

**THE FIRST FILIPINO BAPTIST CHURCH
OF BAYONNE, NJ**

A HISTORY

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THE FIRST FILIPINO BAPTIST CHURCH OF BAYONNE, NJ –A CHURCH HISTORY - by Melvin O. Gatdula, Deacon

Filipinos are a God-fearing, family-loving and music-oriented race. As a social being, the Filipino is unique, hardworking and wants to be around people. Having been raised in a big family, and thus with a solid support system to boot, the average Filipino experiences homesickness in America.

Numbering about 2 million across the USA, the Filipinos have learned to adapt to the culture and the weather. Yet, they want to be together, to preserve their identity, to belong. This is human nature.

Philippine Gospel Fellowship

It is against this backdrop that the **Philippine Gospel Fellowship (PGF)** was born in the late '70's.

From small home Bible studies initiated by a motley group of Filipino Christian nurses and their families, they were bonded together by the hunger for the Word of God and the desire to preserve their cultural identity in a foreign land. Combating homesickness and the stress of adjusting to the American way of life, they found solace and comfort in small fellowships, and not for long, the **Philippine Gospel Fellowship (PGF)** was born. Within 6 months, the fellowship grew from 5 to 30 individuals. The group decided to formally form a church. A constitution was drafted and registered with the State of New Jersey. A Jersey City church building was rented to accommodate the growing number of attendees. The group prayed for a pastor to lead them.

Rev. Jimmy Prieto

Rev. Jimmy Prieto became the first Pastor. He was a well-known evangelist in the Philippines before coming to America for further studies. His arrival brought new members to the Fellowship. In order for the group to be recognized as a bona fide church in the State, the members, through the Pastor's guidance, changed the group's name to **Liberty Gospel Church (LGC)**. A new constitution was approved by the body to reflect the true purpose of the existence of the group. At this time, they worshipped at a rented chapel in Congress Street in Jersey City.

New sets of officers were elected. More names were added to the growing list of members.

The Lord had another plan for LGC: It split into two churches, leading to the birth of **Bible Church International (BCI)**, with Pastor Jim as its head. BCI was based in Garfield, NJ. Pastor Jim stayed with BCI for about a year and left for Hawaii to follow God's leading. Meanwhile, LGC moved on without a pastor, at least for a while.

Dr. David Pelletier

Dr. David Pelletier was LGC's interim pastor. Although he was doing well as LGC's temporary pastor, he was fully aware of the real need of the church: a full time Filipino pastor.

Rev. "Bob" Gequillana

After a prayerful search, LGC welcomed Rev. Roberto "Bob" Gequillana and wife Manang Barbie in 1986 as its new pastor and wife team. A veteran missionary pastor in the Philippines and Thailand, Pastor Bob drew the biggest crowds because of his inspired and Biblically-based, albeit politically-correct and relevant messages. Another crowd drawer was the LGC Adult Choir, under the baton of Sis. Angie P. Navarro. The choir had special presentations during Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons. Choir members included Myrna Tukay, Alva Tukay, Abigail Escalona, Amber Escobar, Joji Ganaban, Alice Austria, Sonia Adapon, Ed De Vera, Ayos family and Melvin Gatdula. The church was grateful to the Ayos and Escalona families for opening their homes for choir practice.

The Gequillana's stay with LGC was short-lived. The church had another split. He had to resume his post as Senior Pastor at Iloilo city's Doanne Baptist Church and host of "Because He Cares" TV ministry.

A Christmas cantata entitled "The King of Who I Am" and a church wedding (Pastor Sidney-James and Rechie Albano) capped the church's tumultuous but challenging 1986.

Pastor Sydney-James Albano

The young Pastor Sydney proved to be helpful in the transition stage of the newly-orphaned LGC. In 1987, LGC's lease with a Presbyterian church in Hancock Street lapsed. The church badly needed a building to accommodate its growing family. Through the efforts of one of its deacons, **Daniel De Jesus**, the church found a "free" place of worship at Pastor Paul Zeron's People's Baptist Church in Bayonne, NJ. It was an eventful year for LGC: a successful Easter cantata, a three-day summer camp, water baptisms for old and new believers, and new faces which included, among others, Rey and Shirley Regozo, Tony-Vic Reyes, Ervine and Connie Manguib, and Mike and Alie Santos.

1987: A Home in Bayonne, At Last!

After years of praying, LGC was able to purchase its own building in Bayonne, to the tune of \$350,000. The church had set aside a substantial amount as down payment, and faithful members pitched in for incidental expenses such as closing costs et al. The mortgage was approved in October 1987 with two payees, the Pamrapo Savings Bank

and a private individual, Gary Maita, a dentist. (The two loans were fully paid as of 2002).

Pastor Ulysses Marino

1988 was LGC's banner year. With a permanent house of worship, a new constitution, a new name, the **First Filipino Baptist Church (FFBC)**, new officers, the church had never been busier. Tony-Vic Reyes and Amber Escobar's wedding in February; Easter musical presentation by both the children and adult choirs in March; an Easter drama monologue in April, directed by Philippine stage director and actor Ruben Tizon, with *Dan De Jesus*, *Melvin Gatdula*, *Ed De Vera*, *Pastor Albano* in lead roles; the Pinoy Quest '88 evangelistic concert of Filipino actor-singer *Eddie Mesa* in May.

The second half of 1988 saw the arrival of **Pastors Rolando Sanico** and **Ulysses Marino**. One of these God's servants would eventually become FFBC's minister by early 1989. After their official ordination as ministers, Pastors Sanico, Albano and Marino had to each follow God's leading. Rev. Sanico had to go back to *Bauan, Batangas* to minister to his flock. Rev. Albano resigned from his post as FFBC's interim Pastor in early February, 1989. Rev. Marino was voted by the church as its new minister. (He remains its Minister from hereon).

1989

In early 1989, the *Elgincolins* (Pastor *Bong*, wife *Rose* and infant daughter *Beah*) were added to the growing list of FFBC Christian workers. Pastor *Bong* served as Assistant Minister. He and his family would soon relocate to Texas to help build a church. The church music ministry through its adult and children's choirs continued to flourish and mature with its successful musical projects. They even participated in different gospel music festivals. The church also had its share of evangelistic stage plays such as "Henry, Come Back!", directed by *Shirley Regozo*. The traditional Christmas cantata, Christmas eve and New Year's eve worship services capped another busy year at FFBC.

1990's

The 1990s flew by fast. FFBC, through the guidance and vision of its hardworking Pastor and leaders led the church to supporting a record number of missionaries from around the globe, most especially the Philippines. Medical Missions teams were sent to the Philippines, and as far as Red China to provide financial and emotional support to the Christian workers. The church also began to sponsor poor but deserving Bible students from *Baptist Bible and Seminary Institute in Tanay, Rizal* in record numbers. Pastor Marino had also visited Europe to minister to the Filipino communities who are hungry to hear the Word of God. The Missions support was the battle cry in the 90s, along with "let's get married and raise a family" syndrome. The single men and women left single hood. They kept the Pastor busy through wedding and baby dedication ceremonies.

Meanwhile, the church music ministry was revolutionized by the husband and wife team of Victor and Melody Del Rosario. Their vision and talents, which were first tapped by then music director **Gideon Gaitano**, flourished and come to fruition with the successful staging of The Choice and The Victor.

In December 1998, Pastor Marino was feted with a "this is your life" tribute for his unselfish service to the church and almost twenty years of Christian service.

Y2K

Determined to fulfill God's command to share the Gospel to the lost and to promote stronger Christian homes and raising God-fearing children, the FFBC family continues to grow spiritually and numerically through recruiting new members, prayer meetings, home Bible studies, missions support and music ministry (adult and children). The FFBC Chancel Choir continues to present state of the art presentations such as Joseph the Dreamer and Two From Galilee. As new members and children are added to the roster, there are accompanying needs such as a bigger church building and parking space. Through God's Grace and the sacrificial financial support of its members, and the Christian community, the goal to purchase properties around the church will one day be fulfilled. **"Lo, I am with you always till the end of the world."-Jesus Christ.**