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The Seventh-day Adventist Church in West Guatemala met with local government and community leaders to launch the first joint public health initiative to promote the Adventist lifestyle among eight Mayan communities in the region.

The initiative was born after Obis Heredia, district pastor in Rio Blanco, was approached by neighboring village leaders who were impressed by the low level of violence and alcoholism in Pueblo Viejo—a village where 90 percent of the 1,200 villagers are practicing Seventh-day Adventists. Heredia, who holds a master's degree in public health, spoke to the community leaders on the importance of fomenting a healthy lifestyle in the community.

"Health is the task of all of us," said Heredia. "In order for us to create a healthy lifestyle it is necessary for us to be empowered by a collective and individual commitment on the conditions and health determinants, keeping in mind that 50 percent of the chronic degenerative diseases are directly related with the lifestyle of every citizen."

"Everything is possible if we want to improve the quality of life," explained Heredia. "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."

Heredia reiterated that a municipal district can become a healthy one when its political leaders, local organizations like churches, schools, and the like as well as citizens can commit to taking part on improving society.

Mayor of Rio Blanco Eugenio Lopez and members of his municipal board as well as community development leaders, school district leaders and teachers from seven neighboring villages convened to hear the church's strategic plans to promote healthful practices among the 7,000 inhabitants.

"I am thankful to the Adventist Church because it is a people who believe in a health message as part of their beliefs system and I am inspired to improve my lifestyle and that of my family," said Mayor Lopez. "As a political leader I am committed to boosting the importance of healthy habits within my district. It is our responsibility to create the kind of a healthy habits with my fellow municipal councils," he added.

Community development leader of Pueblo Viejo Antoliano Israel Maldonado boasted about the advantages of having healthy citizens in his Pueblo Viejo, and challenged fellow colleagues to strive to promote healthful living in their villages.

"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 consumption of unhealthy foods," said Maldonado. "Too many of our neighboring villages are being affected," he continued.

School district leaders chimed in committing to promote healthy habits for children in the classrooms.

In addition, local representatives from USAID, a United States government agency providing humanitarian assistance in Guatemala and worldwide, congratulated the Adventist Church for promoting this initiative and offered human resources to incorporate nutrition programs with the initiative.

All leaders from the different villages and organizations signed a statement committing to promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Heredia said his team of church members are processing a comprehensive survey conducted a few weeks ago in order to cater the health seminars and workshops in the villages of Las Manzanas, Durazno, Loma, Maclen, Pancho de Leon, Protrillos and Rio Hondo, beginning in July. Heredia said that most inhabitants are Mayans and speak Spanish and the Mam dialect—the third largest spoken dialect in Guatemala, among the 24 other dialects.

David Beber, health ministries director for the church in Guatemala, is happy that initiatives like the one in Rio Blanco will foster greater impact in needy communities.

"We are happy that this initiative comes as a result of the union's recent strategic initiative to ignite health professionals and health directors throughout Guatemala," said Beber.

Beber said that church leaders are planning to meet soon with local Pan-American Health Organization leaders to seek a collaboration on similar projects throughout the needy communities in all Guatemala.

For more on initiatives led by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Guatemala, visit

http://www.uniondeguatemala.org/