

## The Kaibigan Ministry of the Center for Community Transformation, Philippines

**Edwin Then.** Edwin Agcopra was just 12 when he was orphaned. Since he was the youngest child in a large brood, an aunt brought him from the southern Philippine city of Butuan to live with her family in Metro Manila. However, rather than being treated as part of the family as he expected, Edwin had to earn his food and lodging with heavy work. Deciding that he would be much better off on his own, Edwin left his aunt's home without a word and without any plans about where to go.

He ended up joining a gang of homeless children who picked pockets and snatched wallets to survive. From them he learned how to inhale solvent fumes to stave off hunger pangs and to gain courage for the next crime. Caught by police the first time when he was 15, he spent much of the next 20 years in jail for such cases as robbery, criminal sabotage and frustrated homicide. At least twice, cases against him were dropped and he would find himself free, but he always went back to crime and drugs on the street. It was during one of those interludes that he came in touch with the Kaibigan Ministry.

Edwin's story is similar to that of many street dwellers ministered to by the Kaibigan Ministry of the Center for Community Transformation (CCT) Group of Ministries in Manila. Pioneer worker Angel Diel says about 50 percent of the men, women and children the ministry has served, survived on the street by begging, scavenging and doing odd jobs while the rest were involved in crime ranging from the petty to the heinous, including drug trafficking and arson.

**Beginnings.** CCT was already ministering to the Filipino poor since 1992, mainly through microfinance to micro-entrepreneurs, and through educational assistance to children. But concern for another poor sector nagged Ruth Callanta, CCT founder and president. She felt for families who slept on the street with nothing but pieces of cardboard between their bodies and the cold pavement, and for those who scavenged for food and recyclables from garbage bins outside the CCT head office. She was concerned about those who sheltered inside tunnels along Manila Bay's seawall, forced out during high tides or typhoons, and for children who tapped on windows of cars stuck in traffic to beg.

Asking God about how she could help street dwellers, she found His answer in Ezekiel 37. In this passage, God takes Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones which He clothes with flesh and skin and breathes life into. God was telling Ruth, "The street dwellers are like those bones – without any hope, without a future. But I will put my breath in them and give them life."

On an earlier occasion Ruth had had a vision of a large kitchen's shiny silver countertops. Telling the CCT board about this, one of the members told her it reminded him of a feeding minister. He was actually already carrying out a feeding-and-Bible study ministry at Rizal Park in the heart of Manila and invited her to see what it was like. She went to observe the

feeding program where street dwellers listened to a pastor preach, then were given food. It was to be a model for CCT's ministry.

CCT's first feeding session was held outside the CCT office on November 5, 2005 with 30 persons attending. By the end of the year, that number had grown to 475. In 2006, feeding sessions were being held in five other areas in Manila.

As CCT began to understand the needs and concerns of street dwellers, it began to craft the vision, mission and strategies of the new ministry. It was agreed that street dwellers would be referred to as *kaibigan*, the Filipino word for friend, in emulation of Jesus who said in John 15:15, 'No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends.' The ministry would be named the CCT Kaibigan Ministry, Inc. (KMI).

Its vision statement captures what CCT wants to see through the Kaibigan Ministry: *We hope to see street people being transformed by the power and love of God into individuals and families who are productive, who live in peace and abundance, and who are mainstreamed back to society in accordance with God's loving plan.* Its mission is to be an integrated, holistic, family-focused and community-based organization, with the purpose of delivering sustainable transformational programs and services among street dwelling individuals and families.

**Transformational Strategy and Programs.** Over the years, KMI has developed and used a transformational strategy that includes trust building and group organizing, access to social services, economic opportunities, and family life and community re-integration.

*Street-side Fellowship.* Initial contact with street dwellers happens when they join feeding and Bible study sessions. The Bible studies primarily focus on the gospel, followed by one-on-one counseling. Here street dwellers are asked to identify their needs (food, health care, housing, jobs, spiritual growth) and participate in simple planning to help them develop hope for the future. The street-side meetings culminate in food distribution. Regular attendees are organized into groups to establish caring relationships among themselves.

*Spiritual Development.* KMI follows CCT's framework of spiritual development which aims to nurture believers toward increased faith and trust in Christ, intimacy with God, deeper knowledge and understanding of His Word, faithful living out of Christ-like qualities and a passion for discipleship. It is dedicated to the holistic transformation of street dwellers and aims to restore the street poor's dignity as individuals created in the image and likeness of God. Evangelization and discipleship are integral components in this transformation process.

*Back to the Province Program.* *Kaibigans*, especially the youth and the children, are encouraged to return to their families. Those who signify their willingness to go home are referred to a government program that provides street dwellers with transportation, food, and other needs. In some cases, KMI contacts the *kaibigan's* family members to ensure that he or she is still welcome at home. After being reconciled with their families, the *kaibigans* are linked to a partner church of CCT in their localities for further mentoring and discipleship. Most

*kaibigans* put off being reunited with their families until years after their initial contact with KMI.

*Hospital and Medical Care.* Medical assistance provided by full-time or volunteer doctors ranges from medical check-ups to medicine supply and hospitalization. Respiratory diseases are found to be the most prevalent ailment, especially among children.

*Educational Assistance.* To break the cycle of poverty, *kaibigan* children are referred to another CCT ministry, the Visions of Hope Christian School. CCT operates two boarding schools for children of former and current street dwelling couples. The boarding schools serve as temporary shelter for children while their parents are being assimilated back into mainstream society or until the parents find regular employment and are capable of supporting their family.

*Evangelical Camp/Encounter God Retreat.* The CCT evangelical camp is a three-day retreat for regular attendees in the weekly street-side fellowship who have shown interest in starting a new life and a willingness to leave street dwelling. The camp helps the *kaibigans* understand and positively respond to the Gospel, see that their lives have a purpose, and assure them that God has hope and a future for them.

*Shelter.* *Kaibigans* who agree to continue with the transformation program after the camp/retreats are housed in a temporary shelter for three to six months. The rehabilitation process in the temporary shelter is basically spiritual in nature. Bible studies, daily devotions, one-on-one counseling, discipleship groups, and regular church services are at the heart of the program. This is usually the most difficult phase *kaibigans* go through as they learn to abide by rules, give up the lawlessness of street life and dependency on drugs, cigarettes and alcohol, and live by a fixed schedule. *Kaibigans* who complete the restoration period are offered food for work either in janitorial, maintenance, or construction services.

In its early years it was difficult finding a temporary shelter for the first *kaibigans* because landlords, and even churches, refused to accommodate them as tenants. Finally, a pastor offered his church in Quezon City to be the first temporary shelter for *kaibigans*. It housed *kaibigans* for 10 months in 2007. Another temporary shelter in Tagaytay housed 14 *kaibigans* for six months in 2008.

The matter of constantly having to look for temporary shelter for *kaibigans* was addressed in 2009 when a CCT corporate member lent an unused spacious residential property to the ministry. Rooms in the existing two-story house were converted into a clinic and offices. More bathrooms, a laundry area, and sleeping quarters with a 50-bed capacity were built. Later on, structures to house income-generating projects such as a water station, canteen, tailoring shop and printing shop were added.

Kaibigan Center also serves as a drop-in place for *kaibigans* who attend street-side fellowships but are not interested in making it their temporary abode. Basic necessities such as food, clothing, and bathroom and personal care items are made available to them and lockers

are provided for the safekeeping of belongings. The elderly, the sick, women and children are given priority for space and meals at the center.

*Economic Opportunities.* Economic sufficiency for street dwellers means being able not only to provide for one's family but also to be successfully reintegrated into the mainstream economy. After rehabilitation, *kaibigans* are given the opportunity to undergo on-the-job training and encouraged to hone their skills and obtain credentials through the government's Technical Education and Skills Development Authority.

About 50 percent of *kaibigans* ministered to by CCT have construction-related jobs as welders, masons, painters, electricians, carpenters and foremen. The rest are employed in janitorial / messengerial, building maintenance, canteen operations, housekeeping and landscaping services.

*The Kaibigan Village.* The vision of transformed *kaibigans* living in a Christ-centered community began to materialize when a CCT corporate member donated 1.5 hectares of land in Nueva Ecija, a province northeast of Manila. More parcels of land were later on acquired through land and cash donations for a total land area of 23 hectares.

CCT envisions the Kaibigan village to be a Christ-centered, entrepreneurial, self-reliant and renewable energy-driven community for former homeless families. Aside from addressing the issue of homelessness and landlessness, the ministry sees the Kaibigan village as a place for providing security and geriatric support for aged *kaibigans*, for arresting generational poverty, and for ensuring family and community integration.

At the initial stage, *kaibigan* families who underwent restoration at the Kaibigan center and who were willing to work in a farm setting were the first to be relocated to the Kaibigan village. In 2009, 15 *kaibigans* attended agricultural training in partnership with the Institute for Learning Foundation. While some families chose to go back to their provinces or to the streets, five families and one unmarried *kaibigan* decided to settle in the village. They worked on a salary basis with incentives for good job performance. Each family was allocated 150 square meters of land and supplied with planting materials and livestock giving them the immediate opportunity to put into practice what they were being taught. A resident agriculturist was alongside to coach them.

The 23-hectare property was subsequently subdivided into seven villages where income generating agricultural projects were distributed. The projects include rice farming, fresh water fish (*tilapia*) production, and small-scale raising of pigs, goats, and chicken. Four *kaibigans* who passed evaluation were put in charge of one or two projects each.

Future target beneficiaries will have to pass a more rigorous screening process. He or she will have to be a KMMC (please see sidebar story) member of good standing with at least five years membership, without any administrative case, able to pay the down payment and

monthly amortization for the land, a follower of Jesus Christ, a regular church attendee and a member of a discipleship group.

**The Kaibigan Ministry Today.** In 2014, KMI ministered to a total of 3,010 individuals. Some 1,409 attended its weekly feeding programs, eight Bible study groups were organized, 652 individuals were evangelized and 42 were discipled. 236 *kaibigans* were covered with life insurance and 172 with health insurance; 1176 *kaibigans* were treated in clinics or in medical missions. An amount of P201,000 was saved by 460 *kaibigans* organized into savings groups. A total of 326 men and women were provided with a regular source of income and 11 were reunited with their families. Six families were resettled at the Kaibigan Village.

Ruth acknowledges that it is amazing and humbling to be involved in a ministry that has helped change Manila's human landscape. "These *kaibigans* are now living productive lives, paying taxes, supporting their families, and growing in their relationship with the Lord! Praise be to God! Their children will grow up with schooling and will have been freed from the cycle of poverty."

**Edwin Now.** One solid example of this is Edwin. He was one of the men who underwent the restoration process at the temporary shelter in Tagaytay City back in 2008. While he worked on overcoming drug dependency, anger and depression, he received training to do janitorial work, how to be a mason and a steel man, and how to raise rice, vegetables and livestock. He was among the first *kaibigans* to show interest in making the Kaibigan Village his home if given the chance and was employed to raise pigs there. In 2014, he qualified to be one of the first *kaibigans* assigned a 500-square meter residential lot at the village. Married in 2009, he now has three children. A man transformed by God's grace, he says, "I am thankful that my children will not experience the danger and hardship of life on the streets like I did."

In 2008, three years after the launching of the Kaibigan Ministry, the Kaibigan Maaasahan Multi-Purpose Cooperative was established to make transformation more sustainable for *kaibigans*. Registered in March 2009, KMMC is the first cooperative in the Philippines whose members are street dwellers. *Kaibigan maaasahan* means dependable friend.

The KMMC was organized to "create a collective identity for former and rehabilitated street dwellers as workers who are reliable and capable of delivering excellent results." Its vision is to "see a cooperative of street dwellers owning land, managing enterprises, becoming successful contractors, undertaking collective action against injustice, and living in a community of God-fearing individuals and families."

KMMC serves as the direct employer of its *kaibigan* members and is responsible for finding jobs for them as a group. It receives a 10 percent service fee from companies needing their services. It also oversees income-generating projects that provide employment for

kaibigans such as a water station, tailoring shop, canteen, printing shop, and pushcarts for collecting recyclable material.

KMMC provides benefits to its regular members with accompanying financial responsibilities. A regular member is required to subscribe to at least 10 common shares valued at PhP100 per share and have monthly mandatory savings of PhP100.

The benefits include annual shares from KMMC's interest on capital and patronage refund covering 70 percent of its total net surplus, the use of a member's compulsory savings as collateral for a loan or for other purposes, and access to employment opportunities provided by the KMMC in its capacity as a manpower agency.

Members are also given social security benefits, including life insurance and medical insurance. CCT maintains formal partnerships with a life insurance company, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation and the National Statistics Office to give *kaibigans* access to social security benefits.

KMMC earnings now support the KMI feeding program.