



The Madaris Volunteer Program and the Document of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together

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Abstract

The Madaris Volunteer Program (MVP) is an initiative of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines being implemented by the Ateneo de Davao University in partnership with the National Association for Bangsamoro Education, Inc., and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Madaris Volunteers serve the Bangsamoro communities with some of the lowest literacy rates in the country after decades of disenfranchisement and unrest from armed conflicts. The MVP deploys volunteers to teach government-mandated subjects in various madaris in the BARMM. The MVP has been most privileged to have amassed great support from the local communities. The volunteers are welcomed to stay among host families and are treated as friends and allies whose presence inspires interreligious and intercultural dialogue. These principles are at the heart of the MVP's work with the volunteers and their partner academic communities, and this friendship among equals is a commitment to the principles of healing and reconciliation. Through the experience of immersion, the volunteers and the Madaris community were able to forge trust and solidarity, to eventually erase prejudices towards each other. The MVP has started to bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians and commits to the continuous process of healing and reconciliation.

Introduction

Islam arrived in the Philippines in the late fourteenth century. For a time, Islam was the dominant religion in the Philippines, especially in the southern Philippines. However, with the subsequent colonization of Spain and the United States, the Muslims became the minority (Angeles, 2013). As of 2022, according to World Population Review (2022), around 81% of the country are Roman Catholics while only 5.6% are Muslims.

From majority to minority, the Muslims fought for a very long time for them to retain their religion, culture, and identity during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Decades of conflicts have hindered human development, especially in the educational sector. The newly established Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao's (BARMM) literacy rate consistently ranks as the lowest in the country.

As a response, the Ateneo de Davao University sought to help improve the learning conditions in the region through the implementation of the Madaris Volunteer Program. MVP is being implemented by the Ateneo de Davao University in partnership with the National Association for Bangsamoro Education, Inc. and the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). The MVP deploys volunteers to teach government-mandated subjects in various madaris (Islamic schools) in the Bangsamoro region. After seven years of peacebuilding through education, the Madaris Volunteer Program has been most privileged to have amassed great support from the local communities. The volunteers are welcomed to stay among host families and are treated as friends and allies whose presence inspire interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

In line with its mission to assist in improving the quality of education in the Bangsamoro, the Madaris Volunteer Program also spearheads capability enhancement trainings and a variety of seminars and workshops specifically designed to address the individual needs of the MVP's partner madaris. These capability enhancement trainings aim to empower partner madaris in their capacity to facilitate learning, design strategies for their schools, and manage their respective learning institutions. They are facilitated in partnership with various offices and organizations of the Ateneo de Davao University as well as other Catholic schools in the Philippines

Now, in light of the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the Madaris Volunteer Program is determined to respond to the call for the adoption of the “*culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; [and] reciprocal understanding as method and standard.*” These principles are at the heart of the MVP's work with the volunteers and their partner academic communities, and this friendship among equals is a commitment to the principles of healing and reconciliation.

Our Strides for Human Fraternity

As a program, the MVP is deeply aware of and influenced by the transformative nature of its mission. This is not just about sending volunteer teachers to teach. The MVP is sending persons who want to be transformed in the immersion process, and in their transformation, they help transform others.

Culture of Dialogue as the Path

The MVP is an example of fraternity-motivated dialogue. Following the *Dialogue of Life and Faith* framework of the late Bishop Bienvenido Tuddud (prelate of Marawi from 1977-1987), the invitation to our volunteers is to meet the other at the heart level. Dialogue is not just a meeting of systems of ideologies. The dialogue of life and faith is a meeting of the hearts, that is, to feel the fears and miseries of the other while sharing in their happiness and triumph.

Dialogue is not about proselytization; it is an engagement by sharing experiences and how an individual or a group experiences God's call and responds to it.

During the deployment, both parties experience an initial resistance to each other, however, as they live and know each other not through the lens of prejudices but of understanding and openness, mutual acceptance occurs. Outside the classroom, the teacher-volunteers are vulnerable to being singled out and discriminated upon. To these discriminatory acts, the targeted volunteer responded in various ways: by engaging in respectful dialogue to clarify the prejudiced view; by quietly carrying out his mentoring duties; gently-firmly expressing his disagreement with destructive acts; and by offering gestures of friendship. These cases of bullying illustrate the process of conflict and reconciliation.

Mutual Cooperation as the Code of Conduct

The MVP also follows the path of mutual cooperation. The MVP volunteers work hand in hand with the teachers of the madaris, *asatidz* (Islamic Studies teacher), administrators, and parents and guardians to improve the quality of education in the school. The MVP offers capacity enhancement trainings executed through strategic partnerships with other Jesuit schools and public schools in the Philippines. The MVP delivered several trainings focusing on sharing best practices and innovative teaching strategies, peace education, and digital literacy.

There was an increase in the participation of the students throughout the school year. The volunteers' students' class participation in Science subjects has been impressive. This significantly high improvement in the students' class engagement may be attributed to the volunteers' passion and efforts to develop innovative teaching methods.

Students were also exposed to more learning opportunities through the volunteers' efforts. Some students reported a renewed appreciation for learning languages such as Filipino or English because of the volunteers' teaching approaches. According to Gomez (2017), the madaris students and teachers in the Bangsamoro share a common narrative that the MadarisVolunteers helped them look at Christians and non-Moro people and allowed them to be more open to working with them. This is due primarily to how the volunteers' engaged the students.

Students recounted that the volunteers treated them like family - without prejudice. The faculty members and administrators also appreciated the willingness of the female volunteers to wear the *hijab*, as well as the rest of the volunteers' expression of solidarity with the Muslim community by joining them to fast during Ramadan.

As a response to the challenge of distance learning, the MVP also started the mentorship program for the Madaris Volunteers. This is a one-on-one session between the MVP volunteer and a teacher from different Jesuits Schools all over the Philippines. This became an avenue for Jesuit school teachers to embody the value of being men and women for others and an invitation for mutual learning from each other.

Reciprocal Understanding as Method and Standard

The MVP is also a model of reciprocal understanding. As the volunteer immersed one'sself in the realities of the community, the volunteers experienced a deepening of self-identity while discovering similarities and differences with others. Coming from the perspective of a volunteer, Joshua Michael Ascaño (Batch 5 - SY 2019-2020) reflects on his experience in Tipo-Tipo, Basilan: *"As a Christian, I realized the beauty of living in a community, to have relationships with Muslims and to share in their joys and sufferings as well as with their hopes and dreams. It is one thing that made me truly human; that is, I was able to relate more and be "with" the people."*

After several months of living with the community, volunteers gained the trust of community members even though they were Non-Muslim and/or from a different ethnolinguistic group. The positive responses of the volunteers on behalf of the other, done with sympathy, a generous spirit, and openness that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, resulted in the development of relationships of reciprocity, approachability, respect, appreciation, and gratitude – resulting in the “once outsider-stranger” becoming a part of the community.

The MVP also advocates cultural competence and religious tolerance. In one of the religious tolerance training of the MVP attended by Islamic Studies teachers and Catholic

Religious Education teachers, Mr. Rowell Ray Aseneta, a Christian participant stated: *“What makes this capacity building training very special to me is how it debunked my negative perceptions of our brothers and sisters in our Muslim communities... To all the asatidz in this training, I have high regard for all of you. You have my respect, you have my praise, and you have gained my trust.”*

Moving towards Human Fraternity

In this time of conflict and misunderstanding brought about by differences in culture, religion, and ideologies, living out the message of the Document of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together is very critical. The experiences of the Madaris Volunteer program resonate with the statement of Rev. Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (2000), SJ, 29th Superior General of the Jesuits, that “solidarity is learned through contact, rather than concepts ...when the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection.”

Through the experiences of immersion, the volunteers and the Madaris community were able to forge trust and solidarity and erase prejudices towards each other. The Madaris Volunteer Program has started to bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians and commits to the continuous process of healing and reconciliation in Mindanao.

Resources

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Web links:

Facebook: Madaris Volunteer Program

Twitter: @teachmadaris

Instagram: @madarisvolunteers

Website: www.teachmadaris.org

Youtube: Madaris Volunteer Program