At local Malaysian markets, mobile medical ministry embodies urban focus
Raising church's profile in Kuala Lumpur; inspiration from Pizza Hut

In Guatemala, Adventist public health campaign to impact local Mayan communities
Health seminars, workshops will promote nutrition, exercise and addiction-free lifestyle
morning street market, Tuesday, May 29. Joseph is part of Hope On Wheels, a mobile medical ministry that serves in markets on behalf of the Adventist Church. [photos: Ansel Oliver]

Pastor Sunny Tan retrieves equipment from the Hope On Wheels van. The ministry operates in local markets throughout Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Ronald Longgou, right, helps a patron of a local morning market in Kuala Lumpur test for body mass index. The former Bible worker is one of three team
At 7 a.m. one recent morning, a nurse and two church workers got out of a van at a morning market here to set up tables, plastic tools and two red canopies.

The trio, all wearing white polo shirts with red trim, set up their booth not to sell produce, meats or trinkets like nearby hawkers, but instead to conduct health screenings sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This fulltime ministry, called Hope On Wheels, operates five days a week to offer basic health assessments and comfort to those who may be experiencing a severe health challenge. With obesity on the rise, some are surprised to learn they may have diabetes.

For not selling, the team does a brisk business. Dozens visited their booth over the next three hours as they offered tests for blood pressure, glucose and body mass index. Later, they’ll visit the homes of regular visitors to their booth, checking to see if guests have called their doctor about an issue or adjusted their diet as suggested.

This ministry, launched in February, is an ultra-local operation, one that was made possible by, literally, an extraordinary gift. A multi-million-dollar tithe contributed to the Adventist world church in 2007, dubbed “extraordinary tithe,” established funds to ramp up projects worldwide, especially in the 10/40 Window, a geographical rectangle in the eastern hemisphere between the 10 and 40 northern lines of latitude. It’s estimated that that more than 60 percent of the world’s population lives in the region, less than 2 percent of which is Christian.

Local church leaders here in Malaysia’s peninsula, located within the 10/40 Window, last year came up with the idea of a mobile medical ministry after hearing about similar initiatives in New York City and Sydney. But while some ministries outfit an entire bus and have patrons come on board, Hope On Wheels, operating out of a van, can get into smaller markets, malls and schools.

“We’re trying to create awareness of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” said Leong Fai, president of the Adventist Church’s Peninsular Malaysian Mission, home to about 5,200 Adventists.

The Adventist Church here is little known, even among those familiar with other Protestant denominations. The mission operates in Kuala Lumpur, the federal capital and the nation’s most populous city, with more than 1.2 million people.

Malaysia is an economically strong Southeast Asian nation, a major exporter of energy, palm oil and computer parts. Its official religion is Islam, which includes about 60 percent of the population. About 20 percent of citizens are Buddhist, and Christians make up less than 10 percent of the population.

“Before Hope On Wheels, many people didn’t know about the Adventist Church like they do in Penang,” Fai said of the island 200 miles to the north, home to Penang Adventist Hospital, which owns a bakery. “Adventist” brand bread is found in stores in Kuala Lumpur.

“If [people] know about the Adventist Church, it’s usually because of the bread,” said Sunny Tan, a pastor who serves on the Hope On Wheel’s team. “We’re trying every way we can to reach out to
people,” the 30-year-old said.

The team will often coordinate with one of a handful of nearby Adventist churches to hold a monthly cooking demonstration. At markets, team members and volunteers will suggest people visit one of the cooking classes to learn how to make more healthful and appealing meals.

Tan said the team has operated here in the Puchong district for two months. They typically minister to a market once a week for three to six months, setting up at different locations five days a week. He said they sometimes encounter gang members extorting market sellers, but they leave his team alone when learning they are a charity.

When entering a new area, the team admits it’s not above employing some strategy. Tan said they once had a local pastor join them wearing non-descript clothes. Market customers, weary of the sharply dressed crew that can appear like so many direct marketing teams, wondered what they were selling. “They’re not selling anything,” the pastor said to assuage their skepticism. “Step in and get a free health screening.”

“I’ve even had my wife stand around holding our baby and doing the same thing,” Tan admitted.

The team began its planning last September, creating a logo and hiring a designer to detail their van. The inspiration for their name: Pizza Hut’s mobile kitchens.

“They had the popular slogan here, ‘hot on wheels,’ so we chose ‘Hope On Wheels’ because that’s what we offer,” said 24-year-old Christina Joseph, the team’s nurse.

Shortly before 8 a.m., the third member of the team, Bible worker Ronald Longgou, was fanning himself with his clipboard, the temperature already 84 degrees Fahrenheit, typical of the humid, tropical air near the equator. That’s when Sharon Pfeiffer, a 54-year-old Malay, came in for her second weekly visit. It’s not uncommon for people to visit the team’s booth up to six weeks in a row.

“I saw this last week and I liked the setup,” Pfeiffer said. “I was so impressed I called my friend,” she said, pointing to an older Chinese woman nearby.

Pfeiffer said her family has a history of strokes and she wants to learn to mitigate the possibility of having one herself.

At 10 a.m., the team disassembled the booth, packed up, and drove to a nearby home of a regular. The family, of Indian descent, is still grieving the loss of their 19-year-old daughter, who died two months ago from dengue fever. Still, they welcomed the team in with smiles.

Sitting on the couch, Tan joked with a boy at a nearby computer while Joseph, the nurse, met with the parents at the living room table across the room. “OK, auntie,” Joseph said as she applied a blood pressure monitor on the woman.

Nothing of religion was mentioned during the visit. If it ever does come up, it’s not until at least after half a dozen of visits.

“All these people, they never really expect us to come visit,” Joseph said. “But they are happy when we do.”
In Guatemala, Adventist public health campaign to impact local Mayan communities

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San Marcos, Guatemala
Yuri Samayoa/Gustavo Menendez/IAD staff/ANN staff

Seventh-day Adventists in West Guatemala recently launched the church’s first joint public health initiative with local government and community leaders to promote the Adventist lifestyle among seven Mayan communities in the region.

The idea came after community leaders told Adventist district pastor for Rio Blanco, Obis Heredia, that they were impressed by the low level of violence and alcoholism in Pueblo Viejo. Ninety percent of the town’s 1,200 residents are Adventists.

Obis Heredia, Adventist district pastor in Rio Blanco, speaks to government and community leaders last month about the church’s upcoming public health campaign. The program will impact residents of seven Mayan towns in West Guatemala beginning in July. [photo: Guatemala Union]

Heredia, who holds a master’s degree in public health, spoke to local leaders on the importance of encouraging healthy communities during a meeting in San Marcos late last month.

“Health is the task of all of us,” Heredia said. “In order for us to create a healthy lifestyle it is necessary for us to be empowered by a collective and individual commitment,” he said, adding that 50 percent of chronic degenerative diseases are “directly related” to lifestyle choices.

Local communities are more likely to embrace healthy living when their political leaders, churches, schools and other organizations commit to improving society, Heredia said.

“Everything is possible if we want to improve the quality of life,” Heredia said. “We can implement programs that can promote a balanced diet, where the consumption of natural foods, good healthy habits, regular exercise and a lifestyle free of addictions can help combat harmful influences affecting the community.”

Mayor of Rio Blanco Eugenio Lopez -- along with members of his municipal board, community development leaders, school district leaders and teachers from neighboring towns -- attended the launch to hear the church’s strategic plans to promote healthy living among the region’s 7,000 residents.

“As a political leader, I am committed to boosting the importance of healthy habits within my district,” Lopez said, adding that he is “thankful” to the Adventist Church for inspiring him and his family to
improve their own lifestyles.

Community development leader for Pueblo Viejo, Antoliano Israel Maldonado, shared the advantages of having healthy residents and challenged fellow officials to strive to promote healthful living in their respective towns.

“It is necessary for us to promote good healthy habits to decrease the deaths provoked by a life of bad habits like alcohol, tobacco and [the] consumption of unhealthy foods,” Maldonado said. “Too many of our neighboring villages are being affected.”

School district leaders took the opportunity to commit to promoting healthy habits for children in the classrooms. Local government and community leaders signed a statement pledging to promote healthy lifestyles.

A local USAID representative was on board, too. The U.S. government agency, which provides humanitarian assistance in Guatemala and worldwide, commended the Adventist Church’s efforts and offered resources to add nutrition programs to the initiative.

Heredia said his team is currently processing a survey that will help the Adventist Church cater upcoming health seminars and workshops to residents of the towns of Las Manzanas, Durazno, Loma, Maclen, Pancho de Leon, Protrillos and Rio Hondo beginning in July.

David Beber, Health Ministries director for the church in Guatemala, says initiatives like this one will impact underprivileged communities.

“We are happy that this initiative comes as a result of the [local church’s] recent strategic initiative to ignite health professionals and health directors throughout Guatemala,” Beber said.

Church officials are expected to meet with local Pan-American Health Organization leaders to seek collaboration on similar projects throughout needy communities in Guatemala, he said.

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