

# Manila's Mega-Move

Victory Church in the Philippines has grown almost 25 percent each year for the last 12 years and now tops 62,000 members. But at the core of this exciting move of God is a simple, “small” concept: discipleship.

It's 10 a.m. on Sunday and pastor Joey Bonifacio is walking through the crowded parking lot of Victory Fort in Manila, Philippines. He's headed to a worship service—one of 94 Victory weekend gatherings with 51 lead pastors preaching in 15 locations around the city. Bonifacio oversees Victory Fort, serving as one of the nine senior pastors who together lead a multisite, multigenerational church of more than 62,000 in the metro Manila area.

He's running slightly late for the meeting, but as he walks through the covered atrium outside the building, he stops for a moment and notices six college students from the nearby University of Makati gathered around a small round table with notebooks, pens and Bibles out. They're intensely discussing the week's sermon.

The sound of people singing inside reminds Bonifacio that he needs to join the service, but he pauses for just a few more seconds, carefully observing the most important meeting of the week. These six college students compose one of 5,000 Victory discipleship groups meeting every day—and nearly every hour—of the week in churches, offices, coffee shops, schools and homes all over the Philippine capital of 12 million.

Inside, the worship is moving, the preaching powerful and the atmosphere compelling; but Bonifacio knows that although the large Sunday gathering is important, the small gathering in the atrium is *essential*.

Why? Because the heartbeat of Victory—indeed, what encapsulates God's remarkable move in this bustling Asian

city—can be communicated in a single, simple word: *discipleship*.

### **What Real Relationships Can Build**

It didn't take much to convince Bonifacio of the power of true discipleship. After all, the former business owner not only personally saw its fruit as a young believer disciplined by a more mature believer, he's also had a front-row seat to observe the exponential growth it has produced at Victory.

In 1986, Bonifacio owned and operated a diversified chemical manufacturing business. A new believer, he was just starting to engage in the life of the church—along with his wife, Marie, and three small children—when Victory's pastor invited them to his home for dinner. Having never spent time with a pastor outside of church, Bonifacio was understandably uneasy about the invitation. And when he and Marie arrived at Steve Murrell's house, composed and dressed in their Sunday best, they were surprised when the American pastor answered the door in shorts, T-shirt and bare feet, holding his 6-month-old son.

"What immediately struck me about Steve and his wife, Deborah, was that they were normal people—people who we could connect with, people who we could be friends with," Bonifacio says. "For some reason, I never expected that from a pastor. Steve was so real."

That evening the two couples began a friendship that has lasted for decades and impacted every area of their lives—their faith, their family and their vocation. Murrell not only disciplined Bonifacio, but their families also spent holidays together, their kids grew up together and they even lived as next-door neighbors for 12 years. During this season, Joey and Marie were established—in the faith, the Word and the church—and were equipped to make disciples.

After several years of doing both business and ministry, Bonifacio joined the pastoral team full-time at Victory and

became the senior pastor of Victory Makati, another of the metro Manila campuses. Naturally, one of the first groups he looked to disciple was people in the marketplace. He identified a handful of businessmen who had recently begun coming to Victory and, wanting to help these men establish solid spiritual foundations, he tried to start a discipleship group with them. With their demanding schedules, however, finding a time to meet together weekly seemed almost impossible.

Nonetheless, Bonifacio was determined to get these men in a small group. After discovering that one of them played nine holes of golf at his country club at sunrise every morning before work, Bonifacio asked the men if they'd be willing to meet there at 6 a.m. on Wednesdays.

"This wasn't necessarily the time I had in mind, but if it was when these men could meet, then I would be there," Bonifacio recalls. "Discipleship is relationship—relationship with God and relationship with others."

And that's exactly what was built. For years, Joey, George, Tony, Poseng and Boom met faithfully every Wednesday. When the group began, these men were new Christians. Some had marriages on the rocks, others were bound in habitual sin and others were in serious debt. But week after week, Joey opened the Bible and showed these men how to follow Jesus and how to apply His Word to every area of their lives. Soon, transformation began to happen.

Today, these men are all church leaders. And not only have biblical foundations been established in their lives, but they have all been equipped and empowered to make disciples. In Jesus' terms—words that are ubiquitous at Victory—they now help others "follow Jesus and fish for men."

### **How to Pass It On**

This last element is what has made Victory's unique culture

“viral” since Murrell first planted it in 1984. In the last 12 years, the church’s annual growth rate has been between 20 to 25 percent; and already since last year the church has increased by almost 10,000 believers. Yet just as Jesus spent the majority of His time and energy equipping and discipling not the masses but 12 men, so Victory’s primary focus remains on relational discipleship—regardless of how massive the numbers may get.

“Many church leaders make the mistake of thinking that the two numbers that matter the most are the offering amount and Sunday attendance,” Murrell says. “Those two numbers often deceive us and never tell the whole story.”

Murrell’s own story is intrinsically tied to Victory’s—and continues to be, despite his current role as president of the global network Every Nation Churches and Ministries that has him in different cities of the world almost every week. A self-described “accidental missionary,” he and Deborah came as newlyweds to the Philippines in 1984 on a one-month summer mission trip. At the time, their focus was on their campus ministry at Mississippi State University, not starting anything major in the Asian archipelago. In fact, the trip had come about only after they’d been recruited by their longtime friend, evangelist and eventual Every Nation co-founder Rice Brooks.

The group of 65 American university students arrived in Manila amid a national crisis marked by student riots and protests against the Ferdinand Marcos regime. Despite the political turmoil, the hearts of young Filipinos were open and ready for change. A student church quickly emerged with 165 new believers, yet as the day of the American team’s departure drew near, there was a growing concern about what to do. After weeks of engaging Filipino students with the gospel and establishing them in the faith, Steve and the team quickly realized the importance of equipping those young believers to minister and empowering them to make disciples. They had no

choice. Time was of the essence.

“Unfortunately, there was no time for a lengthy training school,” Murrell says. “Because we saw ourselves as temporary missionaries, we had to quickly train Filipinos in basic ministry skills. In just a matter of weeks the new converts would be the ones to pray with others to receive Christ, explain water baptism, pray for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit and take them through basic spiritual foundations.”

Although Steve and Deborah’s time in the Philippines eventually extended from one month to three months to 28 years, the urgency to empower ordinary believers to make disciples never left the DNA of Victory. Today the leadership team still seeks to obey Jesus’ call to make disciples by engaging culture and community, establishing biblical foundations, equipping believers to minister, and empowering disciples to make disciples—what’s known at Victory as the “Four E’s” of discipleship.

That explains why Victory’s pastors get more excited about the number of baptisms last year (4,613) or current discipleship groups (5,009) than they do congregation size (62,000).

“I am tired of watching sincerely dedicated pastors and church planters focus on things that ultimately don’t matter and on things that don’t transform lives,” Murrell says. “Anyone concerned with growth will eventually have to deal with numbers. The trick is to figure out which numbers really matter and which numbers don’t.”

Indeed, given the assortment of “mega” stats Victory could brag about in this season of remarkable growth, it’s hard not to fall into the “numbers game” trap. Yet aside from those stats the church’s leadership sets as priority, a few others are still worth noting—and certainly matter to Murrell, Bonifacio and the entire team:

351—For the 351 underprivileged high school and college students across the Philippines whose lives have been radically changed by the church's Real LIFE Foundation since 2007, no numbers can reveal the full story. The foundation was launched out of Victory in 2003 by Dr. Joey Castro, a physician and pastor who dreamed of providing scholarships to poor students who, if not for assistance, would otherwise have no chance to obtain a university degree. Real LIFE began in the squatter community near Rizal High School (a 24,000-student high school that the *Guinness Book of World Records* called "the world's largest" at the time), and has since expanded to include programs in 22 cities for coaching, leadership training, community development and even emergency relief.

2,252—As of June, 2,252 discipleship groups (called "Victory groups") met outside the metro Manila area, proving that Victory's discipleship model isn't just for urbanites. The church recently added seven more church plants, bringing its total outside the bustling city to 56.

330—Victory currently has discipleship groups established on 330 high school and college campuses throughout the Philippines, including an astounding 100-plus in the metro Manila area alone.

120—Through its School of World Missions, Victory has trained and sent Filipino cross-cultural missionaries all over Asia and the world, resulting in more than 120 churches planted in Asia and the Middle East. Some Victory church-planters have gone as far as Sydney, St. Petersburg, Madrid, Dubai and San Francisco.

### **The Faceless Church**

In the U.S., a single "celebrity" pastor typically serves as the face of the nation's largest megachurches—renowned leaders such as Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Ed Young, Rick Warren, Andy Stanley or Bill Hybels. Yet if you were to ask anyone in

Manila, “Who’s church is Victory?” you’d get a variety of answers.

In the evangelical world, many would say Manny Carlos, who is Victory’s representative on the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC). In the business world, they might say Bonifacio, given his business background and his central business district congregation. In the squatter areas around Rizal High School, they would undoubtedly say Castro, who served the community for years as the pastor of Victory Pasig. In the ultra-marathoner community, they would say Ferdie Cabiling, who is the pastor of Victory Ortigas and runs more miles in one race than most do in an entire year. And in Manila’s University Belt, where the church started in 1984, they would likely say Gilbert Foliente, who leads Victory U-Belt, a congregation with thousands of high school and college students.

So who’s church is it anyway? For Victory—which doesn’t even post the names of its lead pastors on its various church websites—that’s an easy answer.

“Our job is to make disciples,” Murrell often says. “Jesus said He will be the one to build His church.”

It’s a typical statement from a man whose blog is fittingly titled “The Reluctant Leader” and who can walk through a Victory parking lot unrecognized by attendees. Because he never planned on staying long-term, Murrell didn’t want to build the church around himself. Rather, his strategy was to equip and empower local leaders who’d take the church farther than an “accidental missionary” ever could. And pastors such as Bonifacio are living proof this strategy continues to work.

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It’s 11:30 a.m. The 10 a.m. service has ended and the ushers are setting up for the noon service. Bonifacio stands outside speaking with people leaving the 10 a.m. service for lunch. He

looks across the atrium to the tables and notices that the group of students from the University of Makati are gone. They've been replaced by seven more discipleship groups, gathered around the same tables, discussing and applying the word they've just heard preached.

He smiles, greets a few more people and prepares himself to preach the 12 p.m. service—the second-most important meeting of the hour.

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**William Murrell** *was born and raised in the Philippines. He attended college in Nashville, Tenn., got his first job in France, went to graduate school in the U.K. and is now pursuing a Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University.*

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To win a copy of Joey Bonifacio's new book ***The Lego Principle*** [click here](#).