

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Embodiment and Transcendence among Tuguegarao Presbyterian Full-time Workers in the Philippines: A Marcelian Existential Analysis

Jay Emmanuel Asuncion*

Abstract: In the Northern Philippines, the Tuguegarao Presbyterian Church (TPC) has dramatically altered the course of the lives of its members and the community. This is attributed to full-time workers who use their physical and spiritual strength to become the forerunners of evangelizing mission in Tuguegarao and the whole Cagayan Province. Today, they are agents of transformation in their local church and communities. The study used a phenomenological method to unravel the lived experiences of nine full-time workers of TPC along with embodiment and transcendence. The participants were interviewed and their narratives were transcribed for thematic analysis. Further, Marcelian existentialism was used as a frame. Results showed that their physical bodies were integral in interacting, engaging, and serving their local church and the people of their community. However, there were also limitations and difficulties that they encountered. These propelled them to fully surrender themselves, realizing their transcendental exigency, which enabled them to hope and keep their faith despite the challenges they encounter. Moreover, this research is essential in knowing who are they to come up with church policies and frameworks to empower them further to become better agents of transformation in their local church and community.

Keywords: lived experiences, TPC, Marcel's existentialism, phenomenology, embodiment, transcendence

INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the fundamental social institutions, and the concepts of embodiment and transcendence among religious organizations should be explored. The importance of the body in religious practices or activities, and the authentic connection of the religious people in the spiritual realm are to be unraveled. Religious scholars and theologians

* Jay Emmanuel Asuncion (✉)

College of Allied Health Sciences, Cagayan State University, Philippines
e-mail: buds122386@yahoo.com

look into the body as essential in religious life and practices (Miller-McLemore 2013).

In the Northern Philippines, the pious and sacrificial life of TPC full-time workers shaped the lives of people in community. Primarily the integral evangelization efforts of Korean missionaries Kim Ja Sun and Kang Jeong In have greatly affected the lives of people in the City and the whole province of Cagayan. Specifically, full-time workers gave up their secular careers to be active workers of the local church. This study focuses on their lived experiences; particularly, on their bodily experiences as church workers at the same time, on their experience of transcendence, and how they go beyond their bodily limitations in the journey with their faith lives.

The phenomenological study is framed in Gabriel Marcel's existentialism. It aims to answer the following questions: What are the different lived experiences of the TPC full-time workers along with embodiment and transcendence? How can these lived experiences be reflectively analyzed using the Marcelian existential frame? It follows to explore the lived-experiences of TPC full-time workers along with embodiment and transcendence, to describe the significance of their embodiment and transcendence, and to reflectively analyze the lived experiences of TPC full-time workers using the Marcelian view. It may enrich the church workers of TPC in enhancing their formation by making them highly aware of the history of grace in their lives and the continual offer of life and love of God through a more conscious practice of the spiritual discipline. It is a diary of their prayerful dialogue and conversations with the Triune God that could be a source for sermons speaking about the experienced outflow and outpouring of God's love for us in severe challenges. This study could trigger more stories of divine blessings and grace in the context of vulnerable or chaos situations. Likewise, the diaries of leaders, as well as followers, could record all the joyful moments. In our pains and struggles in life, it is essential to gaze at the cross, with its promise of resurrection, renewal, revitalization and celebration.

The use of Marcel's exigency of transcendence as a frame contributes to the analysis of grounded numinous phenomena. Its use is essential in coming up with a theory of integrating the embodiment and transcendence of workers in a religious institution. Notably, this study is imperative to come up with policies that would fully empower the full-time workers in their active engagement of being with others, and

most of all how their innate yearning as believers manifested by faith could have an impact on human, social and spiritual revival.

RELATED LITERATURE

Gabriel Marcel (1949, 1951) vividly expressed and made a distinction between “I have my body” and “I am my body”, concluding that the body can be seen as an object and a subject alike. This explicates the intersubjectivity of the body that is here used to venture on the importance of embodiment of the full-time workers of TPC.

Marcel specified that human beings are not just rational beings. He emphasized the concept of transcendental exigency, the essentiality of their need for the other: “Transcendental exigency is rooted in the ontological exigency of being. The search for perfection is going beyond being. Thus, there is a need for human beings to transcend, related to their search for fullness or perfection” (Marcel 1951, 37). For a theistic existentialist, this exigency cannot be separated from God. The spiritual nature of human beings is a mystery. It is only through participation and active engagement with the divine that the fullness of being can be realized. Such a view could be a guide in the phenomenological study on the full-time workers of TPC.

In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber discussed transcendence as an integral way of how human beings participate in the world: the “I-Thou” establishes the world of relation, and it can be understood in three spheres of our relationship with nature, with fellow men, and with spiritual beings in the realm of transcendence (Buber 1958). We surrender ourselves to a higher being because we see our limitations; therefore, we participate in a divine being. There are genuineness and authenticity in this relationship; “there is no deception in this sphere; here is the cradle of real-life” (Buber 1958, 9). Buber’s work about the primacy of spirituality as regards the I-Thou relationship is used in this study, looking at the local church as an institution that holds the spiritual formation and faith of the full-time workers of TPC, marking their personal experience of transformation and no less the change of the local church, which influences society and the local community.

The study of Esmeralda Sanchez (2003) on El Shaddai full-time workers was “an attempt to understand the Filipino religious movement” by reflecting, describing and analyzing the lived experiences of her six co-researchers, including Mike Velarde (the founder of El Shaddai movement). The author realized an insight into the deep relation to God as an essential character of a spiritual journey.

Reynaldo Romero (2006) described the lived experiences of pastoral workers in the ministry. Their spiritual experiences resulted in a profound personal transformation, which led to social change manifested itself through the active participation of the pastoral workers in their respective communities. Nur Kafid's work (2014) explicated how religion plays an essential role in changing an individual and society. Such related studies used the phenomenological inquiry, as the present one does; but the difference lays in the scope and geographical location, and in its focus on the participants' lived-experiences concerning the problem of embodiment and transcendence. None of the above phenomenological studies have ventured into this.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

This study is a descriptive, qualitative, phenomenological approach, analyzing the lived experiences of TPC full-time workers; both researcher and participants are engaged in a dialogue (Groenewald, 2004).

The researcher selected nine study participants or co-researchers based on the following criteria: one must be a full-time worker of the church, should have ten years of experience as a full-time worker in the church, and is willing to narrate the own lived experiences.

Themes collected from the narratives of the study participants/co-researchers

Theme 1: Experiences of suffering

The study participants do not belong to privileged families. They came from poor, marginalized and troubled hopeless families. Almost all of them do not have the means to study. At specific points in their lives, they have felt empty, and they would like to give up. Life for them was bleak and dark. At an early age, they lived in a constant struggle for their survival. They also experienced a lot of suffering and troubles in their homes. One study participant said: "During my younger days, I needed to accompany my mother in selling fish, walking from barangay to barangay just to get allowance for school. Life was difficult for me" (SP1). In the case of others, they always witness the constant fights of their parents. One would even recall how she, her mother and siblings jumped from the second floor of their house to save their lives because her father was alcoholic (SP2). The experience of poverty during childhood is pervasive among the co-researchers.

They belong to needy families, and they came from remote areas. One study participant recalled his experience of being poor: “There were times when we did not have any money to buy food. So, we just ate camote (sweet potato), or mixed oil with rice and salt to suffice our starving tummies” (SP4).

Theme 2: Need for the other

The family members positively influenced some of the study participants. One was influenced by his wife and admitted that he became a member of the church through the fervent prayer of his wife: “Before, I had many vices, and I never liked to be a member of the church. It was my wife who convinced me to attend.”

The persons who greatly influenced the study participants were Missionary Kim and Missionary Kang, who went to their places to share the gospel. Almost every day, the two missionaries lead bible studies from place to place to spread the Word of God. Every Sunday, they preached the Word in the church. The gospel message has captured the hearts of the members to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. One said: “Since the missionaries have evangelized me, my life and community have been transformed. We attest to the power of the gospel in changing our lives. It is through the missionaries that I learned Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life” (SP 9). The missionaries have always been significant figures among the study participants in their spiritual journey. Missionary Kim always prays for every member of the church, calling out every name, kneeling in prayer every day. Missionary Kang prepares food for the members and, most notably, for the workers of the church. Sometimes they treat them in restaurants to eat, talk, and give godly advice and to have fellowship. In times of troubles or sickness, they have always been there to visit and pray, even to give financial assistance. They never stop serving the church and its members. They have dedicated their lives to the mission field. The full-time workers can testify on their genuine, heart-moving service. Thus, they have been an inspiration and guide to serving the church and its members who have wholeheartedly accepted them. On various occasions, the full-time workers seek their wise guidance. Many would admit that during the times when they were confused regarding the purpose of their lives, the missionaries have been an essential factor for them to heed the call of God in the mission field. Moreover, the missionaries have lived a pious and zealous life, especially in administering spiritual discipline. Missionary Kim would lead the congregation into monthly fasting. Both

missionaries would go every Sunday to the remote areas of the mission field after leading Sunday worship in Tuguegarao. “Their lives have been an inspiration for us and have significantly impacted our lives, which stirred in us how we could also be of help in the mission field in our ways” (SP1). On a few occasions, the missionaries would also impose discipline in the church, like calling the attention of members privately or publicly. Sometimes they are mistakenly identified as strict. However, inside their hearts, they want to train members to be real disciples of Jesus; so, the participants expressed their sincere gratitude.

Theme 3: Challenges and difficulties

Some of the study participants caused the displeasure of their parents when they decided to become full-time workers. This situation has not been easy for them. Their parents often beat them because they would not allow them to attend the church. One recalled: “My clothes were packed and thrown outside our house when I showed eagerness to attend the regular meetings of the church. My family persecuted me” (SP 4). Families persecuted most of the co-researchers for being members of the church. However, they always believed that God would open the hearts of their families. Remarkably, after years of waiting and praying, their family members became leaders of the church.

It has been noted that the TPC full-time workers also encounter many difficulties and challenges in the mission field. One of these is having multiple roles because there were few workers in the mission field. Thus, all of them have multiple designations. Pastors were assigned in multiple churches and outreach bible studies (there are 34 established TPC churches). This task gave them limited time to engage with their members. Missionaries and pastors needed to lead three or more churches every Sunday. Some of them were also in charge of the administration part of the mission. The heavy working load made them physically exhausted and vulnerable to diseases. In the mission field, there were many dangers. Several times, pastors and missionaries needed to cross the river despite the strong current: “There were times that I needed to cross the river to reach my serving church. Although the strong current of the river and the water were getting deep, I decided to go because it is my duty. I almost got drowned. Praise God, I was able to gain my strength to swim” (SP7). Another difficulty they had is doing monthly fasting, as part of their spiritual discipline. All of

them confessed that self-denial was hard for them; however, they were eventually accustomed and fasting became their monthly habit.

Theme 4: Surrender

A serious challenge for the study participants was to give up their secular careers. They might have had a high monthly salary rate; they might have enjoyed more material goods and resources in life, but they let go of these material blessings when they decided to live according to God's calling as a greater purpose. They struggled to heed the call. Countless times they wondered about their future, knowing that being a full-time worker will not make them wealthy. However, these thoughts did not impede them in obeying with faith that God who called them will do immeasurably more than they can ask or imagine; they have obeyed the call to work in the church. Calling for them is very important to stay in the mission field; without it, they cannot endure the hardships and difficulties in the mission field.

Theme 5: Directing towards the divine and freedom

Through prayer and words of God, the study participants have overcome the difficulties and challenges they face in the mission field, remaining steadfast in their faith, in constant communion with God. This spiritual work has been a regular habit among full-time workers. The missionaries have taught them that spirituality is of utmost importance to carry the evangelizing mission and other works of the church. Missionary Kim would always say "No prayer, no work"; so, nothing is impossible.

The study participants have a constant feeling of unworthiness, which makes them to seek the grace and mercy of God. After hearing there is forgiveness by confessing and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, feeling unworthy was turned into gratefulness and they experienced real freedom. One confirmed: "I am free because I live with Jesus, the way, the truth and the life; and the truth shall set me free. I am free, indeed" (SP 9).

At the same time, the study participants experience a change from despair to hope, learning from the gospel message. Despite all the difficulties, they move forward with hope. This is the same hope especially among the study participants in doing evangelizing mission, in building churches, in sharing it with those weary and oppressed. Missionary Kim and Missionary Kang have received the same hope to dedicate their lives to serve the mission field. Even though they would feel so tired to the point of being sick, they continue to hopefully work

for the transformation of people's lives that is also experienced by the community.

Theme 6: Creative testimony; born again

All of the co-researchers would affirm the change of heart. Since they have heard the gospel, they became aware of their volitions and corrupt nature that led them to come to repentance. Gradually, little by little, there has been an inner change in their hearts and mindset. They were transformed because of the love of God. From seeking pleasure and material success in the world, they have learned to depend on God's grace. One of them has given up all his vices to follow Jesus. Some of them have dreamed of being economically well, but their mindset was changed. Others who wanted to go abroad to pursue greener pastures changed their plans. They could have earned a large amount of money if they pursued a secular career. Nevertheless, their thinking was changed. From a worldly perspective of success, they have learned the importance of contentment by serving the church as primordial. They have given up their secular works wherein they can have more money and opportunities; they have given up a lot of sweet hours of their sleep for tirelessly working in the ministry; they have denied themselves and learned to sacrifice for the church. They are not perfect, but the grace of God is continually transforming them, making them to born again; and this means a new heart, a new life, being regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Theme 7: Serving others and community

All of the study participants were directly involved in reaching the lost by sharing the gospel. They yearly engaged in activities with prisoners and patients in mental hospital, and twice a year in medical missions, trying to communicate God's love through acts of compassion and kindness, especially to the poor and vulnerable in society. They do this with utmost dedication and commitment.

DISCUSSION BASED ON MARCEL'S EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS

Gabriel Marcel tried to answer the ontological question by stating not just "I am a thinking being" but rather "me and the other beings are experiencing the world" (Marcel 1951, 9). Human beings are not meant to be isolated but they must actively engage with other beings and especially with the Divine Being. Marcel shifts from an egocentric understanding of being towards knowing the existence of other beings. By knowing other beings, we can more understand our existence; by identifying ourselves with other beings, we can find meaning in the

world through our real experiences with them. According to him, human beings are exigent beings, implying that they have need for the other beings (Ibid, 61). More than the faculty of reason, this exigency allows human beings to holistically understand their existence, including humility and faith towards God. This is the starting point in exploring the transcendental exigency of human beings that is their capability to look beyond the physical, which is a deep longing for perfection in their very nature (Ibid, 37). The existentialist and phenomenological insights of Marcel would be essential in the elucidation of TPC full-time workers' lived experiences and understanding how their bodies are essential in their journey as full-time workers; at the same time, how they were able to transcend limitations and difficulties through faith and hope as transcendental possibilities.

The researcher used the Marcelian concepts about (a) "having a body" and "being a body", (b) the need for the other, and (c) the transcendental exigency, adding (d) the creative testimony to explain the journeys of TPC full-time workers.

(a) It is emphasized the importance of the body of the TPC full-time workers: through the use of their bodies, they effectively carry on the evangelizing mission; through their bodies, they actively engage and participate with other beings and the world. However, the body also poses limitations that undeniably make them to search for perfection. This lack urges them to surrender themselves to the divine, which enables them to commit themselves to their local church.

Marcel viewed human beings as incarnate beings, bound to a body not isolated from lived experience, which is the fullness of being (Marcel 1951, 22). This statement is implicative that the full-time workers of TPC are incarnate beings; having a body gives them direct access to the world and makes them to be in contact with other beings. The Marcelian consideration of human beings as incarnate gives importance to our value as beings. Being human is identified with our relationship with the other and our experience with the world because human beings cannot be separated from their exigency of being or the need for the other (Ibid, 61). Their need for the other affirms their existence. It makes human beings as social beings. Being incarnated supposes the consciousness of the self and having a body. For Marcel, when we affirm that something exists, we always mean that we consider this something connected with our body, as able to be put in contact with it, however much indirect this contact may be. He thus

ascribes to our body that it is given to us in a not exclusively objective way (Marcel 1949, 10). This shows that our existence as being is or it must always be interconnected with the other. Marcel stated that existence, consciousness of the self as existing, consciousness of self as bound to a body or being incarnate cannot be separated. To say that something exists is not only to say that it belongs to the same system as my body, that it is bond with it by individual connections, but the awareness of embodiment engages the understanding of the existence of the other and the world (Ibid, 11).

The study participants are incarnate beings; having a body, they exist and are connected with other beings and the world. The embodiment of the soul would be an argument against objectifying the body; body and soul go together as part of our embodiment.

(b) The TPC full-time workers use their bodies to relate to other people and the world. By dealing with the other, needing other, human beings do not treat the other as objects or apparatuses under their control in the world, but as intersubjectivity. The other must be seen as co-beings with whom they have a mutual relationship; the existence of the one makes no sense without the other. In this case, the subject is not detached from the object. The relationship of human beings and the other goes beyond the subject-object relationship, affirming them in co-existence, and making intersubjectivity possible. According to Marcel, incarnation is a condition of being, which is always with the other. Human beings identify their existence with the existence of other beings, as embodied beings, engaging in active participation, affirming by reason and emotions, accessing to the other and to the world (Marcel 1949, 11).

The full-time workers of TPC use their bodies in socially interacting with the others that allows them to know themselves deeper. They grow in the local church through active engagement using bodies to serve others in love. Embodiment gives them access to others; without their bodies, they would be nowhere; embodiment always summons them to the world of other physical beings. Even though, at the same time, their bodies limit them, they give openness to the other, being drawn to the other because of a real need. Their experiences with the other are also a kind of response to the yearning of becoming better versions of themselves. The search for perfection is rooted in their very limitations as human beings; these turn them toward the virtue of humility to the other and of entering a loving relationship to fulfill their functions. They learn to humble themselves before the other, love

the other, and see their very need for the other. This act of humility is an expression of nothingness without the other (Marcel 1951, 85). They confess that apart from the other, they are nothing. And the other can be their significant others, their peers, their family, and it can also be non-living things, or it could be the world itself. Through their experience with the other, the existence could become more valuable because there is someone or something that completes them. Although many of them had painful experiences with their significant others, these experiences made them who they are. Moreover, they have grown in faith in their relationship with other church members who greatly influenced them. Stressing on the importance of the interpersonal relationship, Gabriel Marcel revealed the plane of authentic intersubjectivity leading to the realm of the transcendental. This finds in religion a peculiar network of relationship; through it, the TPC full-time workers establish a mutual openness with the other in self-giving, discovering the value of meeting in love, friendship, and spirituality. They no longer treat the other as an object; the other becomes a real person to them, the other-self, and is no longer seen as an object; the other is also part of their “to be”. This can only be realized through the communion with the transcendental being, the divine.

(c) TPC workers search for the meaning of life. They have wallowed in despair and hopelessness until they have realized that they can be complete only living in relationship with the divine, through humility in prayer, reading the Word of God. They have grown in communion with Him. Through this, they have found light in darkness; they live in hope and become agents in sharing hope to people.

Gabriel Marcel emphasized the man’s innate need for meaning in communion with God, so hoping to find wholeness. It is the avenue the TPC full-time workers have reestablished an abiding sense of the life’s meaning. In Marcelian vision, the transcendental exigency is linked to the search for perfection that is going beyond being. Thus, there is a need for human beings to transcend in relationship with their search for fullness or perfection (Marcel 1951, 37). It means to go beyond the physical, with the possibilities, just like being in a mode of hope, which is relevant to discuss the transcendental exigency of human beings. In order to elucidate this, Marcel has made difference between genuine hope and ‘hope that’. The latter refers to an optimistic attitude that cannot always be separated from indistinct faith, which cannot be shared from the spectator or the other (Ibid, 27); and hope is always

accompanied by despair (see Marcel 1949, 71-91). The hope of TPC full-time workers signifies genuine hope; since it arises from experiences of despair and out of their lived experiences of poverty, troubles and misery. As such, despair is fundamental to them to go beyond being. It is only in the presence of despair that they can transcend and, at the same time, *see the very need to transcend*. It is only in despair that they recognize possibilities, not focusing on the present circumstances, but looking at the possibilities of a better future. They realize that they cannot do it alone; they need the other and the perfect being for strength, in the mode of hoping. Thus, transcending oneself is also the recognition of a transcendental perfect being.

For Marcel, the absolute hope is inseparable from a faith that is likewise absolute, transcending underlying conditions without anxiety. The unity of faith and hope appears as a conscious response of human beings to the infinite being. We can say that hope is being in faith. The present despair is just temporary, but out of the despair there is a possibility of better circumstances because of the belief in the goodness of the transcendental being (Ibid). The transcendental exigency cannot be separated from the need for God (Marcel 1951, 3). The transcendental exigency is evident in the journey of study participants. Their need for transcendence allowed them to turn toward their need for a transcendental Being, perfectly good during times of despair; it is essential for hoping, transcending human limitations and weaknesses as an act of establishing the vital regeneration (Marcel 1949). Relating to the transcendental, TPC full-time workers experience new hope, out the despair, by faith in God. This new hope gives them vital regeneration of their being. Putting their hope in God displaces the egocentrism of themselves. Instead, it creates in them humility, entering into an authentic relationship with the transcendental being.

(d) Creativity only arises from the depths of being through deeply knowing the self. In the case of the TPC full-time workers, they find the purpose of their lives through the hope that they find in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. They have learned to hope that, through believing in Jesus, their lives can be changed. This hope did not disappoint them. Indeed, from being in poor and troubled families, their lives were significantly changed and transformed. This transformation is a result of inner transformation that they possess through communion with the divine, active engagement and participation in evangelizing missions. They use their talents, abilities,

skills and strengths arising from their inner being to make a difference in the lives of people. This is in order to give hope to the poor and weary ones, to proclaim and share the love of God through compassion, kindness and generosity to people. From people without hope to people transformed and giving hope to others, and creatively making a difference to the lives of people in their church and community, they are living testimonies. Thus, creative testimony explains the journeys of TPC full-time workers.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study framed in Marcelian existentialism tried to highlight themes describing the importance of embodiment among the study participants. Their bodies have been integral in their participation and active engagement in evangelizing mission, in relief giving, medical mission, practicing their spiritual discipline and all other church activities. Beyond their bodies' limitations and difficulties, they propelled themselves toward God, by hope and faith; and they were able to become creative testimonies in their local church and community. Both embodiment and transcendence are essential aspects of the TPC full-time workers' lived experiences. Embodiment and transcendence must complement each other; through embodiment, transcendence is realized, and whatever that has been transcended is to be embodied in becoming an effective full-time worker of TPC.

To maintain the spirit of the TPC full-time workers, some salient points are suggested:

- a considerable number of workers should be added in order to address the problems of time and schedule. This is crucial in solving the problems of multi-tasking and overworking. It will further enlarge the mission field and improve the relationships of full-time workers with their families, giving them more time to be with them;
- being in a body must also be addressed. Having a body is to be a reminder that their body should also be given as important, and proper health care should be addressed; the body is their tool or vehicle to carry out their spiritual functions and duties. Hence, more benefits would be given, particularly to older workers;
- the spiritual discipline of TPC, particularly the dawn prayer and fasting are integral to the formation of the workers, and keeping the order of the church. This spiritual formation must be kept and observed by present and future full-time workers;

- grassroots orientation of TPC should always be implemented regardless of the change of its members' status. The poor, marginalized and disadvantaged ones in the society must be the priority of their evangelizing mission.

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