

On My Mind
12/23/05

'Tis the season for giving presents, for thinking of others - especially those in need - and so it is not inappropriate to think about what the CNMI, as an entity, could give to others, inasmuch as it has so often, over the years, received rather than given. Of course, the CNMI still has needs of its own, but the CNMI also has all kinds of things it could offer others, and there are all sorts of people in need - all over the world.

What would be the best way to go about determining what the CNMI could offer others? Probably the first thing to do would be to form a committee. Since it's always difficult to start with a blank sheet of paper, the committee might want to start by drawing up a list of the kinds of things the CNMI could possibly do, as a gift, and then begin holding discussions, throughout the CNMI, to determine what people were interested in, what they would be willing to support, what they thought was needed, and appropriate, and do-able, and for whom, for what group of people.

The committee would also be expected to come up with a purpose statement, describing what the venture would be expected to accomplish - not only in terms of making the CNMI visible, but more importantly, in terms of what the CNMI's gift would bring to its supposed recipients, how they would benefit from the venture.

It might not turn out that the outcome of all that discussion would be to offer to give "safe haven" to 8-16-year-old Vietnamese victims of forced labor in Cambodia - after all, last year's tsunami in the Indian Ocean created hundreds of orphans of all ages who are in need of shelter and eventual adoption, the earthquake in northern Pakistan created hundreds of homeless children and adults, there are the homeless victims of Katrina, and further from home, there are thousands of homeless in need of sanctuary in central Europe, or in Africa, particularly in Darfur.

And there are other types of gifts, as well.

But let's say that everyone agreed that the best present the CNMI, as an entity, could offer others was "safe haven" to the above-described victims. The next thing to do, it seems to me, would be to find a sponsor. Someone with sterling credentials, with actual experience and success in setting up and operating "safe havens," someone with an established reputation, with a sound financial base and proven ability to raise funds - someone aligned and affiliated with the United Nations, or UNICEF, or with other reputable international, or Asian or youth organizations.

On the other hand, one could, at this point, put out what I believe is called a request for proposal - soliciting bids from organizations in which they would describe how they would propose to set up and operate such a "safe haven."

If it's decided not to go that route, next should come some planning. How many children could be accommodated at one time? Where would be the best place to put them? What kind of facility would be needed? What kind of program would be offered? How much staff would be required? What skills would they need - to bring the mind, bodies, psyches of those children back to health? What certifications would the staff need? Who would determine that, and who would do the certifying? What level of budgeting would it take? Where would the money come from? Who would control the flow of funds?

Who would select the children to be accommodated? Who would determine the criteria? How would that be done? What about inoculations, travel documents? Would the children all be issued uniforms? For school and athletics and playing and sleeping? or how would their

clothing needs be accommodated? their toiletries?

How long would it take to find and equip an appropriate facility, to hire enough qualified staff, to get materials in place and procedures set up for bringing the children here? What would the time-line look like?

While much of the planning would be pretty straight-forward, several issues would arise that might require further discussion. For example, on islands as small as the CNMI, would it make sense, would it even be possible, to keep the children in total isolation from the rest of the population? Would they be denied access to beaches? To occasional shopping outings? or picnics? or a night at the movies? If not, how would these be managed?

And what would the eventual fate of these children be? How long would they be given "safe haven?" What - and who - would determine when it would end? What if no one was found to adopt them? What if their parents, or family, were not located? Where would they go? What would happen to them?

Would it make sense to "mainstream" some of them into the CNMI school system? What about sending some CNMI children in need of special programs to the schools established as part of the "safe haven" program? Could there be some sort of "quid pro quo"?

Should more than one "safe haven," more than one sponsor, be allowed? How would that be determined? Would other organizations object to not having been given the opportunity to bid on providing such services?

Once the plan was defined, and the many questions answered to the satisfaction of the sponsoring agency, it would have to be submitted to such local agencies as would be involved in the implementation to make sure the plan also met their approval and support. It could be published as proposed regulations. Or, at this point the plan could be put out for an invitation to bid.

All in all, an enormous challenge!

Maybe it could happen, if it were done right. Maybe it would provide all sorts of jobs for people in the CNMI. And maybe providing "safe haven" to a few hundred children a year would enhance the CNMI's credibility on the world stage - though why it would bring more attention to the CNMI than is given to those countries in which non-governmental organizations already provide similar services is not clear. Maybe it could even bring pride to the people of the CNMI for contributing to the welfare of others rather than always begging for handouts for themselves.

The idea is certainly worth considering - if it were done right.

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Something that wasn't done right was removing all those rope-lit sculptures that used to grace Beach Road during Christmas, and crowding them all into the Chamolinian center in Garapan. The sculptures were not only unique and lovely, but also reflective of the best of island culture - truly distinctive and ever-so-appropriate symbols of paradisiacal islands. It doesn't seem right for them to sit in Garapan, most of them off the road, to be viewed only by paying tourists.

Thought I hesitate to recommend a new office to the incoming administration - one that would be charged with managing and arranging for appropriate holiday celebrations - perhaps the responsibility could be added to a reconstituted public information office. Maybe that way, in

addition to more responsive acknowledgments of the four "C" holidays, the people of the Commonwealth - and tourists - could once again have the pleasure of seeing Christmas decorations along Beach Road, and a decorated Christmas tree by the Susupe multi-purpose center.

As it is now, public decorating for Christmas would appear to have become the domain of the commercial sector - only hotels, stores, and a few retail outlets have decorations that those not employed in the ever so extensively-decorated government offices can view and enjoy. Admittedly, it leaves me with a very grinchy, bah humbug attitude!

Jakarta is a prime example of such commercialism, according to my daughter, who's just arrived on island for Christmas. Despite a population that is more than 80% Muslim, shopping malls and hotels are brightly lit with Christmas decorations, creches set up in the city parks.

What has led to the same pattern appearing in the CNMI, where more than 80% of the population is Christian? This year, not even the church in my village has lit its Christmas decorations. Is the high cost of power really the culprit?

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What has been done right, as I may have mentioned before, is the decision by all involved to finally end the 30% retirement bonus. Yes, it means those retiring in the future will be deprived, but the original intention was not to be so generous to all future retirees. Ostensibly, at least, the intent was to decrease the size of government. Which, this year, it is doing. One can only hope that the incoming members of the legislature don't attempt to revive the benefit, or if they do, that it is not allowed to become law.

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Short takes:

- Boy, was I ever taken in by the story of Vicki Benavente being fired from her position as director of the Marianas Visitors Authority! Talk about being naive! I wrote last week that I didn't think it fair for the out-going board to terminate her - that the decision should be left up to the new board, and that letting her go as was done constituted shabby treatment of a person who'd done a good job and deserved better. Well, seems she did get treated better - considerably so - what with the buy-out of her contract, and, so rumor has it, a goodly amount of leave as well. With her husband facing unemployment, perhaps they needed the money?

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- Curious goings on at Hollywood Theater: it changed movies mid-week: for the rest of last week, the score was 3 PG's, 4 PG-13's. This week, two new films have been added, one a PG-13, and the other, while unrated, surely, judging from its description, an "R." But only one is at all related to the holiday season.

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In keeping with which, may the blessings of the holiday be with you.