

# Business as missions: Reuben Ang of Elsie's Kitchen takes "heartware" seriously

(<http://saltandlight.sg/work/business-as-missions-reuben-ang-of-elsies-kitchen-takes-heartware-seriously/>)

by Karen Tan // May 18, 2018, 6:51 pm



**R**euben Ang is an affable young man.

Hearty laughter punctuates his conversations. Jovial and convivial could easily have been his middle names.

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## “Good Christian businessman”

The NUS Business graduate is the Managing Director of Hased and Emet, the parent company of Elsie's Kitchen, Continental Delight and Hased Table catering. But, he is not content with just being a “good Christian businessman”, a good steward that grows company revenue and channels the profits to charity. He wants to do more.



*The central kitchen in Jurong Industrial Estate.*

Reuben wants to run a sustainable business that fulfils a missional goal at the same time.

“The holistic call for the church is to be that missional force. When we say we want to see His Kingdom come and His will be done, that should also be seen in the professional context as well. I want to see that inaugurated Kingdom reality wherever I am and participate in that redemptive and reconciliatory ministry, even in my work.”

## Dropping anchors

Although Reuben grew up helping the family business during his school holidays as a youth, was from a Christian family and grew up in church, he only got better insights on how to run the business God's way after spending a stint in full-time ministry after graduation. "Before that, you just went along with the mainstream, you study, so you can work and then make money"

Involvement in the Varsity Christian Fellowship as an undergraduate and a year-and-a-half spent as a staff worker with NUS Fellowship Evangelical Students cemented the change in his viewpoint.

"Along the way, I dropped anchors to make sense of what I believed in and I kind of felt my way through, to discover and question, to understand what my place was and what God had called me to. As I served, my worldview continued to be challenged, constructed and reinforced. When I finally had a conversation with my dad, I knew that my responsibility was to come back into the family business. At that point, I understood that it was different but not apart from the missional calling because I had to bring that into my business."

## Hardware to heartware

When Reuben took the helm five years ago, he started making some changes to what he described as a "mom-and-pop" operation then. "Bookkeeping was done manually, and we actually had physical journal books, used typewriters and did not even have a photocopying machine."

In the past several years, he supervised the company's operations from the shophouses in Serangoon Gardens to a modern central kitchen in Jurong Industrial Estate. He expanded his management team, completed an acquisition deal and added corporate structure to the business. All necessary moves as expounded in business schools.

But Reuben was not satisfied with just ticking the boxes. Once the organisational structure was put in place, he worked next on wiring up the "heartware" of the company, one change at a time. The first step he took was to close the distance between boss and employees. "For one thing, we definitely had to close the power distance. We need to treat our people better in the ways they would understand.



*Catering for a wedding celebration at Zion Serangoon Bible Presbyterian Church.*

“One of the most basic things we could do was to pay fairly. Market rate is one thing; we are also concerned with the liveable wage. Therefore, the drivers in my organisation are paid way above the market rate.”

Beyond that, there is no distinction made of salaries for local and foreign workers.

“I have Singaporean, Indian and Filipino drivers – they are all paid the same. We believe they contribute equally to the organisation regardless of where they are from. They all work very hard, and we want to compensate them fairly.”

The move to the 57,000 sq ft facility in Jurong meant they could include a lodging programme on the company’s premises, it was also an opportunity for Reuben and the company to do more.



| The company's fleet of delivery vans.

“When we first came here, one of the big issues was lodging. At that time there was bad press about lodging for workers. So, when we started back then, we wanted to make our ancillary dormitory a place where our staff would enjoy staying. We installed air-conditioning, put in a gym, and gave complimentary staff meals and free wi-fi. I am glad that today, it's legislation and a requirement for workers' accommodation.”

“Staff morale and how they are doing are very important, especially because many don't have family here. We have to be family for them. We care for them holistically; they are not just my employees, they are family.”

## Staff are family

Caring for his employees often means going beyond the call of duty. Reuben takes a personal interest in his staff.



| *The staff pantry.*

“There have been incidents when workers have spent their entire savings at the casino. We had to advise them about signing the self-exclusion and help them manage their finances. There have been times when we had to extend personal loans with the intention to help them manage their finances. Sometimes, instead of paying them directly, we paid their bills instead. When we care for them holistically, that sometimes means planning for them.”

If you thought that was all good, it gets better.

The company has a masseur on site.

When Reuben first joined the company in 2012, he helped with the deliveries and would work till 11pm on some days. He thought to himself: If I feel so tired, what more the workers?

Perhaps, it would be nice to have a massage service at work, came that fleeting thought.



*Celebrating Lunar New Year with staff.*

So, in 2016 when Reuben heard that a churchmate was looking for work as a masseur, he turned that random idea into reality. Since then, Daniel Low, comes to work several days a week.

“Daniel is a blessing to us and the staff as well. He gets to go out and make new friends, which is important to him, and he appreciates that as well. It is a lot about building relationships. We want to build that kind of environment here.”

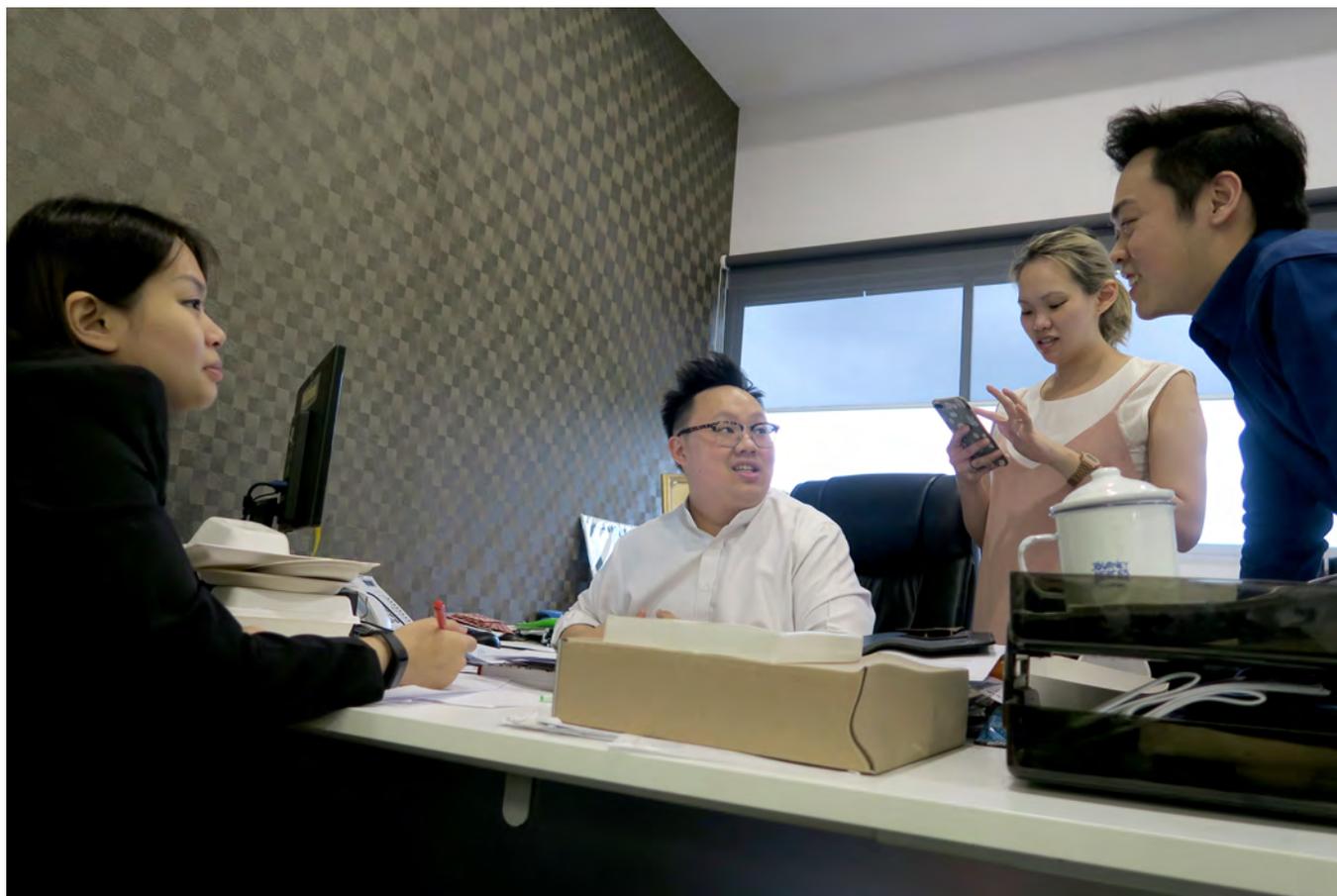


*Daniel Low, the in-house masseur providing a stress reliever*

All these extra benefits must surely eat into the costs.

“You have to do your due diligence and safeguard company's interest. It must make business sense because at the end of the day we are building a sustainable business. We must premise all these initiatives on a sustainable business. If not, I won't be accountable to the business. But it is also in the company's interest to take care of the staff.

“They have become more productive and are happier working here. If they don't manage their lives well, it can affect the stability of the workforce. For us, it is about extending that family, giving them ownership of the company about decisions, building their career here. So it's a win-win.”



Reuben with some of his team.

## Fruits of his labour

Since Reuben joined the family business, his plate has always been full. Nevertheless, he has also been eating fruits of his labour.

“In the last five years, the company has tripled in top-line growth. As a business it has grown in scale, we have tripled in terms of volume, the workforce has quadrupled. But what drives us are the basics: Mercy, justice and compassion. And we want to do it right. We want to be that changing force like salt and light.”

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karen Tan

Karen was a producer at Asia Business News (Singapore), Bloomberg News and CNBC Asia. She subsequently joined the Far East Organisation to oversee corporate social responsibility. Karen is now Associate Editor at *Salt&Light*.