

Testimony from Chen Jia Ling-Cebu Mission Trip March 2007

“Your life would never be the same again.” That’s what Pastor Jacob told us when we went there for our mission trip. Indeed, I think all of us have learnt something and taken it back to grow in our own ministries.

When we first arrived at 5am in the morning, the immigration counters were full of people. This is because of what they call, ‘Pinoy’ time ie rubber time. No one complained or rushed the immigration officers as that was their culture. Being Singaporeans, we tried to find the shortest or fastest queue. In the end, we figured the best thing to do is just to wait patiently and adapt to their culture. We cleared immigration almost an hour later. Welcome to the Philippines!

We stayed in Philippines Teen Challenge (PTC), hosted by Pastor Jacob, his wife and 3 children who are all Singaporeans. Over the next few days, we woke up as early as 6.30am and slept at 1am. With many activities packed within a day, I had to switch my devotion to morning instead of my usual night devotion. The weather was extremely hot - half an hour in the sun and I had sun burn on my neck and hands.

My greatest fear before this trip was the food as I’m quite a fussy eater. Pastor Jacob introduced us to mangoe and fish. Mangoe is nothing like the mango I know. It is actually mashed green beans boiled in gravy. I dislike beans after a bad experience when I was young. However, if I want to help in mission work, I’ll have to learn to eat whatever is offered. This was what the poor people ate and if we don’t eat it, the people may feel that their food is not good enough for us. As I didn’t want this to be a hindrance to the ministry, I ate. We were told that forks and spoons were luxury items for higher class people so we learnt to eat with our hands. We mixed the rice and the mangoe. I was really terrified initially but it turned out to be surprisingly tasty. We finished the fish and the bones. Some of the team members even ate the heads. It was really an experience.

As advised by Pastor Jacob, eating with our hands and associating with the locals helps to bridge the gap between different classes and culture. In the past, some missionaries came and complained about eating with their hands which unfortunately, affected the ministry. As a Singaporean in a multi-racial society, I have no problem with that. However, we were wary of taking the water as the lime content is too high for us.

On our first day, we were given an exposure trip. First, we experienced different modes of transport and were tasked to find out how much they earn daily. The Motorcycle has a carrier attached to the side to carry passengers. All 5 of us squeezed into the bike. In the Philippines, they say “there’s always room for one more”. 2 sat in front of the carrier, 2 behind and 3 on the motorbike, including the driver. If there were more people, they would stand on the side of the carrier. The ride for each person is 5 peso (S\$0.20). Next, we tried the Jeepney which is a jeep with seats behind and beautifully painted on the outside. It cost 6 peso per person. We moved on to the tricycle and the poor man had a hard time carrying 5 of us. It costs 5 peso per person. When we went back, Pastor Jacob said that most of them earn barely enough for food. Sometimes, they couldn’t even pay for the rental of the vehicles. However, if they don’t work, they have no other means of income.

We proceeded to the cemetery which looked like lockers. Each has a column for the deceased. Every year, family members have to pay to keep that column else the bones

will be removed and dumped in one corner. Many poor families live, sleep and eat there. When it rains, they will run into one of the column and sleep inside till the rain stops. I met some of the children there. They were really dirty with torn clothes but they were happily running around. They even led us to the place where all the bones were dumped. To them, the dead are gone. They could only care for the living. I read inscription on some of the columns and realized that some of them were babies and young children. I really wished that there was something I could do to help.

Could I have made a difference if I had lived here, I wondered. Would I be able to help these kids get off the streets and teach them right from wrong and share the gospel? Pastor Jacob explained that many of them take drugs and sniff glue. They have little to eat and no shelter over their head. PTC tried to bring them to the center but they kept running away. This is because they are happy with the way they are as it means freedom. They don't want rules to govern them.

I realized that though the children may be running around carefree, they lacked love. The children loved it when we hugged and held their hands or when we showed affection and kindness to them. We didn't mind that they were dirty. It was God's love flowing out to them. Some of us have to overcome the open display of affection. When we were there, even the "big strong man" just humbled themselves to help and teach them.

Many people say Philippines is a Christian country and the internet will tell you that 90% of the people are Christians. However, I'm sad to tell you, that this is not true. 90% of the people are either Catholics or idol worshippers. Why do I say that? When you enter their churches, you will understand.

When I first entered one of their most famous churches, I was shocked. The church was filled with statues of Mary (mother of Jesus), Joseph (father of Jesus), Peter, Paul, many other disciples and even some nuns and priests. There is also a statue of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross. What shocked me most was the statue of baby Jesus, Santo Nino. Many people were praying to it. They would queue up for hours just to kiss the glass panel which holds this statue. They would use their clothes to wipe the glass and rub it on the portion of their bodies where it hurts. Some would roll themselves or kneel all the way down the aisle just to show their devotion. Their devotion to these idols was a major culture shock to me. I stood there almost in tears for these lost souls.

Over the next few days, we visited some homes in the market place. The area is no bigger than 3 meters by 2 meters with each housing 5 to 10 people. They would have to sleep in sitting position. The children would play naked in the streets and many were begging as their parents have no means to look after them. Where they are, a girl should never sleep alone in the street. She must be with another man or risk being raped.

In our rounds, the adults shared with the adults, while the youths played with the children and learnt from each other. They taught us a new song in their language and we shared ours. We used the songs that they taught to perform for them in church and when we were outside, we sang together. It was a fulfilling time of fellowship, worship and learning from one another.

Filipinos speak with their facial expression. They use their eye brow and mouth to show what they are trying to say. Pastor Jacob told us this story that when he first arrived, they

were lost and his wife asked a man for direction from her car seat. The man made a kissing expression. Pastor Jacob wanted to punch that person for taking advantage of his wife only to find out that he was actually using his lips to point in the direction. Another way of speaking through the face is their eyebrow. When you ask them a question and if the answer is "Yes", they would raise their eyebrow up and down. It's fun talking to them.

When we were on the streets, we saw guys holding hands. We thought they were gays but in Philippines, this is their culture. They show their affection openly. We have to learn to accept and read their body language if we are to minister and share God's love with them.

The biggest barrier I feel in this trip is "yourself" ie your spiritual, mental and physical strength. The devil will be prowling to discourage you. Mentally, it was really challenging as I need to overcome my fear of public speaking, getting out of my comfort zone to love strangers and yes, the food. To me, it tested the limit of how much I'm willing to sacrifice for God. I know that what I've gone through is nothing compared to the persecutions faced by believers in other countries and I thank God he knows what I can and cannot endure. I believe this is the first step to many steps ahead that God is leading me to grow through his molding and shaping into his beautiful vessel in time to come.

Thank God for this trip. I have really learnt a lot.