

The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches

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FEATURE: Home at Rumah Hope

Malaysian Church Offers New Beginning for Neglected Children

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia/GENEVA, 21 April 2011 (LWI) – It is Saturday morning and more than 20 children are squatting on mats on a concrete floor, their eyes glued to a television cartoon show. In a corner, two girls are doing their school homework.

They are among a group of 60 residents of Rumah Hope (House of Hope), a home for abused, neglected and underprivileged children aged five to 17, which is an outreach program of the Lutheran Good Hope Church located outside Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's bustling capital city.

Because it is a weekend, some children have gone home to visit their families.

Those remaining at the home are supported by five volunteers from the University of Malaya psychology and social work programs. One volunteer is helping the two girls with their homework. Another is carrying a young boy. Some give the children bear hugs; others are answering their questions.

“Being with these children is a wonderful and very precious learning experience for me,” says Nge Lay Cher, one of the volunteers. “[It] actually teaches me to get along with children. Through these children, I have learned to be patient.”

The volunteers come to Rumah Hope three times a week and support the work of 12 full-time staff led by Alice Paul, the shelter director. “A hug or a smile is important for these children, who have been separated from or abandoned by their parents,” says Paul.

The Good Hope church is part of the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM).

Education and Life Skills

Rumah Hope not only ensures that the children are fed and clothed, but that they are also sent to school.

During the week the home's two drivers ferry the children to government-run public schools. Those who attend morning classes have to wake up at 5:30 a.m. and be ready to leave for school at 6:30 a.m. Afternoon students leave at 12:30 p.m. and are fetched by the drivers after they are dismissed at 6:30 p.m.

Education in public schools—from the elementary to the secondary level —is free in Malaysia, but there are special fees to pay for books and other items, says Paul.

Children at the home are also encouraged to play games and learn to paint and draw. They are taught to cook and make handicrafts, which can be sold to help support their needs.

The children are also learning to make prayer part of their lives. Each evening before they go to bed, they gather to pray for 30 minutes. "Prayer helps strengthen the character of these children as it helps to nurture their faith," says Paul.

Knocking at the Gate

Rumah Hope started in 1994, when a poor single mother knocked at the gate of Good Hope, pleading with the church to take care of her five children.

The church took in the children and accommodated them in a rented bungalow. In no time word spread about the church's services to poor and abandoned children and more children were referred to the church.

To deal with the growing need, in 1999 the church built a two-story building within its compound in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, just outside Kuala Lumpur.

More children continued to be referred to Rumah Hope and the church built another structure, which opened in 2006. The first building is now occupied by boys and the new building, by girls.

Once they finish high school, children at Rumah Hope can be referred to other schools for higher learning, including a Lutheran church-run center in the Malaysian capital, where young girls learn sewing, computer programming and other technical skills.

After finishing high school, the boys are referred to similar training centers or to private universities and colleges, if they can acquire scholarships.

Victims of Poverty

Poverty is the main reason why parents abandon or neglect their children, says Paul.

Some villagers from the provinces come to the city to seek better opportunities but because they lack education, they end up unemployed, or they are forced into undesirable activities such as sex work.

Out of desperation many turn to alcohol and drugs so they can forget their poverty. “But these (alcohol and drugs) only further complicate their problems,” she notes.

“The victims of these tragedies,” says the home’s director, “are the children born out of relationships between these lonely, desperate and poor men and women.”

Through the ELCM outreach program, these children are given opportunities to chart their future.

But providing the medical care, food, and transport that they need is expensive. It costs about RM 300 (USD 99) a month per child, a price which Paul calls “staggering.”

Therefore Rumah Hope continues to appeal to corporate and public bodies to support and join its effort to create a new beginning for these poor and neglected children. (810 words)

(Written for LWI by Maurice Malanes)

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