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“Quilts in the Tropics”

By Arlene Richardson

As my husband and I worked among an unreached people group in Southeast Asia, one day a box containing three quilts arrived from a group of praying women in North Carolina. They had lovingly stitched together scraps I had claimed from my grandmother’s antique shop after she passed away. Never did I imagine how God would use these scraps.

The quilts were so beautiful they caught the eye of my dear friend Dede. Dede was from a small village in the mountains of our volcanic island. Her husband divorced her after only a few months of marriage. Destitute and despondent, she had come to the city looking for work so that she could feed herself and her baby boy.

Eyes wide with wonder, Dede asked if I would help her learn to make a quilt. Almost without thinking I said, “Yes!” Within days, Dede had produced a simple quilt of her own. The color choices weren’t the best, but her handiwork showed promise.

Soon some of Dede’s relatives traveled from their distant village, and begged to join in. Soon our living room and backyard shed were overflowing with people, all desperate for work and eager to learn a new skill. I quickly recognized that God was doing something unique and unexpected. He had opened a door for me into the hearts and lives of dozens of people!

Within weeks, the expanding project took on a life of its own. When it outgrew our modest home, we rented a house down the street. A Chinese Christian provided scraps of cloth from his garment factory, along with discarded padding.

Now almost 15 years later, HeartCraft employs about 400 people and has been under local leadership for about 15 years. They have produced tens of thousands of quilts, most of which have been sold on the equator, in the big cities of this island nation, and at isolated oil camps. In the process, hundreds of people have heard the gospel around the quilting

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table, and many have found new life in Christ – including Dede, my dear friend, who has become a skilled quilter and a fearless evangelist.

In the adventures of HeartCraft, I have learned many leadership lessons:

**Hold your plans lightly; God may choose a different way.**

I thought that because I was a Bible college and seminary graduate, I should be teaching theology or leading small group Bible studies. But in this context, among an unreached the Lord wanted me to show His love through deeds of kindness and by sharing a practical skill with the poor. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love,” Galatians 5:6 says.

**Build around a few reliable people.**

God starts small, and He uses all kinds of people. He is looking for plodders, visionaries, creative people – all kinds of people who are willing to trust Him to do the impossible. HeartCraft started with one person, my friend Dede, who only had a third grade education.

**Keep the “heart” in what you’re doing.**

I asked God to keep my heart alert to needs around me. One day I met two young women (sisters) who had been excommunicated from their families for accepting Christ. They were desperate for income. The quilters were already making many quilts, but God gave me the idea of making dolls. The girls worked with a team of people in my garage, learning how to make dolls from the scraps and padding from the quilts. During this time, my friends prayed that their unsaved father and mother, who were Hindu leaders in their community, would come to faith in Christ. God answered their prayers, and now the whole family is growing in Christ. The women eventually kept making dolls, worked their way through Bible school, and married godly men. Today they are taking the gospel to another unreached island. The dolls continue to provide a source of income for their ministry of church planting and evangelism.

**God wants to strengthen your own character along the way.**

God knew I needed to change, and I needed to learn the lesson of perseverance. One time our quilting patterns were stolen by a group of Muslims. They started an Islamic quilting group to compete with HeartCraft. Another time my husband and I had to fire a staff worker. Firing is not something that is done in this culture, but we did it and the backlash was strong. Another time a staff worker stole \$10,000 of our hard earned money, which we were never able to retrieve.

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One day the house we were renting nearly went up in flames because one of the men was smoking near the quilts. Another time we discovered a poisonous snake in the cloth. The cutting team started to fight one day and attacked each other with scissors! Someone spread a rumor that the house we had rented was haunted so no one came to work for several days.

The Lord kept assuring me that there would be fruit through it all. Scripture tells us not to be surprised by opposition. It will come and it will be painful. But God promises that "joy comes in the morning."

**God has a sense of humor. Learn to recognize and appreciate it!**

There are so many twists and turns in ministry. HeartCraft didn't make sense humanly. I taught poor people who had never learned to sew a highly-skilled craft which I had never mastered myself. Then I, not being very organized, tried to manage them cross-culturally. And quilts in the tropics? Absurd.

The irony of this whole story is that I have never made a quilt! But I have seen thousands made and sold, paving the way for spreading the gospel. Ministry is not about what we can or can't do, it is all about Him and what He can do when we are willing to trust Him. "My ways are not your ways," says the Lord.

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