

Sharing by the Concerned Citizens of the Diocese of Alaminos (CCDA)

The Concerned Citizens of the Diocese of Alaminos (CCDA) is comprised of various non-government organizations that advocate “Social Transformation.” Catalyzed by the Diocesan Social Action Center’s program on Political Development and Participatory Governance, their activities are divided into three (3) phases: before, during, and after election. The third phase, after election, is crucial in enhancing whatever gains may have been earned in the first two phases.

CCDA’s initiatives include advocacy and mobilization to respond to current issues and problems; education, formation, and capacity-building, especially of leaders; participation in local special bodies (LSBs), such as Development Councils; and many other activities that are meant to help attain the integral development of people and communities.

One unique experience of CCDA is its mobilization of Basic Ecclesial Communities as agent of Social Transformation and Renewal.

A. The Socio-Political Setting:

The Diocese of Alaminos, which was established in 1985, is one of three dioceses in the province of Pangasinan. It is situated on the western part of the province, once tagged as the “wild, wild west” for having the reputation as haven of cattle rustlers, carnappers, and other lawless elements. It is also quite far from the center of development so that this part of the province was virtually neglected in many aspects.

But this once-notorious label has been changed into “golden west of Pangasinan,” for the growth and development experienced by the area through the years. The lawless elements have stopped in their nefarious activities, and were not heard of since then.

The diocese is composed of nineteen (19) parishes in thirteen (13) municipalities and one (1) city, and its current population is about a half million (500,000) people. Its first resident bishop is the Most Rev. Jesus A. Cabrera, D.D. With his clergy and some lay leaders, they embarked on the task of formulating a pastoral plan for the development of the diocese. This pastoral plan included programs and activities that would respond to the primary needs of the constituents.

It is generally known that the prevailing political system has a great effect on people’s lives. In fact it can be a stumbling block to development. But political renewal, which is primarily the responsibility of lay people because they directly participate in elections and governance, can spur growth and development among individuals, and on the nation as a whole.

To bring about renewal in politics, the elected must fulfill their roles with fidelity, and have service for the majority as their motivation. The people, on the other hand, must

do their duties as responsible citizens: participate in governance as mandated by law; demand for their rights to good governance and services by the government; be responsible in exercising the rights to suffrage, and advocate for transparency and accountability in government.

The following events describe the challenges faced by the Concerned Citizens of the Diocese of Alaminos (CCDA):

(a) In December 1992, two thousand (2,000) lay leaders and ordinary citizens led by Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) Chairperson Clarita F. Fajardo, filed a demand with the local government of Alaminos for the closure of honky-tonk joints and beerhouses locally known as “five doors.” These were prostitution fronts which caused disturbances in communities around them: crimes, broken families, several young people who stopped attending school, and a number of young women lured into prostitution, and sickness.

The Alaminos folks asserted their rights as electorate by signing a petition with deep conviction. The process involved the formation of a core group, the Concerned Citizens of Alaminos, which regularly met and planned what action to take. It served as the representative of the people, and it established a feedback mechanism which continuously informed the people regarding the status of their petition.

The issue was brought to a wider coverage through the radio station DZWM of the diocese, where government officials were interviewed regarding the issue; and through print media, notably the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

During religious processions, placards were carried out announcing the sentiments of the people against immorality. Additionally, the people also used streamers, flyers, billboards, and other print materials to inform local officials of their sentiment.

The exposure made so many people aware of the issue that the signatories swelled to more than 10% of the voting population. This must have prompted the local government to finally close all “five-door” establishments in Alaminos, after four (4) months of protest by the people.

(b) The second challenging event was in January 1997: this was the opposition by the people to the construction of a transmission tower by Smart Communications within a residential area along Plaridel street, in Alaminos.

1. a first-class municipality must have an annual income of P20 million; but at the time Alaminos was classified as first-class municipality, it was barely earning P20 million;
2. a first-class municipality must have a population of at least 150,000; yet Alaminos has only a little more than 70,000; and
3. Alaminos lacks the area required of a city, and would attain it only if it would include the Hundred Islands National Park which is administered by the national government.

Additionally, CCDA found out that the document showed by the local government for public information was different from the one approved by Congress: the latter did not have the provision which would give the people a tax moratorium for five (5) years once

Alaminos becomes a city.

The people mounted a strong campaign to reject the cityhood movement; but in this instance, they failed.

Notwithstanding the failure, the people of Alaminos could hold their heads high in the knowledge that they fought for what they believed in, and history will judge them not as mere spectators but principled ones who stood for what was right and true.

B. Programs and Projects of CCDA:

CCDA's voluntary work is centered on contributing to Political Development and Participatory Governance, divided into three phases: before, during, and after elections.

1. Before elections:

1.1. Voters' Education: where voters are helped to understand the importance of elections as a vehicle for change; guidelines in voting are provided them; and their understanding of Christian principles in relation to the right to suffrage is deepened.

1.2. Candidates' Forum: which aims at educating voters and candidates on the need for issue politics. Here, candidates inform the people of their platform, and the voters are able to ask the candidates re their stand on issues and concerns affecting them.

1.3. Covenant Signing: to make candidates affirm their commitment to work for honest, orderly, and peaceful elections. It is also a pledge by candidates not to resort to violence, vote buying, and cheating in elections; and to accept defeat or be magnanimous in victory.

1.4. Public Prayer: where all candidates are presented to the public, and the people in turn pray over them; the intention for peaceful elections is emphasized during the service.

1.5. Information Drive: through the leaders of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), the people are encouraged to go out and vote on election day. The location of polling precincts of voters are made known by posting the COMELEC list of voters in strategic places, or by informing the voters individually through the BEC leaders.

2. During elections:

2.1. Voters' Assistance: through the volunteers, voters are assisted in locating the precincts where they belong in order to vote there.

2.2. Poll watching: through volunteer poll watchers, violations against the Election Code are documented and reported, minimizing cheatings.

2.3. Canvassing and Quick Count: hand in hand with the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), CCDA assists in the canvassing of votes, parallel to the official counting of votes. This system has minimized cheating because the people are given advance results of the counting, with which they compare the COMELEC official count and the NAMFREL unofficial count for discrepancies.

3. After elections--refers to the period the elected officials assume office, and CCDA initiatives here include:

3.1. Advocacy and Mobilizations: examples include the closure of leisure houses which undermine the

morals of the people; campaign against Alaminos's cityhood; opposition to Smart Communications' transmission tower construction in a populated area; rollback of tricycle fares; opposition to Charter change; protection of women's and children's rights; dialogue with the local government regarding lack of consultation re mall construction via BOT scheme; and legal battle against the Agno Cement Plant; and people's march and forum on prohibited drugs and illegal gambling.

3.2. Education, Formation, and Capacity-building: for CCDA and other lay leaders on participatory governance

3.3. Participation in Local Special Bodies—like the Municipal Development Council, PBAC, Peace and Order Council, etc.

3.4. Other activities: institution-building of CCDA, coalition-building with NGOs and POs; establishment of poverty alleviation and ecology projects; support for projects that provide social services; and continuing dialogue with local government officials regarding various issues and concerns of the citizenry.

C. Tools and Strategies:

The major strategy of CCDA in serving the Diocese of Alaminos is anchored on raising the consciousness of the citizens on their rights and responsibilities towards clean and honest elections. Thus, the processes which it does encompass the following:

1. Retreat and Team Building Seminars for volunteer facilitators for clean and honest elections so that their effort will be based on belief in the Great Creator, and their activities will be assured of support by the parish.

2. Volunteer Trainers' Training: for a pool of volunteers who will subsequently train citizens from various sectors, who will raise the barangay folks' awareness of their political rights. Those trained from the barangays will check on the elected officials, to ensure transparency and accountability by those in government.

3. Conduct of Candidates' Forum with the following process flow:

3.1. Each candidate is given time to present her/his agenda. Time allotment is as follows:

for Councilor = 5 minutes
for Vice-Mayor = 5 minutes
for Mayor = 7 minutes

3.2. The sequence of speeches by candidates is determined by drawing of lots.

3.3. An open forum comes after the candidates' speeches. Questions and comments must be direct-to-the-point, and must not be marked by any form of black propaganda.

D. Lessons Learned as Volunteer Worker:

"More than anything, we, the laity who are part of this group, the Concerned Citizens of the Diocese of Alaminos and as PPCRV volunteers, believe God is working with us through these experiences. Thus, we became more inspired to go on doing these things. More than ever we noticed that we are now involved in local governance. But it wasn't easy because some government officials would not make it possible for us, Church people, to get in their way because they feel that our involvement meant Church interference in their turf. And thanks to another blessing, the Local Government Code of 1991 which has given us the legitimacy to

participate in governance.

Clarita F. Fajardo
Founding Chairperson, CCDA

“When I returned to Alaminos to practice law, I did not expect to get involved in local issues. But I readily saw the need to participate in activities that opened the eyes of the masses. It is a self-imposed duty. If there is anything I learned from this volunteer work, I saw that people appreciate the fact that a group of citizens educate others, get them involved and empower them in the process.”

Amado Campos Sison
Legal Counsel, CCDA

“We are members of a newly-organized BEC in our parish. Through our meetings, we are able to have regular exchange of ideas, and these for me became venues for listening to important events around us in our town. My joining the mobilizations and advocacy work and rallies with other citizens made me realize my full potentials and what I can contribute for the greater good even if I am an ordinary housewife and citizen.”

Rufina J. Gabriel
Councilor, City of Alaminos

“My involvement started with election concerns, which broadened to other community activities. I could not just close my eyes to the social ills affecting the lives of people especially the poor. As a concerned citizen, I became more vigilant and encouraged others to get involved in advocating for meaningful changes in our society.”

Miguel S. Maizano
Member, CCDA

“As a Christian, I have come to realize that it is my duty to get involved not only in spiritual but also other activities that address economic, environmental, political, cultural, and social issues that hinder peace and development in our town. We may not have been successful in all our undertakings, but the truth that we did what we believe is best and according to the will of God is enough consolation and inspiration to go on.”

Lourdes B. Garcia
Member, CCDA