A Case Study on Christian Political Engagement
The BCLEF Experience (Buenavista, Marinduque)

I. Introduction

In 2004, our country witnessed for the first time Evangelical and Born-again Christians becoming vocal and intensely involved in the political scene. More Evangelical Christians were engaged in partisan politics as they supported the first Christian candidate running for the highest office in the land. This was unprecedented because the person running for presidency happens to be a pastor and founder of one of the largest church in the Philippines, boasting of more than 2 million members all over the archipelago. And in the recent election season of 2010, Evangelical Christians has once again stepped into the limelight and further intensified their involvement. And for the second time, the same pastor runs for presidency. This time however, many Evangelicals opted for voter’s education while others remained to be partisan.

Given this background, this case study seeks to highlight Christian political engagement in a certain rural area of the country and showcase the impact of their engagement to the wider community. The study also presents the impact of the trainings conducted by the ISACC (Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture) advocacy team for good governance on the churches who participated in the series of seminars held in 2009 and early 2010. Also presented in the study is the process of how these Churches developed their understanding of political engagement and how they practically applied a Christian framework for their engagement.

The case study will focus on the municipality of Buenavista in the province of Marinduque. Marinduque is an Island composed of 6 municipalities, in which Buenavista is one of the largest. The Municipality of Buenavista is comprised of 15 baranggays, with each baranggay having an Evangelical church presence. The Association of pastors and Christian leaders in Buenavista is known as BCLEF (Buenavista Christian Leaders Ecumenical Fellowship). BCLEF was formally organized in December 2008.
II. Background

MOBILIZATION FOR CAMPAIGN:
During the campaign period of the 2004 Presidential elections, the churches in Marinduque were quickly mobilized by well known leaders from Manila to support the candidacy for president of a well known Christian pastor. According to one local pastor, they were quite overwhelmed by the zealosity of national Christian leaders from Manila to campaign for the said leader. He goes on to say, “Narinig lang namin na sa Manila, malakas ang suporta ng mga pastor at Christian leaders kay Bro. Eddie (The pastor running for President). So sino kami na narito sa probinsiya upang tumangi na magbigay suporta sa kanya.” (We heard that pastors and Christian leaders in Manila strongly support Bro. Eddie. Who are we then, merely from the province not to support him?) Christian leaders from Manila mobilized campaign organizers within the local pastoral association called Marinduque Christian Movement (MCM). MCM turned into campaign machinery organized to do motorcades around Marinduque.

ABSENCE OF FRAMEWORK:
At the time Pastors have no clear cut framework for Christian Political involvement. When we asked them about their reflection on their involvement in 2004, most of them felt a strong sense of solidarity with other Christians desiring a godly and righteous government. Because of this resonance within the Christian community, it was easy for them to be convinced to jump in the bandwagon.

“Dahil sa kagustuhan naming ng pagbabago… nabuyo na kami na sumama sa kampanya” (Because of our desire for change… we were easily persuaded to join in the campaign.) But at the same time most of them admitted that they were political agnostics. One pastor said, “Hindi maliwanag sa amin kung bakit kailangang pumasok ng isang pastor o lingkod ng Diyos na pamahalaan niya ang bansa.” (It is not clear to us the very reason why a pastor or a servant of God would want to govern the nation.)

Others made similar statements regarding the constitutional provision of the separation of church and state, but lack the proper understanding on how to apply it. Some stated that: “Ang pagkaka-alam namin sa separation of church and state, ay ang church hindi dapat makialam sa mga usaping politika” (What we know of the separation of church and state, is that, church should not meddle in the affairs of politics); “Wala kaming confidence na maipaliwanag sa mga tao kung ano ang basehan naming bibliical sa paglahok sa mga usaping pampulitika.” (We are not that confident to explain to our people a biblical basis for our involvement in the issues of politics); “Basta ang sa akin, ang tanga kong alam ay ipanalanlang lang ang politika... pero wala akong batayan sa pakikilahok... isa pa wala naman akong malalim na pagkaunawa sa mga isyung pampulitika.” (For me, all I know is that to pray for those in politics... but I have no clear basis in my involvement... another thing is that, I don’t have a deep understanding of political issues.) Nevertheless, it was unanimous that pastors have that desire to see change in the system of politics and install a righteous government. All of them agree that the top-most quality of a deserving leader is the fear of God. Among the loud sentiments were: “Kailangan ng pagbabago sa sistema” (The need for change in the system); “Matikman naman natin ang matuwid na pamahalaan” (We need to have a taste of a righteous government.); “Magkaroon tayo ng lider na tunay na may pagmamahal sa bayan at sa Diyos” (We need a leader who loves the country and God.); “Magkaroon naman tayo ng lider na may tunay na takot at sumasamba sa Diyos” (That we can have a leader that truly fears God and one who truly is a worshipper of God); “Ito na siguro ang pagkakataon at paraan para sa pagbabago.” (This is the opportunity and the way towards change.) The assumption therefore, is that the Christian Brother who is running for president will be the answer to those needs, moving them to engage in partisan politics. One pastor added, “Sino pa ang pipiliin ko, siyempre yung kapatid na natin sa Panginoon.” (I would rather vote for the Christian Brother.) This solidified the focus of churches towards campaign and partisanship.
III. Christian Political Engagement in 2010

CHANGE IN PERCEPTIONS:
In the recent election season of 2010, there was a significant change in thinking among pastors and Church leaders. There was a heightened sense of vigilance and the desire to move in ways that would help shape good governance in their province and the country. The first noticeable change was in their perception of involvement in politics. Before, many were driven by the fact that with a Christian president sitting in the halls of power would mean a great deal of leverage to their evangelistic enterprise. As one pastor puts it, “Usually ang kaisipan namin ay kung papaano palagui yung mga miyembro namin, kung papaano magkaroon ng evangelism.” (Our usual thinking is to grow our membership and seek ways how to evangelize.) Now they see their involvement as part of their overall Christian witness, equally important as evangelism. Before, they see politics as some kind of taboo for Christians to be messing with. Most of them share the old sentiment, “masyado nang madumi ang politika sa bansa…” (Politics in this country is too dirty). But today, they have a clear understanding of God’s desire to transform politics, and that the church would be instrumental in catalyzing this change. Here are some of their current statements:

“Nais ng Diyos na baguhin ang Politika.” (God desires to transform politics);

“Hindi dapat manahimik lamang ang Simbahan sa usapi ng Politika.” (The Church should not remain silent in the issues of politics);

“Nabuksan ang aming kaalaman na kailangan nang ma kialam.” (We gained knowledge why we need to intervene in politics).

Also noticeable is the change in outlook on partisan politics. Before, they would directly persuade their members to vote for a certain candidate. Discernment and selection was in the hands of Pastors and Church leaders, and was endorsed to the congregation. Some believe that, “Bilang mga lider, responsibilidad naming na himukin ang mga miyembro naming na iboto ang kapatid sa Panginoon na may tunay na takot sa Diyos.” (As leaders, it is our responsibility to persuade our members to vote for the Christian Brother who truly fears God.) While Church leaders have a high level of passion in campaigning for a certain candidate, regular members on the other hand are passive. A church member told us in an interview, “Ayaw naming sumawsaw sa politika… ang alam namin ay pagtuunan pansin lamang ang mga concern ng church… manalangin at mangaral ng ebanghelyo… pero sa damdamin namin na loob ng church sinasabihan namin na iboto ang kapatid sa Panginoon.” (We don’t want to meddle with politics…all we want to focus on are church matters…pray and share the gospel…but in our hearts we just silently campaign for our brother in Christ who is running.)

Today, while some Pastors and leaders would still vote for that Christian Brother, the leaders nevertheless, chose to educate their members. They opted to empower their members by providing the necessary data and criteria in order for them to have an informed choice. The Pastors and leaders were also active in organizing local candidate’s forum.

Another noticeable change is the perception on involvement. Before, it was a campaign for certain candidates. Pastors and leaders spent a great deal of time discerning and selecting which candidate to endorse. But today, they focused instead on advocacy. They have pin-pointed the main problem in their province that desecrates the electoral process. With much prayer and discernment, the leaders were lead to address the issue of “Suhol” (Bribe/Vote Buying). This gave birth to the ASIN (Ang Suhol Iwaksi...
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Natin –Let’s end vote buying) movement. Also, the leaders and pastors were active in voter’s education and organizing candidate’s forum.

CHANGE IN STRATEGIC INVOLVEMENT:
The ASIN Caravan was born out of a collective discernment that aims to address a lingering and deep seated problem. The purpose of the Caravan is to challenge the rampant practice of buying and selling votes. The Caravan comprised of motorcades going around the municipality and saturating every barangay with the message “Ang Suhol Iwaksi Natin” (Let’s put an end to bribe/vote buying). The vehicles were strapped with huge tarpaulin ads of ASIN. They have also composed a jingle against vote buying and playing it on loud speakers. Another aspect of the Caravan is voter’s education. They have tarpaulin ads that suggest biblical criteria for choosing a candidate.

Another significant activity that the Pastors engaged in was a series of Candidates Forum held in key strategic places in the municipality. The Candidates forum provided a venue for both candidates and people to interact. The forum gave the opportunity for people to know the candidate’s platform and vision for governance. The people also had the chance to know the candidates up close and personal. It also provided the people the chance to ask questions and air their concerns. One unique feature of this forum is the participation of the young people as they render a skit and production number. The message of the performance was to expose the various schemes of vote buying and showing people its consequences.

The Voters Education was also an added aspect in the church’s involvement. It featured information and recent developments on the Automated Election System. This effort helped church members become familiarized with the PCOS machine, the new ballot form, and the process of the elections. Also part of the voter’s education program was to give a clear biblical criterion for selecting candidates. The church members were introduced to the 5 K’s criteria (Karakter – Character; Kakayanan-Competence; Karanasan-Experience and Track Record; Kongkretong Plataporma-Concrete Platform; Konekstyon-Connections).

DEVELOPED FRAMEWORK FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT:

From partisan to non-partisan:
The framework was developed through series of trainings and seminars conducted by ISACC and NMAP (Norwegian Missionary Alliance Philippines). The process helped pastors and leaders to understand biblical implications on how to view and handle power and engaging the powers that be. Their understanding of the framework manifested for example in their view of their own leadership in the church. Their handle in leadership shifted from endorsement to empowerment, recognizing that the most significant ministry they can exercise is to free individuals to live a life with dignity, purpose, passion and risk. As one pastor puts it, “Importante ang diwa ng kalayaang pumili ng nais niya…” (It is important that people have the freedom of choice.)

This also gave them a new perspective on the Church’s relevance on national concerns. They have appreciated more the role of the Church to be an alternative and prophetic voice in society. As one church leader recalls his learning from the seminars, “Kung may naniniwala kay Willie Revillame (A famous TV variety show host) at Kris Aquino (Famous talk show host and actress and family member of an influential political clan), eh di lalo na mas pakikinggan ang boses ng simbahan.” (If lots of people tend to believe Willie Revillame and Kris Aquino, how much more the voice of the Church?)

From campaign to advocacy:
This realization led pastors and leaders to seek tools towards providing information and education for their members. Now, instead of focusing on political personalities, they have focused on issues. First issue they would want to push in their advocacy is to educate voters. They sought to provide people a clear bible based criteria in choosing a candidate. One pastor said, “Nabuksan ang kamalayan ng tao na hindi lang boto ng boto… na hindi dapat porque kama g-anak, kumpare, palakasan at paramihan ng kakilala… kundi malahad ang tunay na hangarin at plataforma…” (The people’s consciousness was opened… people are made aware to become more responsible voter… voting not on the basis of kin relations, and ties… but knowing their true vision and purpose.) Also important in the process of knowing the candidates were to discern their character. A woman pastor noticed, “Naungkat dito ang uri ng pamumuhay ng iba… nagsusugal, nambababae, nangungurakot at iba pa…” (Their lifestyles were exposed… if they were engaged in gambling, womanizing, and corruption…) Others would affirm they same sentiment, “Nakilala naming ng mas higit ang katauhan ng mga kandidato.” (We came to know their true character better) They not only came up with a criterion for choosing a candidate but also provided venues for aspiring candidates to interact with the people. This was done through the Candidates forum organized by the Pastors and leaders.

Another dimension of equal importance is their advocacy against bribe and vote buying. They pinpointed the main problem, “Ngayong eleksiyon mas lumalim na ang pakikisangkot sa mga usaping bayan, lalo na ng politika… dahil ngayon, mas tinukoy naming ang mismong problema ng suhol.” (Our involvement this election time went deep to the root cause of our problems which is bribe and vote buying). While they recognized that it would be a daunting task, they nevertheless were determined to go head on with the issue. Some leaders commented that, “Dahil sa ang mga Marinduqueno ay lumaki na sa kultura ng suhol, mahirap na ito tibagin… kaya nilang ipagbili ang kanilang boto sa isang kilong bigas…” (People in Marinduque grew up in this culture of bribery. This will be very hard to demolish… they can sell their votes over a kilo of rice). Others point to the fact that economics is the determining factor of a person selling his/her vote: “Isip ng tao dito, pag eleksiyon may pagkakaperahan diyan…” (People here have this thinking that they can make money during election time); “May tangehan ng pera…” (There is a free market of money).

Clear Biblical Foundation:
Today, the pastors and leaders have more confidence to articulate to their members a biblical basis for political engagement. Most of them gave credit to the joint efforts of NMAP and ISACC in helping them develop a solid biblical framework in Christian political engagement.

Promoted Positive but Vigilant perspective on AES:
They also promoted a positive stand on the new electoral system which is the automated election system (AES). While national media and many groups tend to focus on the negative, the pastors embraced a more positive but at the same time a critical stance on the AES. There was a seeming increase of conspiracy theory reports that may have cast a huge amount of doubt and loss of confidence in the AES aggravated by doomsday scenarios that people absorbed during the campaign period. The pastors however would want for people to be confident in the credibility of the process but at the same time challenging them to be watchful and vigilant. One church member observed, “yung iba ayaw na bumoto… natatakot kasi walang alam sa computer…” (Others are discouraged to vote because their quite intimidated with computers). This prompted the leadership to all the more give sufficient education on AES.

Unity in diversity:
While it is somehow inevitable that other Church leaders choose to carry and campaign for a particular candidate especially that of Bro. Eddie’s presidential bid, this did not become a factor to affect their unity. There was a great deal of maturity amongst the pastors and leaders. Here are some of their comments: “Mas mataas ang respeto naming sa isa ‘i-isa at may mas malalim na pag-galang sa pananaw ng bawat
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isa.” (We have high respect for one another and honor one another’s perspective); “Kahit na yung iba ay si Bro. Eddie pa din ang dinala, hindi ito naging isyu… mas nakatuon kami sa ASIN.” (Even other pastors are vocal about carrying Bro. Eddie, this was a non-issue… we were focused more on ASIN).

IV. The Story Behind the Change

NMA AND ISACC PARTNERSHIP:
In 2007 Community organizers from the Norwegian Mission Alliance Philippines started to organize the pastors and church leaders in the municipality of Buenavista. The pastors and leaders had an existing association at that time called Buenavista Inter-Faith Fellowship (BIFF) and were under the umbrella of the Marinduque Christian Movement (MCM) representing the whole province. BIFF with the help of NMA re-organized and became to be known as Buenavista Christian Leaders Ecumenical Fellowship (BCLEF). BCLEF was formally organized in December of 2008. BCLEF had a wider composition of membership cutting across denominational and religious affiliations. It was unprecedented because for the first time Roman Catholics, Aglipayan (Philippine Independent Church), Evangelicals and other Born-again groups were united in one fellowship. Groups who were once hostile towards one another are now sitting and doing things together for the common good.

NMAP provided the organizing and coordination of member churches. NMAP development workers facilitated discussions and dialogues that lead to the establishment of various committees that would focus on different aspects of the community. One aspect was on Good Governance. It was determined by the committee the need for them to be educated in dealing with issues that would shape good governance. This started the partnership of NMAP with ISACC.

NMA tapped ISACC for content/software with regards to Christian Political engagement. ISACC also facilitated the development of a framework for doing ministry amongst rural poor folks. This helped BCLEF pastors to gain fresh vision and pave the way for new directions.

In 2008 ISACC conducted the Integral Mission (IM) seminars, followed up by the Transformational Development Retreat (TransDev) in 2009. Both seminars heightened and expanded their sense of mission, consciousness of social responsibility and pro-active community involvement.

In late 2009 ISACC conducted a Voters education in preparation for the May 10, 2010 elections. ISACC tackled the Automated Election System (AES), criteria for selection and Philippine political culture. This leads to plans to engage and be active players on election season. The result of this was the ASIN advocacy.

In March of 2010, ISACC once again conducted a seminar on Popular Education on Good Government Training if Trainers (PEGG- TOT). The seminar featured reflections on Power, Christian Political engagement, Biblical framework for political engagement, and recent developments on the AES. The main feature of the seminar was the 4-part Bible study series designed to be cascaded amongst regular church members. The seminar affirmed BCLEF plans and validate their new advocacy. It helped crystallize their biblical convictions on matters of political engagement.
V. Impact of BCLEF’s Political Engagement

Here are some of the reflections of BCLEF pastors and leaders:

BCLEF’s united thrust became a powerful voice. A woman pastor commented, “Nagulat sa amin ang mga politiko kala nila ay may dadalahin kami na kandidato.” (The politicians were surprised, they thought we will be carrying a particular candidate). This alarmed local politicians. BCLEF’s collective voice was undeniable.

Because of the ASIN advocacy, BCLEF leaders noticed a significant drop in vote buying and bribery. According to one pastor, “Yung mga dating kilalang nanuhol, marami sa kanila hindi na nanuhol, kaya lang hindi na sila nanalo.” (Some candidates who had a reputation for buying votes ceased to buy votes, as a result they lost.) Others said, that since the people are becoming more aware of ills of vote buying, some candidates raised up the price of bribe. “Tinaas nila yung presyo.” Another pastor said, “Bagaman’t hindi pa din totally nawala ang suhol... nabawasan naman ito... at hindi naman maalis yan sa isang eleksiyon lang.” (Although, there was still vote buying... the numbers have dropped significantly... we cannot eradicate vote buying in just one election.)

BCLEF’s strong advocacy inspired a number of people specially those politicians who are truly competent but was discouraged to run due to lack of funds. A woman pastor told us that, “Nagka-pagasa yung iba na may kakayanan... na sabi nila pwede pala kaming tumakbo na kahit walang pera.” (Some of the politicians who are competent gained hope... saying that it is possible to run without much money.)

BCLEF also served as a true conscience in the community. One pastor observed that, “Yung mga nanuhol hindi makatingin sa amin ng diretso... umiiwa s, pati din yung mga nagbenta ng boto nila.” (Those who bribe and buy votes cannot look us straight in the eye, and likewise those who sold their votes truly felt ashamed.)

Another significant effect was the choice of candidates. More people now were able to vote according to their conscience. They gained confidence in themselves as they went through the process of studying the candidates with a clear criterion.

BCLEF gained strong respect in the community and sought by the local government. In was truly a testimony of the unity of Christians. People around them see one strong voice and a unified body moving rather than separate religious groups working independently.

VI. Some Reflections

Popular Education for Good Governance Bible Study Series (PEGG-BS) was cascaded through the pulpit, Sunday school, prayer meetings and Bible study groups. However, most pastors were selective in the use of the lessons provided in the PEGG-BS. They incorporated some of the ideas in their sermons, in their Sunday school, and some during their prayer meetings and cell groups. But they never had the chance to go through the whole material in a Bible study setting. They attributed this shortcoming to the very hectic schedule of activities on their voter’s education and candidates’ forum. Nevertheless, they were able to cascade what they thought was relevant to their needs: the 5 criteria of choosing a candidate and the information drive on the AES.