

Helping Them to be Worshippers in New Identity and Theology: Analysis of RCCC's Junior High Sunday Service

Rutgers Community Christian Church has three language worship services without denominational affiliations or other campuses. Founded in 1979 with only 20 members, the church has grown into a congregation of over 1000 members, offering Sunday services in Chinese, Cantonese, and English. Most of the English-speaking members are children of the Chinese and Cantonese-speaking members. This article analyzes the use of space, culture, and worship language in the Agape sanctuary of the church through interviews with a pastoral intern and a member, as well as observations of four junior high Sunday services (referred to as JH). Based on these findings, the article concludes that the younger generation of the Chinese church has undergone a significant personal transformation, having become Chinese Americans thanks to their parents' accumulation of substantial personal assets in the US. This has enabled them to access excellent educational resources, and their parents have also invested heavily in their spiritual development. RCCC has not only created favorable physical conditions for the children but has also incorporated the application of ethical and public theology to help prepare them for the future. Despite this, RCCC still faces challenges, such as the need to develop a new language of worship to help the next generation become more deeply integrated into the church structure and transition from "students" to "young worshippers."

The Observations of Economic Status

According to data from the RCCC website, the church occupies a total of 24 acres with 7 buildings and a building area of approximately 60,000 square feet¹. The RCCC parking lot has over 700 parking spaces, and through observing the brands and types of cars in the parking lot on

¹ <https://cn.rccc.org/about-us/our-history/>

Sundays, I found many high-end car brands, such as BMW, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Tesla, and a few more expensive brands like Maserati and Jaguar. The majority of cars in the parking lot are Honda and Toyota models from 2013 and later.

During the JH meetings, I observed the clothing of the children. Although they did not dress up remarkably nicely, they still displayed a certain level of quality in their clothing, and most had branded logos on their clothes and shoes, with Nike, Puma, The North Face, Under Armor, and school spirit wear is the most common. Some also wore commemorative shirts from Christian camps.

On the Sundays I visited, there was a free time before the JH worship started, and most of the children played table tennis while a few played the piano. I was surprised that two of them were highly skilled in playing the piano, indicating that their parents invested a lot of money and time in training their children.

Based on the above observations, the church members have a relatively good economic condition, and their average income should belong to the middle class in the United States. RCCC has the financial resources to implement the JH ministry they want to do.

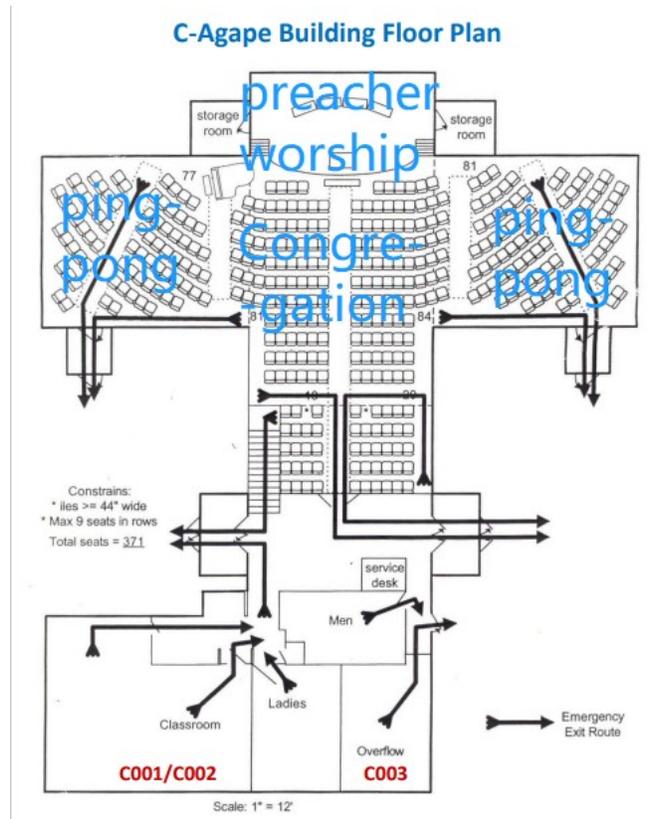
The Observation of the JH Sunday Worship

I have been attending RCCC for six years and am a member of this church. However, attending the JH Sunday worship was a new cross-cultural experience because I had never attended a Junior High Sunday gathering or Friday fellowship. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the age difference - I am 34 years old, while the primary age group for JH gatherings is middle school students, with the oldest being around 15 years old. Secondly, the language difference - Chinese is my "heart language" when it comes to worship, but JH worship is

conducted in English, which is expected because they are "ABC" - American Born Chinese.

Senior high schoolers attend English-speaking adult worship, while elementary school worship takes place in another chapel in the basement.

On the other hand, JH has its own chapel called Agape, which is the smallest of all the chapels and is a separate building. I spent some time observing this building and discovered that it was originally a farmhouse converted into a chapel with a wooden structure. Below is a floor plan of the chapel.



Here is my observation of the spatial layout of the church:

1. The spatial distribution of this church is similar to that of most churches, presenting an overall fan-shaped layout. The speaker and worship team occupy the podium, which provides them with the largest space and an excellent line of sight. The podium is about

half a meter higher than the ground, and there is a clear division between the space of the podium and the congregation.

2. The podium is equipped with musical instruments commonly used by the worship team, several microphone stands, several music stands, a portable podium, and two bookshelves for decorative purposes.
3. Ping-pong tables with communal balls and paddles are placed in the left and right wings of the building.
4. The congregation's seats are movable and almost touching each other, with a central aisle dividing them into two halves. The floor is level.

Space Interpretation

From the perspective of spatial allocation, the JH space is centered around "information," or more specifically, the focal point of the space is the podium or speaker. The speaker or worship team has the most visible area and is elevated significantly higher than the congregation, which creates a sense of contrast and respect through height. However, this design also obstructs interaction between the podium and the audience unless the speaker steps down from the stage. Recently, RCCC hired a new pastor responsible for the JH ministry. She applied for and designed an extension to the podium that extends to the middle of the congregation seats, breaking down some barriers between the stage and the audience.

Previously, the podium had only a drum kit, a stool, and the podium itself. But now, the podium arrangement reminds me of the stage design at Dry Bar Comedy. This new design gives the stage a "homey" atmosphere, and I heard that the church staff plans to add more decorations.

The appearance of the communal ping-pong table, balls, and paddles makes this sanctuary seem somewhat out of place because ping-pong tables are not typically found in churches. I learned that the ping-pong table is used by another fellowship during their activities, but they leave it for JH to play on Sundays. This gives the space a community center feel, which weakens the religious atmosphere but strengthens the sense of community.

The congregation's seats are very close, with most people having an empty seat next to them, but there is no space between the chairs. During most Sunday services, children sit together in groups of two or three. A few individuals are sitting alone, but they are usually latecomers. Overall, JH is relatively introverted, with interaction mostly limited to peers. There is not much interaction with pastors or younger pastors, and the reasons for this are discussed below.

Overall, the design focus of JH's gathering space is on information, emphasizing relationships. JH kids can also interact pretty good with the space.

Language of Worship Gatherings

The language of worship gatherings is an interesting phenomenon. At first glance, we can see that it is an English-speaking gathering. However, is it really that simple? For worship, a person's reactions, expressions, actions, and words spoken are all part of the language of worship. Additionally, the worship time is calculated from before the program starts, which means that not only singing and listening to sermons are considered worship, but also "silence" is seen as a language.

JH (Junior High School) can sit through the entire Sunday worship service, and they also have a handout with some fill-in-the-blank questions, similar to a class. In another Sunday

worship service, I saw a girl raise her hand twice, but the speaker did not invite her to speak. I do not know if it is because everyone knows that this girl's questions are often unrelated to the theme or because the speaker cannot stop to answer questions during the sermon. But in the end, the members ignored the girl, and she put her hand down. After the gathering ended, I watched this girl closely, wondering if she would go to the speaker, but she didn't. She picked up her backpack, said goodbye to her friends, and left the room.

The raised hand represents a form of language in the gathering. Throughout the entire gathering, only one person raised their hand. There was no question-and-answer session, and the speaker's style was not interactive. Why did she raise her hand? Perhaps she wanted to share her viewpoint or raise a different opinion, but nobody knows. However, I think of other children who whisper to each other frequently, indicating that they have something to say but do not want to give feedback during worship.

One of the reasons is their personal identity change. They are no longer Chinese, Taiwanese, or Hong Kongers; they are American. In American elementary school classrooms, students can stand up, go to the restroom, and move chairs. They can ask questions at any time because "there is no stupid question." Differences in educational approaches reflect a significant change in ABC (American-born Chinese) identity within the church.

The most common thing JH does is talk. Friends often talk to each other. This is very different from adults. I found that each of these experiences had one thing in common: when there are adults around them, they suddenly become very quiet. Although some of these adults are only five or six years older than them, to them, five or six years is already a generation gap. These "elders", who are also "coworkers in the church," add to their authority status, causing the children to hesitate to express their feelings in front of them. Therefore, their silence is actually a

kind of fear of elders. Additionally, in JH gatherings, they also have their own ideas about the "power structure" of Christianity. This is very different from the second generation of Korean Christians. In a Korean church gathering, when young people knew that I was studying theology, they would bow to me when they saw me, although the bowing angle was small. This is a form of interaction that reflects the spiritual power structure in Korea, shown in ways such as "bowing" and "honorific language." The lack of a language to "interact" with the power structure makes it difficult for ABCs to express themselves.

Theological Language

From a theological perspective, RCCC is a church that leans towards Reformed theology. This is evident in the Sunday sermons, which are divided into three main parts: the human condition, God's promises, and man's response to God.

For example, on April 2nd, the focus of the sermon was on Jesus healing a sick person, with the Scripture passage being John 5:1-18. Pastor Sandy used three pictures: the first one showed sick people crowded together waiting to enter a pool, the second showed Jesus helping one of them, and the third depicted five hands with the words "Serve: being God's hands and feet" written above them. The outline of the message was as follows: the human condition is that everyone experiences suffering; God's promise is that He will help us overcome it; and man's response to God is to become a helper to others in their suffering.

This structure is the most commonly used method for preaching and interpreting the Bible. What sets RCCC's JH meeting apart is that the third point departs from the traditional sermon format. If following the traditional sermon format, man's response to God should be "we must rely on Jesus to become our helper in times of suffering."

My interpretation is that RCCC is trying to incorporate some common theological or ethical applications and connect theology with the reality of JH. The US education system is at the center of a storm due to social injustice. The JH community is very sensitive to these issues and, because of the integration of social issues such as LGBTQ, the narrative of social injustice is changing public education. RCCC is choosing to join this discussion in a subtle way at this time.

Indeed, if we can see ourselves as God's hands, we know we have the ability to help those around us in need. This is empowering and also a theological application.

At the end of the worship service, JH sang the Trinity Hymn, which was the same as the adult service, but the JH version was more modern and catchy. I observed that almost all the children could sing it.

Conclusion

The next generation of the Chinese church has undergone a transformation in their identity as they are now Chinese-Americans. Their parents have accumulated substantial personal assets in the United States, providing their children with excellent educational resources. Regarding spiritual development, their parents have also put much effort into nurturing them. RCCC has not only created favorable conditions for the children regarding physical infrastructure but has also incorporated the application of ethical and public theology to help them face the future. However, RCCC still faces significant challenges, such as creating a new worship language to help the next generation integrate more deeply into the church structure and transform from "students" to "young worshippers."

Four Visits Fieldnotes

04/02 09:15-10:30

I contacted pastor sandy before attending junior high schoolers' Sunday service and asked her if I could come in and join. She welcomed me. And then, I got to the Agape Chapel at approximately 9:00 AM. I found a few people, including myself, and the high schoolers were playing ping pong. A few were playing piano. I was surprised that one of the kids was very good, and later to my greater surprise, his friend was even better at playing piano. That was impressive. I thought I turned around and wanted to make a friend. This junior high schooler was sitting behind me, who was about 13 years of age. His name was David, and he was timid. He didn't look into my eyes when I spoke to him; his voice was meager. I could barely hear him, but I thought that he was being adolescent.

When pastor sandy got on stage, I noticed that she dressed less formally than she would typically do attending the adult service.

She delivered a friendly and quick sermon for about 30 minutes. I was expecting a more interactive sermon, but I was surprised to find out it was a regular sermon, although she used words that were easy to understand, and in her slides, there were quite some emojis and pictures. The junior high schoolers sat through the entire service, nobody got up to do other things, and nobody asked a question. There were minimal interactions during their sermon.

At the end of the service, pastor sandy was called to pray for the congregation and to bless them.

After the blessing, the worship band came up again, and the junior high schoolers sang the doxology, which ended the whole service. I was surprised that they knew how to sing the

doxology, although the version of toxicology that the junior high sang was different. But it is still a doxology.

04/09 10:00-11:00

Today I attended the Easter combined service of RCCC. Junior high, Senior High, elementary schoolers war at the Main sanctuary attending their service with their parents. So it was difficult to separate the junior high from other kids. There are all hidden in the crowd. RCCC main sanctuary can hold up to 1350 seats and on that day it was full. There were so many people attending the service.

To my great surprise many junior highs were on stage because they we're serving and the choir or in the orchestra. The kids we're playing violin Viola cello double bass trumpet Oboe, and so on. It is clear that all of these kids on the stage are participating in the orchestra in their school. And this church is an another opportunity for them to practice and to enjoy music.

The service include orchestra Bible reading And sermon and choir. It was relatively long but in good order. During the entire service people were sitting in silence. And the kids we're sitting and the seats arranged for the orchestra as well.

During the orchestra, parents of junior high and Senior High were at one time frantically taking pictures of their kids playing the orchestra. They were proud of their kids and they should be. The kids were talented, they're well educated And are now the face of this church at such an important festival as Easter.

The service also includes and baptismal. The sanctuary has an open pool that can exhibit baptisms. Among the people who are waiting to be baptized which is about 20 people, there are about 6 kids. I can't tell their age but by judging from their voice and their manner, I would say they are about 13-18 years of age. When they were publicly denouncing the world and announcing their faith, the young generation in the church shout out cries of joy and support for their friends.

04/23 9:15-10:00

Today there were more people than on April 2nd. More girls than boys. I arrived at about 915, and the service was about to start. This time I sat in the back.

There are about 25 junior high schoolers in total. The boys sat together to the right of the aisle. And the girls sat in the opposite direction. It was interesting to see the crowd segregate themselves towards the same sex. Back in the room, there was an attendance sheet. When people came in, they would sign their names, pick up their handouts, and join their friends.

I can't help but also notice that this stage was decorated. The decoration reminded me of dry bar comedy. It looked like a modern theater, not as fancy but to the effect of it.

The worship band had two people, and they led three songs. The girls in the combination were more engaging; four were dancing to the music at a time. It was always good to see people voluntarily dance during worship. It shows that their hearts and minds have been touched and encouraged. The boys, on the other hand, did not show much engagement during worship. But the boys broke their silence during the sermon. They were not asking any questions, but they were talking among themselves. They got a little too loud, so one of the young coworkers

intervened and whispered to them to stop. Some of them smiled, a little embarrassed, and did not speak again. One girl raised her hands twice during the sermon, but the speaker did not interact with her.

The speaker is very young; her name is Grace. She recently graduated from her seminary and is transforming into a full-time minister under this church. Her sermon uses several visual elements: in her slides and handouts. The verses she uses are from John Chapter 9, and Grace uses the story of the person born blind and healed by Jesus to make her point.

03/13 Intern Ministers Meeting 1pm-2pm

Today I was invited to attend the intern ministers meeting.

I met all the intern ministers during the meetings. All of them are ABCs, so I am the only one from Asia. I asked Andrew what his identity was. I wanted to know whether he identifies as an American or an Asian American. He said neither. He identifies as Chinese American. I asked what is the difference between Chinese American and Asian American. He said the main difference is that he does not usually hang out with other Asian races. I asked, "why don't you identify as an American?" He says he doesn't think that he is "white enough."

"Is it just you, or do you think most ABCs share this identity?"

He said most ABCs would identify themselves as Chinese Americans. His answer was interesting. I've never thought that he would not identify himself as an American. In his mind, it means America represents a Geist that does not define him. I wonder if that is true for others, so I asked. I got the same response from other interns.

I also listened to their discussion of junior high ministries. They were talking about the need for Sunday school teachers. They are teaching a book about emotional health. They also mentioned that junior high schoolers are more equipped with the "language" to deal with their emotional health. Their schools have trained them through seminars, lectures, and classroom participation. This generation knows much more about their inner side than their previous ones, at least in concept. However, I thought about the soaring mental illness cases, self-harm, and even suicide rates among young people; I couldn't help but doubt the effectiveness of such training through schools. If the data can tell us one thing, it is that the new generation faces a tremendously harsh environment and is not showing that they are receiving the training they need.

One Interview

Interview with Joe Yu 04/23

Joe is one of the intern ministers of RCCC. He is a seminarian and working on his degree. One of his main tasks in the church is to help the junior high schoolers. I had a short interview with him after the Sunday worship ended.

I asked him how does he think about junior high schoolers. Are they good at listening? Because from what I can see, there is little conversation or feedback. He said junior high schoolers can be challenging because they are still learning to express themselves. But these kids listen. Joe shared an example, he was teaching in Sunday school one day, there were very few interactions during class, and he felt frustrated. During the discussion, he thought there would be no questions, but the kids were asking him excellent questions about the materials. He was amazed. He learned from that experience not to judge a book by its cover. From the look of it, the junior

high congregation may seem cold and distant. But the kids are sensitively receiving information and lessons in their brains and hearts.

I asked him how do you break into groups during fellowship time. Do you break up by district or age group? Joe said, "We usually break up in age groups, but also, we try to pair them up. They need to learn how to work together. That's why they don't always get to hang out with their best friends. But they also like to be in the same group with their best friends." I asked this because, in the adult fellowships, people are grouped by location.

I asked Joe, "Do the parents go to the English or Chinese service?" Joe said, "It's almost all Chinese because they are immigrants." I continued to ask, "When junior high becomes Senior High, do their parents go to the English service with them?" Joe answered, "No, it usually happens that the parents stay on the Chinese side, and the kids go to the English services by themselves, most of the time with their friends."