

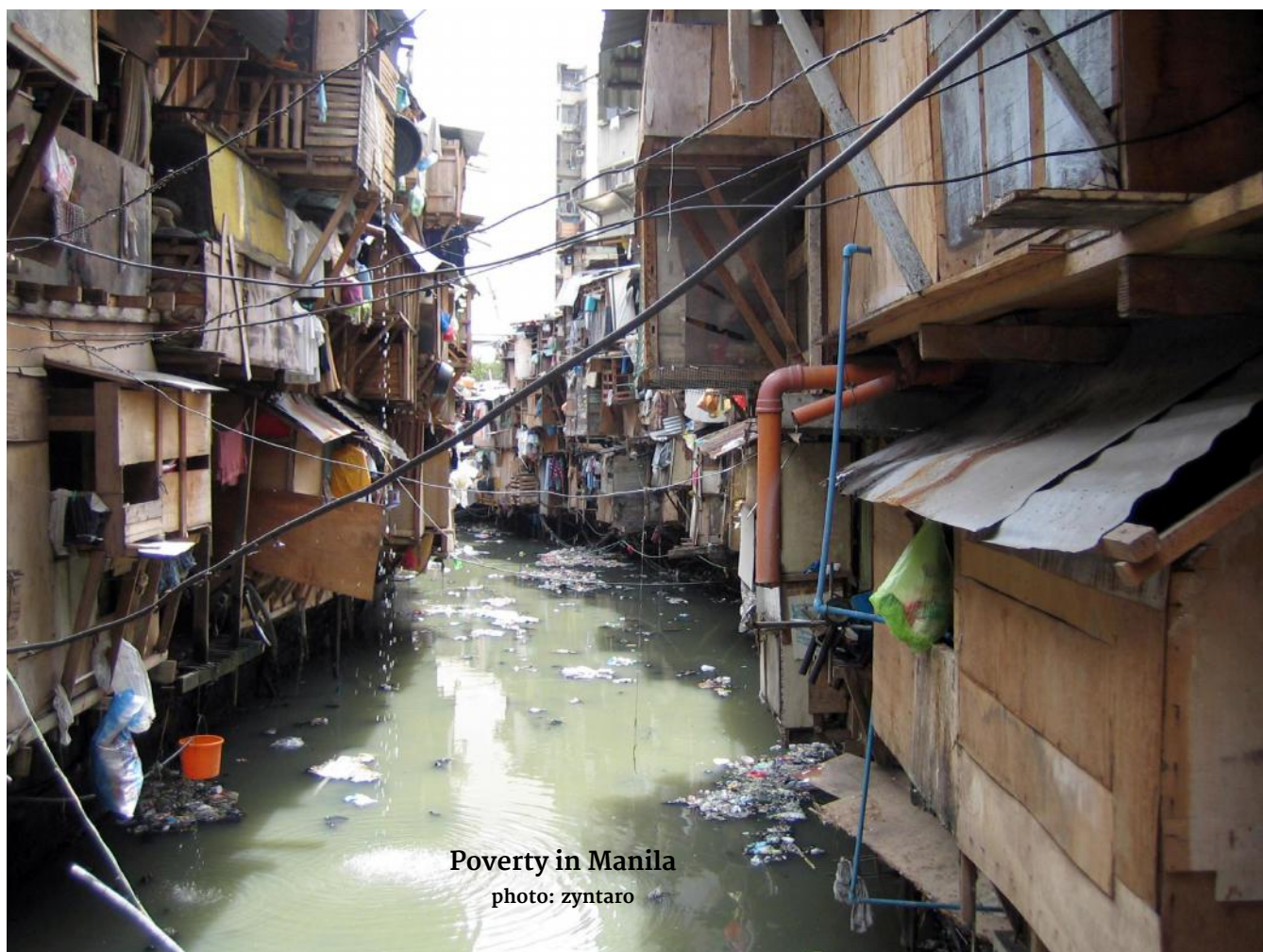
# Changing Human Hearts, Transforming a Nation

*Ruth S. Callanta* recounts how the stark contrast in Manila between abject poverty and enormous wealth caused her and her friends to try and do something about it. They tried to achieve social transformation by activism and other more radical social movements, working with NGOs, the business community and a change of government, but all these failed. They then decided that change can only come from the heart and started programmes combining both evangelism and social action.

The vision of realising social transformation had been my quest. Where I come from, where there is so much poverty in the midst of so much wealth, people are appalled by the contrast.

For me, it all began with a question: “Why is our country so rich, and yet we remain so poor?” If you walk the streets of Manila, you may ask the same question. The Philippines is very rich in

natural resources, yet so many people are at the edge of poverty, living a hand-to-mouth existence, dying daily from sickness and starvation – without anyone knowing about it.



**Poverty in Manila**  
photo: zyntaro



Many people's houses are dilapidated boxes. They eat meals which consist of rice mixed with mere water. The contrast is heartbreaking. This picture of poverty is set against the backdrop of beautiful blue mountains and rich forests with trees heavy with various fruits in the countryside. This scene is also set against a context of soaring skyscrapers and malls teeming with merchandise in the cities.

The Philippines is very rich beyond measure, yet also very poor beyond one's understanding. So the disturbing question: Why has a country so rich become so poor? Can this situation be changed? Is transformation possible at all? And if so, how?

### Approaches that Failed

We tried activism and other more radical social movements in our younger days, but an ideological bias entered the movement. The ideology was advanced, but our goal to lick poverty was sidelined. We joined non-government organisations

(NGOs), which are driven more by mind than heart, by methodology perfected by social reformers. But I witnessed NGO leaders helping themselves with goodies meant for the needy. Where is the real heart for the people, the passion to serve?

Then we sought answers from the business community, but the profit motive remains business's compelling force, making it difficult for enterprises to truly make transformation possible. An earnest effort to bring business to lick poverty and transform society was built into an ambitious business-led organisation called the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP), where I was executive director for some time. But "tokenism" took over, and real profound social change was not possible.

We thought a bloodless change in government might be the answer, especially when a dictator fled the country when he was face to face with a million-strong People Power Revolution. But it was a short-lived change. The change restored

democratic space, but the old ways returned as fast as they went.

Finally, our search for an answer to true, lasting transformation ended in something so close to us, something inside our chest: the human heart.

Where politics and power structures will fade, where developmental projects and strategies will cease, the human heart will throb forever. It can now be said: "The heart of the matter is the heart". True transformation is "A Question of the Heart." That by the way is the title of my book! <sup>1</sup>

There is one inescapable, compelling truth: the human heart can never truly be changed without the Cross of Christ. Christ is indeed the Center for Community Transformation.

### CCT – Bridging the Great Divide

CCT is the anchor for all community-based socio-economic programmes across all ministries of the CCT Group. It integrates CCT services in 176 areas of operation nationwide.





The ministry incubates new initiatives benefitting farmers, fisherfolk, savings groups, disaster and armed conflict survivors, communities at large, and overseas Filipino workers. It is also revitalising a community mobilisation and conversion, driven by the sustained spirit of volunteerism.

Our organisation, the Center for Community Transformation (CCT), is not an institution – it is a *movement*. An institution is interested merely in perpetuating its existence for its own good, but a *movement* is ever dynamic as it is driven by the passion to expand its impact — *for the greater good*.

I dare say that CCT is a theological movement that focuses on heart change. It’s a vision that sees that true transformation begins with changed hearts which in turn strengthen families. These families empower communities which in turn transform nations.

Theologian John Stott said: “According to Jesus, the ‘evils’ which we think, say and do are not due primarily to our environment, nor are they bad habits picked up from bad teaching, bad company or bad example; they are due to the inward corruption of our heart.”<sup>2</sup> In short, if you change a heart, you change everything.

The great divide in Christian evangelical service has been between evangelism and social action. Some groups advocate an over-spiritualised view of the Gospel focusing merely on evangelism and gospel sharing, and neglecting the finer points of feeding the poor, and taking care of the widows and orphans. Other groups advocate a focus on social action as a means for transformation, and neglect the vital point of the Gospel, the problem of sin, and the need for repentance.

Many groups begin and end with “social welfare” expressed in Christian philanthropy – feeding programmes, caring for widows and orphans, rehabilitating victims of abuse, visiting hospitals and jails, and alleviating pain and suffering. This contrasts with groups and churches that begin and end only with Gospel tracts and a prayer for salvation, with little else offered. Yet this divide shouldn’t exist at all, for the Gospel is one of the heart, and it is in the heart where physicality and spirituality come together.

When Jesus fed the five thousand, his act was from the heart—he had compassion for those who were hungry. But that heart-act would be used to point them to the spiritual reality of true provision and sustenance, and the physical reality of hunger.

When Jesus raised Lazarus, his act emanated from the heart – “He wept” – yet it was to point them to the spiritual reality of the Resurrection and the Life, and the physical reality of human death. His miracles were acts of the heart, as Christ allowed himself again and again to be interrupted, moved, and distracted. And yet they were according to God’s greater plan, because miracles were visible evidence of his high spiritual authority.

Christ’s compassion modelled his heart. To date, the physicality of the Cross remains the best picture of God’s limitless love. Simply said, physicality and spirituality come together.

This has been the driving force of CCT from the very beginning. It is to act out the compassion of God so that his glory is declared for everyone to see and feel. We have always worked out our salvation holistically – full of truth and grace.

### **Our Programmes**

Our feeding programmes, micro-finance, and savings groups are all evangelistic acts of compassion, first to our co-workers in Christ, and second to the various marginalised people we serve. When you see a beggar on the street, you wish government could solve the problem

of mendicancy. I remember a song, “When you point a finger at someone, three fingers are pointing back at you” – or words to that effect!

And so we realised God was asking us to do something. So at CCT we began a programme to invite street dwellers to our rehabilitation centres – to start life anew. (The rescued street dwellers are called “kaibigans” – inspired by the words of Christ when He said, “I now call you friends.”) Each of our social workers who minister to kaibigans has been the expression of love and an open door for discipleship. In every encounter, we make sure the kaibigan is gifted with a Bible in his pocket and a box of provisions in his bag.

We geared our microfinance business as a vehicle to transform people. As we mentor our partners to put up micro-enterprises – their first step away from poverty and steps closer to become wealth creators – we begin Bible study groups. So, over and above business, our micro-entrepreneurs become disciples of Christ, and they too advance God’s Kingdom. Imagine the multiplier effect of every micro-enterprise on the economy! Personal transformation, as experienced by many people, leads to community transformation.

We have a flourishing ministry for street children, they who once

roamed the streets of every city. After rescuing them from the clutches of poverty and crime, we bring them to our rehabilitation and training centres – and start a whole new life away from the uncaring and danger of the streets to the caring and safety of our centres. We call this ministry “Visions of Hope”.

We knew, from earlier on, that we cannot give what we do not have. Transformation begins with a transformed heart. Community change only begins when we ourselves are changed first. So we begin our day with a fellowship with God, before we have fellowship and ministries with people.

And God indeed is faithful. For what was once one ministry with just six members has blossomed into 16 ministries that reach out to street families, children, youth, micro-entrepreneurs, farmers, fisherfolk, informal workers, tribespeople, overseas Filipino workers, and the community at large.

**‘... we begin our day with a fellowship with God, before we have fellowship and ministries with people...’**


### **The Key to Transformation**

Through the years, people have come to the Philippines asking us what was the key to transformation, and what made CCT grow in such a manner. Many have come asking for frameworks and strategies and ideas about making lasting transformation into a reality. *We always answer in*

*this way – it is the Holy Spirit at work among His people.*

For we, as followers of Jesus Christ, merely join the Holy Spirit in God’s work of transforming lives and communities. And through that singular act of faithfulness – God’s faithfulness, not ours – we continue to expand a network of Christ-centered communities, where Jesus Christ is honoured as Lord and Saviour, and where people live with dignity and sufficiency, in accordance with God’s great plan for a just, humane, and caring society.

How is the love of Christ expressed in an uncaring society? It is manifested by acts of service to persons so they can live with dignity and justice. How do we enable our people to realise themselves as creatures made in the image of God? By pursuing ministries which address their total needs, spiritual and physical. How do we transform communities? By intentionally building faith-based communities composed of transformed individuals. How do we remain true to our mission? By praying to God daily to give us the gift of steadfastness, establishing our roots where we are needed, and putting up centres of transformation accessible to all our people.

How do we help transform a nation? By expanding into numerous faith-based communities from city to countryside, from valleys to mountains – driven by millions of changed hearts, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and led by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. 

1 Ruth S. Callanta, *A Question of the Heart*, CCT Publications, 2017.  
2. John R.W. Stott, ‘But I Say to You...!’ *Christ the Controversialist*, IVP, 2013.



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