

Gonzales, Randy. "The Filipino Mission Moves to Talisheek, Louisiana." *Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley* 16.2 (2017): 83-96. Print.

## **The Filipino Mission Moves to Talisheek, Louisiana<sup>1</sup>**

Lito covered the hand-painted wooden sign in front of the old Talisheek Baptist Church with a banner for The Light by the Lake Filipino Mission. The residents of Talisheek, Louisiana heard that Lito moved into the house on the church property. A few times a week, they heard the church bells ring through the pine forest. They saw the double doors of the once boarded church spread open. Lito was preparing for the church's grand opening. The banner explained the arrival of cars full of Asians, but it didn't welcome Talisheek residents to the church.

Residents of Talisheek fall into three general categories: born and raised, relocated for marriage, or migrated from the metro-New Orleans area. The born-and-raised identify the town as part of a family heritage, with many living on parcels of land divided from large ancestral pine farms. Most who married into Talisheek talked about the sense of community they feel in the small rural town of approximately 200 almost all white, residents. Suburban transplants see Talisheek as a refuge from "city life," a term they define with a selection of descriptors that includes crime, expensive property, small lots, too many people, and too much change.

For Lito, Talisheek was an opportunity. Talisheek Baptist Church had been shuttered for more than ten years and on the market for seven. Unable to sell the property, Northside Baptist Church in Slidell put the church under the care of Lito, an itinerant Filipino pastor they

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws from ethnographic research conducted over eight months in 2011. As a participant-observer with the Light of the Lake Filipino Mission, I observed the move to Talisheek. Interviews and observations with the local Talisheek community were conducted in August 2011. The week I was conducting these interviews, a neighbor's tree fell and damaged the roof of the church.

sponsored to minister to Asian populations. With two trips in his Toyota Tercel, one for him to move the family's possessions and another to bring his family, Lito became a Talisheek resident.

### **Where the hell is Talisheek?**

"It's not Talishik. It's Talisheek. You say the ees like creek."

"Talisheek," I said emphasizing the ees.

When going out to Talisheek for the first time, you are told to take Highway 41 North past Pearl River until you think you have driven too far, to remain on the highway as it curves through tall pines and past a clearing spotted with cows, until you come upon a turnoff for Highway 435. You are instructed to turn onto 435 and drive until you reach a T-junction, an intersection between 435 and "the spur." At the junction, you'll find the Talisheek Grocery.

"Jason, ya open," a man said as he nudged the store door.

"The sign says open," Jason answered, gesturing to the door.

"This one too," he added, tilting a neon sign away from the window so that it glowed toward the man straddling the entrance.

"I was checking you didn't close early."

"Nah, got 15 minutes."

The man let the spring snap and the door close as he stepped back outside. He pushed the door open again and held it with an extended right arm for a girl in pink cowboy boots and a boy in a wash-worn Power Ranger shirt to walk under and into the store. The children stopped in front of a chip display. The man collected a loaf of bread, two large bags of chips, and a six-pack of Coors. He paid and waved the children back under his arm.

"The railroad depot used to be the center of town. Now, it's the grocery. Out here, this patio... this is the new town hall," Jason said nodding to the self-adhesive black letters that read TOWN HALL. "I serve the people of Talisheek, know every customer by name."

Jason was from the Westbank, a part of metro New Orleans on the western side of the Mississippi River, but found himself in Talisheek after he "met a girl" and bought her parent's property.

"This used to be an auto shop. The last slab was poured here in 1963," Jason pointed to the year marked in the corner of the slab. "I found this Gulf sign back in those trees a few weeks ago. I dug it up," he said as he moved his hand from a heavily wooded area in the distance to an orange and blue sign mounted on the patio's white lattice fence.

Jason moved around the patio in a patterned haste, clearing an assortment of tables, arranging green plastic patio chairs, dumping coffee can ashtrays, and locking the outdoor storage shed. It was five o'clock on a Sunday.

"The store's closed," he said as he straddled the white Harley parked under the Motor Cycle Pitt-Stop sign and adjusted his black *Where the Hell is Talisheek?* tank-top to reveal his holstered sidearm, "but Town Hall stays open."

I sat in one of the plastic lawn chairs. The pop-pop sound of his engine multiplied as he bent with the highway around the pines.

### **What name is best?**

Lito's self-defined mission was to develop communities through faith. From his home in Mobile, Alabama, he served a network of Filipino communities across the Gulf Coast region, targeting those along the I-10 corridor. He met small groups of Filipinos in need of a Tagalog-speaking pastor who could connect scripture to their lives as Filipinos outside of the Philippines.

Lito met with Filipinos in Alabama (Mobile), Mississippi (Gulfport), and Louisiana (Slidell, Kenner, and Baton Rouge), driving hundreds of miles to pray with several groups a day.

Lito gave his Slidell church group the name *The Light by the Lake Filipino Mission*. With his family-- his wife, Helen, and their two children, Josh and Natalie--, he drove each Sunday from Mobile to Slidell to hold services in homes, backyards, or small rooms loaned to him by other churches. Sunday services and bible study sessions migrated between available locations, with a core group of ten members attending on each occasion, with others joining when a close friend hosted or a special event was celebrated. These weekly services helped a group of dispersed first-generation Filipinos develop into a community with shared spiritual and cultural concerns.

The Talisheek property provided Lito with a physical church, and brought him closer to the communities he served in Louisiana, especially the Filipino Mission in nearby Slidell. The church gave him the opportunity to expand his mission and bring church-life back to Talisheek.

The town without a functioning church and the Filipino Mission without a place to worship, both stood to benefit from Lito's move. The property brought new responsibilities and challenges for Lito. For the first time, his church seeding activities wouldn't be focused on Asians. If he was going to draw residents to Sunday services, he would have to relate to a white, rural community that hadn't asked for a church or a minister. If the property was to benefit the Filipino Mission, Lito would have to convince his regular members to drive to Talisheek for services. Lito embraced the opportunity. The townspeople weren't sure what was happening at the church.

A few weeks after the church officially opened, Lito took down the Filipino Mission banner. With a thick coat of white paint, he covered the original name. Helen carefully painted in red, block letters *The Church at Talisheek*, a generic name that spoke to the difficulty of defining a space that would welcome two distinct communities.

"We aren't sure what it should say yet," Helen said. "We don't know what name is best."

### **Talk to the neighbors.**

The patio of the Talisheek Grocery is decorated in a Rock/Country bar theme of road signs, Pink Floyd and John Lennon posters, rebel flags, and beer bottles in paradise. 70's rock music plays from speakers mounted in the rafters.

Across the street, two children played on a rusted A-frame swing set, a girl in the functioning swing, a boy pushing her. After each push, he glanced at me sitting on the patio.

"Not too high," she screamed as she lifted off the seat.

A blonde-haired woman walked past me. Her arms and legs pumping as she weaved through tables to the back of the patio. She looked through the lattice and into Jason's yard, her black shoes rising and falling in place.

"Is that a dog? I didn't know they had a dog."

She moved past me again.

"I thought they might race," she said on her way back to the highway.

She went down Highway 435.

The boy and girl were now sitting under the patio.

"We like living here, a store across the street," the boy said to me. "We live there." He pointed across the street to a two-story corner house that I imagined was too full to hold the sofa, oven, kitchen table and chairs that had been placed outside. "We sleep on the top floor. Big windows, we see all around."

"Papa builds houses and Mama cleans them."

"Shut up, he don't want to hear about that," the boy tells his younger sister.

"I not talking about your papa," the girl responds.

"My dad gets out in January."

"Nuh-uh."

"Yea, January five."

"You don't know."

"Mom told me," he tells his sister and turns back to me. "He got twelve years, been in three, but they cut it to four. When he gets out, we'll have a big Christmas. Before we got like twenty presents, from just them, not counting others. Now, we don't get much. When he gets out, we'll get all kinds of stuff again."

The boy picks up coffee can ashtray and shakes it. He walks to each table to shake each can, before walking back across the street. The girl follows him into the street, and then sprints past him.

The exercising woman made a lap of the church grounds. When she came back around to the patio, I joined her.

"Two people around here had a stroke, one a heart attack. Just around here! I'm exercising," she said, walking just left of the dividing line. "I'm not from here. These people are country. I worked in the casino on the coast, in Gulfport. Blacks and whites, we just get along."

"This man that lives here," she pointed to a house with an overgrown yard. "He has cancer. Over there is Mr. Bill," she points to a pickup truck with a man sitting on the tailgate. "He don't like me none. I don't flirt with the old men out here. I've been married before." She married into Talisheek. She stays to be near her adult children. "These country men they expect that I flirt. I don't flirt with them, so they don't like me."

She turned down a worn grass path towards the pickup.

"What's your name? I'll introduce you."

"Mr. Bill this is Randy," she said her feet stomping the dusty lawn.

Bill stood to greet me. Without a word, she walked away.

### **Bring your stinky fish.**

Lito consulted the Filipino Mission about the move to Talisheek. All agreed that it would be convenient to have him closer, most worried about the drive. The Filipino Mission catered to first-generation Filipino women between 25-45 who had recently migrated to the United States. If they drove, they weren't comfortable making the thirty-minute drive down a two-lane highway to Talisheek. They all saw the advantages of having a regular place to meet-- no more worrying about where services would be held. They could have large community gatherings in the fellowship hall.

Lito described the Talisheek property as a Filipino space. He told the Filipino Mission it would allow them to congregate and bring along pungent-smelling foods, like dried fish and fermented fish sauce, without feeling embarrassed. He noted that Filipinos with American spouses were reticent to serve these Filipino foods in their homes. In rural Talisheek, he welcomed them to bring “smelly” foods, equating the newly acquired space with a freedom to eat food that defined their culture. Stepping into the fellowship hall for community gatherings could be like entering the Philippines. Tagalog would echo around the cement-block hall. Trays of *adobo*, *pancit*, dried fish, and white rice would sit on long cafeteria-style tables.

### **Have a beer.**

Bill shifted his beer to his left hand and held out his right for me to shake. I had seen Bill numerous times, sitting alone on the tailgate of his F150, beer in hand, shoulders slumped, head bent so his straw cowboy hat curved in front of his eyes. "He sits there every day, all day," I was told. Sitting next to him, I felt self-conscious, as if I was altering the Talisheek landscape. Certainly, drivers would pause at my unfamiliar form beside his familiar figure.

"I'm here about everyday, doing work and sitting here. Friends come by sometimes. I'm the local counselor, I guess," Bill said. "This is my office, my playground," he laughed, "my garden, my carpentry shop, I make things, doors, cabinets, anything you need of wood."

Bill, a Korean War Veteran, moved to Talisheek with his wife to retire on her parent's land. She died of cancer shortly after the move. Bill stayed. He bought an old Methodist church and converted it into a carpentry workshop. He built a vegetable garden. Daily, he travels to the



site from his home by the old railroad tracks, relocating himself to the center of the town, between the grocery and the newly awakened The Church at Talisheek.

"This is main street," he laughs. "This is my first time living on main street."

### **Help, eat, and drink.**

At a backyard service for the Filipino Mission, Lito announced a workday to repair the church and clean the Talisheek property in preparation for a grand opening. Lito called the workday a *bayanihan*, a Filipino term used when communities work together towards a common goal.

"*Bayanihan* comes from two words: *bayan* which is community and *ihan* which is harvest-- community harvest," Lito explained during a home-service held in the backyard of a Filipino church member. "When harvest comes, it is too big for one family to do it, so the community comes to help them harvest. If anyone needs help, people will come to help. So, we call it *bayanihan*."

Lito reached out to communities he knew well, his network of Filipino church groups and fellow pastors, including the pastor of the Woodhaven Baptist Church. More than forty members from Woodhaven made the hour drive to Talisheek, descending on the property with tools, building supplies, pressure washers, and weed eaters. While the men and women from Woodhaven replaced rotten panels on the church, pressure washed the fellowship hall, trimmed hedges, rearranged the wooden church pews, and scrubbed the altar, an equal number of Filipinos prepared the fellowship hall for a celebration.

Filipinos from Slidell, Gulfport, and Baton Rouge arrived in Talisheek with trays of food. The large contingent played the role of hosts. Like they would in the Philippines, the Filipino

community expressed their gratitude for those who came to work on the church by hosting a fiesta. The celebration was also an opportunity for participants to extend their network and meet Filipinos from other communities.

Community building is a large part of Lito's mission. He sees prayer as an occasion for a cultural gathering. "Life in the Philippines, no matter how busy we are, we really take time to connect with people we care about," Lito explained. "That's the number one thing we are missing as Filipinos in diaspora. We have to connect with at least one other Filipino just to be able to satisfy something in us." For the Filipino Mission, services and prayer meetings were an occasion gather with other Filipinos of faith.

Bill joined the *bayanihan*, without being asked or without asking if his services were welcomed. He connected his mower attachment to his tractor, drove across the road to the adjacent property, and cut the tall grass on the back acre while other participants trimmed along the buildings with weed eaters. After he finished mowing the grass, he returned to his position on the tailgate and drank a beer.

### **Pray for them.**

"We have been praying for Ate Rose to get a job," Lito said as he started a Sunday service in the living room of a Slidell home.

The group sat in a circle of dining room chairs, sofas, and recliners. Lito stood in front of them, backlit by the sunlight coming through a picture window.

"She got a job," he continued. "Now, she has another need. She doesn't have a vehicle. Let's pray for a vehicle for her. I told Ate, 'you have a family here.' Maybe one of us can take her and maybe one of us can pick her up. Amen. Can she count on us?"

Lito nodded. The group followed his lead, verbalizing their affirmation with “yes” and “amen.”

Each home prayer service started with Lito encouraging participants to share their needs, fears, worries, and frustrations, and to offer them up as subjects of prayer. At one service, members updated the community on their latest visit to the hospital, expressed concerns over the immigration process, discussed the mass firing of Filipino teachers in Baton Rouge, and asked for prayers for an aunt in the Philippines who had recently been diagnosed with Leukemia. After their prayers, Lito gave a sermon.

Lito’s sermons blend biblical teaching with topics that Filipinos find important. In one sermon, he related a conversation between a pastor and a Filipino nurse who was working overseas to provide for her family.

Pastor: You have been away for about twelve years working. Why do you have to be away from your family for twelve years?

Nurse: Because I love my family so much.

Pastor: You love your family so much. Why have you been away for twelve years?

Nurse: Because, I would like to earn money so my children can eat good food.

Pastor: Did you ask your children if that is really what they want from you, that you should be able to feed them with delicious food, that you would have the money to bring them to what, Jollibee or McDonalds? Is that really what they want?

The Filipino Mission could relate to this dialogue. Most of them knew someone in this situation. All of them struggled with being separated from their extended family. Most of them sent money to the Philippines to support relatives.

After the service, they ate. The kitchen table, flush against the wall, was lined with food--white rice, *sinigang na isda* (sour fish soup), *adobo na baboy* (vinegary pork stew), boiled crabs, and *suman* (sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves). They stood around the table, holding their plates in one hand, eating with the other. They talked about food, jobs, and children. They planned their next meeting.

### **Don't think about moving.**

Mary designed her tombstone five years ago, after the doctor told her she had two years to live.

"It says 'gone home,'" she said. "Isn't 'home' a sweet word?"

Through the screen door of her little red house, I saw Mary lying down on the sofa. She saw me before I could walk away.

"Come in," she said, lifting her head slightly.

Mary rarely left her house. She was nervous about tomorrow's trip to the hospital for an angiogram, but she wanted to tell her story. She told me about her husband, their move to Talisheek in 1944 to help care for her father-in-law. They bought a large plot of land that was eventually divided amongst the children. Her son had just finished building a red barn on his 10 acres. She never thought of leaving Talisheek, even when her husband died.

"People drift to people they like to be with," she said.

Mary heard about the Sunday services at The Church at Talisheek, but she wouldn't attend. She had been a member of the Talisheek Baptist Church. After it closed, she made the weekly 3-mile drive up Highway 435 to Hebron Baptist Church. Her health deteriorating, she stopped attending services altogether.

When I stood to leave, Mary directed me to a framed needlepoint poem hanging next to a box TV. Her eyes glossed as I read about memories and friendships.

"No one can leave without a joke," she said.

I sat back down.

"Who should brew the coffee in your house, you or your wife?"

"Me," I said.

Mary squinted her eyes at me. "Why?"

"Because my wife makes decaf."

"That's not why," she said with a smile. "You should make the coffee because the bible tells you to."

"Really?"

"Yes, the bible says *He---brews.*"

I laughed. Mary's smile grew wider. I thanked her and left.

### **Celebrate with *lechon*.**

The *bayanihan* was followed a few months later by a larger event, a child dedication (baptism) that served as an introduction to Talisheek for the larger Filipino community. The highlight of the dedication saw an infant passed to each of her fourteen godparents, alternating between native Filipino women and their American-born husbands. The child cried throughout

the process, as each godparent bounced her in their arms and patted her back. As her crying grew louder, the godmothers laughed and joked, while the godfathers watched solemnly.

The dedication was followed by lunch, which featured *lechon*, a whole roasted pig. Lito hoped that putting out the word that there would be *lechon* at the event would guarantee a good turnout.

“Filipinos don’t eat *lechon* everyday,” he explained, “not even every week or every month, but they look forward to events like weddings or child dedications to have *lechon*.”

Filipinos from around the region came and stayed into the early evening, eating, talking and playing games. The sound of Tagalog could be heard throughout the fellowship hall. Lito was pleased. As the guest left, he high-fived members of the Filipino Mission.<sup>2</sup>

## **Where were you when the tree fell?**

June told me about the tree falling.

"The dogs started barking. Then, I heard a big crash. I didn't know what it was. The chickens clucked like crazy. When I came out, I saw the tree across the road."

June lived in the blue house across from the north wing of the church. You enter the church through double doors, walk down a single center aisle lined with mahogany pews, until you reach the altar. Modest wings extend from the altar on both sides. The roof on the north wing was damaged by the tree.

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<sup>2</sup> A video documenting the event, “There has to be Lechon: A Celebration in the Filipino Community,” can be found at <http://piney.org/vol1/lechon.php>.

June came to the door with a can of flying insect spray. Before she said anything, she shot a stream into the corner of the porch. A few wasps crawled out from under the plywood ceiling and dropped to the floor. She stepped on them. A few more began to swarm.

"Maybe we should get out of here," June said and nudged me to the lawn.

"It fell during the 12 o'clock news, but by the time the Family Feud was done it was gone. The parish came and cleared up the big stuff. Cleared the road. Cyril and his boys came and cleaned up the mess on my lawn. You can't even tell it happened."

The large branches resting on the church's roof and the debris that littered the church grounds were the only remnants of the tree.

"I saw the church was damaged, so I called Dorothy. Her husband used to be the pastor. I didn't know how to get in touch with the church people," June continued.

After I spoke with June, I walked over to Lito's. He wasn't home. I had been in Talisheek for a week. Lito hadn't been home the last three times I visited. I made a matter-of-fact statement to Helen that Lito was never home. Helen replied in a tone and manner that left no doubt about her husband's mission, "of course, he's not here. There aren't any Filipinos around here."

### **Who'll fix the roof?**

"Aw man." Lito shook his head and took my hand in both of his. "Did you see the church?"

It was late afternoon; a saucer of dried fish was on the table.

"The roof's broken." Lito shook his head. He had been on the phone most of the day. He had just gotten off the phone with Chester, a local church attendee, who pushed for the local

community to take responsibility for repairing the church. Lito told him that he had already reached out to the pastor from Woodhaven.

“Our insurance company says the tree was damaged. They won't pay to fix the church.” He shook his head, "Aw man."

"Did you talk to Cyril about his tree being damaged? What about his insurance?"

"We're neighbors. Better to stay good neighbors," Lito replied. "We'll take care of it. Some men from Woodhaven will come Saturday morning."

"I'm coming," I said.

"We'll have another *bayanihan*," Lito smiled. "We'll let everyone know about it."

### **Repair the church.**

The tree fell on a Tuesday. A *bayanihan* to repair the roof took place Saturday of the same week. Lito and his son Josh unloaded packets of shingles from Lito's Tercel. Lonnie and two other men from Woodhaven Baptist Church set up saws and ladders. Chester leaned plywood against the church.

Chester and the Woodhaven men took turns on the roof. Josh and I ran shingles up the ladders. It was a hot summer day. Helen served lemonade and water.

Across the street, Cyril, his sons, and a few friends drank beer around a cement picnic table. They alternated between the aboveground pool that occupies most of the front yard and the picnic table, between swimming-pool volleyball and cards.

I asked Cyril if he saw the tree fall.



"I wasn't here. By the time I got home, the parish had taken it away," Cyril said. He turned to his youngest son. "See if your mother still has them pictures."

Cyril moved to Talisheek twelve years ago at the insistence of his wife, Sheila, who reasoned that the old house across from the church could be paid off in three years if they paid the amount they were paying for rent in Metairie, a densely populated suburb of New Orleans.

"I watched it fall," his shirtless teenage son interjected. "It just slowly went down until it crashed into the street. Roots out of the ground."

After the parish cleared the road and hauled the tree away, Cyril and his boys picked up the branches and raked up the leaves. By the time they finished, the only visible signs of the fall were on the church property.

"She deleted them," the younger son yelled from the porch, "but she put them on Facebook."

"I don't know why the tree fell." Cyril twisted the tab from a beer can. "We apologized to the groundskeeper," he said, referring to Lito.

### **Give thanks.**

The day after the church was repaired, Lonnie, a young Woodhaven pastor-in-training, led the Sunday service. Lito wanted Lonnie to be The Church at Talisheek's "white" pastor. He felt that Lonnie, a Louisiana native who was comfortable driving a tractor and dressing a deer, could relate to the local community and build the congregation.

"We need somebody who can go to the houses here and talk to the locals," Lito explained. "I put flyers in their mailboxes, but nobody comes to church."

After the service, the congregation walked to the north side of the church. They wanted to see the repaired roof, "look they fixed it yesterday." Some resurrected the tree, "it was as tall as that one there" and sketched it into the landscape, "it was over there, next to that shed, in front of that pine." I narrated its slow descent. Josh pointed out the remaining damage.

In the fellowship hall, Lito blessed the buffet-line of hot dogs, *pancit* (a Filipino noodle dish), sodas, cookies, and cakes. Speaking in a blend of Tagalog and English, he gave thanks for the spirit of *bayanihan* that brought representatives from different communities together to fix the church. Helen held a sleeping child. Filipino women mingled with Woodhaven women. The men who repaired the roof lifted their sleeves and opened their palms to show-off their sunburns and blisters.

Outside, Cyril grilled hamburgers by the pool. Bill sat on his tailgate drinking a beer. It was Sunday afternoon. Jason would be in his store. Lito would be on the road before we finished eating.

When asked to draw a map of Talisheek, one local resident put her house at the center, added the store, the church, a graveyard, and Talisheek Creek. She drew a box around it as if to close the town off from the rest of the world. There were no highways in or out. There were no trees. I thought about what Lito's map might look like. I imagined the church at the center. Every highway led to it. Each road was wide enough for Filipinos from around the region to pour into town and straight enough for the long days Lito spent driving out to minister to Filipinos in backyards or living rooms.