CS501.NA People as Social and Cultural Beings
Dr. Stanley John
A Reum Song
Summer 2020

Lay Leadership Rediscovered in Bethel Nepali Church

Introduction

Bethel Nepali Church (BNC) is composed of Nepali-speaking congregation. Since the church's beginning in 2006, its aim has been to work for God's Kingdom through the Nepali immigrants in New York City. Thus, the church has been focusing on bringing Nepali immigrants to the church while retaining the Nepali identity and language within the church. Although the church started small as a prayer meeting of three people including Pastor Ganesh Paul Rai who is the current pastor, the church has grown to 85 congregants as of now, reaching almost 100 people on special occasions such as Christmas service, Easter service, and other celebrations. To have a clearer and more accurate appreciation of the presence and the significance of the growth of BNC, it is crucial to understand the cultural contexts of Nepal and the Nepali community in New York City. It is also important to note that the church's neighborhood was one of the hot spots of Covid-19 in New York City earlier this year. Considering the impact of the pandemic the community might have experienced, the focus of the ethnography project has been geared toward discovering and understanding how the unique culture of the church has evolved and innovated to bring the church build resilience during the challenging times.

I participated in four Sunday services and two weekday youth Bible study fellowships as an observer, and conducted interviews with Pastor Paul and David Chataut, a Deacon of the

church. Through these experiences, I began to recognize that all the leaders and active participants are relatively young, representing the majority of congregants who are in their 20s to 40s. More importantly, four or five leaders, including the pastor, took turns weekly to lead the regular Sunday worship service and the Bible study meetings. The apparent heavy and active involvement in the ministry by non-pastoral staff was noteworthy and intriguing. The church is also non-denominational. In this paper, the discussion will be focused on how the lay leaders' active engagement in church ministry, including teaching, leading the worship service, and even preaching, came to be one of the unique characteristics of the culture of the church against the backdrop of Nepal's age-old construction of social stratification. Additionally, how the lay leadership of the church has been renewed even as it has strengthened the church ministry during the pandemic will also be intertwined in the discussion.

Evolving Diversity in the Neighborhood of Bethel Nepali Church

Bethel Nepali Church is currently located in Woodside, Queens in New York City. All the congregants of the church, except for three families living in Long Island, reside in Woodside, Sunnyside, Jackson heights and Elmhurst in Queens. Queens is the city's, or perhaps the nation's, most diverse borough, with at least 138 languages spoken among its residents, and the neighborhoods where the congregants live have long been recognized as embodiment of the city's ethnic and cultural diversities due to the constant flow of immigrants from different parts of the world.[1] There have been waves of different ethnic groups moving in, resulting in the gradual transformation of the dynamics of the ethnic landscapes of the community over the past decades. With the developments of large infrastructure, including fast and frequent train and bus

[1] Steph Koyfman, "The Languages of Queens: Diversity Capital of the World," *Babble Magazine*, September 27, 2017, http://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/the-languages-of-queens-diversity-capital-of-the-world.

service by the Long Island Railroad and NYC transit network, Queens saw its population grew from about 450,000 to more than a million during the 1920s. Soon it became the center of the entry to the city with the later constructions of two international airports, LaGuardia and John F. Kennedy in the 1940s.[2] Starting with the Irish moving out of Manhattan in the early 20th century and the newly arrived Irish immigrants from Ireland, European ethnic enclaves, including Italian and German, formed the majority of Queens' population prior to the 1960s.[3] However, in 1965, when the Hart-Celler Immigration Bill which eliminated the national origins quota system, was signed, a new era of mass immigration began. The Hart-Celler Act significantly expanded the immigration flow from Asia and Latin America which created the more globally diverse and connected Queens that emerged after 1965.[4] Historically, the ethnic patterns in Queens have been dynamic with ongoing tendencies of earlier immigrants moving east toward more suburban neighborhoods and new immigrants taking their place and adding their own color to the existing ethnic and cultural landscapes. According to the 2010 census, Asians and Hispanics make up 40 to 60 percent of the population, respectively, of the western neighborhoods in Queens once occupied by European ethnic groups.[5] One of the newer immigrant groups to settle in the neighborhoods is the Nepalis who have been coming to the US in the hope of seeking economic opportunity and escaping political turmoil in their country.[6] Although the Nepali community does not yet have as many number of immigrants as other dominant ethnic groups, it has been growing steadily and becoming increasingly visible. A survey done in December 2010 by a

[2] Brendan McGovern and John W. Frazier, "Evolving Ethnic Settlements in Queens: Historical and Current Forces Reshaping Human Geography," *Focus on Geography* 58, no. 1 (January 2015): 11, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/foge.12045.
[3] McGovern and Frazier, *Focus on Geography*: 13.
[4] McGovern and Frazier, *Focus on Geography*: 14.
[5] Matthew Bloch, Shan Carter and Alan McLean, "Mapping America: Every City, Every Block," *The New York Times*, accessed July 22, 2020, https://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer.html.
[6] Marjorie Cohen, "Jackson Heights is home to a growing Nepali community," *Brick Underground*, October 19, 2017, https://www.brickunderground.com/live/jackson-heights-nepalese-community-diversity-queens.

human rights advocacy group called *Adhikaar* reported that the rate of growth of the community accelerated in the last two decades. It showed that 85 percent of 300 surveyed respondents arrived in the US after 2001, with almost half of them arriving after 2007.[7] According to *Asian American Federation*, the population of Nepalese alone in New York City doubled from 3,156 to 6,392 from 2010 to 2015 – a growth rate much higher than the 13 percent growth rate of the total Asian population.[8] Among the Nepalese New Yorkers, 87 percent lived in Queens, largely concentrated in the neighborhoods of Elmhurst, Jackson Height, Sunnyside and Woodside.[9] In this context, BNC is situated in the heart of the Nepali community in New York City, reflecting the immigration history, current demographics and lifestyles of the Nepalese immigrants.

Cultural Context in the Homeland: Geography and People

Most of the congregants of BNC moved to New York within the past ten years to work or to study further. Being first-generation immigrants, they have been maintaining their ethnic identity through solidarity with other Nepali believers in the church. Since most of them grew up in Nepal, it is essential to understand their ethnic background to follow their evolving cultural context.

Nepal, their home country, is located along the southern slopes of the Himalayan mountain ranges. It is a landlocked country sharing borders with India to the east, south, and west, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north. Sandwiched by two giant countries, Nepal depends heavily on India for transit facilities and access to the sea, namely, the

---

[7] Susan Hangen & Luna Ranjit, "Snapshots of the Nepali-Speaking Community in New York City: Demographics and Challenges," *Adhikaar, Human Rights and Social Justice*, 4, December 2010, http://www.adhikaar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/JankariReport_Final4Web.pdf.
[8] "Profile of New York City's Nepalese Americans," *Asian American Federation*, 1, accessed July 24, 2020, http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/2019np.pdf.
[9] "Profile of New York City's Nepalese Americans," *Asian American Federation*, 1, http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/2019np.pdf.

Bay of Bengal.[10] Its shape is roughly rectangular, about 500 miles long and 90 to 150 miles wide, a size slightly larger than New York State.[11] It is a mountainous and hilly country with eight of the world's ten highest peaks, including the famous Mount Everest. For a small country, Nepal has a great diversity in its geographical features, ranging from the lowland belt called *Tarai* plains situated 300 meters above sea level in the south to the hill region between 1,000 and 4,000 meters in altitude, and the mountain region situated at 4,000 meters or higher above sea level to the north of the hill region.[12]

Life in Nepal is intricately intertwined with its physical environment. Although there has been an increase in migration and dispersion in the past few decades, Indo-Nepalese ethnic group traditionally inhabited the more fertile lower hills and Tarai plains, mostly engaging in agriculture, and Tibeto-Nepalese occupied the mountainous region, focusing on herding and some farming. These major people groups are furthered divided into numerous ethnic groups. The 2011 census shows that Nepal's indigenous nationalities comprised 36% of the total population of 26.5 million, recognizing 59 different nationalities.[13] Among the Tibeto-Nepalese is an ethnic group called *Rai*. Pastor Paul Rai briefly explained in the interview about the Rai people to which he belongs, as is revealed by his last name. According to him, the Rai people have traditionally lived in the eastern part of Nepal and had their own indigenous religions mixed with Hinduism and Buddhism. His family's religion was based on the worship of nature distinct from Hinduism or Buddhism. Although Nepal's various non-Hindu indigenous nationalities and tribes were incorporated into the caste hierarchy since the unification of Nepal in the 18th

[10] "Geography," Countrystudies.us, accessed July 21, 2020, http://countrystudies.us/nepal/21.htm.
[11] "South Asia:: NEPAL," *CIA The World Factbook*, last updated June 10, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/np.html.
[12] "Geography," Countrystudies.us, accessed July 22, 2020, http://countrystudies.us/nepal/21.htm.
[13] "Indigenous Peoples in Nepal", International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, accessed July 21, 2020, https://www.iwgia.org/en/nepal.html.

century, they did not necessarily adhere to the practices of the caste system. As such, his family's experience regarding the caste was different from the people in the mainstream Hindu society, being allowed to have more freedom to convert to Christianity. Although evangelism was virtually criminalized in Nepal, many people in the lower caste who came to his village to work gradually chose to convert to Christianity along with his family, resulting in a church to be planted in their village. On the other hand, David Chataut who has a different ethnic background from Pastor Paul, grew up in a rural area in the western part of Nepal as a Hindu priest's son and had been strongly influenced by Hindu culture. He became a Christian only after he left his hometown to move to Kathmandu to study. Such characteristic of ethnolinguistic diversity in Nepal is also visible in the congregants of BNC as many of them come from different parts of the country. Therefore, it is important to understand that the Nepali diaspora communities are not to be considered as one homogeneous monolinguistic group. Even within a congregation of a church, we can find multi-ethnic and multi-cultural backgrounds. Yet, there is no language barrier among the congregants in BNC as everyone communicates in Nepali, Nepal's official language, in the church.

Opportunities for Growth of Bethel Nepali Church

As mentioned previously, Bethel Nepali Church started humbly with three people and it has been growing steadily since its beginning, witnessing several new believers' baptisms each year. Others joined the church after they had already become Christians. As David pointed out, most of the congregants share impactful conversion experiences with powerful testimony of encounter with God in a supernatural way. Their ongoing passion to witness and participate in the work of God began with a drastic change in their life. For example, Pastor Paul became a Christian after experiencing God's miraculous healing of his gravely ailing brother through a

pastor's prayer, which led to the conversion of his whole family. Since then, both he and his father became ministers.

In addition, David said that a noticeable factor that has been motivating Nepalis to become Christians is the Hindu caste system. In Nepal, caste discrimination is still practiced and people in lower castes suffer the most. This observation is also found in *The Guardian* as follows: "It is Dalits, and other marginalized groups, who are leading a surge in the growth of Christianity in Nepal. More than a million people in Nepal identify as Christians, and the country has one of the fastest growing Christian populations in the world. The Federation of National Christian Nepal says 65% of Christians are Dalits."[14] *Dalits* refers to members in the lowest caste. It is true to all believers, but even more so to socially marginalized and discriminated people as Dalits that to convert to Christianity is to have a new identity which frees them from the previous status externally assigned to them, thereby enabling them to perceive themselves in a radically different way.

Church Ministry to Equip Lay Leaders

Empowered by extraordinary personal experiences, the congregants of BNC are passionate about participating in ministries, as is evident in the lay leadership structure. The first time I joined the virtual meeting of the Wednesday Youth Bible Fellowship, David was leading a group of around 20 people appearing to be in their 20s to 30s. Pastor Paul was also present, but he participated in the same way as all the participants without any intervention in both David's teaching on the Scriptures and commenting on individual's sharing. Everyone, including Pastor Paul, took turn to share his or her insights or thoughts passionately. However, in the following

[14] Pete Pattisson, "'They use money to promote Christianity': Nepal's battle for souls," *The Guardian*, August 15, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/15/they-use-money-to-promote-christianity-nepal-battle-for-souls.

week, when the Bible study fellowship was led by another leader named Amar, I was slightly confused by the sudden change of the leader and my curiosity grew in the following observations. In the first Sunday service I observed virtually, there was another leader who led the whole service with two other people who sang the worship songs together and participated through spontaneous prayers before the sermon was given by the main leader. I began to wonder why each service and meeting is led by a different person or group of people. The second Sunday service I observed was led by one person from the beginning till the end. The third Sunday service was led by David and two other people, except this time, the sermon was preached by yet another person. Finally, in the fourth Sunday service I observed, I could see Pastor Paul's face as he led the whole service. Through the interview with Pastor Paul, I learned that the format of Sunday service has been simplified and modified to adjust to the virtual setting in the pandemic situation. Whereas the virtual service lasts for about an hour and is led by one main leader, it would last for almost two hours with different people in different roles participating in leading the worship service under normal circumstances. Yet, what remains the same is that four or five leaders take turns each week preaching the sermon. According to David, the level of participation of the congregants has, in fact, been enhanced through the virtual setting. He also noticed that more people are actively engaging in the Bible study and less hesitant about sharing their thoughts. Prior to the pandemic, the gathering on Sunday had been challenging to many of the congregants due to the conflicts with their different work schedules. Therefore, the leaders have been serving those who are unable to attend the Sunday service through various weekday fellowship meetings. In the past few months, as the leaders adopted changes to better serve the church through expanding their commitment, the congregants have been able to connect even more than before with one another.

All the leaders of BNC, including Pastor Paul, are volunteers. The process in which the leaders, or the board members, are appointed is as follows: at the annual meeting of the church, congregants decide who will be appointed a new board member based on qualifications of a leader as written in the Bible, such as in 1 Timothy 3. Once the potential candidate for new board member is selected through the congregants' prayer, the leadership team communicates the expected commitment of board members to the candidate as it can be challenging to be continuously available and committed to the church ministry as a volunteer. Once such expectation is acknowledged by the candidate, the leadership team prays for God's anointing to the newly appointed leader. Thus, while the more important issues are discussed and decisions are made by the congregants' prayer and voting at the annual meetings, the leaders hold frequent meetings where new visions and ideas are initiated by any of the leaders. Pastor Paul has confidence in the lay leadership model in BNC as he believes it can demonstrate well that God is the one who works through ordinary believers who have hearts to voluntarily serve. It also enables BNC to more effectively focus on the ministry as the offerings are used to pay for the rent of the church building, provide financial support to churches in Nepal, and purchase various resources including Nepali worship song books and Nepali Bibles. The churches in Nepal with which BNC has relationships are mostly the ones BNC's congregants previously attended when they were in Nepal. Pastor Paul sometimes preaches and teaches in those churches during his occasional visits to Nepal.

Challenges in the Future Ministry

The egalitarian aspect of the lay leadership model in BNC certainly encourages participation of the lay members of the church, especially those who experienced discrimination due to the caste system. How the leadership embraces and welcomes the congregants' decisions

and involvements stands in stark contrast to many of the congregants' personal experiences of being subtly disassociated by other Nepali immigrants when they reveal their low caste. However, according to David, some of the congregants have difficulty accepting the way the leaders are appointed because they believe that the leaders should be appointed according to how long they have attended the church. When sometimes such disagreements arise, the leadership normally waits for them to gradually accept the church's law. Since the lay leadership has constantly been developing and evolving, some people might see it as absence of strong leadership and continue to challenge its authority.

Another issue concerns how the church can continue to minister to the second generation. Due to the young age of most of the congregants, there are still only a small number of children and they are all below the age of around 10. The number of children will apparently increase as more young couples will have children in the future. Currently, the low Nepali proficiency of the second generation in BNC also limits the Sunday school teachings of the sisters who are not fluent in English. Therefore, BNC is considering the possibility of recruiting volunteers outside BNC. Such generational issue will eventually have to be dealt with in the long term.

Conclusion

Bethel Nepali Church is a relatively young church with young Nepalese congregants who came to New York City recently. Most of them are both first-generation immigrants and first-generation believers. They became Christians with extraordinary conversion experiences to which they have been responding with high level of commitment and deep trust in God in light of their own culture's hostility toward Christians. In the past fourteen years, BNC has continuously grown though the sacrificial service of lay leadership. The lay leaders have shown flexibility in making changes during the ongoing pandemic which has resulted in more

participation of the members of the church. BNC is facing challenges of continuing the lay leadership structure as the church keeps growing and meeting the needs of the next generation. As BNC is entering a new stage, it will first seek God's guidance through prayers as it has always done. The vibrant dynamic of BNC will continue to be renewed as the whole church engages in developing and equipping the lay leaders while teaching and embracing the second-generation.

Bibliography

1. Countrystudies.us. Accessed July 21, 2020. http://countrystudies.us/nepal/.

2. Crane, Julia G. and Angrosino, Michael V. *Field Projects in Anthropology: A Student Handbook*. Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1992.

3. Hangen, Susan and Ranjit, Luna. “Snapshots of the Nepali-Speaking Community in New York City: Demographics and Challenges.” *Adhikaar, Human Rights and Social Justice.* December 2010. http://www.adhikaar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/JankariReport_Final4Web.pdf.

4. McGovern, Brendan and Frazier, John W. “Evolving Ethnic Settlements in Queens: Historical and Current Forces Reshaping Human Geography.” Focus on Geography 58, no. 1 (January 2015): 11-26. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/foge.12045.

5. “Profile of New York City’s Nepalese Americans.” *Asian American Federation*. Accessed July 24, 2020. http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/2019np.pdf.

6. “South Asia:: NEPAL.” *CIA The World Factbook*. Last updated June 10, 2020. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/np.html.

Field Notes

*Church Name: Bethel Nepali Church
*Location: 41-37 58th Street, Woodside NY 11377
*Congregation Size: Approximately 85
*Ethnic Background: Nepali

Participant Observation #1: June 24, 2020, 6pm Wednesday Youth Bible Study (Zoom)

-Begins with 18 participants; everyone greets by saying "Jaimassi"; David Chataut seems to be the leader; He greets everyone; David greeted me and allowed me to introduce myself to everyone. Everyone clapped David translated what I said in Nepali to everyone. I asked what "Jaimassi" means; he explained it is a greeting among Christians

-6:15 pm started with a prayer by David; followed by singing worship songs; someone plays the guitar; Nepali worship songs; *sounds traditional Nepali songs*
-6:35pm discussion starts; Each person shares thoughts; after each sharing, David comments; people respond to the sharing by showing thumbs up emojis; when people finish their sharing, they hold palms together
-Pastor Paul's turn to share; he welcomes me first in English and he goes on to share in Nepali
-7:42pm Special prayer request - people are invited to unmute to share prayer requests
-Everyone prays together and at 7:53pm everyone says "Jaimassi" and the meeting is done

Participant Observation #2: June 28, 2020, 5pm Sunday Service (Facebook Livestream)

-Two men and a woman sitting down on sofa at home; woman is dressed nicely; men are not wearing formal suits; they are wearing colorful dress shirts
-After praying by man in the middle, woman talks; she turns on recording of instrumental accompaniment; *sounds Nepali instruments Sounds like shaker and xylophone*
-People greet through the live chat as he keeps speaking.
-Something dropped with loud sound in the background; the woman smiles; *I feel they are very relaxed*; *quite different from my own church worship atmosphere*
-Preacher not following any script; *He seems very free. He only looks at the Bible to read certain passages*
-6pm He finishes preaching and prays regarding Covid 19 and the service is done

Participant Observation #3: July 1, 2020, 6pm Wednesday Youth Bible Study (Zoom)

-17 participants; today it seems Amar Pakhrin leads; I see new faces - Rashmi, Bryce, several more
-It is done in the same way as last week - leader comments after each participant shares; more people to volunteer to share
-Meeting ended at 7:01 pm with 'Jaimassi' by everyone

Participant Observation #4: July 5, 2020, 5pm Sunday Service (Facebook Livestream)

-A man (who? Pastor? familiar face) sings worship song with guitar; seems to be at his home on the sofa -- Different person than last time; *I wonder if the leaders rotate to lead the worship and preach*
-Nepali worship songs evoke emotions
-5:19pm I see Pastor Paul Rai greets everyone on FB chat
-Preacher talks about "Agape"
-I hear a girl's voice.; he is briefly interrupted but he doesn't seem to care; *I feel people are much more casual in Bethel Nepali than my church*
-6:12pm Service finished.

Participant Observation #5: July 12, 2020, 5pm Sunday Service (Facebook Livestream)

-David Chataut and two other men leading the worship; someone named brother Dinesh is the speaker today
-Romans 6:11-13 (He said this in English)
-It seems this church highly encourages lay people to be actively involved; lay leaders seem to be confident
-6:17pm David prays, and the service done

Participant Observation #6: July 19, 2020, 5pm Sunday Service (Facebook Livestream)

- Pastor Paul leads the worship today; he is seen on his couch
-Worship songs – sung by voice only
-He's talking about Hindu, Buddhism, Muslim, etc.