

For the Love of Chinatown

Vicky Liew and her team of Chinese women are taking God's love to illegal immigrants in one of New York City's toughest areas.

Vicky Liew is less than 5 feet tall and weighs only 100 pounds, but she has giant faith. This spunky Asian woman and her co-workers pour their hearts into bringing the gospel to illegal aliens in New York City's Chinatown. They evangelize day and night in the streets and back alleys, plugging away 75 hours a week for meager wages.

Liew, 37, who works with evangelist Bill Wilson's Metro Ministries organization in Brooklyn, New York, broke down in tears when she talked to Charisma about the spiritual darkness she encounters every day in this underground community. When she first arrived in New York City from Malaysia in 1999, she cried when she saw the needs of Chinese immigrants.

"I felt like it's so hopeless because they don't know God," Liew says. "They are slaves, and they don't know how to come out."

Thousands of illegal immigrants from China toil long hours at off-the-books jobs in sweatshops and restaurants. Many are literal captives trying to work off an impossible \$50,000 to \$60,000 debt to a loose band of smugglers known as the Snake Heads.

They fear deportation by U.S. immigration agents and worry about relatives left in China. In the United States they live like animals. Several families squeeze into tiny apartments in shabby tenements with outside public toilets. Gambling is

endemic, and women are forced into prostitution.

New York has the largest Chinatown in the United States, with an estimated population in excess of 100,000, excluding undocumented illegal aliens. Counting the illegals could easily double that number.

Chinatown eats up two square miles in lower Manhattan in a neon-lighted quilt of narrow streets crammed with honking vehicles, noodle shops, restaurants, curio stores, smelly fish markets and 19th century apartment buildings.

Liew pilots Metro Ministries' Chinatown division with a team of young women from Taiwan—Kitty Chuang, Maggie Haung and Barbara Lin. Other staffers and interns from the Brooklyn-based Sunday school ministry aid them.

Once a Buddhist, Liew found Christ when she was 28 and on the verge of committing suicide because of severe family problems.

"I couldn't take it anymore," she says. Then one afternoon under a cloud of despondency she left her florist shop in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to visit a nearby Chinese tea shop. Noticing a Bible there, she questioned the proprietor, who told her about Jesus and said, "I have a word for you." The woman quoted Matthew 11:28, a verse that stunned Liew.

She demanded: "Who told you about me?"

"God told me," the woman replied.

Liew eventually accepted Christ as her Savior during a Bible

study in the woman's church. She worked for the church and attended Bible school before coming to Brooklyn as an intern at Metro Ministries. After working at Coney Island, she jumped at the chance to minister in Chinatown. She rebuffed skeptics who warned her that Chinese people would not come if she preached the gospel.

In their first effort Liew and her team aimed Metro Ministries' Yogi Bear Sunday school outreach at the mostly Hispanic and African American children living in the Alfred E. Smith public housing projects near Chinatown. The after-school program clicked and began attracting Chinese children. "We reached out to the kids and came to know the families," Liew says.

The program has grown to six weekly sidewalk Sunday schools in parks and streets throughout Chinatown, plus outreaches to teenagers in local churches. Every week the Sunday schools attract 900 to 1,000 children. Parents or other adults might also attend and watch from the sidelines.

An estimated 2,000 conversions to Christ result annually. Ministry workers follow up on converts and help them become part of local evangelical churches.

Iris Yip, 13, learned about the ministry in 2002. "When I first came I was with the Jehovah Witnesses," she said. "Vicky talked to me and said they teach the wrong thing. I gave my life to Jesus and was baptized in May. My brother goes to church, and my mother will be baptized soon."

The outdoor services mix funny stunts, games and prizes, music, and Bible stories with a concluding gospel message

given in English and Mandarin. During hot afternoons team members chase the children in circles, blasting them with water balloons in front of smiling parents.

Though most of the children understand English, the adults hear the gospel in their native tongue. "We don't care who you are or where you come from," says staffer Pat Imbimbo. "We don't ask for immigration papers before we preach the gospel. We'll preach to a rat if they can get saved."

The Chinatown Methodist Church opens its doors for Liew's after-school program on Friday afternoons and once a month for a youth service that includes parents. "Parents like this program because you're helping their children," said James K. Law, senior pastor. "If you help the family, you help the Chinatown community."

Many gangs rule the streets in Chinatown and are involved in drugs, auto thefts, gambling and extortion of local merchants. Yet they don't bother the Sunday schools. A drug dealer approached Imbimbo and pointed to a youngster in the park. "Here's 100 bucks," he said. "That's my little brother there. I don't want him to be like me. I like what you're doing."

Prayer and home visitation are vital legs of the ministry.

"We spend a lot of time in prayer walking in different areas," says Chuang. "We just go to a park and walk and with faith we pray and proclaim this is our land, just like Joshua. The heart of the people is much softer now."

The young women visit homes to share the gospel, pray for

needs and distribute boxes of food. Sometimes it's long after dark when they do because they try to reach parents who work late. They must overcome traditional Chinese beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

"Every single family we are working with, there is an idol in their house," Chuang said. "They are all idol worshipers."

The Chinese immigrants also worship their ancestors. Becoming a Christian means cutting off family roots, a painful step that assures persecution. "When your parents die you are not going to worship them [if you are a Christian]. But that is the biggest sin of a Chinese," Chuang said.

She overcomes objections by persuading parents that their children will love them much more if they become Christians. To explain the doctrine of salvation, she compares Christ's shedding His blood on the cross with the Chinese practice of sacrificing chickens and dogs.

She also encourages children to pray for their parents. "There is nothing else you can do," she tells them. "Don't fight with your parents because the more you fight they are going to think you are in rebellion."

The Chinatown workers deal with tough issues—including modern slavery. Chinese young men 18 or older who are U.S. citizens are lured into marrying women in China whom they divorce after returning to the United States. Upon their arrival here, the women are indebted to gangsters for as much as \$50,000, and the husbands who divorced them are paid \$5,000 cash. Husbands of poor families divorce their wives so they can make money by bringing a new wife from China.

A woman accepted Christ recently and was troubled because she works in a massage parlor to pay off her husband's gambling losses. "She knows that it's wrong, but she needs the money," Chuang says. Metro Ministries contacted churches that are willing to help her.

Liew struggles with these and other frustrations. Sometimes, she admits, she feels like the reluctant prophet Jonah. "Sometimes I feel like saying: 'God, kill me, and kill these people because of all their sin. I cannot make it anymore.'"

But so far Liew has refused to quit. "I only know that Jesus loves me, and I love these people."

Peter K. Johnson is Charisma's New York City correspondent. He lives in a New Jersey suburb.

For more on Metro Ministries' outreach to Chinatown, call 718-453-3352. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.