



AUGUST 2015: PBCI-MCC FINALIZES HAIYAN DISASTER RESPONSE

Reported by Jonathan Cranston, Information and Communications Team

This month we mark the completion of a nearly two year PeaceBuilders Community Inc. operation designed to enhance the disaster response capabilities of the Church in the Visayan Islands of the central Philippines. From small beginnings, this program really took off thanks to the enthusiastic participation of the Visayan pastors and the financial backing of Mennonite Central Committee. As we thank God for blessing our endeavors in the Visayas, we look back on the events that led to our involvement in the region.

PeaceBuilders Community, Inc. (PBCI) staff missionary Kriz Cruzado has just tied up the final loose ends of a long-running PBCI operation in the Visayan Islands – a project she initiated, organized, managed, and has now completed. During her sojourn in the islands of Samar and Leyte, Kriz organized six teams of Christian ministers and oversaw their training in rapid disaster response, search and rescue, first aid, relief distribution, and PBCI’s Anabaptist-infused Peace And Reconciliation (PAR) principles. Each one of the six Peace And Reconciliation Disaster Response Networks (PAR-DRNs) learned to operate as a team, every member mastering an assigned role. In the aftermath of last December’s destructive Typhoon Hagupit, and during disaster simulations conducted last month in the city of Ormoc, the pastors got the chance put their training into action. They proved remarkably capable students, and as Kriz turns over management of the teams to the pastors themselves, she and PBCI are confident that the PAR-DRNs can save lives and alleviate the suffering occasioned by typhoons – which, in our Earth’s changing climate, now hit the Visayas harder than in past decades, and with ominous regularity.



Kriz can scarcely believe all that God has accomplished through her in less than two years; her goals when she first came to Ormoc were nowhere near so ambitious. She arrived in the Visayas in November 2013, as did thousands of others from across the globe, to aid the survivors of one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes the world had seen in decades.

On 14 November 2013, seven days after Super Typhoon Haiyan (Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines) crashed into the Visayas as the most powerful storm ever recorded at landfall, a team from PBCI



arrived in the devastated city of Ormoc, Leyte, winding their difficult way through debris-clogged streets filled with the stench of unrecovered dead. The team's immediate task was to connect with the city's Evangelical ministers and work with them to identify the hardest hit areas and the neighborhoods in direst need of relief supplies. Yolanda had killed thousands in Ormoc and left many thousands more in desperate want of shelter, food, and clean water, but so far most of the relief organizations responding to Yolanda had gone straight to the larger city of Tacloban, located on the opposite shore of Leyte and equally ruined by the storm. Thus, for many of Ormoc's pastors – leaders of their communities, who for the past week had been directing the best rescue efforts they could without supplies or support – the PBCI team were the first outsiders to come alongside them and share the burden.



Those first sleep-deprived weeks of the relief effort forged a close bond between the Ormoc pastors and PBCI. At the end of November, when Kriz arrived in Ormoc to take command of PBCI's relief operations, she too began to work closely with the pastors. Listening to their narratives of the first hours and days following Yolanda's fury, she became convinced that PBCI could make its greatest contribution to the future wellbeing of Visayans by seeing to it that their community leaders knew how to respond to storms. The local ministerial association vetted fifty pastors for Kriz's initial training course, which ran from January to July of 2014.

Some of the pastors enrolled in this course came from neighboring regions outside of Ormoc, and at the end of their training they urged Kriz to help them organize local disaster response networks in their home territories. So Kriz accepted that considerable task as well, eventually overseeing the training of 150 disaster responders for the six local PAR-DRNs.

As she concludes her role in Samar and Leyte, Kriz is optimistic that the new model of church-based rescue and relief squads will not end with the initial six PAR-DRNs, but will be reproduced throughout the Visayan islands, where so many communities in harm's way need a force of trained first responders on call – something that government cannot provide for every neighborhood. Four of Kriz's pastor trainees recently spent a week in Davao City, where PBCI CEO Rev. Daniel Pantoja put them through further training to prepare them to take over the work of organizing and equipping rescue networks. It seems a movement is underway, and that the Church in the Visayas is now willing more completely to embrace its role as Christ's hands and feet in the world. The pastors of the Visayas are ready to rush into danger to defend the lives of their neighbors.