



## Red-Tagging the Gospel

**Derek Duncan**  
Area Executive for East Asia and the Pacific

In my neighborhood, several small public kiosks have been erected in recent years with names like “Little Free Pantry” or “Blessing Boxes.” One near me is shaped like a miniature, red house. People place books, food, or personal hygiene items in these cabinets to share, and take items as needed. The need has clearly increased this past year.

Churches that install these kiosks are drawing on a long religious tradition of meeting the basic needs of their community. The ancient Hebrew practice of gleaning obliged farmers to leave a portion of their crops “for the poor and for the alien” (Leviticus 23:22). Many local churches support food pantries, Agape meal programs, and community gardens to address hunger and food insecurity in their community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty and hunger have increased around the world. In the Philippines there has been a proliferation of free community pantries to help people make ends meet. Churches like the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) have supported community pantries and delivered food aid to isolated families during these difficult times.

The Government of the Philippines has been hostile to churches and community groups that serve the poor—even through food pantries. Authorities use a tactic called “red-tagging” to label activists and advocates for the poor as communists, in an attempt to justify legal action and violence against them. Ana Patricia Non started the Maginhawa Community Pantry in Quezon City, but had to suspend distribution after police showed up calling the organizers communists and taking names of donors and recipients. A spokesman of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict said Non was acting “like Satan” and admitted doing background checks on pantry organizers. “Red-tagging is no joke, especially during these times,” Non told the news outlet [Inquirer](#), noting the risk that came with the allegation.

An international review of human rights abuses in the Philippines, called InvestigatePH, concluded red-tagging is used to suppress dissent and intimidate critics of President Duterte’s harsh policies. In a report to the UN Human Rights Council, InvestigatePH details numerous cases that illustrate how red-tagging “provides cover, justification, and support to police and military operations to target and dismantle civil society organizations through intimidation, threats and harassing surveillance; raids and unjust arrests; enforced disappearances; and extrajudicial killings” ([First Report](#), p. 36).

One notable case concerns the HARAN Center of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) in Davao City, which has been a sanctuary for Lumad indigenous tribes whose land has been forcefully taken for mining and agri-business interests. When the UCCP drew international attention to the plight of the Lumad, the government in March accused the center of financing terrorism and teaching “communist ideals.”

Other UCCP leaders have been red-tagged in an attempt to discredit the work of the UCCP with the poor. On Sunday, May 2, police arrested UCCP Pastor Daniel Balucio, an ecumenical disaster response coordinator in the Albay province. The senior pastor was charged with illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Claiming this is another case of planting evidence, legal defenders have demanded his release. In a [Pastoral Statement on the Continuing Persecution and Harassment of Church Servants](#), UCCP leadership declared their commitment to “the mission imperative that the Church sides and journeys with the poor and the downtrodden, the way Lord Jesus Christ lived his lifetime and ministry.”

Whether in little or big ways, the imperative for the Church to serve the poor is Gospel. No matter what color you tag it with.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Derek Duncan is the Area Executive for East Asia and the Pacific for Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ.**

**LEARN** [ucc.org/justice](http://ucc.org/justice)

**DONATE** [ucc.org/donate](http://ucc.org/donate)

ARCHIVE  
**WFJ** [bit.ly/witness4justice](http://bit.ly/witness4justice)

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*