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Guatemala Church in the East Coast

Tae Baik

CS501: People as Social and Cultural Beings

Dr. Stanley John

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Analysis of Guatemala Church in Palisades Park New Jersey

Jesucristo Es La Puerta is a Spanish-speaking Guatemalan church located at 451 Grand Ave, Palisades Park, NJ. It belongs to the Pentecostal denomination and was established in December 2018. The church's founding can be attributed to Pastor Santos Teletor, an immigrant from Guatemala who had a vision to establish a place of worship for the Guatemalan community in the area. To realize this vision, Jesucristo Es La Puerta currently rents a small space from Somahng Presbyterian Church. The church community comprises approximately 30 regular attendees, with a significant number being immigrants from Guatemala. Many of these congregants have chosen Palisades Park as their home, making Jesucristo Es La Puerta an essential gathering place for the local Guatemalan population. The church for Guatemalan is not simply a place of worship but a supportive community for those who are in need. It provides a sense of belonging and connection for immigrants. Jesucristo Es La Puerta aims to create a space where locals and those in search of a community can come together. Through its services, teachings, and outreach efforts, the church strives to meet the spiritual and communal needs of the Guatemalan population in Palisades Park, NJ

During the time of visits, four members were interviewed: Head Pastor, guitarist from the worship team and a married couple. The interviews took place on a Sunday, both before and after the church main service. Communication was challenging as many of the members had limited skills in English. It was difficult to engage in meaningful conversations as using google translator was one of the main methods. Despite the language barrier, efforts were made to bridge the gap and gained insight of their experiences as immigrants.

One aspect that came up from the interviews was the absence of fellowship activities at Jesucristo Es La Puerta. The limited space available for the church prevented them from

organizing fellowship gatherings as they have done in the past. Previously, they used to have fellowship with meals but due to many congregants with tight space, it became impractical to continue. Even though they face challenges of the absence of fellowship, they still remain focused on worship and teachings to provide spiritual support to its members. The sense of community and shared faith among the members of Jesucristo Es Puerta continues to thrive.

Jesucristos Es la Puerta organizes a significant event during the weekdays. They travel to a church in Cliffside Park, NJ and hold a dedicated worship night. This event serves as an important gathering for the Guatemalan Church community. Worship is the center of Jesucristos Es La Puerta. It is viewed as a foundational aspect of their service and it is deeply embedded in their cultural identity. During these worship nights, the congregation engages in hours of worship and prayer. The Guatemalan tradition encourages singing with passion giving praises to God.

“Immigration of Hispanics is one of the most important issues in the United States.”¹ Many have crossed the borders to find better life and to be able to provide for the family financially. Many immigrants have risked their lives to pursue the American Dream but not all have found the success of their lives. Facing the reality of hardships and difficulties have been major problem for immigrants. Immigrants of Hispanics had increased and have been increasing each year. The number increased “fifty-eight percent since 1990 and is estimated that 35.3 million Hispanics live in the United States Representing over twelve percent of the population of this country.”²

One of the difficulties many Hispanic immigrants are facing is being able to earn money for the family. Culturally, it is normal for men to work and women to stay home as housewives.

¹ Madera, Pablo Jose Rivera. *The Dominant Model and Style of Preaching for Hispanic Immigrants*. (Erskine Theological Seminary, 2010), accessed May 2, 2023. doi:10.2986/tren.064-0173.

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One study showed that women who have migrated being married were less likely to work compared to women who migrated as single.³ Due to this circumstances, immigrants who move as a married couple were faced with more financial crisis. Many rely on low-income services such as Food Stamps, Section 8, and Cash Assistance. “The relative decline in immigrants’ wages and disproportionate representation in low-paying and unstable job markets makes migrant women’s employment an increasingly important determinant of individual and family economic well-being.”⁴

Because of the hardships faced by Hispanic immigrants, many have experienced feelings of loneliness and a strong desire to find a sense of community. This is where the significance of the church comes into play. Hispanic cultures typically prioritize family and community, making the importance of being part of a supportive community even more crucial. Jesucristo Es La Puerta serves as a prime example. The major congregants at Jesucristo Es La Puerta reside in Palisades Park, with their homes being within walking distance of the church. Owning a vehicle may not be available for many of them, leading them to seek out churches in close proximity to their homes. As first-generation immigrants, they face unique challenges in adjusting to life in a new country, and some have children who were born in the United States. The age range of the the children in the congregation spans from infants to 16 year olds.

Pastor Santos, the head pastor of Jesucristo Es La Puerta, has a testimony that is remarkable. He was born and raise in a small city near Guatemala City. Growing up in a humble family as the youngest of seven children, he did not want anything else but to live a simple life. Coming from a background of poverty, Pastor Santos wanted to move to America to bring

³ Ansari-Thomas, Zohra. “Migration, Marriage, and Cohabitation Among Hispanic Immigrant Women in the United States1.” (Journal of Comparative Family Studies 5, no. 33) accessed May 2, 2023. 335.

⁴ Ansari-Thomas, Zohra. “Migration, Marriage, and Cohabitation Among Hispanic Immigrant Women in the United States1.” (Journal of Comparative Family Studies 5, no. 33) accessed May 2, 2023. 335.

financial support for his family. While he was raised in a Christian household and had faith in God, he was not passionate nor took his faith seriously.

In 2001, Pastor Santos made a decision to move to America. However, the transition was not easy for him. He faced numerous challenges particularly with the language barrier. Adjusting to a new culture and way of life was a big hurdle for him. It took him quite some time to find stability as he worked in various fields such as a deli, construction sites, and multiple restaurants. Despite the difficulties, Pastor Santos did not give up.

At the age of 24, Pastor Santos experienced a significant event in his personal life when he met his wife, Camila. However, it was in the year 2013 that Pastor Santos started his pastoral journey. He received a divine calling from God to start a church. He received a clear vision where a tall angel appeared to him, presenting him with a bible. This powerful encounter marked Pastor Santos igniting a deep sense of purpose and dedication to Jesus Christ.

From that point on, Pastor Santos committed himself to serve God. He put all of his time studying the Bible and reading it from Old Testament to New Testament multiple times. The Word of God became his guidance giving him wisdom and inspiration to fulfill his calling. Soon after, he began to walk around in the street of Palisades Park and engaged in evangelistic efforts. He shared the gospel and handed out flyers inviting them to his church.

In 2018, Pastor Santos started on a journey to find a right place for his church in Palisades Park. With much passion, he reached out to multiple churches in the area hoping to find a place to rent where his congregants may gather and worship. However, Pastor Santos faced many challenges along the way. One of the main hardships he faced was the financial aspect. As a newly established church, he did not have enough money to accept offers from the

churches he contacted. It was discouraging for him to receive such high rentals fees as he envisioned a place where his church members could come together and worship God.

Even though there were setbacks, Pastor Santos remained diligent and determined to find a solution. He truly believed in the calling he had received from God and trusted Him that God would provide a way. When Pastor Santos was reaching the lowest point, Somahng Presbyterian Church showed a genuine interest and offered a very minimal rental fee. This was the start of Jesucristo Es La Puerta. Despite the size of the sanctuary, the space was filled with joy and enthusiasm of the congregation. Every Sunday, the sanctuary was filled prayers and genuine worship towards God.

Today, as Pastor Santos reflects back on the early stages of his church, he stays grateful for the partnership and the generosity of Somahng Presbyterian Church. The humility Pastor Santos carries is evident and it is clear that he is a man who deeply fears God.

The church initially began as a family church, with Pastor Santos' relatives being the primary congregants. To attract more attendees, he took the initiative to personally distribute flyers on the streets every Sunday, advertising the church. It was challenging to bring people in because many had already established their church affiliations. Nevertheless, Pastor Santos held onto his faith, and within a span of two years, the congregation grew from 10 to 50, including children. The church faced a space constraint as there were not enough seats for everyone, resulting in some individuals having to sit outside in the hallway. However, over time, the number of attendees gradually declined, and presently, there are approximately 30 people who regularly attend the church.

The order of the service in Guatemalan Church differs significantly from that of Western or Asian Churches. At Jesucristo Es La Puerta, the service starts with worship and prayer, which

typically lasts for about 30 minutes or more. While the congregation engages in worship, a designated person steps forward and intercedes on behalf of the church, families, friends, cities, and the nation as a whole. The worship style itself holds a unique beat and tempo: Vibrant and upbeat. It creates an atmosphere where some individuals joyfully dance in celebration. In contrast to Korean American Churches, Guatemala Churches embrace a joyful approach, incorporating fast-paced songs into their worships.

Following the worship, Pastor Santos takes the pulpit and delivers the message that is about 45 minutes. Afterward, the praise team returns to the stage and leads another 30 minutes worship session. The same individual who led intercession at the beginning of the service comes up to offer additional prayers. Guatemalan Churches prioritize worshipping the Lord and interceding for people and nearby cities. They are dedicated to praying for their neighbors, those who are sick, and those facing difficulties in life. Additionally, they extend their prayers to include Somahng Presbyterian Church and its pastors asking for their faithfulness to the Lord. These prayer sessions can be extended to an hour depending on the movement of the Holy Spirit.

One significance distinction of Korean American Churches is their approach to worship and prayer, specifically by the views and durations. Unlike other churches, Korean American churches tend to place less emphasis on prolonged sessions of prayer and worship. This perspective comes from concerns that the long worship and prayers might be seen as disruptive or burdensome for congregants. There is a strong inclination within these churches to prioritize the opinions and preferences of the attendees. Consequently, if any members expresses their complains about the length of the worship or service, Korean American churches are more likely to take these concerns into consideration rather than sticking by to a specific style or duration.

This flexible approach reflects their desire to create an environment that matches to the preference and comfort of their congregants.

However, on the other hand, Guatemala Churches seem firm with their style of worship that congregants are already aware of. Focuses on worship and prayers seem normal and it would be different if it was any shorter. They believe that as Christians, prayers and worship is a sense of spiritual connection with God and through this, members seek God's presence and guidance. They also have a strong sense of community and collective participation. Worship and prayers allows people to engage as one body and feel the sense of unity. Also, congregants have a strong sense of gratitude towards God for His provisions in their life.

In conclusion, Jesucristos Es La Puerta, a Guatemalan Church, has demonstrated five years of unwavering dedication and a sincere heart for worshiping the Lord. Pastor Santos' vision to reach the Guatemalan community in Palisades Park, NJ is both honorable and deeply respectful. The approach to church within the Guatemalan community stands differently to Korean Americans as they show a genuine authenticity without being overly focused to other's opinions. The Guatemalan Church's focus is not to please others but to solely please God. Their worship and service are driven by a pure desire to honor and glorify the Lord.

Bibliography

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Field notes:

March 25 - 4 PM Service

Jesucristos Es La Puerta church rents our building so during this time, no one is present except Jesucristos Es La Puerta church people. I didn't know the service time very well. I knew that it was in the late afternoon. I got to church at 3 PM and there was young man sitting by himself outside of the sanctuary in a lobby area. He had his ear phones on while watching a video on his phone. He was laying down on the couch.

I walked passed him and made an eye contact. He took off his ear phones and said "Hi, do you need anything?" I replied back asking what time the service is. He answered 4 PM. I asked him if he is willing to be interviewed but he was very hesitant. He had a look on his face that he did not want to be interviewed but I told him very simple questions. He kept saying I should interview the head pastor because that's his uncle and the pastor would be better. I told him it was okay and that I will ask him about the church

I began to ask him questions and with his broken English, he answered them. His name was Thomas and he was 15 years old. He plays guitar for the church and he has been attending the church for 6 years. He is the oldest of the three In the beginning, it felt like he had his guards up but he slowly opened up. As time was getting closer to 4PM, worship team started coming and they were setting up the stage. Every single one of them smiled and said hi to me. I offered to help but they said it's okay.

I stayed for the service but I could not stay for the entire service. I ended up leaving middle of the service and could not interview other people.

April 1 - 4PM Service

I got to church a little after 4PM and service had already started. There was loud worship song playing in Spanish. One guitar, drum, and two keyboard players. One guy in the front was praying. He looked like he was in his 40s. At that time, the seats were really empty. There were about 10 people. 6 men and 4 women. Many of them were in their 30s. They all looked at me at least once because I was the only Korean. They never expected a Korean to walk in. But every time I got eye contacts, they all smiled.

The praying and loud worship songs went on for 35 minutes. All the congregants were standing and all were praying. There was one guy, with a tambourine seating right outside of the door. It was interesting because there were so many seats inside but he moved the chair out so that he could sit right by the door. He would hit the tambourine but it was very off beat but people didn't mind it.

I looked at the worship team and they seemed passionate about what they do. There was a sense of joy in their face. Worship ended, and Pastor Santos came and deliver the message. The message was 45 minutes long.

Once the message was done, the same person who led prayer in the beginning of the service came up with the worship team, and began to pray more. Prayer went about another 30 minutes. I stood there as people kept praying. I was not used to such a long service but people seemed to be totally normal with it. There was this young male that caught my eye because the whole time, it seemed like he didn't want to be there. His face, posture, and he kept checking his phone.

I decided to be bold and tried to talk to him and asked him if I can ask him few questions. However, he said he doesn't speak English with a smile and walked away. I felt very discouraged and went home.

April 15 - 4PM Service

This time, I arrived late around 5:30 when service was ending. I got eye contact with Thomas who was playing the guitar. We got eye contact and he smiled at me. As I was walking in, many people looked at me and I didn't like the feeling. They are welcoming but couldn't help to feel out of place. I stood by my seat as they were closing in prayer.

I noticed a young couple with an infant. They looked like they were in their late 20's. I decided to interview them after sermon. I was a bit hesitant but they were willing. They were speaking in broken English but it worked out. Their names were Jose and Maria.

They moved to America in 2019. They told me they came for hope and to make money. However, COVID broke out and they were struggling financially. They received unemployment and food stamp to survive. They lived in Palisades Park and the wife stays home and takes care of the baby while the husband goes out to work construction.

Overall, they seemed genuinely happy despite their hardships. It made me reflect on my life and my other friends who are working 9 to 5 full time job. I felt like they were living in a different world.

As I was walking out, Pastor Santos came over to me and welcomed me. I have talked to him previously through messages about the usage of the church but this was the first time seeing him face to face. He was really nice and told me that if I needed anything, don't hesitate

to reach out to him. I asked him if he had some time for an interview and he was extremely open to it. I've talked to him for about 45 minutes asking him about his life as a Pastor. From the story about his family to his marriage to his calling, he was trying his best to explain his journey with a broken English.