

MY JOURNEY IN MEMBER CARE

Grace Margaret Alag

MISSIONARY MEMBER CARE

I had never heard of this term before, but there I was in my 2nd year of MA in Organizational Leadership (Azusa Pacific University), in the classroom of my professor, Dr. Lois Dodds and later Dr. Larry Dodds. And on a table, they had brochures of Heartstream Resources, their organization and programs (www.heartstreamresources.org). They gave me some to read and said I might be interested to come and join their programs. At that time, I was serving in a church denomination as a trainer and was on my final year of the ten years service. Towards the end of my service, I would also have had three major surgeries related to my reproductive system. The last was a total hysterectomy and the year after would make me experience bouts of grief and depression after realizing that I would never be able to have biological children. Sharing this with my professor, Dr. Lois invited me to come to their Intensive Care Retreat in HSR Hqs., Liverpool, Pennsylvania. For a lowly church worker that I was at that time, having no millions in the bank nor properties to show to the US embassy visa officers, I said, 'oh thank you, your invitation will need lots of prayers.

HEALING IN COMMUNITY

Long story short, in 1999, the Lord provided in unexpected ways and I was able to visit in time for their Intensive Care Program which was a wholistic retreat offered to missionaries and families. I was also invited to enroll in their Member Care Foundations and Implementing Member Care Programs and served as an intern during my stay. The Intensive Care Retreat afforded daily counseling which helped me process and gain understanding about my life situation. It also involved being with American missionaries who served in different countries and came for much needed rest and refreshing. We took all meals together, shared our life stories, one or two at a time every evening and spent mornings learning about. "*Coping with Stress and Understanding Burnout: Understanding ourselves and others, how people develop, how we are uniquely designed, Conflict styles and conflict management,*" among many other topics. Since I was a graduate of AB Psychology with training in clinical psychology, I felt very encouraged that here at last was an application of my academic preparation that would focus on ministry. I also came to realize that my "brownout" or almost burnout experience due to lack of self-care and a number of surgical procedures were my preparation and development of empathy as I later will meet several harvest workers who experienced similar challenges, applying 2 Corinthians 3: 1-5.

WHO CARES?

From 1990 to 1999, I was a church worker, not a missionary. The residential community experience in Heartstream Headquarters in Liverpool, Pennsylvania, was my first introduction to missionary life through the shared stories of the missionaries who participated in their Intensive care retreat. Thus, I was all ears and wide eyed with their shared stories. But at the end of all the programs, I asked myself, what do I do with all that I have learned? This was in 1999, and it so happened that I was to start on my Capstone to complete my MA in Azusa Pacific University, and this led to my decision to tackle the question: "A Look into the State of Missionary Care in the Philippines?", using the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry. During the crafting of my Capstone, the Lord would work in my heart and called me to the ministry of missionary member care, not just as a requirement for graduation but as a life vocation. The process of call was filled with divine interventions and supernatural experiences which can fill a book. My faith journey towards accepting the Lord's call upon my life, the second one, was greatly facilitated by what I call my "constellation of mentors", and not all were older than I was but were definitely highly attuned to the Lord, very discerning and not afraid to confront me with the truth. They helped me process this re-direction and I am so thankful to the Lord, that up to now we share this exciting journey of missionary member care.

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When I finished my capstone proposal in 1999, I sought the blessing of the Philippine Missions Association (PMA), which at that time was under the leadership of its Director, Rev. Rey Corpuz. He encouraged me to pursue my interviews with mission leaders and if I had the burden to "run with it". I eventually got to have meaningful conversations with Rev. Dr. Jorge De Ramos, CBAP, Dr. Jojo Manzano, then with ATS and OMF, Dr. David Lim (ASDECS). I remember their common statements, that they had

multiple tasks of leading their mission organizations, human resources, member care but no one focused on member care alone. They encouraged me to pursue this focus if the Lord was calling me to do so. Later, as I would pursue the ministry, they were the major encouragers and “think tank” of how the MCare movement would proceed, starting with several consultations and conferences to “put our ears to the ground”. Later, Ptr. Bob Lopez would be leading the PMA. In 2005, the mission leaders and PMA, ACM and my MCare partners and supporters organized the Philippine Member Care Conference in 2005. The mission leaders crafted the Member Care Declaration of the Philippines which articulated their commitment to Missionary Member Care in the Philippines. We were blessed to have MCare pioneers and authors, Dr. Kelly O’Donnell (WEA Member Care) and Dr. Laura Mae Gardner (Wycliffe International) as our main plenary speakers.

LISTENING TOURS

Stepping back to 2000 to 2001, my classmate in Azusa Pacific and dear missionary friend Karen Lynip, knew of my journey and heard of my interest in missionary care and the Capstone project. As a consultant of Translators Association of the Phils.(TAP), she introduced me to its Executive Director and his wife, bro Tony and sister Ate Amie Dasalla (+). I shared my Capstone project with them and they also shared their concern for extending member care to their membership. Thankfully, after several consultations, Amie and I would become partners in visiting their Bible translators from the north to the south of the Philippines. In doing these tours, I was guided with my capstone’s purpose, “to discover if member care is an organizational ethos, value or culture in selected missions organizations in the Philippines (sending churches or mission agencies). And the following questions were little by little answered: If these missions organizations have MCare, how do they define it? What are their practices and experiences in member care and What are their dreams and visions for member care? And what are the needs to implement member care?

In studying the practices of Member Care of the missions organizations, here were my goals:

1. Open up a cooperative dialogue about member care.
2. Learn from each other about member care and visualize what is MCare.
3. Agree together in identifying member care indicators and practices
4. Seek consensus about how to innovate specific models in developing member care. (taken from Meg Aleg’s “A Look Into Member Care Practices in Philippine Mission Organizations”, Research Proposal)

I committed to preparing a member care program for their organization which they would later present to their membership for approval in their

annual conference. Our visits to some 30 full time missionaries entailed traveling by land, by air, once by small plane, hiking mountains and stay with the families. Sister Amie and I listened to their stories or did informal debriefing and got to know their concerns as parents and as couples. There were also a number of single missionaries. They opened their homes and opened their hearts to us, as we cooked together, shared meals and stories till the depth of night. I also had the privilege of spending precious hours listening to sister Amie’s personal testimony of her and her husband’s missionary journey. This became my actual immersion in the lives of Filipino missionaries, my “exposure trip”, with the special focus on the lives of the frontliners.

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My original plan was to conduct the Appreciative Inquiry with several organizations, but TAP alone already had some 30 missionaries, so I decided to focus on this organization mainly. Sis. Amie would take me under her wings to meet other MCare practitioners and trainers like Brenda Bosch and Selma Guanzon of YWAM who were in deep involvement in missionary care already at that time. Amie and I were then invited to attend the Asian Missions Congress in 2001 in Pattaya, Thailand. The first Asian Member Care Consultation organized by Dr. Kelly O’Donnell was held back-to- back with this Congress. This was attended by other member care practitioners and leaders from Asia, such as Pramila Rajendran of India, Harry Hoffmann, from Thailand, among others. The meeting birthed an informal agreement to promote “purposeful affiliation” (Dr. Kelly) and networking among member care practitioners in Asia.

By 2002, I was invited to join Asian Center for Missions (ACM) as its Deployment and MCare Director and Deputy Director under now Dr. Elsie Reyes-Cook. This will be the start of my organizational service for the next 12 years. My service with ACM afforded me the opportunity to visit frontliners in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, China and Indonesia as well as be involved in preparing the ‘goers’ and their senders. Through ACM, we were able to equip the sending churches and organizations through “Sending with Care Seminars” from Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. The module of Missionary Care was also included in the curriculum of the Missionary Training Program, with the objective of equipping each missionary trainee a thorough understanding of the Phases of Missionary Life and understanding what happens in their whole being as

they navigate the various stages of mission life, from Recruitment to Retirement.

PURPOSEFUL AFFILIATION

A major strategic approach that I had taken was to encourage networks of care and equip sending churches and mission organizations in the ministry of member care from recruitment to retirement. I recognized early that no one agency can be responsible for caring for all Filipino missionaries. I deeply believed in the Acts 13 model of sending and for churches to be in partnership with other organizations or individuals in the care of the frontliners and their families. I also sought partners who could join me in the MCare travels to visit the frontliners. Since our organization cannot sponsor their travel expenses, they needed to raise personal support and this would give birth later on to a network of MCare practitioners who joined our annual trips. As I transitioned to moving to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to join my engineer husband in 2013, my partners and I decided to formalize our group to form Heartstream Resources Philippines. The name is similar to the organization where I trained, having obtained their permission to do so as an active member of the Heartstream International Partners Network. It took several years to obtain the SEC registration but the ministry never abated. Now we are a registered non-stock, non-profit organization. Unlike Heartstream USA which has its beautiful member care facilities, Heartstream Resources Philippines focuses on offering equipping programs for member care for sending entities, churches and mission organizations as well as programs for the well being of missionaries and ministry workers. From the UAE, I joined my husband in Kuwait since July 2018. And from here I continue to be the Director of Heartstream Philippines, reporting to a Board of Trustees and working with a team of gifted volunteers who are based in Manila.

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“You are not a missionary, how can you care for missionaries?” was an accusation I encountered from the start of my journey and at different times in my service. Reflecting on my life, I believe that my calling and vocation was birthed by God in my life even before I was born. I looked back at my grandparents

who were pioneers of the Christian faith in Mindanao. My grandmother had a passion for helping struggling pastors and set up a scholarship fund for them to be able to go through Bible school.

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My parents, particularly my mother loved to care for American missionaries through her delicious cooking and baking. She also had a passion to care for widows and orphans. Her favorite verse which I will always remember was Psalm 37:25. “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.” Both my parents were open handed in their generosity and modeled Ecclesiastes 11:1 and 2. Missionary member care I learned is not a job, nor a title, it is a lifestyle. Despite an affliction (Rheumatoid Arthritis) that I got in 2005, which affects my mobility now, I continued in the ministry, visiting frontliners every year with my volunteer partners in the MCare. My husband and I share the dream of having a missionary care home or facility with a farm towards our retirement years in Iloilo. I received this vision in 2000 and though it has yet to be fulfilled I firmly believe that the Lord who called us is faithful and He will complete what He started in our lives. To him belong all the glory, honor and praise!

“...there are practical, relational, subjective experiences that move us toward ministry. But in the end, it is the hidden hand of God's gracious providence that puts us, throws us, where he wants us to be.” -John Piper



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