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& deed*

**A Missionary's Journal: Bringing the  
Idea for a Ministry to a Church**

by

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The Chalmers Center for Economic Development is devoted to assisting the Church worldwide in declaring the Kingdom of God in word and in deed. Through research and education, the Center trains college students, pastors, missionaries, churches, and ministries in bringing spiritual transformation and economic development to the poor.

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All names of individuals, churches, and communities have been changed to protect all parties.

## Abstract

A missionary shares her role in sharing with church leaders the idea of using a ROSCA and ASCA as a ministry to a community that is just behind the church.

Today, August 21, was the initial session with Pastor Miguel de los Santos regarding the development of a paluwagan<sup>1</sup> in a squatter community in conjunction with the church he is pioneering there. Sarah (my daughter) and I met together with Miguel and Josie, the wife of his senior pastor.

The situation is an interesting one. Miguel's senior pastor has a nice home in an upper middle class subdivision on the outskirts of Metro Manila. Less than 30 feet from his back door is a small squatter community. The mother church felt that it would be good to reach out to this community, so they have begun make attempts at relationship, up until now mostly unsuccessful. A small, tin-roofed chapel was built behind the pastor's home, about five yards from the back wall of the subdivision. The squatter community is on the other side of the low retaining wall along a small creek or estero.

Miguel's church, Jesus is Lord Church (which is also the name of the larger organization to which this little church belongs), theologically evangelical/ charismatic, has a rather unique composition. There are a few people from the subdivision itself, Miguel and his wife Maria, some college students who were formerly Miguel's students and about four or five women, one man, and numerous children from the squatter community.

Miguel and Maria are both university graduates holding BS degrees in Physical Education. Miguel, who comes from a middle class family, had, unbeknownst to his family, decided to drop out of school and was living on the streets. A friend of his led him to Christ. Filled with new energy and hope, he returned to school. He became involved with a church and received formal training through Calvary Bible Institute. His senior pastor received his training through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

We first met Miguel and Maria when they came to the Birthing Home where I work for prenatal care. They were deeply touched through their experience at the birthing Home and found renewed vision for wholistic ministry. Sarah, my daughter, was the attending midwife at the birth of their daughter, Cherise Anne. Both Miguel and Maria are very practical, steady, but yet visionary people. Both are natural leaders.

The squatter community is very small, contained, and well-defined. They call themselves, smilingly, "Gillage East", a combination of the Tagalog word, gilid, or "beside". Thus, "Gillage East" is "beside Village East." There are eleven families living in ten structures. They have been granted permission by the barangay [village] to have the ten structures, but they are not allowed to build any more. There is a total population of about 60-80 people. Miguel isn't quite sure of the headcount. It fluctuates. The initial person there was a fellow who worked as a security guard in Village East. Soon, barrio [village] mates from his place in Cebu joined him. Most of the people are related to one another or knew each other in Cebu. There are a couple of folk there from Illocos who have been allowed by the community to stay on. Josie was telling us that a fellow showed up a few weeks ago and was not allowed to stay in the community.

Most of the adults in the community work, the men at casual jobs, although a couple of them are drivers. One recently got a job driving a school service. The women also work in the subdivision mostly, as lavenderas [wash ladies] or katulongs [household helpers]. One lady works in an office in Quezon City. The largest number of children in any one family is seven, but most of the families have two or three young children at this point, indicating a generally younger population for the community as a whole.

Miguel, Josie, Sarah and I discussed how we should begin this project. We decided that first, we will meet with those from the church who are interested

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<sup>1</sup> The Tagalog (Philippines) name for a ROSCA or ASCA.

and not part of the squatter community in order to learn about the poor, to examine our biases and misunderstandings, and to learn a bit about microenterprise and microfinance before we talk about how we want to introduce this. A tentative meeting was scheduled for the following Saturday.

We met with Miguel, Maria, and three of their young people at Miguel and Maria's home. As a foreigner, I am very cautious about the level of my involvement in the development of the paluwagan. At this point, I have decided that I will meet only with Miguel and his participating non-squatter church people at his home, which is a subdivision away from the church site. I feel it would not be good for a foreigner to be visibly involved for several reasons: 1.) the paluwagan members would expect me to lead it and provide all or most of the impetus, 2.) the possibility looms large that they would expect my financial involvement 3.) my presence would likely stifle the creativity and leadership potential of the group.

The church members who came to the meeting are all first year college students. One is the senior pastor's son. They seem very interested but will not be too active with the project because of their own study responsibilities. We did have a great time together, however, hoping that they will, at some later date be able to be more actively involved in the project. The church is really hoping that this will be the doorway into the community that they have been looking for.

The first thing we did was to talk a bit about poverty. We did this in the form of questions that I asked them to think about and respond to. We started out by listing our thoughts about the poor. What are they like? Why are they poor? What are some of the things we think about if we were to answer the question, "The poor are: \_\_\_\_\_." The students were very candid, sharing honestly some of their thoughts, observations, and opinions. The answers were somewhat predictable, but interesting and provided no small amount of conversation. The list we made included such things as the poor are: lazy (head of the list), unclean, rude, shout a lot, gamblers, drunkards, have a lot of kids, and uneducated. They recognized these as biases that they bring to the project. We talked about making ourselves open to be changed as we worked with these people and agreed to take our list of biases, and not discard them, but set them on the shelf for the moment.

We then talked about why we think the poor are poor. They identified several things: lack of education, lack of self-confidence, will not or cannot make opportunity for themselves, have too many children, come from broken families, migrate to Manila looking for work, no job skills, cannot be organized, and a feeling of hopelessness or uselessness.

When I asked them if they thought the poor were interested or able to save money, they all answered, very quickly, NO! We went on to talk about the paluwagan, how it could help bring the church and the community together, and that the poor can and want to save, but have very few means by which they can do that.

We also talked about their own personal experiences with paluwagans. Each of them had been in paluwagans as students in grade school. I was amazed. Some of them had joined student paluwagans when they were only second graders. Two had had pretty good experiences with paluwagans, and one had not and had vowed never to join one again. When I asked what happened, he said that several of the group had dropped out after getting their payoff. As we talked, it became clear that the most important factors in the success of a paluwagan are trust and faithfulness to the group.

This discovery set the tone for the rest of our time together that evening. We talked about how they thought they might go about setting up the paluwagan. I made it clear that the impetus for the involvement of the community and the direction the paluwagan would take must come primarily from the community. It would be essential to the success of the project that the community has a strong sense of ownership. The church was not to go in and dictate to the community how it was going to be.

I strongly stressed the absolute necessity for total participation of each member in the ongoing decision-making process. They decided that they would take it back to the other church members a few of whom are from the squatter community.

When I talked to Pastor Miguel the next week, he said that they had decided that they would start among a few church members and invite the squatter folk to join.

The following week I talked to Miguel again and he was extremely excited. They had started out at the first meeting with 15 people, six from the church and nine from the community, many of whom were the Sunday School children. They decided that the collections would be made weekly and they initially decided on a lottery format. The members voted to make the hulog [payment] P50<sup>2</sup> a week, figuring that they could save P10 a day, Monday through Friday. They would meet on Sunday after church to make their payment and collection.

The next week Miguel reported that the membership was up to 30. He said the new members, all from the community had come the very next day and asked if they could join. Says Miguel, "It was really amazing. I was really surprised." The new, enlarged group decided to increase the hulog to P70 a week, P10 per day for the full seven days, and to make it more of a long-term savings. The weekly hulog was going to accumulate to be dispersed among the members at Christmas. I asked Miguel who was making these decisions and he insisted that the community folk were, that the initiation of these ideas was theirs. He was really pleased as he felt that finally things were opening up between the church and the community. I asked him who was holding the money and he said he and Maria were. I cautioned him against that and asked him to rethink it. Could they come up with another solution or option?

We talked again the following week. He reported that now the group had decided to make small loans. My red flags went up. How much? They had decided to loan a maximum of P 500 at 5% interest taken out up front. I again cautioned him about moving too fast, that maybe they had better slow down. Had they set down any kind of parameters for policy in the group? His response was vague.

Sarah is Ninang for their daughter and she and I along with our midwives were invited to the dedication not only of the baby, but also the little church building. At the dedication I scheduled a meeting with Miguel at his house. When we got to his place, he wasn't there. We were able to have a good talk with Maria, his wife. She expressed concern that they were holding the money. It's a lot of responsibility and temptation. She would like to bank it. During our time with Maria we learned that more people had joined the group and now it was up to 33. Another red flag. Maybe this is getting a bit out of manageable reach. She also said that several of the group had enrolled their small children in the paluwagan and were making payments on their behalf. Another reddish yellow flag. I'm a bit worried that I can see disaster looming particularly if they keep mushrooming and making decisions that may not be well thought out.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2000 the Philippine Peso (P) had an exchange rate of approximately P45/US\$.

Miguel came to our house for supper and afterward we had a delightful visit. I had a number of questions about the loans and the composition of the group, particularly the children. I asked how it was that the group had so quickly decided to make loans. He said that the request had come from Marisa, one of the members community who is a strong, committed part of the little church there. She is also one of the core members of the paluwagan. Marisa has a small sari-sari [variety] store in the community and as with most sari-sari store folk, has more IOU's than money in her till. She has to take out a weekly 5/6<sup>3</sup> loan from the loan shark who comes to the community and she wondered if she could borrow from the paluwagan.

Marisa is also the collector and bookkeeper for the paluwagan, chosen by acclamation. As a result of her request, the group collectively decided to make loans. The terms of the loan are very clear and very tight. As mentioned earlier, the maximum amount loaned is P500. 5% is taken out up front. The loan must be paid back in full by the next payday, either the 15th or the 30th of the month. If full repayment is not made, another 5% comes out. At present, there are three loans outstanding. Marisa's is more of a revolving loan, because of her weekly needs. The group has decided that all loans must be in by November to ensure that all the money will be there for the Christmas disbursement.

Miguel reported that people keep asking to join the paluwagan. They are admitting new members, but newcomers have to buy their way in. For example, at the time we spoke, the paluwagan had been going for a month. At P70 per week, that meant that anyone joining that week would have to pay P280 to join. Two people had dropped out and their money has been refunded.

There are now 31 people in the paluwagan. Of those, 12 are children. When I raised my eyebrows at that one, Miguel hastened to assure me that it was important to the group that the children be included. All of them are faithful Sunday School attenders.

The plan is that the paluwagan will be closed out and the funds disbursed for Christmas. It will then start again after the first of the year to save for the heavy expenses than come with the opening of school in June. This project has become so successful that the group is discussing, if they have an equally successful second go saving for school opening, that they would like to begin a co-op. I have recommended a good friend and strong Christian who is extremely knowledgeable in this field to be available as a consultant or advisor to them. They will take that up when the time comes.

Miguel reports that out of the eleven families in Gillage East, ten are represented in the paluwagan. The lone holdout has been causing some trouble among the other community folk. The husband works for one of the local government offices and he comes now to the community carrying threats from the local government that the community will be bulldozed to make way for a widening of the estero that flows alongside it. While frightening and unsettling to the community, they are looking into land options. There is a large empty field adjacent to them and Josie, the senior pastor's wife is asking about the price of the land.

I have suggested to Miguel that I can hook them up with Habitat for Humanity and give the community an opportunity to explore that option. He has met with the community and they are interested, but a bit distrustful. When I told Miguel that Habitat would come and present their program without any obligation coming from the community, he seemed relieved. We have not yet moved forward with that, but, I expect that we will in the near future.

We talked again about the dangers of he and Maria holding the money and he agreed that it would be wise to open a savings account. He and two members from the

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<sup>3</sup> For every P5 taken in loan P6 is repaid.

community can open the account. The monies collected so far total more than P10,000.

Since Miguel's last visit, we have spoken on the phone several times. He reports that the project is opening up wonderful doors between the church and the community, providing an arena for dialogue that had not existed before. There are numerous indicators that God is using this simple, culturally familiar and acceptable savings concept to break through into the community. Miguel said that when he and Maria had first opened services there, they had wanted Sunday service to begin at 8 am but there seemed no corporate will for that, so 9 became the reluctantly agreed upon time. Since the formation of the paluwagan, community people are asking him if the time could be moved from 9 back to 8! They are interested, now, he says in talking about God. Why? Because they have seen God's people, and therefore God himself involved with the stuff of their everyday lives.

He said that as the paluwagan group was meeting one Thursday (they have changed the day of their gathering), someone came in and asked for prayer for the healing of a daughter. They prayed and the child was healed. He also says that the wife of the one hold-out family has come and asked him for counseling. He anticipates that they will soon join the group.

In reflecting back over the success, realizing that it is very recent, not having time yet to build much of a track record, Miguel calls the paluwagan a catalyst. He says that the church had tried to reach into the community before through other economic ventures such as the selling of fish, and other food, but everything fell through. Not even fell through, really, never got off the ground. Now, upon assessment and given his experience with the paluwagan, he realizes that the success now enjoyed is, in part, because of the fact that the community has a strong sense of ownership of the project. It has been community-building at it's most basic level...that of the kitchen table.

He remarks, "It's easy to say you have a burden for the people but it's hard to make the connections. It compliments our ministry because it has been so hard to break through." He also admits, with a bit of a twinkle, "I really didn't think it would work."

What has made this particular simple paluwagan work? I think there are a number of factors which have contributed to its success. This is an unusual community. It is very small, contained, fairly new, and very cohesive, as squatter communities go. Relationships are established. People know one another well. They know, for example, who among them is a good loan risk, who is not, and are not afraid to say so. The core group, made up primarily of people from the community, decides who will and who will not get the loans. Trust had already been established before the paluwagan was ever formed.

The energetic, engaging, and forward thinking leadership of Pastor Miguel and his wife Maria is another large reason for the success of the project. Both being college graduates, they command a great deal of respect from the people. Both being young and fun-loving, teachers at heart, and good basketball players, earns them the love and cooperation of those whom they serve. They are real, genuine folk, committed to the people of this tiny little "Gillage East" the village "beside the village".

My relationship with Miguel and Maria began more as a "mom" of sorts to them. My daughter is a midwife, and I am a sort-of midwife, (a long story), but more so a teacher and community worker. I'm Nanay, "mom" to all the women who come to our Birthing Home for prenatal and maternal care. My own philosophy as regarding birth is to be very non-interventive, as freeing as possible to the immediate participants and that approach characterizes most of my interactions with the people I work with on almost all levels. As such, I gave a great deal of autonomy to Miguel, the church and the community. I was a resource person, an

encourager, a cheerleader, if you will, but I was NOT the boss. And neither was Miguel. It really was a corporate venture. I am a networker, enjoying immensely watching the process of people helping people. This has simply been a fun time for me. I stand amazed at God's timing, doing his work through the willingness of people eager to step out and try something new, even if they "didn't think it would work."