

Unificationists Marina Acevedo and Emiljun Rapada Pastor Ethnic Communities

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Spring is emerging in the village of Hopkins Park, an hour-and-a-half south of Chicago where a five-acre campsite has started to bloom. Budding flowers and fruit trees line the property's orchard as far as the eye can see.

"We have more than 50 blueberry trees," says Rev. Marina Acevedo.

When Rev. Marina isn't busy co-pastoring the Chicago Hispanic Community for Peace with her husband, Rev. Jhon, they tend an array of other fruit trees, too.

"We are providing not just spiritual food, but physical food," she says.



The longtime Unificationist couple, blessed in marriage in 1992, purchased the campsite three years ago to advance their ministry, including leadership training, marriage counseling, and nonprofit work. The retreat is ideal for small gatherings of Divine Principle workshops in their "Healthy Couples, Happy Families, Peaceful Communities" program. The Divine Principle is the core teachings of the Unification movement.

"Since Covid, a lot of our programs transitioned online," says Rev. Marina.



Every Friday evening, as many as 400 participants worldwide tune in to a live stream on their Facebook ministry page. The couple, natives of the Philippines and Colombia, have pastored together for more than a decade and have connections far beyond their homelands, including Mexico, Spain, Argentina, and even Korea and Japan.

"We have to translate our programs from Spanish to English now," she says.



They're part of a growing network of trailblazing leaders who are empowering ethnic Unificationist

communities in the U.S. -- and beyond.

"In America, there's a lot of immigrants and ethnic communities," says Pastor Emiljun Rapada of Elizabeth Family Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. "We have a strong Filipino membership here, and around 400 Filipino Unificationist families in the U.S. and Canada. For me, it's very important to give a voice and opportunity to ethnic groups and empower them for leadership roles."

Like the Acevedos, Rev. Emiljun provides a host of programs and outlets to uplift and strengthen the ethnic community.



"We are busy organizing the 4th Outstanding Parents Awards and Gala," he says. "We recognize outstanding parents who have been married 10 or more years and have contributed to the community with a strong spiritual life and overcoming challenges."

The awards, to be held virtually, honor both Unificationist and non-Unificationist parents.

"We also have a weekly online support and mentorship program for our holy communities," says Rev. Emiljun.

He and Rev. Marina both say their work represents their faith -- aiming to live what they believe -- and underscores the importance of family in all communities.

"Each ethnic community has its own challenges and values," says Rev. Marina, "but what we have in common is that we all want to build a family and we have a culture of heart. We must be a model to everyone and embody our faith in our lives and actions to have a strong community and nation, and bring God into it."

Michael Irwin, a longtime overseas missionary with his wife, Marianne, will be guiding the next steps as the National Ethnic Ministry Coordinator of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU). After many years in Nicaragua and other places abroad, Irwin serves in his new role from California.

"We have a lot of hope in the ethnic communities; it's really a passion we've had our whole lives," says Irwin. "We're so grateful to be able to work in this area, and bring more structure, nurturing, and connection to our ethnic communities."