**From North Miami to Miami Shores: How a faith-filled merger gave new life to a growing church**
Written By: Keila Diaz
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MIAMI SHORES—What began as a simple search for rental space to accommodate COVID-era worship services unexpectedly became a Spirit-led merger that provided a permanent home for the growing Filipino American Christian Church—and a testimony of God's faithfulness.

Pastor Vener Rafael never imagined that stepping into Miami Shores Christian Church in 2019 would be the beginning of a new chapter for his congregation. After years of the congregation feeling cramped in its North Miami location and struggling to find a larger space, Rafael had all but given up the search.

"I told the church, 'If God wants us to stay in North Miami, we'll stay." I stopped chasing the 'white whale,'" he said, referencing the elusive goal of finding a better facility.

Then the pandemic hit, and like many pastors, Rafael faced the challenge of safely bringing his congregation back together. That's when he reached out to Miami Shores Christian Church—just a mile and a half away—to inquire about renting space there.

What happened next was unexpected.

Instead of simply agreeing to rent out the facility, the pastor of Miami Shores Christian Church suggested a different idea: "Why don't we just worship together?"

And so they did.

At first, the two congregations held joint services. Though stylistically different, both churches worshiped in English, allowing for a smoother transition. Over time, it became clear that the Filipino congregation was larger and growing. After three months, Pastor Rafael was asked to take the pulpit permanently.

'Legacy of faith'

What followed was a quiet and prayerful transition. The pastor of Miami Shores Christian Church eventually stepped aside, handing over not just leadership but also the future of the church's legacy.

"This wasn't just a building transfer. It was a spiritual hand-off. A legacy of faith was entrusted to us."

Vener Rafael
pastor, Filipino American Christian Church, Miami Shores

“Looking back, I realize it was like a long, unspoken job interview,” Rafael said. “He didn’t know me, but he watched how I led and preached. He saw that we were faithful to the gospel.”

By 2022, the transition was complete. Leadership had shifted; worship had stabilized, and legal ownership of the building was placed in an irrevocable trust—ensuring that the space would remain a place of worship for generations to come. If the Filipino church ever dwindles, the trust stipulates that the facility must be passed on to another church.

“This wasn’t just a building transfer,” said Rafael. “It was a spiritual hand-off. A legacy of faith was entrusted to us.”

‘God stepped in’

With a new space came new momentum. The church—now officially renamed the Filipino American Christian Church—has grown both in number and in spiritual vitality. The large sanctuary, adorned with chandeliers and traditional pews, has even helped make the church more inviting to unchurched Filipinos in the area, many of whom come from Roman Catholic backgrounds.

“It’s familiar to them. It’s not too far from what they’re used to, and that has helped us welcome new visitors,” Rafael explained.

The church continues to focus on sharing the gospel with the Filipino community throughout South Florida, while also welcoming people of all backgrounds. Services are in English, and the congregation includes members from various cultural backgrounds.

“We may be an ethnic church,” Rafael said, “but we are part of the body of Christ. The gospel is for everyone.”

Beyond its own ministry, the church has also opened its space to other congregations in need. Its former North Miami facility now houses a Hispanic church plant that had previously been meeting in a funeral home during the pandemic.

“We don’t charge them much—just enough to cover basic costs,” said Rafael. “We see it as stewardship. God gave us this, and we want to be faithful in how we use it.”

As he reflects on the past few years, Pastor Rafael is filled with gratitude and awe.

“There were so many moments of uncertainty. But when I stopped striving, when I let go, God stepped in. It wasn’t about chasing buildings anymore—it was about trusting His plan.”

And that trust has turned into a new home, a growing church and a legacy that lives on.

Rev. Vener Rafael

TREASURER (FL)

Filipino American Christian Church

Vener came to the United States in 1994 as a Physical Therapist and has always been involved in the church. He was a worship leader, Youth Pastor and Associate Pastor and eventually pursued formal theological education. He graduated from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 2010 with a Masters in Divinity.

He accepted the call to be the Lead Pastor of Filipino American Ministries in 2011 and continues to serve the Filipino American community in South Florida. The church he pastors merged with another church and is called the Filipino American Christian Church.