

Church Planting and Creation Care among the Mangyan in Mindoro, Philippines

By Jocelyn Dino

Nicko Liwadi comes from Occidental Mindoro. He is a Tawbuid, one of the six tribes that together make up the Mangyan people of Mindoro. From Monday to Saturday, Niko farms the sloping land in Baco, Oriental Mindoro entrusted to him by the Mangyan Tribal Church Association (MTCA). His farm is thriving, showcasing how best to produce organic crops without harming the soil. On weekdays he also finds time to teach students at the Mangyan Agricultural School about his craft. He takes a break from his work on Sundays and leads the worship service for the twenty Iraya households in the village of Balabagon, in the neighborhood of his farm. Niko said: “I want the people to see that I am a Christian not only in word but also in deed.”

OMF missionaries began to share the gospel with the Mangyan tribes of Mindoro in the 1950s. Gospel-sharing has become part of the lives of the Mangyan believers, and some have been sent out as missionaries to other parts of the Philippines. Many of the tribe’s young people have wanted to follow their parents in this work. Niko is not unlike his fellow Tawbuid. He also wanted to enrol at the Mangyan Bible School and become a missionary. When Niko agreed to his village elders’ decision to send him to the Mangyan Agricultural School in 2005, the gangly eighteen year old expected to learn about more effective ways of farming, and then return to their village to share his new agricultural skills. He believed this would also improve his livelihood opportunities. What he didn’t expect was that his new practical knowledge would bring him a deeper understanding of his spiritual heritage as a Christian.



Niko gained a new perspective of his Creator God and mankind’s role as steward of God’s creation. He learned to work and care for his land in obedience to God’s command (Gen 2:15). He became aware that the traditional slashing and burning of the trees and plants to prepare the land for farming was no longer sustainable: a more productive method of food production was required to meet the needs of the growing population. Niko took initiative in applying what he had learned, including the use of local plants

to maintain the health of the soil, while waiting patiently for his elders to see the benefits of the agricultural education they had enabled him to gain. He also had a heart to demonstrate a way of living the gospel so that unbelievers could witness God’s love and abundant provision for mankind.

Niko is now a twenty-seven-year old father of two who is considered a community leader by his tribe. His agricultural knowledge, experience, and expertise have led him back to the Mangyan Agricultural School, not only as a teacher, but also as a preacher. Now Niko wants to pursue his studies at the Mangyan Bible School. He believes that his practical work is a validation of the word of God. Niko wants to express not only in deed, but also witness in words, his faith in the Lord.

The exploration of the place of creation care in mission resonates with what we have been doing among the Mangyan for many years. We have always sought to integrate practical development work with our church planting ministry. Admittedly, our discussions about the “practical” aspects of holistic ministry or integral mission usually have focused on social justice, land issues, human rights, and health concerns. Now we see that our work has relevance to a broader vision of caring for God’s creation and resisting an unhelpful dichotomy between the material and the spiritual. I remember a comment from one Mangyan leader who said it is hard for them to discuss the material in connection with their spiritual life. Whenever material things, especially those concerning money, are discussed, they felt it was of the devil, and that it created confusion and conflict among their members.

This also brings to mind a story of a tribe in Safa, Pinamalayan, Oriental Mindoro. Safa Evangelical Church is one of the biggest of the 130 Mangyan churches in Mindoro. What makes it unique is that the building, which can seat 300–500 people and can accommodate many of the tribe’s conferences, was nearly fully funded by the community’s tithes. The main source of income is their banana produce. When asked why they are faithful in their tithing, one church elder said, “God gave us the banana trees; we didn’t plant them. That is why we also need to be faithful in giving back to Him our tithes.”

It must also be noted that the Tawbuid tribe mentioned above holds community devotions twice daily. They hold worship services on Wednesdays and Sundays. And they are one of six Mangyan tribes active in missions work locally and outside Mindoro.

Ernst Diggelmann, OMF’s current Indigenous Ministry leader in the Philippines, explained that practical lessons on agriculture were integrated into the Mangyan Bible School from its inception in the 1970s. The six-term (three months each) curriculum now includes a one week compulsory training program for SALT (Sloping Agricultural Land Technology).¹ Two years ago, the

Mangyan Ministry Team and MTCA held a competition to identify the community most faithful in implementing what they had learned in community development and agriculture. The first prize went to a Tadyawan community from Dyangdang in Bansud, Oriental Mindoro. They had adopted SALT, were the best organized community, and faithfully complied with the project requirements laid down by government and non-government organizations. This process revealed some internal and community issues that are being dealt with by their respective community and church elders. It may not be possible to fulfil everyone's expectations of what it means to maintain the right balance between word and deed in any missional endeavour. It has been claimed, for instance, that the MTCA is only concerned about the spiritual and not the physical needs of man.

The tribe is also known, like their Tawbuid cousins, to hold community devotions twice daily and have worship services on Wednesdays and Sundays. Interestingly, the three prize-winning communities were also the most faithful in witnessing and professing their faith in the Lord Jesus.

Diggelmann mentioned a missionary to the Mangyan who enrolled in a Philippine university to study rice farming. "Teaching the Mangyan good farming methods is not unlike discipleship. You don't just tell them about farming and nurturing their land, you have to show them how to do it." For the Mangyans to be empowered, they must also learn to embrace new ideas in response to changing circumstances. For instance *kaingin* (slash and burn) practice can harm the land, causing landslides and flooding. And it can lead to the loss of the Mangyan's land to unscrupulous lowland residents, because with this method, farmers leave their land after harvest and only return to it after several years, when a lowland resident can just as easily come in and claim it. The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 seeks to recognize, protect, and promote the rights of indigenous people. But until the Mangyan adopt farming methods that respond to these challenges they will continue to lose their land.

Gemma De Guito is an agriculturist from the lowland of Mindoro. As she worked for the government's agricultural programmes, Gemma kept in touch with the ministry among the Mangyans. Diggelmann and his wife Sonya recognised Gemma's heart and gifting for this work and encouraged her to quit her job and work for the Mangyan Tribal Church Association, even though this would mean a big drop in her income. Gemma learned about the Mangyans' extensive lands and their planting methods. She saw how they had been abused by other people and how hard it was to gain their trust, especially for a person from the lowlands. The young agriculturist chose to wait patiently for the Mangyans to take the initiative in asking for help. Slowly, as Gemma gained their trust, she taught them the value of their land and their responsibility for it as God's stewards. She encouraged them to seek God's will in making a good plan, and to learn new skills. Soon she was kept busy by the numerous requests by the villagers to stay and help them with their crops. Gemma always includes creation care teaching in her ministry, using indigenous materials, because: "If we don't teach them about caring for nature, there will be more flooding and towns will disappear, as in the past."



Diggelmann recalls that during the 1960s and 1970s, hills in Mindoro were denuded of trees. Deforestation was declared illegal in the 1980s and the big flood in 1993 reinforced awareness of the need for forest conservation. Thousands of lives and properties were lost during Typhoon Kadiang. These events led the government to implement reforestation, funded by national and international agencies and by local communities. But even a well-funded, well-intentioned plan, if it fails to empower the local people, can bring destruction not only to nature but also to community relationships, even among believers.

Ernani, an Iraya tribal leader from Masaklang, Occidental Mindoro, relates the following story. "The program reached us too. There was a surplus of money and many were able to buy carabaos. Someone was even able to buy a jeep from the reforestation program. But it caused division in our church. One of our leaders handled the funds for those who participated in the program. He was the one who was able to buy a jeep." One half of the church members chose to stay at the interior of the forest, wary of any program, government initiated or otherwise. The other half, including the community leader who was believed to gain from the program, left the forest. Relationships were slowly mended, but the trust was never regained. Ruben Palbo, who chose to stay with Ernani's group, was more forgiving. "We all gained from the project. Trees have been planted and our labour was paid for. I was able to buy a carabao from my income. It's just that maybe this happened because he," referring to the Mangyan manager, "had not been honest with us."

It takes time to build the relationships that are essential in Mangyan culture. Diggelmann, who has spent most of his 33 years in the Philippines working among the Mangyan, explained, "It was five years before we saw budding of the fruit from the agricultural school which was established in 2005." The school was planned in 2003 but it wasn't until a willing local leader was found that the plan took off. Diokno from the Buhid tribe is a Mangyan Bible School graduate who has served as president of the MTCA. He and his wife became the first house parents at the Mangyan Agricultural School. As a former leader to the six Mangyan Tribes, he has wide cross-cultural experience. All were in agreement that chronological Bible teaching should be included in the curriculum. The students are out-of-school Mangyan youths.



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Applicants need not be Christian, but church endorsement is required for a student to be accepted into the eight-month, two-term, program. Gemma prepared two textbooks in Tagalog on rice farming and SALT, which were contextualized to the needs and situation of the Mangyans. She also prepared manuals for vegetable planting. The program stresses the importance of Christian values in agriculture and uses the Bible as a source of teaching about stewardship, management, and planning. Church involvement is equally important to guide the students when they return to their communities. This discipleship does not start or end inside the school.

Gemma serves as academic dean and teaches the agricultural topics. The house parents handle Bible topics. Their day starts with personal devotions, house cleaning duties, and group devotions. Mornings are for classroom activities and the afternoons for application of what has been taught. Graduates who show promise are asked, with the tribe's permission, to return to the school for in-service training. Trainees are entrusted with teaching jobs in the school. Praise God, more than sixty students, both young men and women, have graduated from the school. Some of them have gone on to graduate at the Mangyan Bible School, and now serve as elders in their village churches. A number became Christians while they were studying at the agricultural school. One of them, Rocky, was just sixteen and could hardly read or write when he went to the agricultural school in 2010. He has become an eloquent preacher and is now enrolled at the Bible School.

There was no poverty in Eden. All mankind's material needs were met as part of creation. But as a result of sin, mankind's relationships with God, with others, and with the rest of creation, were broken, and the land was cursed (Gen 3:17–19), necessitating hard work to make it fruitful. But this did not supersede God's command to work and care for the land. Among the Mangyan, continuing the old practice of slash and burn agriculture came to be seen as an inadequate response to this command. Equally God's call for his people to join him in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20) encouraged a hopeful determination to begin restoration of the land and its crops and forests.

It amazed me that during one of our appreciative inquiry meetings with the Alangan tribe in Occidental Mindoro (making an inventory of community resources/assets), none of them thought of the natural resources surrounding them as assets; they considered themselves poor and unworthy. And although they knew that they were being taken advantage of by lowlanders who bought their produce at a low price, they felt powerless to do anything about this.

As we took an inventory of their assets, they said that the share of one Alangan family man is at least two hectares, excluding his share of their land in the mountains of the interior. They were just giving us numbers for their nearby village. Do they have animals? Yes. One or two goats, a pig, some chickens, and houses made of nipa palm and bamboo. Some have corrugated iron roofs and solid wood walls for which a lowland resident would pay thousands of pesos! They also have a spring a kilometre or two above the village.

We discovered later that the Alangan do not have a word for “development” in their language, but have borrowed a lowland term with connotations of luxury goods. This borrowed term has shaped the values and self-image of the community, and helps to determine the use of funds from outside the community. One family had a big corn harvest. The next day, the man came home with a television set, a generator, and a DVD player. Since the village had no electricity, he couldn't watch television without the generator and because the signal was weak on the hills they needed a DVD player. The total cost was more than his earnings from the harvest, so he took a loan and mortgaged the land that had produced the big harvest. After a few months, with the interest charges on the loan and a bad harvest of rice that is alternated with corn, the family gave up the land. They kept the television set, the generator and the DVD player. Even without the land, that Mangyan family with all the household appliances is considered well off.

The tribe sent a student to the Mangyan Agricultural School. He excelled in class and was hardworking. He kept his garden well. He used compost and other organic materials as fertilizer. He diligently measured with his A-frame tool on the sloping land to prevent top-soil erosion. Yet after graduation, he returned to his village and reverted to its “modern” farming methods using chemical fertilizer. What happened? It is easier, he said, to follow instructions while he was at the school. Everyone was supportive of what he did and nobody laughed at him while he, like the other students, was gardening. And at school he had more time to measure the land before planting. Back home, the women do the gardening and men do the heavy work on the field. He would be ridiculed if he insisted on gardening. He tried, he said, to do SALT on their land, but the same elders who sent him to school were his main critics. They said it would take too long to prepare the land and so they would be late in planting. And composting and making organic fertilizer were too much work for the resulting small return.

So despite the financial support of the community for the young man's training, he was ridiculed for attempting things that could have helped improve his community's harvest and stewardship of the land. He could have started his own garden and SALT like his other classmates, to show his neighbours and elders the benefits of what he had learned. But shame and cultural norms discouraged him. So we have learned that our efforts will be fruitless if the community's culture is not taken account during the planning of any major change of farming method.

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The Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) of the Department of Agriculture agreed to give a loan to an Alangan community in West Mindoro. We were excited. We knew that there is a market for Mangyan handicrafts made from available non-timber forest products—baskets, coasters, hot pads, and similar handwoven and handcraft products. The trainers are Eastern Irayas who are skilled in these crafts. During the training, the Alangans brought their materials. Many showed great promise. Even Alangan men proved to be great weavers. Advanced orders were placed. It was the Christmas season and even the ATI staff ordered from the

Alangans. But the deadline for orders passed and no handicrafts were ready. The community said the time taken to fetch materials from far away, and for weaving, plus the cost of materials, made the profit margin unattractive to them. They wanted to resume their *kaingin* (slash and burn) farming.

In contrast, the Eastern Irayas are skilled weavers. Materials abound in their area and they prefer weaving in the comfort of their homes to hill farming. The Alangan women spend more than two days weaving an eight inch hot pad but the Irayas can finish one in half the time. So after consulting the Alangan group and the ATI staff, it was agreed that the money would be used on a different project. The tribe chose to invest it in rice seedlings. They returned the money on the agreed day and had enough left over to buy a new engine for their hand tractor. We can share the lessons learned from this with the different Mangyan Tribes of Mindoro.

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We have seen many examples of ecological degradation. One Mangyan Tribe known for their faithfulness to the Lord and for unity, were divided over the issue of mining. We facilitated a meeting and prayed with them as we studied biblical perspectives for resolving conflicts and bringing reconciliation.

On our first visit to a remote Iraya village, we stood in awe of the clear waters abounding with fresh-water fish and prawns. Little kids carried big stones on their shoulders as they crossed the rivers to prevent them from being swept away by the raging current. Our present of bags of salt was eagerly awaited, being much more highly valued than rice. Salt was a precious commodity to preserve their large catch of fish that went perfectly with their root crop staple.

When we returned some years later, we cried as we saw that the once pristine rivers had been made cloudy by illegal gold panning. A group of gold prospectors had persuaded the villagers to exchange fishing for the shine of gold. We reminded the church that as ministers of God's reconciliation, we are commanded to take care of the land. Some had resisted the temptation of easy money, but many succumbed. The rush of gold mining was followed a month after by a little boy's death. The child, as he had been accustomed, followed his father across the river. As he was crossing the water with a rock on his shoulder for balance, he stepped on a newly mined area, now much deeper than he remembered. He was carried away by a strong current and it was too late for his father to save him.

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OMF's integrated approach to mission was described by Denis Lane, a former director of the Fellowship, in *Keeping Body and Soul Together*. This book, written in 1982, shows that social and spiritual needs do not necessarily conflict. "Human need is human need, of whatever kind. Scripturally, spiritual and social need are as close as belief and life, faith and works, body and soul, hand and glove. Polarization of needs multiplies problems. God is the God of the

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whole life."² Therefore, just changing the structures of society will not meet the needs of the whole person. Equally it should be expected that the gospel will have beneficial social effects. Lane states that money can be a dangerous commodity and explained why OMF uses comparatively little in relief operations.

When OMF missionaries arrived in the Philippines in the 1950s, they did not have any plans for creation care, but came to share the gospel to the Mangyan people. However, as Lane described in his book, as they lived among the tribes, the missionaries could not ignore the tribes people's general needs. Mangyan lives were changing as they were freed from their spiritual bondage, but they continued to be enslaved by the cruelty and abusiveness of some of the lowlanders. Mangyan lives were lost and no justice would have been done had OMF missionaries not taken action. More local Christian professionals, church leaders, and young people from the city were mobilized to respond to the tribes' social and material needs. Later on, missionaries with agricultural expertise came to help with this practical ministry. A more concerted effort was made to provide regular assistance to empower the people. All of this took time. For instance, OMF missionaries started to teach SALT principles in the early 1980s, but it was only twenty years later that the Mangyan started to implement these principles for themselves.

While developing these responses to the Mangyans' pressing social and material needs, the missionaries did not lose sight of their original vision to share the gospel among the Mangyan. The integrated ministry that resulted led to Mangyan missionaries being sent all over the island of Mindoro and even to other Philippine islands, who combined gospel testimony and teaching with practical ministry.

One of the biggest obstacles in encouraging creation care among the Mangyan is the necessity of their meeting basic needs without engaging in quick-fix, unsustainable solutions such as illegal logging and slash and burn farming. The challenge is not to organize big, well-funded projects, but to sustain even a small ecologically-sound endeavour while engaging the national and civic sector in supporting it. This requires people committed to staying until the local people are empowered to take it forward. Diggelmann envisions a core group of Mangyan agricultural students transformed and practicing a lifestyle of creation care who influence others to do the same.



The missionary's example is more important than any big, expensive program to teach creation care. We should demonstrate our trust in the Lord in how we use the resources he has given us, and in our care for his creation. Big programs that try to impose rapid change normally last from three to six years. This is not long enough for a lasting change of the mindset of the indigenous people.

Making plans for the future and welcoming change have not been part of Mangyan culture. There is no word for "progress" in the Mangyan languages. In the past, the forest has always produced enough to meet daily needs. When it has not, people have looked for alternative ways of earning money, such as working as field labourers in the lowlands. As in other animistic cultures, it is expected that all the Mangyan people will be economically more or less equal, so that individuals are discouraged from "getting ahead". This means that any lasting change in response to new ecological challenges has to be owned by the whole community. The missionaries have been walking with the Mangyan for decades to build relationships of trust. This has meant patiently waiting until the Mangyan become more open to change, and teaching them the same lessons over and over again. For example, in 1996 we introduced coffee planting to complement the Mangyan's monoculture banana plantations. By the year 2000, they managed to plant about forty hectares of coffee. Working for three years before the fruit of their labor could be seen was very hard, so most of the coffee plantations were abandoned. Some ten years later the yield of the banana plantations dropped drastically and the price of coffee doubled. This convinced some to try coffee planting again.

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The spiritual and physical needs of the people we minister to belong together. The biggest need for the Mangyan in the future is not funding but people who are concerned about the whole person and have been transformed into God-trusting people who care for God's creation. They will walk alongside the Mangyan, to mentor them towards the calling God has given to each of us: to proclaim the good news and to be good caretakers of his creation. There is still a long way to go. There are challenges for the Mangyan that have yet to be addressed, such as the

conservation of endangered animals and plants. But our heavenly father is patient with us when we are slow learners and he is the same with the Mangyan.

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The pressures on the ecology of Mindoro, and the resulting challenges and opportunities for ministry among the Mangyan people, are examples of what is happening in varied but inter-related ways across the Philippines. I was a member of a crisis team responding to Haiyan, the super typhoon that caused so much loss of life and devastation in November 2013, especially in the Eastern Visayas. When the serenity of the sea was disturbed, it vented its rage and surged, not once but, in some areas, up to five times. Waves, as high as six meters, claimed thousands of lives and flattened whole communities.

There were many factors contributing to this catastrophe. The size and strength of the storm has been attributed to climate change, but we cannot deny that in one area, Western Samar, illegal logging used to thrive. Armed conflict between rebels and the military drove the people from their homes on the hills to settle near the coast. We can ask, if there had not been a breakdown of social relationships that caused the armed conflict, and if logging had been controlled, even if it meant limiting the output of many furniture and wood businesses, would there have been as many people living near the coast? And had the mangrove been conserved instead of being cleared for recreational businesses, would the sea surges have been diffused, sparing whole communities?



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NOTES

¹ SALT is a form of "alley farming" in which field and perennial crops are grown in bands four to five meters wide between contoured rows of trees and shrubs to reduce soil erosion while restoring soil fertility. It was pioneered in the Philippines by the Mindanao Baptist Rural Life Center (MBRLC).

² Denis Lane, *Keeping Body and Soul Together* (Sevenoaks: OMF, 1982), 8.