Micah Network Asia-Pacific Regional Consultation
“Marginalised People – Our Christian Response”
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Case Study: A successful partnership with the Christian Community on Early Intervention for Children with special needs in Malaysia.

WELCOME TO MALAYSIA

With a population of over 25 million people residing on the Peninsula and the states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo Island, Malaysia is a country of great diversity. The country has long maintained a harmonious existence between ethnic groups, including among others, Malays, Chinese, Indians, Ibans and Kadazandusuns. The official religion is Islam. The population comprises Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and followers of other religions.

According to the United Nations, 10% of people in the world have a disability. Three out of four of these people with disabilities live in a developing country. If we take the 10% indicator, that means there is likely to be 2.5 millions persons with disabilities in Malaysia. However, the registered number of people with disabilities (under our Department of Welfare and Social Department) for the year 2005 (latest figures on its website) is only 170,455 persons with disabilities. This is probably due to the fact it is not compulsory for people with disabilities to register and many still do not register for various reasons such as no substantial benefits of registration, no informed knowledge that the person with disabilities need to register, or face difficulty in the registration process. But, I like to point out that. the registered number of persons with learning difficulties/intellectual disability/mental handicaps have been increasing as seen from the official statistics from Year 2003, 2004 and 2005 are 49,340 persons, 57,483 persons and 66,130 persons respectively. Greater awareness and advocacy as well as the Government’s effort in community-based rehabilitation nationwide are possible contributing factors for the increased registered numbers.

Powerpoint slide presentation:

Personally, the overarching principle for me to be involved in this ministry is that every person (with or without disabilities) is of EQUAL VALUE and possess the God-given dignity.

Slide 1: “Every child is of equal worth, without respect to physical beauty, intelligence, health or productivity. That inherent value is a gift from the Creator, who loves us all with infinite fervor.”

Dr James C Dobson
(Acknowledgement: Slide 2 to Slide 15 - Statements extracted from Inclusion International DVD on its website but superimposed with photos of our service-users.)

Slide 2  Hear Our Voices (photo of our young people with learning difficulties at the 2nd Self-Advocacy Conference in 2007

Slide 3  There are 130 million persons with intellectual disability and their families in the world.

Slide 4  The vast majority live in poverty and experience exclusion

26 million people with intellectual disability are living on less than $1 a day

Slide 5  …an estimated 97% of disabled children in developing countries are denied even the most rudimentary rehabilitation services

(Source Report of Rights for Disabled Children at Children At Asia Cutting Edge Conference in Kuala Lumpur 2004)

Slide 6  Less than 5% of children with disabilities in majority countries complete primary school

Slide 7  Children with disabilities are excluded and denied their rights

… their families share this exclusion

Slide 8  People with intellectual disabilities face higher risks of HIV/AIDS because of lack of education and increased vulnerability

Slide 9  They are excluded from dialogue, public policy & poverty eradication

Slide 10  Families & self-advocates said

“Poverty is not about money, it is about exclusion (from school, from work, from community).”

Slide 11  They want education

Slide 12  They want health

Slide 13  They want employment

Slide 14  They want to be part of society

Slide 15  They want structural reform
Organisational History

MALAYSIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION FOR RELIEF (in brief, Malaysian Care) was formed in 1979 as a non-profit Christian organization committed to serving the poor and needy. Initially, Malaysian Care set up small residential homes for children whose parents are ex-leprosy patients, half-way homes for ladies who have mental health problems and male ex-prisoners respectively, drug rehabilitation centres for male and female drug addicts respectively and a small residential home for persons with disabilities (July 1981).

KIV: to show Video on Malaysian Care (7mins) – its ethos, vision and mission – & Malaysian Care Services, namely Prisons, Drugs & AIDS, People with Special Needs and Rural & Urban Community Development.

Our approach is wholistic, believing we are called to meet physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual needs.

We work in partnership with Churches and Christian organizations in providing relief, development assistance and spiritual hope to individuals and groups irrespective of race, religion and ethnic background.

Historical Background

In the 1980’s, there were very few services for people with disabilities. These were mostly “institutional or custodial care” whereby no or little training was provided. Malaysian Care made a deliberate paradigm shift from residential care to community services on the premise that the disabled person needs not be “sent away” if there are adequate support services for the family within the community. However, the public universities do not have a degree course on special education, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, etc. Moreover, working in a non-governmental organisation (NGO) was not a career pathway for people as often the NGO did not pay competitive corporate salaries or its perks. Thankfully, a team of overseas personnel (from Christian agencies overseas) joined the local team in pioneering community and support services for people with disabilities. Concurrently, the team pioneered various community-based projects which later evolved to structured educational and training programmes for children & young adults with learning difficulties and support services for their families.

Though pre-schooling or kindergartens were available for non-disabled children, very few children with disabilities were able to attend the local neighbourhood pre-schools or kindergartens. Much emphasis was placed on the medical model of disability. Existing services tend to focus on the rehabilitative and treatment aspects only. Even then,
children who required essential therapy like speech therapy and physiotherapy often had to wait a long time, even in the urban areas.

**What is Early Intervention?**

Malaysian Care pioneered Early Intervention Programmes (EIP) in 1987 through the early efforts of Mr. Robert Deller, a clinical psychologist seconded by TEAR Fund U.K. Ms. Wong Poh Wan (now, Director – Services*People with Special Needs) has continued to pioneer and develop the Early Intervention Programmes further. To date, Malaysian Care has helped to establish 14 EIPs nationwide.

It is an acknowledged fact that a child’s early years are crucial in their learning and development. Early Intervention is a philosophy which states that support and help should be given to parents at the earliest possible age when a disability is first suspected or diagnosed so that the effects of disability can be minimised and the child will have the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential.

In Malaysia, we have to concentrate our efforts on developing cost-effective programmes, otherwise parents may have to bear the cost of more expensive programmes and this will further marginalises those who are poor and needy. Although there are increasing professionals in the field of disabilities, their services can be costly and not affordable to all who need them. In many ways, this is precisely where Malaysian Care and its church partners can be “the visible expression of the wholistic mission of Christ to a broken world, displaying His Love, compassion and justice to the poor and socially deprived.” (One of the factors is that most of our Christian partners usually ask for a donation and the staff are committed and caring). In line with our organization’s vision, our strategy is to work together in partnership with the local Christian community in the establishment of services for people with disabilities and their families in the community.

**Before I go into details of the partnership, What do you think are some of the important ingredients for a successful partnership? Please share.**

How did you go about addressing the problem, and who was involved?

However, in the initial years, the churches were not quite ready to undertake this type of social ministry for children with special needs and their families. The first EIP was started as a new initiative with an existing special school. The service club, like Kiwanis, was more eager and ready, so the Kiwanis Down Syndrome Centre in Petaling Jaya was established in 1989. There was much prayers and supplications made to the Lord to stir the hearts of the leaderships of churches to see such needs and to respond in Christian love and action. It was later in 1989 that an EIP in Dayspring Centre (Klang) that was our first Christian project partner. Subsequently, our EIP projects were largely focused on partnership with the Christian community.
In 1997, Malaysian Care helped to establish SPICES. **SPICES is an acronym for Support for Parents, Infants & Children through Early Services.** SPICES Early Intervention Centre provides support services to children with developmental delay and learning difficulties, and their parents. It is non-profit community project by Emmanuel Evangelical Free Church, Kuala Lumpur. SPICES is part of a nationwide network of Early Intervention Programmes/Centres set up with the assistance of Malaysian Care, a local-profit Christian agency serving the poor and needy. **Every man, woman and child is valuable in the eyes of God.** Each person’s presence, whatever the measure of his or her abilities, adds to the richness and diversity of life. **The old adage that ‘variety is the spice of life’ embodies a part of what SPICES believes in as we work with children with special needs.** The four key principles of Rights, Independence, Choice and Inclusion should be consciously embedded in our services, strategies and approaches.

Our Mission: “We strive to extend God’s love to the community by developing and implementing support services for people with learning difficulties so that their full potential may be realized.

**SPICES OFFERS AN EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMME (neutral programme) WITH THE FOLLOWING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:**

- To provide children having developmental delay with opportunities for learning so that they may achieve their full potential.

- To prepare these children for integration into regular kindergartens and formal schools.

- To encourage parental involvement in the education of their children with special needs by equipping parents with essential information and skills.

- To offer practical, emotional and spiritual support to the families who participate in the programme.

**THE EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMME (EIP)**

Each child enrolled at SPICES follows an individual Education Programme drawn up after a comprehensive assessment. This programme seeks to systematically stimulate all areas of a child’s development, and includes the following activities:

- Art & Craft
- Singing & Music
- Sand/Water Play & Dough play
- Pretend Play
- Story Time
- Table Activities
- Physical Activities
SPICES was our fourth Christian project partner. There was staffing problems and the centre eventually “struggled on” with only one staff & few volunteers. Churches begun to respond and guidance and technical support was needed to be given to existing centres and the Malaysian Care staff team for Early Intervention was very lean too. As our key staff is a resource person and Malaysian Care has decided not to run its own Early Intervention Centre, new staff (who generally do not have prior early childhood qualifications) did not have an operational base to acquire skills competencies.

With prayers and waiting on the Lord and consultation between the eldership of Emmanuel Evangelical Free Church (EFC) and Malaysian Care, the partnership relationship was strengthened with an official signing of an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) on August 21, 2001. This MoU is not a legal contract but serves to act as a guide to the effective management and administration of SPICES (Support for Parents, Infants & Children through Early Services). This partnership project was spelt as:

“SPICES and Malaysian Care …
… a new partnership initiative for early intervention”.

Objectives of the Emmanuel EFC & Malaysian Care Partnership

1. Ensure the running of a good Early Intervention Centre (EIC) to cater for the needs of the community, especially the poor and needy;
2. Promote awareness of the rights and needs of children with learning difficulties;
3. Enhance the quality of special education for children with learning difficulties;
4. Encourage the set-up of family support groups;
5. Provide a training and resource base for parents, staff and volunteers, placement students.

In this shared undertaking of providing community services (in particular, Early Intervention Programmes for young children with learning difficulties) to support parents of children with disabilities, we agree to the following terms and conditions:

MUTUAL COMMITMENT

1. To ensure and to enable that the project is sustainable and viable;
2. To maintain the identity of the project which is called “SPICES” (Support for Parents, Infants & Children through Early Services), a community project of Emmanuel EFC;
3. To ensure that all publicity and promotion of the project will not in anyway jeopardise the dignity and self-worth of people with disabilities (or service-users) and the image of Malaysian Care and Emmanuel EFC.
Other Key Points from Subsequent Sub-sections highlighted as follows:

Malaysian Care’s COMMITMENT

- Malaysian Care shall be appointed as “the Manager” of SPICES by Emmanuel Evangelical Free Church Malaysian Care

EMMANUEL EFC’s COMMITMENT

- Emmanuel EFC will undertake the employment of three (3) staff for SPICES.
- Emmanuel EFC will appoint a Head Teacher to oversee the day-to-day operation of SPICES. The Eldership of Emmanuel EFC is responsible for all policy matters of SPICES, in consultation with Malaysian Care.
- As the ownership of SPICES is Emmanuel EFC whilst Malaysian Care is only appointed to manage SPICES, Emmanuel EFC undertakes to assume all legal liability for whatever happens at SPICES.

FINANCIAL MATTERS

1. Emmanuel EFC is responsible for the total financial operational costs of SPICES (SPICES staff salaries, rental of premise, overheads, and maintenance costs).

2. Malaysian Care is responsible for the full salaries of Malaysian Care’s staff attached to SPICES.

3. All monthly contributions from parents whose children are receiving services from SPICES shall be channelled to SPICES Account.

4. All other donations that are designated shall be channelled accordingly.

GENERAL PROVISIONS ON THE PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

SCOPE and DURATION

**Phase I.** The first MoU was officially signed on August 1, 2001 for a period of two (2) years, and thereafter, if need be, it shall be extended by another year.

For this duration, CARE’s Toy Library cum Parents Resource Centre was incorporated together as an extension of the partnership for the effective utilization of facilities to support parents of children with disabilities and others.

Upon the expiry of the partnership, CARE is to have undertaken to assist SPICES to be equipped with the necessary and relevant resources (toys and books and teaching aids) for its continuing effectiveness. These resources can be built up progressively in different stages during the duration of the partnership.
Phase II  This MoU, after three years, was further extended for two years (2005 & 2006).

This time, CARE’s Toy Library cum Parents Resource Centre was not incorporated in the partnership as it was designated to move to the new Headquarters in Bandar Tasik Selatan to extend its scope of services in a new community.

Phase III  A third MoU was signed for the duration of two (2) years (Year 2007 * 2008).

A development programme (School-Age Programme for children with special needs, aged 6+ to 12 years) has been established.

A pilot school project was also undertaken and training of teachers in the government school pilot project had been successfully undertaken.

**POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF THE PARTNERSHIP**

It is without doubt that both parties have mutually benefitted from the partnership. The partnership synergised the intake of more children (currently, 56 children on the programmes), the conducting of more trainings for parents and teachers from other centres, the widening of scope for staff development and the visible unity of Christians working together.

1. SPICES has now been established as a service model for early intervention programmes for young children with special needs.

2. In response to community needs, SPICES has moved on to develop a primary school-age service model (for ten graduants, aged 6 to 7+, of the early intervention programme) in Year 2005. The results have been encouraging and further programme development needs to be done. Currently, there are 26 children of 3 different age groups.

3. Other than the specialist staff and another junior staff, the other 3 Malaysian Care staff based at SPICES are young and new in ministry and they need to be trained and acquired core competency skills.

4. SPICES remains importantly as the Resource Development and Training centre for staff, parents, volunteers and placement students.

5. The whole staff team (together with the support of the parents) are ready to pilot another school project nearby for the children in the School-Age programmes.

6. There is increased involvement of church members as volunteers on a regular basis and on project basis, and children too contribute in voluntary services (such
as art, making of teaching aids, playing music) and be a buddy in integrated activities). This year, the church is taking some children from SPICES to attend the Vacation Bible School in November.

**Key principles and practices adopted**

Similar to the Partnership Values of the Micah Network, we define partnerships as mutually beneficial relationships of the two autonomous Christian bodies who share a common vision and are working towards a common goal. We relate to one another on the basis of our beliefs, shared values and shared commitment to the wholistic mission of Christ to a broken and needy world (read as “integral mission” in Micah Network and TEARFund). Malaysian Care is committed to work with the local church and through the local church. Emmanuel EFC is a strong supporter (donor and prayer partner). I concur with Tearfund UK, that surmises “Partnership for us is an expression of our oneness in Christ but is also strategically important because of insights and benefits we gain through working with others.” (Cheung, V. 2004)

Partnerships need to be recognised as hard work and positive outcomes do not just happen. As pointed out by Tearfund, a key principle to effective partnership is to recognise that “authentic partnerships are ultimately organisational relationships mediated by people.” Ms. Wong Poh Wan, who is our specialist and manager for the partnership, is also a member of Emmanuel EFC and considered a “missionary” sent out by the church. Undeniably, she plays a key role and much success and developments are to her credits and focused persevering endeavours. Of course, it is our God who bless the ministry and grant us favour.

**Key lessons Learnt**

1. It is not easy to look beyond what is humanly possible, so the parameters (i.e. scope and duration) are rather subjective. It is also our first learning formulation of partnership guidelines whereby staff from two different organisations work ‘as one team’.

2. Though the top leadership from both parties understood our mutual and individual commitments, newer staff find some difficulty in grasping the conception and internalisation of the partnership except in operational practice. It became apparent to me that as the Head of Services (People with Special Needs) to brief the staff concerned more thoroughly and to let them read the signed MoU. In principle, everyone acknowledged the positive outcomes. What is needed is a deliberate critique and in-depth evaluation.

3. As our services (except our evangelistic camps and parents meetings) are generally neutral, I felt that, at times, we need to be more bold to declare our Christian witness and to be very sensitive to the Holy Spirit to share His words at every given opportunity. (Having said this, the parents are fully aware that we are a Christian faith-based organisation and SPICES is a community project of a local church).
References:

Resources from Micah Network:
- Partnership Values of the Micah Network
- Micah Network Partnership Guidelines
- “Christian development as meaningful partnership” – a literature review by Victor Cheung, December 2004

Rachel Blackman (2007), *Roots 11 - Partnering with the local church*, TEARFUND UK


Malaysian Care Services*People with Special Needs: 5 Years Plan (2004 – 2008)


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