



Manila's Street Dwellers: From a Place of Poverty to True Flourishing

Beginnings

In 2001, a typhoon ripped through Metro Manila. When the winds died down, I drove down Roxas Boulevard. I watched as scores of street people meandered along the bayside in bare feet, picking up recyclable trash. They lived in holes dug into the barrier walls of Manila Bay. I learned that the storm surge that breached the wall had flushed them out like mice from their dugouts.

Later in my car, I broke down and cried. *This is not how God intended it to be*, I thought. *Didn't the Bible say that God made man a little lower than angels?* I struggled to understand it all.

That same year I went to Korea for a prayer retreat. The tour included a visit to the Osanri Prayer Mountain. Members of our group were each assigned a specific hour to take part

in the 24-hour prayer chain that had been going on at this place for years. At my appointed time, I climbed the hill to my assigned prayer cell, donned a white robe and knelt in prayer. I recalled the street people of the boulevard and spent the hour crying out to God for the chance to help them.

Four years later, the Center for Community Transformation Group of Ministries (CCT) held its first feeding and Bible study session for street dwellers. This later evolved into the CCT Kaibigan Ministry, Inc. (KMI).

John 15:15 says, "I no longer call you servants ... I have called you friends." This verse captures the essence of KMI. *Kaibigan* is the Filipino word for friend. We call our street-dwelling friends *kaibigans*.

BY **RUTH S. CALLANTA**

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Understanding Street Dwellers

As KMI ministered to the street dwellers, we began to understand them and their needs. We saw that they had no place to stash what little they had, and no place to bathe. Health centers refused to give them basic medical attention because they were not registered residents. Women refused to go to hospitals to give birth, believing that their babies would be stolen and sold by hospital staff to childless couples.

During one feeding session, Angel, one of our pioneer staff, asked why one of the men who came regularly was missing. “He broke a leg,” someone answered. Angel found out that, for lack of a place to keep their clothes, some street dwellers hide their belongings up in the tree branches. The man had fallen and broken his leg while retrieving his things—and was still lying under the tree two days after, waiting for help! We immediately sent someone to take him to the hospital.

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Going a step beyond Bible studies and feeding on the streets, we invited men, women and children to undergo a restoration process. This involved living in a halfway house where they would receive counseling, spiritual nurturing and life skills training. The Kaibigan Center offered free meals, toilet and bath facilities, lockers, a safe place during typhoons and floods, and—quite significantly for me—an address. Having an address would allow the street dwellers to register as voters. In addition, it would allow them to avail of government services like healthcare.

Journey of Change

Some have said that in ministering to street dwellers CCT went into an expensive venture, but for me, nothing is expensive in the development of peoples. From the perspective of the eternal, short-term costs are investments in helping the disadvantaged see the face of God.

The street dwellers’ journey of change starts building trust during street-side Bible studies, feeding, discipleship and savings. Next, staff assess their physical and psychological health, skills and behavior while they live temporarily at the Kaibigan Center. Street dwellers who wish to be reunited with their families and return to their home provinces are given boat or bus tickets and pocket money for the trip.

Those who express interest in starting a new life in Manila attend an evangelistic camp where they learn about intimacy with God and their purpose in life. Then they return to the halfway house for training in basic livelihood and life-coping skills as well as cooperative principles and work values. Trained kaibigans then become members of the Kaibigan Maaasahan Multipurpose Cooperative (KMMC), which has the responsibility of finding jobs for them with companies needing construction, building maintenance, housekeeping and landscaping services. KMMC receives a 10 percent service fee from these companies.

The individuals come full circle in their journey at this point because earnings of KMMC support KMI’s street feeding program.

Lessons Learned

Of all the groups that CCT works with, ministry among street dwellers is the most difficult. Street dwellers are hardened by the need to survive. Working with them, you are confronted with raw truths about yourself, about others, about ministry and about God.

One truth I learned is that no one is beyond hope of transformation. I have seen hardened criminals realize their need for a Savior, repent of their sins, change their ways, face their past, acquire skills, adopt socially-accepted behavior and move on to a future filled with hope. These are stories many times repeated and relished.

On a personal level, I learned that as development workers or missionaries, we tend to impose our perspectives and values on the people we serve—perspectives and values shaped by our culture, context and beliefs. This prevents us from appreciating each person's journey. Worse, we miss out on the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the change they are going through, lessening our ability to empathize, to feel, to love.

This was my experience working with *Tatay* (father) Carlo, a gifted painter. For some reason, he took to the streets in his 50s. We invited him to join CCT's communications unit, where he provided illustrations for many of our print materials.

Often, other kaibigans would tell me things about him, which he would always deny. I would confront him about it and believed what he said, until my son took a video of him to prove that my trust in him was misplaced. When I confronted Tatay Carlo with the video, he again denied his activities.

I was upset. Betrayed. How could he lie? Because of this confrontation, he went back to the streets.

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A year later, the Lord allowed me to see Tatay Carlo in a different light. How could he not lie? His whole life was a lie. It was years, in fact, before he even told us his real name. My task should have been to enable him to accept his past and help him develop trusting relationships again. But I failed him when I gave up on him.

I wanted to ask his forgiveness. I asked co-workers to look for him. They found him suffering from terminal lung

cancer and had him confined in a hospital. When the doctors could do nothing more for him, they brought him to the Kaibigan Center.

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I was not able to see him personally as I was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer at the time, but we did communicate. We forgave each other. We constantly prayed together and found joy in studying the Bible long distance before he passed away.

Another lesson I learned while ministering to street dwellers is that sometimes our goals, our timetable, and the targets we set can become our gods, displacing love and compassion.

Sadly, this is how I drove one street dweller away from his journey of change. Lito was a self-confessed arsonist. His wife, Evelyn, was a self-confessed con person. One day, Lito himself was set up to get burned and die. He found refuge with CCT. Staff brought them to the Kaibigan resettlement village. Unfortunately, they simply could not live in harmony with the others. Fights would always ensue despite daily devotions and Bible studies.

One day, they asked me if they could live apart from the other families. Believing that this would be a negation of our goal to develop a community among former street dwellers, I said no. We lost the couple to the streets again. My set goal of establishing a community took precedence over allowing Lito and Evelyn to find their pace and time in their journey of change.

Impact

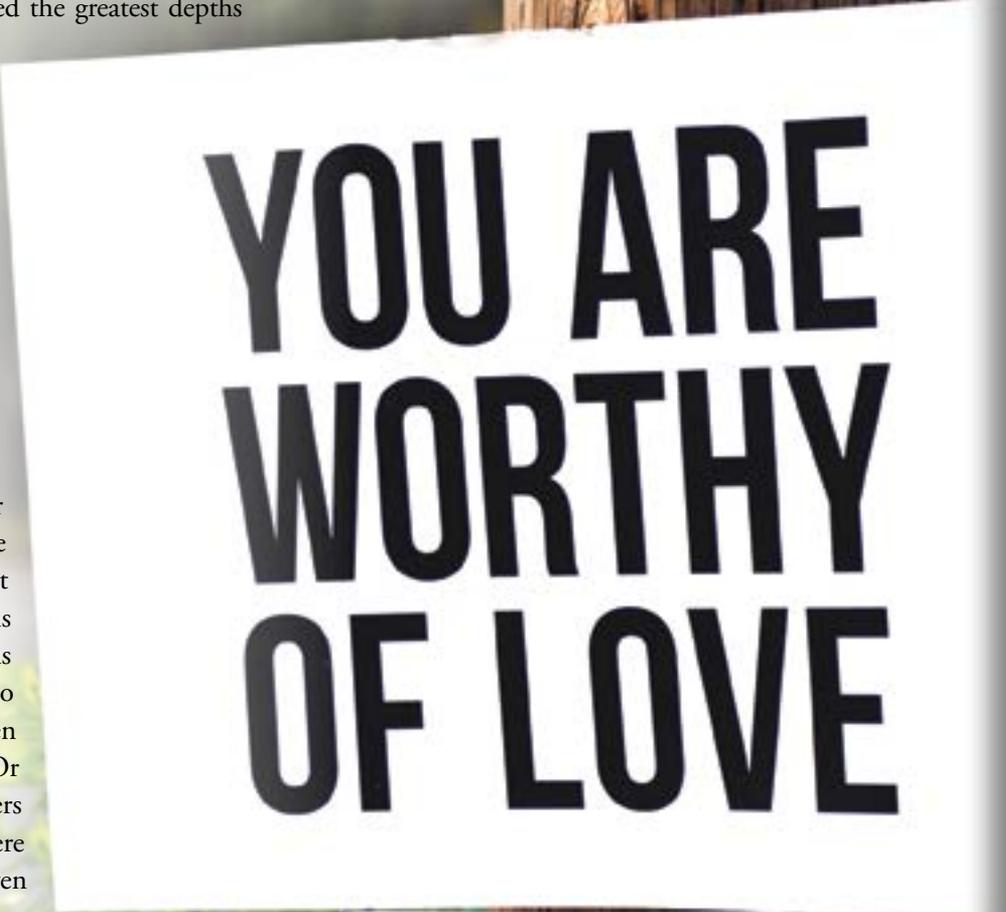
Though work among street dwellers is the most difficult, it is likewise the most rewarding. Of all the groups CCT serves, street dwellers have experienced the greatest depths of depravity and need; therefore, seeing their transformation is almost like seeing them literally resurrected from the dead.

For example, most street dwellers commit petty thefts every day to survive. Others stage holdups or commit more heinous crimes. So how can we measure the effect of one life off the street?

What is the impact of at least 450 former street dwellers earning regular incomes? What is the impact of one whole public park cleaned up of street dwellers because those individuals now rent or own houses? What is the impact of their learning how to save? What is the impact of children no longer born into misfortune? Or of more than 2,000 street dwellers partaking in a feeding program where they also hear the gospel and are given hope for a better life?

The impact of men and women leaving crime to become responsible members of society again is something not captured by any gross domestic product report or included in the numbers churned out by government statisticians.

In Ezekiel 37, the Prophet Ezekiel records his vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones—and this vision has always inspired those of us who serve people who live on the street. In the lives of transformed street dwellers, we see dry bones gathered, connected with sinews, covered with flesh and skin and given life once again by the Spirit of the Lord Himself. 



**YOU ARE
WORTHY
OF LOVE**