon. “There were different savings groups. One was even composed of all widows who wonderfully supported each other. In these groups of five to 10 people, they saved funds, thought together, learned together, and planned together.

“CRWRC’s partners then introduced simple livelihood projects. For instance, in one workshop a group of housewives made rice cakes. Later, some participants were selling with confidence and earning income from their rice cakes, setting their savings aside.”

To people like Vangie Cordora who were struggling in hard-hit villages, the programs were invaluable.

“Many months after Typhoon Reming I was eager to earn a living and operate my small flower shop again,” said Cordora, but I felt financially helpless and hopeless. I almost resorted to borrowing from lenders who charge extremely high interest rates. Thankfully, I was invited to this savings group where I met people from different walks of life.

“Our group was composed of farmers, variety store owners, pedicab drivers, and public school teachers. Belonging to our savings group gave farming and livelihood another chance. We were given hope!

“Seeds were provided to the farmers, livelihood training for everyone, and capital for small enterprise. Each of us got back to business. Today, business is good. My flower shop is thriving and blooming.”

Not only did the savings groups provide an immediate network of support, they also formed the basis for long-term community strengthening. In July 2008, 28 small savings groups joined together and formed a cooperative called Kasama-Ka (which means “you belong”).

Today, Kasama-Ka is a registered cooperative with the Philippines government and has opened a savings account with a Filipino bank.

“CRWRC, together with our partners, celebrates this new cooperative and the changes in the community brought by the programs in Bicol,” said Rossellon. “We celebrate restored livelihoods and renewed hope in the lives of the Bicolanos.”

—by Lem Rossellon and Kristen deRoo VanderBerg
Ending Poverty Through Partnerships

The Philippines is one of 20 countries in which Partners Worldwide works to strengthen Christian businesses, create jobs, and end poverty.

In 2001 Partners Worldwide and CRWRC worked together to establish an organization called Evangelical Businesspeople and Entrepreneurs for Social Transformation (e-BEST).

E-BEST was set up as an international affiliate of Partners Worldwide, with a stated mission to provide Christian fellowship, mentoring relationships, and access to capital for small businesses. By June 2005 it had seven chapters with about 200 members. The following year it had grown to 17 chapters with about 400 members. After overcoming a series of growing pains and reorganizing management, e-BEST is making significant strides.

Partners’ executive director, Doug Seebeck, comments in the new book My Business, My Mission: Fighting Poverty Through Partnerships on his recent visit to e-BEST. “We came back from our trip to the Philippines with memories of creativity, giftedness, commitment, and competence. We also returned with the sense that e-BEST still has a bright future and the best is yet to come.”

E-BEST is currently working with businesses through cell group mentoring, access to affordable capital, and business training. As evidence of its continuing growth, e-BEST hosted the Partners Worldwide Asia Business Conference in April 2009, which drew more than 160 business leaders from the surrounding region.

To learn more about opportunities to serve in the Philippines, contact Greg Matney at gregm@partnersworldwide.org. To order your copy of My Business, My Mission, see www.mybusiness-mymission.com.

Andrea McLurg, Marketing Coordinator for Partners Worldwide

The Philippines at a Glance

Location: The Philippines is one of the world’s largest archipelagos, consisting of more than 7,100 islands. Lying southeast of mainland China, the islands of the Philippines stretch for 1,000 miles between Taiwan and Borneo.

Population: The 72 million people of the Philippines are a mixture of many ethnicities and nationalities, including Malaysian, Indonesian, Chinese, Spanish, and American. Roman Catholicism has influenced the Filipinos since Spanish priests came to the islands in 1521. Many Filipinos still practice animism—a belief in and fear of spirits—mixed with Catholic Christian beliefs. Protestant missionaries first came to the Philippines in the early 1900s. About 7 percent of the people are Protestant today.

First CRC contact: 1955 radio broadcast by Back to God Ministries International

First CRWM missionaries: Rev. and Mrs. Vicente Apostol in 1961

First CRWRC missionary: Fred Schuld in 1970

Start of the Christian Reformed Church in the Philippines: May 1976

Number of CRCP churches today: 46 organized churches, 27 church plants or emerging churches