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Mission Connections

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Cathy Chang and Juan Lopez | Mission co-workers serving in the Philippines

Enhancing Community during ECQ

Friends in Christ,

Our "enhanced community quarantine" (ECQ) will end this Friday, May 15, in our home in Metro Manila, but there will be some modifications. We prayerfully decided that it was safer to shelter in place, in the Philippines, instead of traveling and being with our families located in hot spots like northern California, New York City, and eastern France. Thanks to God, our family is keeping safe, healthy, and strong.



March is the last month of public school in the Philippines, so usually, I (Juan) am busy preparing for summer camps. These camps take place in April, so March is my busiest month during the year. This year, however, instead of being bustling and overcrowded, shops, restaurants, and streets were deserted because people had fled Metro Manila to join their families in the provinces. Sensing the coming storm, we bought simple food, toilet paper, and activity books for our daughter.

Instead of just hosting one camp per week, our family hosted never-ending, at-home camp. Boredom didn't exist because of board games, books, book clubs, video games, crafts, movies, TV shows, music, Zoom calls with friends and family, cooking, baking, role-playing games (pen and paper style) and family slumber parties. Both planned and unplanned special occasions included an Easter Egg hunt, our daughter Aurelie's 8th birthday, online worship services and Sunday schools with our local Filipino church, Mother's Day, and a Zoom family funeral.



Birthday festivities began with pancake breakfast for our daughter Aurelie.

Thank you for supporting Cathy's and Juan's ministries in the Philippines. Your prayers and financial support have helped make a difference to people in the Philippines.

Not everybody shared this same privilege of preparing for the pandemic. Many of our partners, as well as those individuals and communities that we serve together, were already struggling to stay afloat and to stay alive.



In collaboration with multiple children's organizations, Juan facilitated training for overstressed workers who serve children.

Four days before the beginning of quarantine in mid-March, I led a training about "Working with Children Suffering from Trauma, with Overstressed Workers." The goal of the training event was to provide ideas and tools for different organizations working with at-risk, high-poverty communities. The Children's Rehabilitation Center (CRC) and Salinlahi Alliance for Children Concerns hosted this event. They invited four other groups to join them: Parents Alternative on Early Childhood Care and Development (PAECCD), the Action for the Care and Development for the Poor in the Philippines (ACA), the Association for the Rights of Children in South East Asia (ARCSEA) and the National Church Council of the Philippines Ecumenical Education Nurture (NCCP-EEN). Around 25 workers were present. We talked about building communities, building strong workers, gaming and teaching, and ways to provide safe spaces. The workers also shared their struggles, difficulties, and stressors.

That long, tiring day of training included many meaningful discussions and intentional activities designed for community building and safe spaces. These workers serve extremely impoverished people by bringing food and clothes to them and providing psychosocial support. Most of the families are victims of violent crimes, and the children experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

They are victims of extra-judicial killings due to the government-sanctioned war on drugs. They are street children and street dwellers, as well as children from displaced communities like the Lumads (indigenous people).

Back in February, I had the privilege of assisting one program with the Lumads. Mostly located in regions on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, the Lumad schools were closed by the government because they were not following the national standards, and because of the fear that the Lumads were supporting the New People's Army, the armed Communist insurgency movement. The Philippine military has burned, bombed, or occupied these schools and their communities. These children fled to Manila but insisted on learning in "Bakwit" schools, translated as "on the go" or "evacuee" schools. The University of the Philippines in Diliman, through the Save Our Schools (SOS) network, proposed to shelter some of the students and teachers so they could continue classes according to their traditions.

Although it broke my heart to meet the teachers, we were also grateful to share solace, laughter, and good ideas. As you can imagine, those students have a hard time studying and learning miles away from their families in a foreign environment without knowing how their families were coping back at home. Their teachers become parents, counselors, older siblings – and their students' burdens began to weigh heavily on their shoulders.

As much as I have felt stuck and powerless during this quarantine, I held onto those shared experiences with my colleagues. Quarantine and our limited traveling options, coupled with my fears and anxieties, meant that I couldn't help our communities as before. I have lost a lot of contact

with the most vulnerable families and communities. Recently I learned that the Lumad students missed the opportunity to return to their homes in Mindanao when the quarantine order was put in place.

Thanks to some frontline church workers and leaders, there is extra support. We helped by contributing financially to the different packages of relief goods that our colleagues prepared and delivered to these communities. Still, our colleagues could not contact and help everyone, although many more were seeking assistance. No work, no pay, no food, no shelter were the challenges of these at-risk communities, as well as the challenges for some church and school workers. Although we don't know the full extent of damage wrought by this pandemic, we are grateful to the Lord for health workers and others on the frontline, many of whom are our colleagues. We are eager to rejoin them.

Time seemingly slowed down under quarantine, and now we are bracing ourselves for what will happen when we come out of this "hibernation." Instead of summer church visits in the U.S., we have been preparing for virtual visits with sermons, Zoom presentations, and children's Sunday school lessons. Let's stay connected with one another and with God's work in the Philippines.

We appreciate your prayers and support that help us and our Filipino colleagues and communities.

With the deep peace of Christ,

Cathy, Juan, and Aurelie

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Cathy Chang and Juan Lopez

Serving at the invitation of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines and other Asian partners

You are invited to continue supporting Cathy Chang's and Juan Lopez's work through prayer and encouraged to get to know them through updates like this, personal letters and emails. If you are able, please support this ministry through financial gifts. Individual donations may be made online at presbyterianmission.org/donate, or mailed to the address below. Churches are asked to send donations through your congregation's normal receiving site (this is usually your presbytery).

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