

January 6, 2023

Dear friends,

We send you our heartfelt Seasons Greetings from the Philippines as we begin a New Year in 2024. Our prayers are that this finds you well and renewed by the celebrations of Christmas and New Year.

Finding the Space

“Finding the Space” may be the appropriate description of the year that has come to pass. Much appreciated work has been provided by PC(USA) World Mission in sensitizing all of us to the missteps of historical mission particularly as the lessons of diversity, equity, and inclusion inform our work as PC(USA) mission co-workers in the Philippines. Such lessons have led to the re-evaluation of our space in light of a deepened awareness of recurring blind spots that may disempower rather than empower the communities that we work with and serve.



Restoration of the coral reefs in the community of Dumaguete. Photo by Cobbie Palm.

Silliman Water Ministry

The Silliman Water Ministry, which continues to be a centerpiece of Cobbie’s ministry, is now on track to transition from international dependency to reach the desired intention of being self-sustaining. Presently, well established on the campus and supporting several communities in need of clean drinking water, Cobbie is spending much time advocating for Silliman University to assume greater responsibility for the support of the Silliman Water Ministry. This would relieve the demand on international partners, individuals, and churches and place greater responsibility on Silliman University. In the design, Silliman Water Ministry generates some income to enable sustainability. The challenge Cobbie is facing is to convince Silliman University to direct that income back into the project for sustainability. Cobbie is learning that changing patterns and models that affect financial resources from dependency to self-reliance is challenging at best.



Silliman Water Solar Water Purifier being transported to an island village. Photo by Cobbie Palm.

Mediation in the Quest for Peace

Peace education has been among the responsibilities Cobbie has taken on over the past many years in connection with the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform addressing the national Peace Talks between the Philippine Government and the National Democratic Front. This past year,

with the Peace Talks on hold and not in process, Cobbie has been invited by the partner church in the Philippines to work on an internal reconciliation process between the broader United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), and a faction within the UCCP that is threatening to separate because of issues around the stewardship of church resources. In recent years, to discern ways for the church to reduce its dependency on international partner churches and to augment pew offerings, the UCCP has sought ways to translate valuable church property into long-term income for the UCCP without selling property. This has evoked criticism among some to form a faction with which Cobbie is part of a team trying to bring reconciliation between both parties.

Amplifying Voices

Coro Inocensio grew up in small-scale fishing. His father fished before him and later he fished the coast of this island. At times, he fished independently in small outrigger boats with hook and line, while other times he joined larger boats pursuing greater returns. Coro tells a sad story. It is evident that life as a fisherman did not uplift him and his family from poverty, but he simply says, “We were never hungry.” His heartache is not the evident poverty that has persisted throughout his life. Rather, his heartache is his complicity in the destruction of the coral reefs during his younger years. He talks about his younger years when he joined boats that stretched a net between the coral at one end of the coral reef. He and his companions then swam at the other end of the coral reef while pelting the coral reef with rocks to frighten fish toward the nets. As a young person, he did not believe coral would ever die or that fish would become scarce.



Cobbie with Coro Inocensio, community leader in coral reef restoration. Photo by Nic Inocensio.

Today, at 67 years of age, he has become the hands and voice of coral restoration in this coastal area. He has drawn Cobbie into his campaign teaching him how to create coral gardens and to plant coral to restore coral biodiversity. He has led a paradigm shift among the fisherfolk in this area. Together they have agreed to protect coral in sanctuaries restricted from fishing and put an end to destructive fishing methods.

Cobbie has found a space in his world of coral restoration. Under the water, Cobbie is learning how to plant coral while above the water he is engaging Silliman University and the City of Dumaguete on behalf of Coro and his advocacy. A small way Cobbie can support and nurture this instrument of God and renewal of Creation.



Restoration of the coral reefs in the community of Dumaguete. Photo by Cobbie Palm.

Theater and Creative Work for Evangelism and Advocacy

Theatre and creative work for evangelism and advocacy remain central to Dessa’s work. An annual space for continuing theological education with which Dessa engages is the Church Workers’ Convocation hosted by the Silliman University Divinity School.

In 2023, the theme bannered by the gathering was "Global Trends in Liturgy in a Fragmented World." Dessa led the seminary's students and faculty in interpreting the theme by surfacing stories, insights, questions, and reflections and translating this into an original theatre production performed by the students. The collective sentiment that emerged is that amid the global and contemporary trends, liturgy in its diverse forms and expressions should remain faithful to the following tenets, that it needs to be biblically grounded, theologically acceptable, culturally sensitive, and contextually relevant.



A scene from Hibla, an original theater production produced by the Silliman University Divinity School Banikanhong Magdudula for the 2023 Church Workers Convocation. Photo by Lavinia Louise Tigas of SU Camera Club.

Building a Creative Sanctuary

Towards the end of 2023, another space is creating much anticipation and joyful buzz among the youth creatives who are part of the "Youth Advocates through Theater Arts" or YATTA. As it turned 18 in December 2023, a long-time dream of finding its own home is finally coming to fruition. With seed funds gathered from supporting churches, local government, and private supporters, YATTA has partnered with the faculty and graduating architecture students of the Foundation University and the Kawayan (Bamboo) Collective. Through its program called "Estudio Damgo" (Dream Studio), they have agreed to undertake the participatory design process and supervise the construction of the YATTA Creative Sanctuary, a training and performance center that will enable YATTA to create more regular creative and life-skills building programs for children and young people.

YATTA was birthed in 2005 under very simple circumstances as well, but a robust passion of young people to do something good for their lives and the communities harnessing their creative gifts. Without any regular funding or steady institutional support, it has managed to sustain its work and impact many lives because of God's provisions translated into a village of support that enabled the organization to do its creative mission through the years. The groundbreaking ceremony and blessing of the site happened in early December of 2023, and we ask for your prayers for its successful completion.



This is the design created by Estudio Damgo for the Creative Sanctuary.

We have been blessed in the year 2023, God has provided us with a community of friends that from near and far continue to journey with us. You are God's gift to us. Your prayers, your notes and messages, lifting our names in your congregations, all are blessings. In good times and in hard times, we can persevere knowing that you are journeying with us. As we usher in the year 2024, we shall build upon the past, celebrate each of you, and continue to pray and work towards

finding and creative spaces where Christ's love, peace, and joy shall be nurtured through our ministries.

With deepest appreciation, Happy New Year!

Cobbie and Dessa

Co-workers Philippines