

The Reopening of Bethany Hospital under Dr. Earl A. Viernes vs. The Reopening of Bethany Hospital under the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP)

(First of two parts)

By Bishop Jaime R. Moriles

Let me be forthright that the arguments taken up by PAGMATA FB account as to the reopening of Bethany Hospital- Tacloban were, unfortunately, the arguments coming from Dr. Earl A. Viernes, former Medical Director of Bethany, who sued the UCCP in the amount of P10 Million (Pesos) at the Regional Arbitration (Branch VIII) in the intervening months of Bethany Hospital's rehabilitation. This observation is a very needful one because the only body given the exclusive mandate by the General Assembly to rehabilitate Bethany Hospital was the National Executive Council (NEC) not Dr. Viernes. The mandate declares: "to task the National Executive Council (NEC) to expedite the rehabilitation and the opening of Bethany Hospital in Tacloban, as soon as possible." It is difficult to understand why some sectors while parroting the 2014 GA action to reopen Bethany Hospital are not inquiring with the NEC the actual situation on the ground that largely shapes the nature of their response relative to the mandate. Instead, the narrative of Dr. Viernes that surreptitiously creeps into the discourse was taken as gospel truth. A line must be drawn here because the difference between the reopening of Bethany hospital under Dr. Earl A. Viernes and the reopening of Bethany hospital under the management of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines is as wide as the Pacific Ocean. The difference has to be clearly explained to engender full appreciation what the UCCP-NEC has done so far in the rehabilitation efforts of Bethany Hospital.

As one of the members of the NEC and the Bishop assigned to the East Visayas Jurisdictional Area where Bethany Hospital is located, this is the situation on the ground when I reported to office in 2014. There were three (3) labor cases filed against the UCCP by Bethany employees from rank and file, middle managers and senior management lodged at the Regional Arbitration (Branch VIII). The latter complainant, represented by Dr. Viernes, who is supposed to defend the interest of the owner (UCCP) being the senior manager, was simply ironic. He sat in the Board to represent the Church being the Medical Director and senior manager. But he inversely accused the principal (UCCP) for illegal dismissal when his office, unlike the rank and file, is a position of trust. A position of trust is a position exercised at the pleasure of the appointing body, a privilege that can be recalled anytime. But that is only in so far as the definition goes. Actually, he was not recalled, he was not fired, he was not dismissed, he was not terminated. As far as I know he was still part and member of Tukdaw Task Force in June of 2014 after the General Assembly in Legaspi whose members are important resource persons and actors on the ground who can guide the National Executive Council (NEC) in the rehabilitation plan. But something awry happened after he broke the news in Tacloban that the 2014 General Assembly made an action to reopen Bethany Hospital. While there was rejoicing as reported among like-minded friends around sympathetic to him, there was complete absence or non-involvement on his part in the workplace. I think his excitement over the news was the reason. He forgot his important presence and role in the Task Force as soon as everyone was expected to go back to work and assess the attendant requirements and processes to undertake for the eventual rehabilitation of the hospital. His withdrawal probably stemmed from the fact that he associated the GA action from his mindset to reopen Bethany Hospital as soon as possible under his own terms. But this could

not be because the mandate of the GA to rehabilitate the hospital was directed to the National Executive Council (NEC) not to him. He wants to be in charge! Thus, not before long, he came out from the periphery attacking the National Leadership and eventually filed a formal complaint with NLRC (National Labor Relations Commission) against UCCP for illegal dismissal. And here lies the gaping difference.

How would Bethany Hospital be reopened under Dr. Viernes?

1. **As to timeline.** Dr. Viernes will literally buttress the mandate of the General Assembly to reopen Bethany Hospital immediately in June of 2014 by making the services of the Delivery room available to the public. This was a fact that Dr. Viernes allowed me to see through the shots he took via cellphone on the cleaned and restored part of the hospital. This clinical service can be ably managed by former Bethany OB-Gyn doctors and additionally perhaps Pediatric outpatient under his wife, being Pediatrician, who formerly heads the Pediatric department prior to Yolanda.

This move would give semblance to GA's mandate as to Bethany's immediate reopening. But this cursory approach will soon bind Dr. Viernes to face what was a common and persistent demand from the rank and file: reinstatement. For the Birthing facility, the only concrete feasible clinical service available to begin with, cannot absorb the more or less 300 personnel wanting to be reinstated. This cursory opening can only benefit a handful in the medical profession, not the angry rank and file whose possibility of reinstatement is nil under an extremely premature medical service. This semblance of normalcy in the operation only brings false hope to the majority of employees while Dr. Viernes or his company will exclusively secure uninterrupted economic benefit in the exercise of their professional service with the Church's blessing. By then, it is very clear who benefits the immediate reopening of Bethany Hospital.

Let me validate this point of view. Shortly after typhoon Yolanda ravaged Bethany, the Bethany Hospital Board itself submitted a resolution to the NEC to close down the hospital to commence the huge recovery effort. This is the background why there was a resolution submitted to the 2014 GA requesting that Bethany Hospital be reopened because, in the beginning, it was precisely closed down by the Bethany Hospital Board of Trustees itself. The resolution to reopen, barely four (4) months after its closure intended solely for rehabilitation purposes, allegedly came from the North Eastern Leyte and Biliran Conference (NELBICON). There was haste in the reopening resolution allegedly from NELBICON, only to discover that that resolution never had an imprimatur of NELBICON's Conference Minister, Rev. Mylen Kadusale. I invite anyone interested to get hold a personal copy of that resolution in 2014 GA and see for yourself that the name and signature of NELBICON's Conference Minister was conspicuously absent. This came to my attention because Rev. Kadusale herself complained to me about this maneuvering. Many knew that the 2014 Annual Conference of NELBICON did not reach a consensus because the Assembly during that time was deeply divided by the manner in which Bethany will be opened. Among NELBICON constituency, there were remarks circulating around, among others, expressing aversion over Dr. Viernes's role in a newly reopened Bethany Hospital. In fact, record will show that there was a signature campaign, a vicious letter to use a term, among Bethany Doctors, openly assailing the leadership of Dr. Viernes as Medical Director. (The details of their opposition are contained in that letter.)

Who made the NELBICON resolution? At this point, I am not interested. What alarmed me at this point was the fact that a fabricated document reached to the highest policy making body of our Church, the General Assembly, and made it appear as official document. This is anomalous and contrary to Christian morals. I believe, the haste to reopen the hospital and its attendant economic gains on the part of those who will enjoy its immediate opening is the culprit. To paraphrase, the ulterior motive of the latter transforms this supposed collective noble yearning to reopen into a deeply personal crusade with deeply personal pecuniary interest.

2. **As to resources.** Dr. Viernes would happily hear the remarks oft-repeated in public forum that Dr. Ubial, former DOH Secretary, offered government fund to help rehabilitate Bethany Hospital. In addition, Dr. Viernes will utilize the purported 70 million remaining fund out of Bethany Hospital's reserve fund to reopen the hospital. He will maximize the assistance of his friends and families in the U.S., for as he said, the "weakness" of the UCCP leadership, "sad to say, was that they do not have the network to reach out for help."

To begin with, the government offer is highly notable. But when I inquired the finance officer of Bethany Hospital, Ms. Minerva Cua, she told me that that offer was not a grant, nor assistance coming from the government. It was a cash advance meant to be credited against the account of future PhilHealth collection of Bethany Hospital from patients. This is believable. Government, generally, has no business rehabilitating private enterprise. In fact, government's moral obligation to rehabilitate communities in Eastern Visayas was wanting and there were issues surrounding rehabilitation funds coming from international donors going elsewhere. The much touted comprehensive rehabilitation plan in the past Aquino Administration under Senator Lacson as rehabilitation czar was never heard again after it came out dramatically in the national headline. Certain that government will never give a grant, the purported loan would surely jeopardize hospital operation because PhilHealth collections are main revenue sources that the hospital will primarily rely upon especially in its early stage of operation. It cannot afford to just plow back all its revenues to pay back its debt it drew out from government coffer. This arrangement cannot, absolutely, rehabilitate the hospital. It will upset hospital operation even before it can jump-start.

On the other hand, the utilization of Bethany's purported 70 million reserve fund and contacts of funding networks abroad that Dr. Viernes has, at some point referred to, are moral obligations that he or any other legitimate body of the Church tasked to responsibly manage institutional ministries must take care of. These accountabilities are appropriately discussed and examined in the proper venues like Boards or Church's legislative bodies where these accountabilities reside with standard accounting mechanism in place so that financial statement of expenses like Bethany's labor cases and compensation package to workers; expenses to restore the diagnostic and treatment facilities, medical laboratory and the Out Patient Department can be readily accessed to anyone minus the malice from those wishing to obtain copies. On the other hand, our covenanted partnership in mission has ever since at work with Europe and U.S. mission partners and they are always upbeat especially over humanitarian concerns with catastrophic proportions like typhoon Yolanda to assist us. Among them, it was UEM (United Evangelical Mission) and Bread for the World (BfdW) who committed to restore back the healing ministry in Tacloban

through their technical support and financial assistance. On November 27, 2017, we were informed that our fund request was approved in the amount of €850,000.00 (European Money). Unfortunately, Dr. Viernes is not the person officially tasked to oversee and sustain such partnership relation and definitely, not the person in charge to manage the purported 70 million reserve fund. If he were so, he will be answering exactly the same questions that the Church is answering now that he himself has raised.

3. **As to legal personality.** Dr. Viernes will reopen Bethany Hospital under same name, Bethany Hospital and same governance structure which was not registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) since time immemorial.

To repeat this fact, what we know as Bethany Hospital, then and post-Yolanda, was not SEC registered. Dr. Viernes will continue operating the hospital under this arrangement that has, certainly, legal implications, foremost, BIR that remains a formidable challenge even in post-Yolanda negotiations. As you are reading this, you might wonder where in the world Bethany got BIR TIN number to establish an obligation with the latter when the former was not registered with SEC, or has no legal personality? This is a million dollar question. This has to be addressed. And it must be remedied to begin anew.

(To be continued)