

Justin Tung

Ethnographic Project

CS501 People as Social and Cultural Beings

A Church for the Indonesian Working-Class Immigrants

The Need for a Church

On a quiet street in Queens, NY, there is a house church that meets every week on Monday evenings for worship, prayer and fellowship. This Indonesian house church gathers around 20 people every week. Consisting of mostly married individuals, but with no other family in the area or country, worshippers enter the house every week exhausted, but with a joyous and excited facial expression. Most of the members met Christ, accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior in Indonesia, and were even baptized in Indonesia, and now have immigrated to the United States for a better life with goals of reuniting with their families and becoming financial stable.

Five members of the congregation were interviewed from this church, which includes the pastor, worship leader and 3 additional members. Attending the worship services, interviewing, and having fellowship with the members of the church reveals the need for a church for the working class among the Indonesian immigrants.

This unnamed house church was started out of a need for a time and place for people who worked long hours on the weekends to have a moment to worship and encounter the Lord. It started with a group of believers who immigrated from Indonesia, wanting to attend an

Indonesian church, yet found that they could rarely attend due to difficult working schedules. Almost all the members of the house church work in restaurants in Queens New York, work long hours and have Mondays as a rest day. Members of the house church find that worshipping together as a church and being in the Word and presence of God each week was not optional for their spiritual well-being. Each member looks forward to worshipping together each week in order to be refreshed by the Lord to have the strength to continue another week and to maintain the hope they have in the Lord. One member quoted Isaiah 40:31, *but those that hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.* They truly understand and value the words from Matthew 18:20, *For when two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.* Richard, one of the church members, shares how he works at a restaurant in Elmhurst from 5PM to 3AM then at 8AM, attends classes at Baruch College to finish his bachelor's degree. He misses his home country, his family and his home church back in Indonesia, but he grateful that there is a place where he can consistently go to worship the Lord. Mondays is the only day of the week he does not need to work so he can dedicate his time to the Lord. Each week, he feels refreshed and renewed in his body and his spirit after worshipping with his church family. This church exists for people like Richard.

Under the leadership of Pastor Mark, this small group of Indonesian believers are able to gather weekly in order to be the church, have community and meet with Jesus. Each member takes the author of Hebrew's seriously when he writes, *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day*

approaching. Pastor Mark explains how this verse encourages and reminds each worshipper, as they come each week, to come expectant, come joyfully, and come ready to love and encourage one another. This was clearly visible as one enters into the home for worship and while watching others enter into the home. Pastor Mark himself is also a bi-vocational pastor. Working as a restaurant worker himself, the only difference between him and his congregants is that he has attended seminary back in Indonesia. He is a working-class immigrant leading and walking with other working-class immigrants. He has had previous experience pastoring at other churches, but it was also on a volunteer basis, while working bi-vocationally. He shares that he loves pastoring and shepherding a congregation, but at this season in his life, he does not feel called to full-time ministry.

This church provides spiritual refreshing for the hard-working Indonesian immigrants. One member shares how she had previously visited an Indonesian church in Manhattan's Chinatown when she first immigrated to the United States, but because of her working schedule, she almost never attended that church, which resulted in feeling distant from the Lord and feeling burnt out from working. She knew she need to spend time in worship with other believers, but a typical church would not work because of scheduling conflict. Clearly there is a need for a church for the Indonesian working-class immigrants who are unable to attend a normal Sunday church service.

When asked about outreach, evangelism and growing the church, this church in particular was not very interested in increasing in number. This was about worship and community, not actually building a large group of people. When asked if they ever partner with other churches, the answer was no. People learn about the church solely through word of

mouth and newcomers were most often invited because one of the church members personally invited them in. Shirley, one of the members of the church, explains how she typically invites her coworkers to the church. The typical invitation would happen as follows: Shirley finds out that one of her coworkers is a believer of Jesus and speaks Indonesian. She then asks if they attend a church and if they would like to attend a church. She explains that most of the time, they reply saying they do not attend a church because they work on Sundays which then gives her an opportunity to invite them to worship with her. This is how people learn about the church and how they receive new members. Some newcomers come for a couple weeks, while others join for a longer period of time. Some newcomers are strong believers, while others may just be interested in the faith. Although it is not the vision of the church to grow in number, Shirley explains that people are always welcomed to join and worship with them. This is similar to how Rynkiewich explains in chapter 11 how migration can be like a revolving door. As migrants move from place to place, some stay longer, and some stay shorter. As migrants move around, it creates open doors for new relationships, new opportunities and new networks of groups. This migration pattern especially opens doors for Christians to reach out to new people, whether they are already believers or not yet believe. This is how this house church reaches out to their community and people group to gather more people to worship.

The Need for Community

This house church also exists because of the need for community. Many of the members of this church, although married and some with kids, are here by themselves. Their families are still back in Indonesia, and some are even in different parts of the United States. They

immigrated to America to have a better life and to provide for their family. Some members shared that their financial goal in the United States is to save up enough money to move their entire family to the United States, but until then, they must work hard and send money home to provide for their family. Due to the loneliness and isolation that can happen here, there is an important need for community for the Indonesian working-class immigrants here. Although there is a significant group of Southeast Asian in New York City, especially Queens, the percentage of Indonesians in New York is low compared to other Southeast Asian groups. After working long hours and many days, not only does the culture bring this group of people together, but Jesus Christ is at the center of their community. Attending their services, everyone arrives to the house with a smile, and everyone is welcomed into the house with a loud greeting. Their bodies may look tired, but their faces look at peace and with joy. This church is a space where they can be open about their culture and their faith. Kumalasari shares how most Indonesians are Muslim so when Christian Indonesians can gather, it is a blessing and a joy. Kumalasari shares how it is typical for Christian Indonesians to gather together in megachurches back in Indonesia, especially in more rural and poorer neighborhoods so gathering in a home in America to worship, although very different than a megachurch, reminds her a bit of home. She shares how the house church became a safe space for her, not only to be vulnerable with her feelings and experiences in the United States, but also a safe space for her to worship Jesus the way she feels comfortable worshipping Jesus. She says she is glad there is a space to worship in her cultural style. Kumalasari led worship back at her church in Indonesia and she shared how when she visited a Southeast Asian church in Elmhurst, she felt disconnected and felt out of place with the worship. She was open to new songs and new styles of worship, but also missed

Indonesian worship songs that connected to her culture and experiences. She also shares that because majority of Indonesians are not Christians, having this community of Jesus followers strengthens her soul and spirit. She quotes Proverbs 2:17, *as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another*. She also quotes Galatians 6:2, which says, *carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*. Kumalasari shared how the house church not only carries one another's work burdens and burdens from financial trouble, but also carries one another's burden to be Christ-like in the world. In a community where there are not a lot of Christians, Kumalasari shares how at times it could be difficult to be open about faith and to be salt and light to their peers, but when this group meets, they are able to encourage one another, strengthen one another and carry each other's burden to fulfill the law of Christ and to be more like Christ. They can pray for their co-workers and neighbors and friends and give testimonies of how the Lord is answering their prayers.

Community is clearly very important in this people group. During the second visit to their worship service, I walked into a pastoral care time where Pastor Mark was listening and praying for a young mother with two children. She came to the pastor for parenting advice and clarity on culture in the United States for her kids. As an immigrant parent that does not speak English, only Indonesian, there were difficulty and conflict in raising her children in the United States, while also working six days of the week and many hours of the day. This church provides community to a group of people that unfamiliar to the culture of the country. Pastor Mark is able to not only care for the spiritual needs of his congregation, but Pastor Mark is also there to help his people understand American culture and help parents understand how to raise their children in the United States.

The need for community among this people group is great and this house church unites them to be one body for Christ.

The Need for Jesus

Lastly, there is a need for Jesus among this community. Understandably, all human beings in the world have a need for Jesus, but this group of believers emphasized their need and their love for Jesus. They wanted to make it clear that this weekly gathering was not a social club disguised as a church, but they truly came each week to worship Jesus out of their deep need for Jesus. As members shared their stories, it was clear that there was not only a deep need for Jesus, but encountering Jesus and encountering God's presence was the primary thing in this church. An encounter with Jesus was all they came for and all they needed in order to keep living. Many of the members had watery eyes as they spoke of how Jesus was working and moving in their lives. Members shared how community is important and fellowshiping with other believers is enjoyable, but the primary reason they join together each Monday was to meet with Jesus together.

Many members shared how they met Jesus in their home country. Most did not grow up following Jesus but had someone back in Indonesia lead them to an encounter with Jesus. Because many of the megachurches in Indonesia are located in poorer region in the country, it is common for people to seek help from the church. Although megachurches do not offer much social programs and help for the poor and marginalized, megachurches are leading people to following Christ and encountering Jesus. Instead of offering social programs, members of the church explained how they do lead people into encounter instead. Through prophetic rooms,

healing rooms, prayer rooms and deliverance ministry, people encounter the Lord in a supernatural way and give their lives to Jesus. Their situations may not be very different, especially if they came for financial assistance, but their lives are changed forever because of Jesus.

This community of believers have an advantage in gathering together because they gather as a small ethnic church. Because the members all come from the same background, the same culture, and even live very similar lives here in the United States, it confirms Rynkiewich's theory that America is not so much a melting pot, but a stew because of the large chunks. In one of the most diverse places in the world, and the most diverse boroughs in New York City, societies and cultures still gather based on similarities and based on ethnic identity. This cancels out many fellowship barriers for this group because they are very similar to one another. Especially because there is a clear separation between classes in Indonesia, the class separation is still present in the United States. Because they are so similar in social status and class, there is less chance of miscommunication and less chance of misunderstanding the culture of one another. There is not a barrier between the members and there is much support. The way that this church is set up and the people that it gathers creates a great opportunity for the gospel to be shared in context without misunderstanding.

People also seem to lead others to an encounter with Christ the same way they were led to Christ. At the house church, there is always a ministry time at the end if anyone wanted to be ministered to. Every time I attended, there is a ministry time at the end and every time there were people that asked for prayer. Watching them praying for each other, although there was a language barrier, was clear that they were not just praying repetitive prayers, they were also not

just reciting typical prayers, but each person ministering to someone else was leading the person into encounter with Jesus and inviting the presence of God into their lives. Monday nights were never rushed and always had more room with Jesus.

One significant unique aspect about this house church was their emphasizes on communion. Attending one communion service, the entire service was dedicated to communion. They spend the entire time reflecting on the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. They never rushed the moment and spent the time necessary to reflect on the cross and repentance.

It was also clear that each person had a personal relationship and intimacy with the Lord. There was not a set prayer or ministry team at this house church, but it was common to see one someone finished praying for other person, they would switch and the person doing the ministering would now be ministered to.

Jesus is at the center of this house church. Jesus is the main focus of the gathering and no one wanted to leave until they had a personal and intimate moment with Jesus. This community clearly knows the significance of Jesus and their deep need to rely on Jesus. One member quoted John 15, *I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.* This church emphasizes and understands the importance of abiding in Christ and not being separated from Christ.

Conclusion

Among the Indonesian working class immigrants, there is a need for a church, a need for a faith community and a need for Jesus. This need is satisfied by a small house church that meets weekly on Mondays in Queens New York. With many of the members separated from their family, from their culture and from their comfort zones, this house church provides a space of peace, of safety and of comfort. This space gives them room to worship, to encounter the Lord and to encourage and love one another. This space offers refreshing and renewal to their souls. As stated by Pastor Mark, this gathering is less like a church and more like a small group. More like how the early church gathered. Through worship, the hearing of the Word, fellowship and prayer, each week, this church gives time for the Indonesian working class immigrants to rest for a moment, become refreshed in the Lord and prepare for the long week ahead. Through difficulty financially, socially, and within their family, Jesus offers them peace, offers them joy and offers them hope. With many of the members having goals of being financially stable, being reunited with their family, having weekly encounters with the Lord with other believers keeps their hopes high and faith in Jesus strong.

Field Notes:

February 13th 7PM to 9:30PM, Worship Service at Indonesian House Church

It was a bit awkward walking into this house church because it was in the home of the pastor, and I did not know anyone there. When I walked in, I receive a smile from a man sitting at the end of the room that I later find out is Pastor Mark, who is shepherding this small congregation of restaurant workers. Pastor Mark is inviting and warm. Very fatherly and very excited that I have come to visit. He was told by the person who had connected and invited me that I would be coming, and it seemed like everyone was aware and excited that I was joining them for worship.

As I sat down, I realized not many people were present yet, but Pastor Mark expects around 20 people to come to worship. I begin conversation with him, and he shares that has been leading this church for a short while, previously this group was led by a different pastor. They meet on Mondays because all the members must work over the weekend, but all wanted a dedicated time to worship the Lord with other Indonesian Christians. As we speak and Pastor Mark shares about his time at the church, and pastoring the church, more people begin to arrive. Everyone arrives with a smile and a loud welcome by other people. They all speak Indonesian, but some speak English. I meet a man named Richard. I believe this is probably his English name. He is a restaurant worker and works the night shift at a restaurant in Elmhurst. He works from 5PM to 3AM, where after he attends college to finish his bachelor's degree, studying business. He met Christ in Indonesia, at a megachurch, which he explains is common in the country. Richard looks exhausted, but also very excited to worship the Lord. He says he always looks forward to Monday because he does not need to work and gets to be refreshed by the Lord. As we begin to worship, Pastor Mark starts with prayer and musical worship begins. Worship is loud, joyful and very energetic to start. The voices in the living room echo around and they invite the presence of the Lord to come. They seem very hungry for the presence of the Lord. Worship lasts for about 35 minutes, then they begin to pray. Praying out loud, popcorn style, randomly, for about 15 minutes. I do not know what is being prayed for as it was in Indonesian, but people were being moved and touched by the Holy Spirit. Then Pastor Mark preached in Indonesian for about 20 minutes and the service ended. Observing from the side, I saw that post preaching, people prayed for each other, encouraged each other and then some stayed for additional fellowship.

February 27th 7PM to 9:30PM, Worship Service at Indonesian House Church

This time, it was less awkward walking into the house. Pastor Mark once again had greeted me from his seat. This time there were two children present in the room that were not there last time. Their mom had arrived early and was asking Pastor Mark to pray for her. I walked in before they started to pray so Pastor Mark invited to me to pray for her as well. She did not speak English and I do not speak Indonesian, so Pastor Mark had helped me to translate for her. It was difficult to understand exactly why she had asked for prayer since Pastor Mark's explanation and translation was not very clear. It was encouraging to see a faith community that supported each other in prayer. I asked Pastor Mark this week about other Indonesian churches. He said that there are other Indonesian churches in NYC, but they all meet on Sundays when his members could not attend. He shared that there are other Indonesian house churches around too, which do the same things. When I asked if they ever partner together, he said no. They seemed to prefer staying small and intimate, as a family group, rather than growing into a church. He mentioned that this is more a small group than a rather, explaining that they rather use this time to be refreshed by the Lord than turn this into something bigger. That's when I realized they did not take offering last time I was here. He explained that they don't take offering, but really just gather together for worship and refreshing.

As people begin to arrive, I realize that although service is supposed to start at 7, no one really shows up at 7, unless they want care from the pastor. We start closer to 7:30-7:45. Once again, it begins with worship. Not as upbeat as last time, but the passion in singing is just as

loud and echoey. Worship definitely seems like a very important thing to them. This time, I think I recognize some songs they sing. They are not in English, but it sounds like some of the contemporary Christian songs that are sung at my church. This time after service, I spend some time with the members. I spoke to Kumalasari. She is the worship leader for this house church. She has been leading worship at this house church since she joined. Pastor Mark had asked her to join. Back in Indonesia, she led worship for her church with a team, but she explained that she enjoys leading worship by herself in this setting because it is a more intimate way of inviting the presence of the Lord here. Kumalasari shares that she also works at a restaurant, works long hours and is commonly exhausted, but also looks forward to Sunday to be refreshed. I asked if leading worship every week leads to burn out, but she says no. She has been leading since COVID every week, and says that everyone has a role, and her role is to lead worship so the Lord gives her strength and power to do so. Everyone is enjoying some snacks and tea, and they make me an avocado latte, which was interesting. They share that it is a common drink to have in Indonesia on the street.

March 6th 7PM to 9:30PM, Worship Service at Indonesian House Church

Today was a special day because today they took communion. This is very different from the way that my church takes communion. The entirety of the service was about communion. Although once again it was all in Indonesian and I could not understand what was being said, it was clear that this was a very holy moment for the church. They did not take the elements until towards the end of the service, but the elements were the center of attention the entire time. There was ample time to reflect on the significance of the elements and they were reflecting on the last seven things Jesus said before going to the cross. It seemed like a Good Friday type of service. The music from the piano was more calm, but the voices were filled with passion and energy. As Pastor Mark led a time of reflection, I believe that some were blessing the Lord while others were repenting. It was really significant to me that everyone in the room was participating and seemed to know exactly what to do. At my own church, there are always people that zone out, fall asleep, or don't pay attention, yet at this church, everyone seems to come eager, ready and expectant. This may be because it is a small group of strong believers that choose to gather together solely because they are unable to gather at other churches on Sunday mornings.

After the service, I asked another member, Shirley about outreach. She said that this church isn't about growing. She shared that people are always invited in, but the people invited are usually when they find out that a friend at work is a believer with no church to attend. Usually, they recently immigrated to New York and works the typical "Indonesian hours", but still want to find time to worship the Lord. They do not do much evangelizing, but more strengthening each other, encouraging each other and supporting each other on their walks with the Lord. As a youth pastor, I wanted to ask about the kid's situation. I learned that there are not many parents with kids here that attend and those that do, they prefer family worship because they want their kids to learn to encounter the Lord how their parents encounter the Lord.

March 13th 7PM to 9:30PM, Worship Service at Indonesian House Church

Since this is my fourth time attending, I had a pretty clear idea of what would happen. I asked Pastor Mark if they ever have any events or gatherings outside of Monday evening, and he replied no. Seems like they do not have much free time throughout the week. I asked him if he ever feels burnt out being bi-vocational in ministry. He replied not really. This is similar to what the worship leader shared with me. They share similar attitudes in serving. He shares on Monday what the Lord taught him through the week. And he shares that he basically only preaches three times a week since the first Monday is always just communion. He shares that occasionally they will have Mondays where they only share testimonies or they only pray together, but he does not normally feel burnt out. I found out that he attended seminary in Indonesia, but because of his family finance situation, he had to move to the United States. I asked him if he would ever consider going into full-time ministry, and he said he would consider it only if the Lord told him to and he could continue to minister to people with the same background, meaning people who works in the restaurant business that could not attend a church on Sunday morning. He feels called to care for those who are believers but can't worship on Sunday and still wants to worship with a body of believers. This makes me think about my own church context. I also have a lot of people in my context where they cannot make it to church on Sundays due to work. Do we need a Monday service?

As my last time attending, after the service, Pastor Mark asks me some questions about my experience. As I share, another member translates for me so that the rest of the group can understand. Translating makes it difficult for me to communicate. One thing I ask them about is the difference between worshipping here and worshipping in Indonesia. They share that in Indonesia, they mostly worship in megachurches. These churches have a lot of money and a lot of resources, but do not care so much for the poor and marginalized. They enjoy the house church setting very much because in this setting, they are not "blinded or distracted" by money. They come for the Lord and they leave feeling refreshed. It seems like Monday night is the most important night for them through the week because they feel filled to face the rest of the week. This church genuinely loves the Lord and knows the power of the Lord. They come eager and ready every week and knows truly how to depend on the Lord.