“History and Challenges of Hilltop Ministry” by Rev Dr William Ebert

As I contemplated writing a brief summary of the Hilltop Ministry I thought there is no better way to present it but by the words of my older brother, Dr. Dan Ebert IV.

When I was just three years old my parents took me, along with my two siblings, DJ and Bill, to the mission field to do Bible translation. There in the jungles of Palawan in the Southern Philippines, Dad was not only our father, but also our schoolteacher, coach, and friend. In the Lord’s providence, many years later, my brother and I, along with our wives, Darla and Sue, joined him and Mom in the work of training others for Christian ministry. For the next 35 years Dad was our mentor and co-worker. Dad went to be with the Lord in August of 2012. Mom, who had served at his side for over half a century, had gone to glory two years earlier. What follows is a brief story of Mom and Dad’s work, and includes the founding of the Christian Training and Missionary Fellowship, along with the establishing of the Hilltop Ministry.

Prelude: The Call (1930 to 1955)

Dan and Dot grew up in Pennsylvania, with Dan’s family spending the summers at the Jersey shore. As high school sweethearts they attended the Church of the Open Door in Philadelphia. The young married couple had given their lives to missions. They began their family and waited on the Lord for their field assignment. Dan studied Bible and then linguistics at the University of South Dakota to prepare himself for translation work. Dot had told the Lord she would go anywhere in the world, except Alaska or the Philippines; she never made it to Alaska, she would spend the next 55 years as a missionary in the Philippines, a land that she and Dan came to love.

We can only briefly tell the story of their missionary adventures under three headings: the Jungles, the City, and the Hilltop.

Part I - The Jungles (Palawan – 1955 to 1964)

For the first ten years of their missionary work, the Eberts lived in the mountain jungles on the island of Palawan in the Southern Philippines, sometimes considered a part of Islamic Mindanao.

Dan’s work was not among the Moros, the sea faring, coastal Muslims, though he had occasional contact with them but among the animistic tribal people in the mountains.

The Palawanos, who numbered some 20 thousand people, had no written language, lived in relative isolation, and had never heard the gospel message. Dan and Dot, along with three foreign missionary ladies, and a few Filipino workers, had come to bring them God’s Word.

Dan was the lead translator, and worked with a small team. They broke the language down phonetically, formed an alphabet, learned the language, and over a ten-year period translated the NT. Dan was often extremely sick with malaria and dysentery. He
pressed on in the work, not only translating, but also helping to teach and train the new believers.

As happens from time to time on the mission field, there was a great turning to Christ. Tribal chiefs and witch doctors professed the gospel, and village after village turned to the Lord. Churches were established throughout the mountains, like this one on a mountain that used to be feared as the haunt of evil spirits.

Meanwhile Dot, who also was occasionally sick with Malaria, was busy in her own heroic way. Like so many faithful missionary wives, she turned a difficult place into a home. Their “nepa hut” was where the children felt safe and loved. Dot kept the family well fed, and could work wonders on very little. She traded with the tribal people for food, and even found time to have another baby.

Little Ethel Ann was loved by the Palawanos, who jokingly said, “We know you came in big sizes and little sizes, but we didn’t know you came in baby sizes, too!”

15 In the early 1960s the children had homeschooled before it was fashionable. Dan and Dot taught the children to love each other and the Lord. This, too, is a critical part of a missionary legacy.

By 1964 the Palawano NT was ready for publication. Dr. Henry Waterman, a professional linguist from the American Bible Society, came and spot checked it for accuracy, and gave his stamp of approval. The Ebert’s moved to the City of Manila to oversee its final printing. Helen Boydstun, a longtime co-worker, stacked the NT on the table, a handwritten copy to the left, and a copy in triplicates on the right – representing over ten years of work!

There are stories to be told here, as well: the burning down of a large part of China town where the final proofs were initially stored; the sinking of the ship that took the first 500 volumes to the island, and the final arrival of the NT in Palawan. It was the first NT to be translated and published after World War 2, and Dan was made an honorary lifetime member of the American Bible Society. He knew it was a recognition that the whole team deserved.

Part II - The City: Early Days of CTMF (1964 to 1989)

In the mid 1960’s Dan and Dot took an extended furlough to restore their health, visit with family and churches, and evaluate their future work in the Philippines. Dad had a growing burden to help develop church leaders, not only in Palawan but throughout the Philippines. This would be an important transition time in their missionary service.

The kids were growing up and said goodbye to their childhood playground in the jungles, and prepared for life in the city.
During their furlough, Dan and a fellowship of pastors and church leaders formed a new mission for the work ahead. It began as the Christian Translators Fellowship in 1966, and eventually, as the work of training national leaders developed, became the Christian Training and Missionary Fellowship.

Dan continued to oversee the translation work in Palawan in fellowship with New Tribes Mission, completing OT portions, a Palawano hymnbook, and other study material. But increasingly the work was shifting to the training of national leaders for ministry and missions – a key, Dan was convinced, for reaching the nation for Christ.

For the next ten years Dan began to teach everywhere – often in very humble circumstances. He lectured at a small Bible institute, preached in local churches, taught at church conferences, and served as a mentor to younger pastors. He would often say, “Just teach the Word and be faithful, God will bring in the harvest.”

Dot worked faithfully at Dan’s side, and holding the fort together at home. The children were quickly growing up, attending Faith Academy, and soon going off to college.

Dan continued teaching. He wrote Sunday school material, a doctrinal Bible study series, little commentaries on various books of the Bible, which often served as the basis of lectures at conferences. Dan’s teaching ministry spread to Singapore, where he developed a strong relationship with several Chinese pastors. This would prove to be highly significant for the work in the Philippines in the years ahead. The teaching ministry was growing rapidly, but Dan’s health was often poor – he struggled with allergies, dysentery, and frequent bouts of pneumonia.

Part III - The Expansion Years: Growth of CTMF (1977-1989)

In 1976 Dan Ebert the 4th graduated from Clearwater Christian College, and Sue and he, with their first two children, joined CTMF and arrived in the Philippines in 1977. Bill and Darla graduated from Tennessee Temple and arrived in 1980. Both couples raised their children on the field and worked together alongside their parents.

Several important developments took place during this season. Dan continued to teach, write, and mentor younger leaders. He wrote nearly twenty Bible study books, began a revision of the Palawano NT, helped to further develop the Bible school, guided in the establishment of a fellowship of churches among graduates, and continued to build his relationship with churches in Singapore.

It was in Dan and Dot’s home, which also doubled as the CTMF field headquarters, that Dan and his two sons launched a small graduate school, called the Center for Biblical Studies. This was in 1982-83 school year.

Dan taught biblical Hebrew and other courses. Dot, as always, kept everyone happy with good food.
Dan’s love for books had been contagious; the three missionary couples put their collections together and this formed the start of the CBS library.

Dan and Dot were always conscious that the Lord’s work was a team effort. Many came to visit during those years, to help in the ministries, and to bring encouragement. This truth is represented well by the visits of John and Birdie Sharpe who came to help with the expanding publication work.

In every way the missionary endeavor was growing: the printing ministry, the Bible conferences, the translation work, preaching and teaching in local churches, the growing graduate school, and the ongoing work at the Bible Institute. At this time Charles and Frieda Seet came from Singapore to join the CTMF work as full-time missionaries.

As this period drew to a close, the work was also facing significant challenges. Dan struggled with ongoing allergies and bouts of pneumonia. In part this was a result of the hard years in Palawan, but it was also due to the heavy pollution during his years of ministry in the city of Manila. The work was now scattered across the city, requiring much travel. The graduate school was in one place, the Bible institute at another, the growing conferences moved from place to place each year, seeking rented facilities. The teachers at the graduate school and the Bible Institute were also scattered. Added to this was the challenge of life in the city. Even today Metro-Manila is listed among the top 10 most stressful cities in the world.

The Bible Institute, which at this time was known as the Metro-Manila School of the Bible, was meeting in cramped rented office space in a congested part of the city.

Dr. and Mrs. Steele, from Clearwater, Florida, had visited and encouraged the missionary in his dream of a campus location. The brethren in Singapore were also in touch with the Eberts about just such a possibility. Rather quickly the Lord did an amazing thing, which brought the ministries of Dan and Dot Ebert to a new phase, one which situated the work for a future beyond their own lifetime.

The ball started rolling in earnest when a concept design came from some Christian architects at a large church in Singapore. Dan 4th happily shared the plans at a Monday prayer day with the fellowship. It was just a concept design, but it would soon lead to the campus of the Hilltop Christian Ministries.

Part IV - The Hilltop (1990 -2010).

What had been a dream would become a reality in a few short years.

It was as if the Lord was blessing Dan and Dottie Ebert for their long season of faithfulness. The land was fully purchased by the end of 1990. There was a season of prayer and dedication.
Dan’s two sons lead in the development of the campus. Dan 4th chaired the construction committee and Bill skillfully handled the finances.

The old missionary, though struggling physically, continued to provide the much needed leadership and wisdom. In the Lord’s providence, it was his connections with Singapore, as well as with believers back in the U.S., that enabled the buildings to be built without a penny of debt, from the day of groundbreaking in early 1992 till the last building was completed.

The last years of Dan and Dot’s missionary career were spent on what people affectionately refer to as the Hilltop for Christ. Dan preached and taught in the chapel. He lectured in the classroom block, with its beautiful rock amphitheater and covered walkways, which were great for the rainy season.

The lady students were like daughters to Dan and Dot, and they delighted to know that they could live in a dormitory eventually named after Helen Boydstun who had labored with them for so many years.

The three-story men’s dorm would house men. Dan loved nothing better than encouraging these young Christian servants. Dot enjoyed seeing that the students had a great place to eat; though she still loved having them up to the house for her special treats. The Hilltop also has its own library, a flowering of the missionary’s love for books.

The Annual Bible Conference, at which Dan had taught for so many years, now had its own place to meet.

During this final decade the missionary returned to his first love, Bible translation. Along with Crispin, his translation helper from the early days on the island, who was also himself now an old man, they revised and republished the Palawano NT, which was a great encouragement to the southern island churches.

The Journey Home - Final Years (210-2012)

Dan and Dot’s missionary career was drawing to a close. They had to spend more and more time in the U.S., as Dan would recuperate from repeated bouts of pneumonia. He still made trips with Dot to the Philippines and Singapore to preach and teach, but these were less and less frequent. The work that they had guided all these years was now mature and poised for even further growth and effectiveness. They longed to be on the Hilltop, but soon this was not possible.

Mom went home before Dad, though she had been the one who was rarely sick. Two years later, on her birthday, Dad followed. They left behind a legacy of missionary work that, Lord willing, will bear fruit for many years to come.
Mom’s life verse was Jeremiah 33:3, “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.” The Lord had answered her prayers.

Dan’s last comment to Bill and me was his expressed desire to return to the Philippines just one more time. “But,” he sighed thankfully, “the work continues.”

These final words echoed those of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:6, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work among you will carry it to on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.” Mom and Dad served faithfully. May the Lord find you and I faithful as well, whether here at home, in the Philippines, or around the world.