

## **The Victory Christian Fellowship: A Mother Megachurch that Daughtered Multi-Site Megachurches**

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### **Introduction**

This study analyzes the historical development of various megachurches in the Philippines with special reference to Victory Christian Fellowship (VCF) and how VCF engages its Christian witness in the business hub centers of Metro Manila. We used an extensive review of literature, series of field visits, and interviews of its leadership to investigate what makes a megachurch mega and how they replicate themselves as a megachurch in the metropolitan cities. This study presents qualitative evidences of the secrets of their growth manifested in the historical evolution, model of discipleship, belief and culture, leadership development, social engagement, and passion for global missions. We assert that Christian individuals attending megachurches are shaped and energized to act in the public sphere due to the strengthening and enhancement of their deep-seated belief system and moral values. Affirming the findings of Hong that megachurches enhance individual inner meaning that boosts the private and public morality of individuals (Hong 2000, 106), megachurches like VCF will continue to attract religious individuals because they offer a new form of Christian spiritual capital that contributes to the overall well-being and happiness of an individual. Furthermore, megachurches like VCF also provide knowledge, networks and technology, public spaces to translate that spiritual capital for civic engagement, and the production of the common good. Because it increases volunteerism and engagement of faith in public life, VCF mobilizes their congregants to increasingly participate in the global mission of Jesus.

### **The Historical Development of Megachurches in the Philippines**

While most scholars observe that the phenomenal increase of megachurches can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, social scientists like David Eagle argue that this contention is inconclusive. Eagle contends that megachurches have a long historical evolution from the early church (Acts 2), through the Reformation period, and up to the present. For instance, there is historical evidence of megachurches among the protestant reformers like Martin Bucer, Jacques Perret, and George Whitefield, as well as Charles Finney and Broadway Tabernacle (Eagle 2015, 589-90). The Angelus Temple of Aimee Semple McPherson is an example of a megachurch built by the early pioneers of the Pentecostal movement in the 19th century (Eagle 2015, 592-597). This sociological observation is more evident in Southeast Asia, as in the case of Korea and the Philippines (Hong 2000, 102; Tejedo 2018). Based on the definition of Bird and Thumma that a megachurch has at least two thousand adult members and children (Bird and Thumma, 2020, 1), this study classifies five observations of megachurches that arose from Catholic and Protestant organizations in the 20th century.

The first observation of a megachurch could be called classical. While it is not the locus of this study to examine large churches outside of the Protestant movement, we cannot simply overlook these large churches planted and built within Metro Manila. We have a few prominent examples among the Catholic churches, like the Manila Cathedral in Intramuros Manila, the Christ the King Church in Quezon City, and the Aglipayan Church formed at the dawn of the 20th century. One could also consider the Iglesia Ni Cristo (indigenous Church of Christ), although it denies the deity of Christ and the Trinity.

The second observation of megachurches that are prominent in Metro Manila are megachurches started by Western missionaries who arrived in the Philippines in the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s. The Pentecostal movement in the Philippines was a product of various missionary efforts of western Pentecostal missionaries and Filipino Pentecostal *balikbayans* (Filipinos living abroad who come home) who arrived in the 1920s up to the mid-1930s (Suico 2004, 223-224; Ma 1997, 324-342). However, Pentecostal megachurches did not spring up until the 1950s when Lester Sumrall, a well-known Pentecostal revivalist, pastored what became known as the Manila Bethel Temple (now Cathedral of Praise, "COP"), because of the healing of Clarita Villanueva from demon possession (Oconer 2009, 66-84). Oconer observes that the revival under the ministry of Lester Sumrall paved the way for healing evangelists who brought thousands of members to Pentecostalism (Oconer 2009, 66). COP made a significant

contribution to this “Manila Healing Revival” and became one of the early megachurches in the Philippines. It was the center for healing and revival in Metro Manila and nearby cities in the 1950s. COP was initially affiliated with the Philippine General Council of the Assemblies of God. However, the church became a Pentecostal independent congregation after a leadership crisis in the 1970s. In doctrine, the church adheres to the fundamental beliefs of the classical Pentecostals and claims to have eight thousand members with ten different campuses in Metro Manila, fourteen satellite churches in various provinces in the Philippines, and six overseas churches (<https://cathedralofpraisemanila.com.ph/locations/>).

Another megachurch considered one of the fastest-growing Evangelical churches attractive to the middle class and Filipino celebrities is the Victory Christian Fellowship (VCF). It was started by Steve Murrell in 1984 and has 110,000 members all over the Philippines (Tejedo 2024, 89-90). Based in Taguig City, the VCF managed to position its fellowship meetings at different business centers in Metro Manila and other major cities in the Philippines.

Alabang New Life Christian Center (NLCC) is a Spirit-filled megachurch founded by Paul and Shoddy Chase in 1991 after serving as missionaries in the Philippines in Kalibo, Aklan for eight years. The church is built on Don Manolo Boulevard, Alabang, Metro Manila. Its members come from the middle class and are affluent business people in Metro Manila. The church has five thousand regular worshippers, but it is also known for its satellite congregations in different cities and towns in the Philippines. With its passion to evangelize the Philippines, the church aims to be an agent of change in the country stricken by tremendous poverty. The ministries of NLCC take seriously the various needs of individuals and groups in society. Thus, its ministries are focused on connecting and building individual lives by integrating their members into various cell groups and ministries. Sermon messages are highly publicized to make them available to their adherents. NLCC has three satellite churches in Metro Manila, seven in Luzon, twelve in Visayas, and three in Mindanao.

Third, another type is megachurches that are a by-product and are influenced by the mother organizations. Among the Catholic charismatic churches in the Philippines, the most notable megachurch that became an influential charismatic organization within the Catholic tradition is the *El Shaddai* Movement founded by Mariano “Mike” S. Velarde, a former real estate developer in Parañaque and Las Pinas, Metro Manila, who experienced what he called an “angelic visit” when he was confined to a hospital because of heart enlargement in 1978. After his “born again” experience, he organized and started the *El Shaddai* Movement through

his radio station in 1981 and propagated his personal experience of God's miracle of provision in his business that attracted thousands of Filipinos. Velarde, influenced by prosperity preachers in the West, popularized his prosperity doctrine to Catholic members who sympathized with the charismatic renewals. During the formative stage El Shaddai held its weekly services in public places in Metro Manila, like the Quirino Grandstand. In August 2009, El Shaddai inaugurated the one-billion-peso House of Prayer on a ten-hectare property at Amvil Business Park in Parañaque, Metro Manila. El Shaddai, a local charismatic lay movement, is now recognized as an influential religious organization with eight million members. However, this figure needs to be corroborated. The El Shaddai Movement interweaves Catholic and charismatic spirituality, advocating a prosperity gospel that promises material blessing to those who confess faith in the saving grace of Jesus (U.S. Department of State Diplomacy in Action, 2005, n.p.).

The Word of Hope Christian Church (WOH) is a Pentecostal megachurch that claims to have 40,000 members and 4,744 cell groups from 41 satellite churches in Metro Manila and its suburbs. It has a 6,500-seat auditorium in its main sanctuary, across the street from two large shopping malls in Quezon City, Metro Manila. David Sobrepeña established WOH with three members at the Paramount Theatre along the EDSA highway in 1989. Two years later, the church increased in number and recorded an average attendance of 8,000 at its Sunday services, which have since increased from three to five services (<https://www.wordofhope.ph/copy-of-about-us>).

Fourth, some megachurches are independent and indigenous, and consider themselves Evangelical and Pentecostal. The Jesus Is Lord Church Worldwide, better known as Jesus Is Lord (JIL), is another significant indigenous and independent Pentecostal megachurch. This church has vast social capital in the religious and political landscape. Eddie Villanueva, a former professor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and later an atheist-activist during the Marcos regime, accepted Christ with his wife in 1973. Known for his bold and charismatic preaching, he and his family were targets of religious persecution, even surviving an assassination attempt in 1983 when a grenade exploded in his house in Bulacan. JIL is a Bible-centered church with a charismatic congregation that desires to evangelize and disciple Filipinos. Villanueva is also a vital part of the Philippine for Jesus Movement (PJM), an alliance of churches and ministries engaged in a prophetic ministry bringing spiritual and socio-political transformation to all spheres of society. JIL started as a Bible study group at Polytechnic University with fifteen students in 1978 until it became a prominent Pentecostal

congregation with four million adherents worldwide. JIL is known for its bold calls for the spiritual and political transformation of the Philippines. Aside from the weekly services scattered throughout the Philippines and overseas ministries, JIL started a multi-media ministry in 1982, a TV program called Jesus the Healer. After fourteen years of spiritual battle, JIL acquired Channel 11 from a committed Christian businessman. JIL's primary services are located in Bocaue, Bulacan, Sta. Mesa, Greenhills and Ortigas Center. While its headquarters is in Bocaue, Bulacan, its congregations are scattered in Metro Manila and various towns and cities in the Philippines.

Another significant megachurch established during the 1980s is the Bread of Life International Ministries (BOL), a Pentecostal, nondenominational church founded by Caesar "Butch" Conde. The BOL Church, which used to be a halfway house for prostitutes in Olongapo City in 1980, grew to become a megachurch that claims to have 30,000 members attending their local and international services. During its formative stage, BOL transferred its weekly church services from the Philippine Heart Center to Celebrity Sports Plaza in 1984 to accommodate 1,200 members. BOL is steadfast in its conviction that the God of American Christians is the same God who can provide for Filipino churches. Thus, BOL did not seek support from foreign missionaries during its formation but sought to be a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating church.

Megachurches in the Philippines are also found among nondenominational and Evangelical churches. One such megachurch is the Christian Commissioned Fellowship (CCF), founded by Peter Tan-Chi in 1982 in Cainta, Rizal. CCF is considered one of the fastest-growing evangelical megachurches and claims to have 100,000 members, with a ten-story building with a seating capacity of 10,000 on 2.3 hectares. It has thirty-eight satellite outreaches within the Philippines, eight international outreaches, and forty-six congregations. The Day By Day Christian Ministries (DBD), also a nondenominational megachurch, was founded on June 6, 1985, by Pastor Ed Lapiz. DBD claims to have 6,000 members in its main sanctuary with different satellite outreaches in the country and overseas. DBD is known for advocating cultural redemption, using Filipino arts, music, and indigenous dances as a form of Christian worship and spirituality. DBD operates radio programs around the Philippines, such as "Day by Day." DBD produces and publishes Lapiz's sermons in Tagalog and English through Kaloob Publishers to reach out to ordinary Filipinos.

Fifth, megachurches are daughtered by a mother megachurch. While Victory Christian Fellowship is distinguished as one among the eleven

megachurches planted by Western missionaries, VCF satellite churches within Metro Manila are forming and growing as VCF megachurches within the mother church. Winston Reyes, one of the pastors and educators of VCF, in 2011 identified five VCF satellite churches with an average attendance of 2,000 members. These churches are thriving and growing congregations of VCF within the Metro Manila area (Reyes 2012, 75-76). These churches are the following:

**Table 1. Daughter megachurches of Victory Christian Fellowship**

Names	Discipleship Groups	Group Leaders	Weekly Attendance at Discipleship Group	Weekly Attendance at Weekend Ministries	Number of Volunteers	Weekly Attendance at their Worship Services
1. VCF Pioneer	340	334	2,000 or 34% of weekly attendance	421	981	4,437
2. VCF Nova	172	141	1,032	269	405	1,863
3. VCF Ortigas	375	520	1,717	611	680	7,000
4. VCF Fort	734	688	----	1,045	1,200	11,400
5. VCF QC	461	417	Minimum four pax per group	270	528	2,373

What is striking from the empirical study of Reyes is that these megachurches consist of people from “restaurants, malls, college, and high school campuses, offices, and homes” with the leadership of laymen who are disciplined through VCF leadership training. Reyes observed that the causes of growth within VCF churches in Metro Manila include “Spirit-anointed preaching, discipleship, leadership training, intercessory prayer, and passionate worship” (Reyes 2012, 75, 77). Members of these megachurches come primarily from middle-class families; they are multi-sectoral and multi-generational members with toddlers, kids, youth, and adults. The largest congregation among the five is VCF Fort with 11,400 members and a 1,200-seat auditorium. While VCF Fort rents the VCF headquarter in Taguig, the other four megachurches are conducting their worship services in malls, huge business centers, and facilities (76). All these megachurches of VCF have penetrated various university campuses and businesses in Metro Manila.

## History of Victory Christian Fellowship

Victory Christian Fellowship was founded in Manila in June 1984 through the ministry of short-term missionaries Al Manamtam, Rice Brooks, and Steve and Deborah Murrell, who visited Metro Manila when the Philippines was experiencing political turmoil, and students protested because of the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino in Tarmac Airport in Metro Manila. The Philippines during those times was in a state of collapse as investors pulled back their capital because of political instability that was caused by the assassination. These short-term missionaries, who arrived at University Belt in Metro Manila and started a church for the nearby college and high school students, conducted a two-week evangelistic work that produced 150 members as they met in the basement of the Tandem Theater in Recto Avenue (Murrell 2019, 20).

Before coming to the Philippines, Steve and Deborah Murrell met at the University of Georgia as courageous and bold disciples of Jesus Christ. They used to call themselves accidental missionaries and reluctant leaders. However, even before they were students at the University of Georgia, they were known as life preservers and known as soul-winning Christians. The couple served as campus ministry volunteer pastors at Mississippi State University before and after launching a mission team of American students in the Philippines. After much prayer and conversation with the senior leaders, Steve and Deborah were sent again to the Philippines for a six-month mission trip to develop the leadership team of the newly planted Victory church. The couple's strong passion for discipleship has transmitted this value and culture to VCF, which has caused phenomenal growth of the church (Murrell 2011, xix-xx, 23).

The formation of VCF resulted from the collective ministry of Western missionaries and local Filipino Christians who participated in its development and growth as a megachurch. Murrell often admitted that without the faithful and active contribution of local Christians like Manny Carlos, Juray Mura, Jun Escosar, Luther Mancao, and Ferdie Cabling, some of the original members of VCF, the work of evangelism and discipleship would not have been made possible (Murrell 2011 xiv, 1). Murrell recalled:

It was never my intention to become a missionary or a leader. I had never met a Filipino, and I did not know anything about the Philippines except that it is an island nation on the other side of the world. Rice was excited about taking a team there. He is an extraordinarily persuasive person, especially when it

comes to evangelism, campus ministry, and church planting. It was May 1984, and the departure date was only six weeks away. We would need five thousand dollars for the two-month trip—a fortune. I told Rice, “Sounds good, but we do not have any money. I guess if God provides, then we will go with you.” God provided, and we went (Murrell 2011, 13).

Murrell believes in “empowering volunteers and imperfect people to spread the most important message worldwide. Murrell takes seriously the “Same Ole Boring Strokes” principle of sports coaching that patiently teaches people “every day, over and over,” until they master how to “engage, establish, equip, and empower” other people to become disciples too. Murrell pointed out that “if we simply focus on making disciples who are equipped and empowered to make disciples, then health, strength and growth happen naturally” (Murrell 2011, 6, 7, 8). Murrell pointed out:

We have not grown in size, depth, and influence due to revival meetings, supernatural manifestations, healing miracles, or celebrity endorsements. Sure, miracles occur periodically, people encounter God’s presence regularly, and now and then a celebrity will decide to follow Christ. None of these, however, has anything to do with Victory’s character, size, or “flywheel momentum.” (Murrell 2011, 4).

Victory church was born through prayer meetings of university students and a strong discipleship program of the newly organized church. However, these prayer meetings and the passion to evangelize and disciple the Filipinos were compelled by a deep compassion in the heart of Steve Murrell. Murrell recalled:

Kneeling by my chair, the Holy Spirit was putting a supernatural compassion in my heart for the Filipino people that was greater than any vision or dream I could have conjured up on my own. It was as if God had switched something inside of me. My involvement in the church that would become Victory-Manila was birthed in that moment, not out of great vision or some sense of destiny. From the beginning, we were motivated or “compelled” by compassion for lost people. Vision gradually grew out of that (Murrell 2011, 19).



Ten years after its first inception, in 1994, Rice Brooks, Phil Bonasso, and Steve Murrell began to visualize turning their church into a powerhouse for campus ministry, church planting, and world missions. For this purpose, a worldwide church planting movement named Every Nation was born, and one of its founding members was VCF. VCF's main church is located in Bonifacio Global City, Taguig City, surrounded by universities and schools. Taguig City is ranked the thirteenth largest city in the Philippines, with a population of 804,915 (<https://cmci.dti.gov.ph/lgu-profile.php?lgu=Taguig&year=2019>).

In 2009, Murrell recalled that from fifteen locations of VCF in Metro Manila, there were eighty weekend services that they were conducting, in addition to forty-five VCF churches they planted throughout the Philippines and VCF overseas churches in Thailand, Bangladesh, China, and Dubai, with overall members of fifty-two thousand. Most attendees are younger-generation Christians, mostly young professionals or college students. These young professionals are responsible for their “weekly discipleship groups in coffee shops, dorm rooms, living rooms, and board rooms all over Metro Manila” (Murrell 2011, 2, 4). It was reported in 2015 that VCF has 110,000 members attending their weekly services. In 2019, VCF claimed to have one hundred-two provincial local churches in the Philippines and fifty satellite campuses around Metro Manila. VCF also successfully planted local churches overseas in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Iran, Laos, Spain, and Vietnam (Murrell 2019, 30).

Over the years, VCF has committed to mastering a single move: to develop a simple, biblical, transferable discipleship process for its members. VCF perceives itself as a discipleship-based church rather than a cell-based church. Their goal as a church is not to bring “church people into cells, but rather to bring nonchurch people to Christ” (Murrell 2011, 28-29). Because of this approach, VCF grew from 165 members to 2000 members after six years of its founding (Murrell 2011, 34). While churches struggle with whether they can grow quantitatively, Murrell believes that regardless of the small number of church congregants, they have the potential to grow qualitatively and quantitatively. Although it is not easy to control growth, churches are meant to grow when they are properly organized. This conviction is theological and depends on how churches cultivate and process their people to become disciples (Murrell 2011, 36-39). VCF mobilizes efficient small groups that make disciples through retreat training to teach fundamental Christian doctrines and training like an intentional equipping track to teach how the ministry operates, and a ten-week training that prepares anyone to make disciples

by starting, leading, and participating in a church-based small group (Murrell 2011, 50).

### **Beliefs, Values, and Culture of Victory Christian Fellowship**

VCF Every Nation's doctrinal confession adheres to the World Evangelical Alliance Statement of Faith. However, their doctrinal statement of faith is comprised of only seven important theological themes that profess their faith in the Scriptures, God, Jesus Christ, Salvation, the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Church as the Body of Christ, and the Resurrection of the Dead.

VCF exists as a religious group in the Philippines to honor God and to make disciples. Members of VCF are trained and equipped to honor God wherever God has called them. At their place of calling or workplace, VCF members are mandated to follow Jesus and help others follow Jesus.

VCF recognizes and acknowledges the Lordship of Jesus as the foundation and starting point of Christian life and growth. Obeying and submitting to the Lordship of Jesus is paramount for every member of VCF. VCF believes that God loves every human being; therefore, VCF spirituality is compelled to reach the lost and plant local churches where they are most needed. While they value places of worship, programs, and projects, VCF believes they are called to minister and make disciples, bringing people to spiritual growth and development. VCF believes that after they bring people to Christ and make them good disciples, they must help these new disciples to discover and enhance their spiritual gifts, giving them opportunities to develop as future leaders through identification, instruction, impartation, and internship. However, the heart of these values and cultures in the church is the daily exercise of fond, loving, and positive relationships within family, church, and community (Tejedo 2024, 100-102, 105-107, 119).

VCF is a member of Every Nation Movement, a mother organization of VCF that is organized to plant and establish churches and campus ministries in every nation. Every Nation Philippines has three primary purposes: to plant new local churches in various people groups and cultures, establish campus organizations to develop and empower campus students to become new generations of leaders, and plant seeds of transformation in every nation.

Steve Murrell, the founding pastor of VCF and Every Nation Movement, directs VCF. VCF is supervised by five distinguished

members of the Advisory Council, which consists of the founder, chairman, bishop, and two pastors of VCF.

VCF of Every Nation Philippines has its headquarters in Taguig City. Three important leadership offices describe the existence of VCF Every Nation as a movement and missionary force globally. First, VCF Every Nation is a movement of local churches scattered in the Philippines, Asia, and other parts of the globe. Manny Carlos, a bishop, and Gilbert Foliente, the pastor, are the two important leaders overseeing the ministries of local churches of VCF Every Nation. Manny Carlos serves as the Chairman of Victory Philippines, and Gilbert Foliente serves as president of Victory and Every Nation Philippines. Ferdie Cabiling, a bishop, oversees the churches of the Metro Manila Area.

VCF, as a religious body in the Philippines, is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR). VCF is a distinguished member of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) and the Philippine for Jesus Movement (PJM), a religious body of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the Philippines.

### **Discipleship Model of Victory Christian Fellowship**

The discipleship model of VCF originated and developed even when Steve Murrell was still becoming a Christian. He inherited two important Christian traditions: the power of the Holy Spirit and Christ-centered, Word-based, systematic small-group discipleship from his Presbyterian and Pentecostal Charismatic heritage (Murrell 2011, 79, 80). According to Murrell, these two critical components of discipleship that became VCF essentials can be traced back to the methodical approach of the Wesleyan Revival Movement and to the influence of other megachurches thriving around the globe (Murrell 2011, 81, 84). According to Murrell, effective discipleship is leading by example, and it requires commitment and consistency in integrating the good programs of the church with the singular aim of making disciples (Murrell 2011, 89).

While there are many models of discipleship, Steve Murrell and the VCF leadership have developed a relational, spiritual, intentional, and missional culture of the church based on four principles: engage, establish, equip, and empower. These cultures and principles aim to share the gospel with unbelievers, establish a strong foundation, and equip their skills for ministry, so that they become confident and competent in their practice of ministry and mission (Murrell 2011, 91). A discipleship journey is patterned by VCF this way:

**Figure 1. Discipleship journey**



Murrell’s concept of discipleship has developed over time. Discipleship is a call to follow Jesus, not to separate oneself from nonbelievers, but to “fish” people and to fellowship with others (Murrell 2011, 58, 60, 64; Bonifacio 2012, 3). Discipleship has nothing to do with spiritual authority or human accountability. Rather, it is about a relationship with God (follow), then with nonbelievers (fish), and finally with God’s people (fellowship) (Murrell 2011, 65, 67, 69). VCF pastor and author Joey Bonifacio, in his book, *The LEGO Principle: The Power of Connecting to God and One Another*, explained further the model of discipleship at VCF by arguing that discipleship should not be understood only in terms of a pupil or student, but the word “ship” added in the word “discipleship” carries the idea of a journey. A disciple is not made overnight; rather, one becomes a disciple. Bonifacio argued that he journeys and is immersed in a personal relationship with God and fellowship with others (Bonifacio 2012, 4-6).

### **Theological Education and Leadership Development**

Over the years, VCF has developed a leadership institute that serves as a think tank to train future church leaders to actualize and fulfill the mission of VCF Every Nation. Through the Every Nation Leadership Institute (ENLI), they arm young leaders of VCF to plant local churches, campus ministries, and cross-cultural missionaries through practical ministry. VCF Every Nation has designed ENLI to engage young leaders

in a holistic lifestyle and spirituality in the ministry. The school runs an integral program to equip leaders to become theology-informed and ministerially-engaged in personal encounters with God. Faithful to the vision and mission statement to honor God and disciple others, ENLI interweaves innovative learning instructions with impartations of spiritual skills from their well-rounded leaders (Ng, Every Nation Leadership Institute, n.d.).

Run and managed by the Board of Advisors, ENLI is a theological and ministerial institution of VCF. It is comprised of four schools. First, the School of Campus Ministry is designed to prepare incoming students for the principles and practices of campus missionaries. Equipped with various teaching methodologies, the school arms students with the necessary skills to start and manage a campus ministry that disciplines students. Second, the School of Church Leadership is designed to train and equip incoming full-time pastors for church ministry. This school acquaints students with the principles and challenges of the multifaceted nature of church ministries and enables them to develop a ministry template and strategic planning, and to gain tools and skills. Third, the School of Church Planters was designed by ENLI to prepare students to engage in church planting and vocational ministry. This school motivates church planters to develop a strategic model for doing church planting in potential cities and towns. Fourth, the School for World Missions integrates the three schools to engage students to plant local churches, campus ministries, and pastors of VCF churches overseas in every nation. The program aims to raise missionaries who are passionate about discipling and training God's people in a cross-cultural context (Ng et al. Institute, n.d.).

### **Contextual and Integral Preaching**

What characterizes effective preaching among megachurches in Metro Manila? Studies by Reyes, an educator and one of the pastors of VCF, who examined the preaching models of VCF through the lens of qualitative multi-design research, show some interesting observations. In general, preaching in megachurches by senior pastors varies. According to Reyes's observations, David Sumrall of the Cathedral of Praise is passionate and skillful, especially in teaching the Bible. Peter Tan-chi of CCF is direct, prompt, and does primarily expository preaching. Eddie Villanueva of Jesus is Lord Fellowship, however, is passionate and nationalistic, yet scriptural and evangelistic. For the Greenhills Christian Fellowship in Ortigas, the preaching of the senior pastor is an interplay of theologically rich, God-centered, scripturally sound, and didactic

preaching. For Mike Velarde of El Shaddai, a Catholic Charismatic megachurch claiming to have eight million members in the Philippines and overseas, it is a combination of a charismatic style and down-to-earth preaching that brings the message into the people's language. However, it has an element of the prosperity gospel (Reyes 2012, 64-68).

Studying the preaching of VCF pastors of five VCF megachurches within Metro Manila, Reyes finds three interrelated frameworks: 1). Pastors are challenged by different issues of preaching ministry like time preparation, contextualization, short attention span of listeners, time management, and communication skills for a multi-sectoral and multi-cultural audience; however, 2). Reyes found that VCF pastors advocate an honest and careful biblical exegesis and exposition of the scripture. 3). VCF pastors acknowledge that they struggle to relate the text to their context, but there is growing evidence from the study that this is the heart and direction of the pastors of megachurches within VCF (Reyes 2012, 90-102). It appears in Reyes's study that VCF pastors believe that preaching ministry should be engaging, creative, and innovative. That is to say, pastors must be clear and illustrative. However, preachers must be digitally skillful and preach in a way that defines a tension or problem that leads to resolution, identifying the bright spot for the audience to agree with to establish a rapport with the audience (Reyes 2012, 101-102). VCF also advocates preaching that is transformative, changing one's attitude and ways of thinking, a sermon that builds up one's faith and provides wisdom that enables the listeners to please God (Reyes 2012, 109).

### **VCF Campus Ministries**

VCF Campus Ministries is an embodiment of local churches and campus ministries established in major universities in Metro Manila and other major cities in the Philippines. Beginning in 1984, the VCF Campus Ministry envisioned changing the university campuses through the gospel of Jesus so that, eventually, they could change the nation. VCF believes that university campuses are the locations of talented university students who will become future leaders who shape the moral fabric of society. Major movements, whether good or bad, have originated from campus ministries. VCF also believes that the majority of those who become Christians when they are students will in turn influence national or international students and will consequently impact nations. Students also can be instruments for reaching their families. They are the most trainable group that adds positive values to the campuses and the society. The belief in students' potential was born from the biblical conviction of

VCF that “in the last days, the sons and daughters will prophesy” based on Joel 2:28-29. Joseph Bonifacio, the pastor, is currently directing the campus ministries of Every Nation Philippines with seven leadership team members under him. Since they started the ministry, they have grown to 102 local churches nationwide, with 400 campus missionaries in over 700 campuses.

### **VCF Global Mission**

VCF Every Nation as a missionary force is also active in sending and training Filipinos to establish mission frontiers in other parts of the globe. Michael Paderes, a pastor, supervises this ministry with three missionary leaders under him. The foreign mission department of VCF enshrines three principles: pray, give, and go. VCF believes that VCF local churches nationwide and overseas are the launching pads of Christian missions, where Christian discipleship should be released and deployed for mission and ministry. VCF missionary engagement with other nations is engagement in different cultures. Gio Saynes, a pastor of VCF Every Nation in Macau, recalls:

Macau is known as the Las Vegas of Asia. People come here to work in the casinos and hotels. Way back in 2010, when we arrived here, there were already existing small groups; even though we were still small, we decided that we would continue what we were supposed to be doing, bringing people into the discipleship journey, and through that, one by one, as people began to understand the importance of discipleship, they started to reach out to others. They brought their colleagues and friends, which is why the church is growing (Saynes, Mission Update, n.d.).

According to Escosar and Walker, mission strategists and resident missiologists, VCF in the Philippines now has “185 long-term cross-cultural missionaries serving in forty-five nations and an average of 650 short-term missionaries serving in twenty-three nations each year” (Escosar and Walker 2019, xviii). Existing as a movement to honor God, VCF is committed to the work of evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development in every nation. Escosar adds that most of the engagement of these VCF missionaries is stationed in “restricted countries” like Vietnam, China, and Bangladesh. VCF in Vietnam has five mission centers as of 2019, and its aim was to plant four more by 2024. The missionary drives of VCF to plant churches and campuses in

every nation was born in obedience to the mandate of Jesus to go into all the nations, fueled by their experiences as a church and individuals who participated earlier in missionary visits to other nations. VCF also armed themselves with knowledge and skills from the prominent trailblazers of Christian missions in the church's history (Escosar and Walker 2019, 1-10). Backed up by the modern statistics of the presence of Christianity, VCF challenges and trains its people to participate in the ongoing mission of the Kingdom of God to every nation (Escosar and Walker 2018, 207.)

### **The Use of Digital Technology**

VCF is keen to maximize the potential of social media to promote their religious activities. Congregants are encouraged to visit the Facebook page of their local churches for updates, new information, and promotional activities. Steve Murrell and the pastors of VCF are innovative and excellent communicators who utilize the power of social media to publish their teaching instructions through livestreams, YouTube, and podcasts. With the attack of COVID-19, all VCF churches in the entire Philippines placed all their worship services online through social media.

Fallaria's excellent study about mobile apps for the Millennials of VCF Ortigas finds that Millennials, on a personal level, are leaning to "use mobile apps for Bible reading, devotions, and in-depth study." For their engagement with the ministry and others, they utilize the power of mobile apps "to evangelize, disciple, and equip themselves for the ministry." While there are risks involved in using mobile apps for religious practices—like distraction, technical errors, and the tendency to decrease traditional use of the Bible—Fallaria pointed out that the Millennials of VCF continue to use mobile apps because "it satisfies their needs and expectations" (Fallaria 2019, iv). Fallaria's descriptive and qualitative research also shows that in 2014, VCF launched Victory Apps for sermon podcasts, materials for discipleship groups, and links to social media accounts with 50,000 downloads, all available in iOS and Android Operating Systems. This was followed by One to One Discipleship Apps, a discipleship guide that contains seven lessons for new Christians attending Victory (Fallaria 2019, 24-25).

Our observations as research staff during our visit to VCF Fort show an excellent use of media communication. They borrow cutting-edge communication models and contextualize them in the church context. For instance, when they give announcements, they use the newscasting model to announce important information, events, and other items.



Worship songs produced by the worship teams are digitally promoted on YouTube and other media outlets.

Discipleship and Sunday school lessons taught by pastors and Christian workers are published in Tagalog and English and electronically cataloged and posted on their websites. Teachings on how to make disciples and how to start and manage a cell group are all available in videos that can be easily watched on their website. In the leadership section of their websites, essential doctrines and teachings on servant leadership, spiritual disciplines, relational unity, service, etc, are all available in podcasts. Bible study lessons by series are all available in PDF files or ebooks that members can download for their weekly home or campus Bible studies (Victory Resources, n.d).

### **Worship Services**

Worship services at VCF Fort are patterned like cinema schedules. VCF Fort has branded and tailored their worship services for two hours every service. Victory Fort is comprised of two big halls that can accommodate one thousand people. At their Assembly Hall, the English services are scheduled at 10:00 am, 12:00 pm, 6:00 pm, and 8:00 pm. In the same hall they host their Tagalog/English worship services at 4:00 pm on Saturdays, and on Sundays at 8:00 am, 2:00 pm, and 4:00 pm. Overall, the Assembly Hall hosts eight English and Tagalog services every Saturday and Sunday.

The Function Hall hosts three English worship services at 11:00 am, 5:00 pm, and 7:00 pm. The Tagalog/English Services are scheduled during Sunday worship services at 9:00 am and 3:00 pm. There are thirteen adult worship services from the two halls in their English and Tagalog/English services.

Youth worship services are scheduled and spread out to different time schedules and locations. At their Assembly Hall, there are two services at 6:00 pm on Fridays and 6:00 pm on Saturdays, and another at 4:00 pm on Saturdays. Victory Fort can no longer contain their people, so they also schedule a youth worship service at 3:00 pm on Saturdays at Cinema 6 of Market Mall in front of VCF's main campus. Worship services are all watched via livestreams in two venues during weekends. Metro Manila has fifty worship services in different locations with one hundred congregations all over the Philippines.

### **Social Engagement & Public Theology**

One of the most important demonstrations of the social concern and engagement of VCF Every Nation is the Real LIFE Foundation Inc., a charitable non-government organization of VCF that exists to honor God and provide educational scholarship, character formation, and leadership development to under-privileged students, mostly coming from the context of urban poverty. The foundation was the initiative of Joey Castro, a physician and a pastor of VCF, who with his wife, Tess, financially assisted some high school and university students in Victory Pasig. This humble beginning grew in number and required more funding. Thus, in March 2007, it was formally incorporated into the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to attract more donors, then the program opened up to provinces like Batangas, Bacolod, and Negros Oriental. Through the National Scholars Conference they launched in 2011, the foundation spread its program to VCF local churches to prepare their students for a life of integrity, faith, and excellence (Real LIFE Foundation, n.d.).

The foundation has sponsored 616 students and has a track record of 482 alumni from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao since it was started in 2003. Mae Perez, an executive, pointed out that the Real LIFE Foundation's goal is for Christians to become the hands and feet of Jesus on earth and to empower younger generations of Filipino youth to become change agents and productive citizens in society (Real LIFE Foundation, n.d.). The foundation is comprised of three integrated programs. First, they provide financial assistance and scholarships like tuition fees, allowances, and other miscellaneous fees for their students so that they can get out of the poverty trap and have a brighter future by educating them. Second, it is a firm conviction of the Real LIFE Foundation of VCF that character formation is what shapes them to become change agents in the future, so it is integral in their program to coach students concerning moral leadership integrity, faith, and excellence. Third, the foundation aims to mature these students into future leaders who will shape society's moral fabric and make them powerful witnesses in different sectors of society (Real LIFE Foundation n.d.). Trisha Tadle, one of the scholars of the foundation, recalls:

My father was the only one working in our family, and his income was only enough to pay our bills. What made things more difficult was his recovery stage after getting hospitalized and undergoing a series of physical therapy sessions. However, praise God for opening doors! In 2016, my leader from church,

*Ate* [elder 'sister'] Rachele, then a Real LIFE scholar [student], introduced the scholarship to me. She encouraged me to apply since we were unsure if I could finish my studies. By the grace of God, I was accepted. Real LIFE Foundation taught me to trust that God is always able and in control. I now work as an admin coordinator for a technology company and can help with the expenses at home. God is so faithful to provide for Mama's hospitalization and her medicines for recovery. He provides for us in many ways beyond my income, beyond what we can imagine (Tadle 2018).

On September 5, 2015, Ferdie before celebrating his 50th birthday, Ferdie Cabiling, a pastor of VCF, launched the project RUN50 and set out to run 2,180 km—the whole length of the Philippines islands—with a decision to run 50 km a day in 44 stages in 44 days from General Santos City as the starting point in the southern Philippines to Aparri in the north as the final point. Accompanied by 500 volunteers representing government and non-government organizations, he started running the race at 2:00 am. With 415 donors, Cabiling and the whole VCF had fundraised an amount of PHP 2,885,482 for the foundation (Cabiling and Walker 2018, 2-6). The foundation is organized and managed by the executive boards and some pastors of VCF, and it is fully staffed by the organization. Internal and external auditors audit the foundation's financial statements, and financial reports can be downloaded on their website (Real LIFE Foundation, n.d.).

### **Response to COVID-19**

After President Rodrigo Duterte proclaimed an Executive Order mandating the government to enforce an Enhanced Community Quarantine in Metro Manila and the entire island of Luzon in March 16, 2020, Victory Every Nation, with all their satellite churches, transformed their worship services into online and internet churches providing spiritual and moral encouragement to their adherents locally and globally. The church also provides online prayer meetings using Zoom Conference Meeting as an online platform (Murrell, YouTube, March 29, at 12:30 pm; Fort Bonifacio).

Victory Fort Bonifacio is one of the first local churches in Metro Manila that re-purposed their facilities to provide food and shelter for medical doctors and nurses at St. Luke Medical Center and Pasig Medical Center. In collaboration with the hospitals, Victory provided

other amenities such as pillows, blankets, and slippers. The official statement of the church said:

As a church, we are joining our community to support our frontline workers in this crisis. One of the ways we can serve and do our small part is to provide them with food and shelter. Starting March 31, we are opening our building in Bonifacio Global City as a temporary housing facility for frontline workers in St. Luke Medical Center-Global City and Rizal Medical Center. We are collaborating with these hospitals to make room for those who need it most. Despite what we are facing globally, we are in faith that God will give us the grace to serve one another in love (Every Nation, Facebook, April 1, 2020).

Addressing the VCF churches during the global pandemic, Steve Murrell provided spiritual direction and encouraged their churches to become signposts of hope amid the crisis. He believes that the task of the church during a crisis is not to provide updates about COVID-19 or advisories, but rather, the church should provide spiritual leadership—guidance and prayer for those people who are suffering. Murrell said:

“Our job is to ensure that this health and financial crisis does not turn into a faith crisis. On every leadership call this week, our discussions centered on spiritual leadership and crisis leadership. There are so many places where people can get coronavirus updates and travel advisories. However, there is only one place they can get spiritual guidance. Moreover, there is only one place they can strengthen their faith, and that one place is the church.” (Murrell, March 17, 2020; 1:00-8:53; Carlos, March 12, 2020; 1:5:24).

### **Conclusion**

While we recognize that there are many competing theological and sociological voices speaking about the growth of megachurches around the globe, we argued at the outset of this study that there are many characteristics of megachurches in the Philippines that are shaped by different religious traditions and theological orientations. We have made particular reference to VCF, a megachurch that started small but thinks big because of its strong discipleship program manifested in its cell groups in homes, campuses, and public spaces. This megachurch

will continue to attract and boost individuals because it provides belief, meaning, morale, and social spaces for volunteerism that actualizes Jesus' mission on earth. With astute leadership and proper stewardship of various resources, VCF caters to the needs of different groups and ages and is bold in innovating its worship services through social media and technology. VCF knows well how to use technology to teach theology. As the years unfold, VCF will continue to engage its Christian witness to its people's painful yet multi-faceted socio-economic challenges. The visible and laudable Christian witness during the global pandemic will fuel the church to become more responsive to the challenges that confront the church. In addition, VCF's passion for ministry and discipleship will continue to mobilize its people for the global mission of Jesus.

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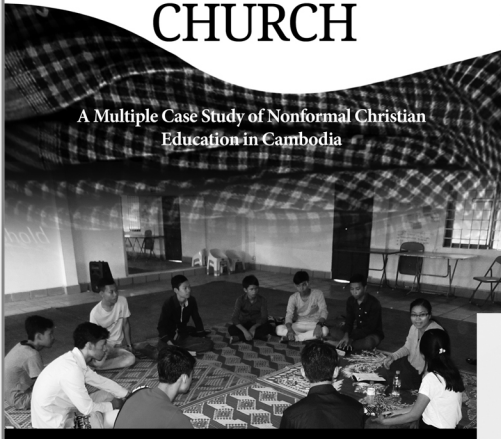
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